EARTH II
REBIRTH
RAY JAY PERREAULT
AWARD WINNING SCIFI AUTHOR
BK 4

“Earth II-Rebirth”

Written by
Ray Jay Perreault

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Thursday, September 7, 2051

Storage Room onboard the USCF Aircraft Carrier Burlington

The scratching at the door stopped. The torn metal that the cow robot made through the hatch went from the upper right side down to the lower left. The cow robot form that was visible through the rips in the metal stopped moving; then, it slowly lowered itself out of view.

Captain Darlene Drummond stood motionless with her pistol aimed at the attacking creature. Admiral Nial Hagerly was standing next to her with a machine gun on his hip. Sergeant Robles and the remainder of his team were on their knees in front with their weapons aimed for their last stand.

Command Center Langley-Eustis USCFAFB

Arnold Patterson, the President of the United States, his Chief of Staff Eddy Purser, Sergeants LL, Mack, Secret Services Agents Michael Dereaux, and Ruth Minor listened as the metal screeched while the hatch was being torn from the frame.

Then, to their surprise, the horrific sound of death ripping apart the metal-reinforced door stopped. There was a moment of silence, and they could see the large form of the attacking cow robot slowly lower itself to the floor of the hallway.

Command Information Center of the USCF Aircraft Carrier Murphy – Pearl Harbor

Admiral Shirley Mears felt overwhelmed. How could she integrate a ship from the Eastern Alliance into her defense of Pearl Harbor, especially after they attacked a couple of times? She had to admit, the times were changing, and regardless of their recent attacks, it was now humanity against those horrible invading robots. She had to be smart and let Admiral Son Wu from the Eastern Alliance and his ship, the Wosong join her fleet.

“Admiral, something unusual is happening,” she heard from the Attack Radar Station.

“What is it?”

“Ma’am, a couple of the alien ships just started to penetrate the atmosphere with a landing point near here and a trajectory towards us. When they started, they seemed to turn ballistic, and a couple of them have disintegrated upon re-entry. The others have stopped maneuvering and seem to be falling from the sky.”

“That's odd,” was the only comment the Admiral could make.

Cockburn Sound – Near Perth Australia

How am I going to defend this place? Even with the Australian Navy’s help, we’re in a bad position, Admiral Monson thought.

The Fifth Fleet had been hit hard as it raced across the Indian Ocean. He had been caught in open water, and each time he was effective in defending the fleet, the attackers changed tactics and found other ways to do damage.

“Sir, income 7ing vehicles, starboard side,” was yelled at him over his comm from the current watch officer on deck to his right.

The Admiral looked up, and just in front of the tower were three streaks of fire. It took a minute for him to piece together the image in front of him.

Then he realized that they were vehicles entering the atmosphere, and they were burning up and disintegrating.

What the…? he thought as he raced into the CIC.

All the Cow robots Stopped

The cow robots stopped in front of the Admiral, Captain Drummond, and Sergeant Robles on the USCF Burlington. They stopped in front of Sergeants LL and Shirley next to the President of the United States. They stopped for Admiral Mears in Pearl Harbor and Admiral Monson in Perth, Australia, and they stopped for Colonel Beal in San Diego. All the robots stopped exactly where they were. There was no further aggressive movement. They just stopped, then slowly lowered themselves to the floor.

All the robotic cow-like creatures stopped across the world. The largest percentage of them were in remote areas where they had never encountered the indigenous humans. The robots that were near the humans stopped like the others and slowly lowered themselves to the floor. The people who watched saw nothing else and heard nothing else. They didn't know if the alien invasion was over or the invading robots were just changing tactics.

The suspicious virus, created by an invading alien race, had decimated the entire human race. 99.99997% of Earth's population had succumbed to the virus, and then the invasion began. No one knew why; they just did their best to live to see the next day.

The 1,864 Alien Landing support craft were still in orbit, but they were silent. They had already dispensed the 22,368 cow-like robotic invaders.

Only a hand full of people knew of SIMPOC-The Thinking Computer and how it helped humanity. Fewer knew of Julius, who was another thinking computer that was following its own agenda. An agenda that included destroying those who could harm it. SIMPOC and virtually all the remaining humans fell into that category.

Of all the people that knew of SIMPOC and Julius, even fewer knew that Joan Herl, the past Commander of the Space Station Oasis, and her husband Colonel Thomas Herl left Earth with SIMPOC. They took a huge risk and followed Julius to the home planet of the invaders. They were trying to find a way to fight back, save humanity and prevent Julius from returning to complete its agenda.

The Stop

The President of the United States stood and watched, and suddenly he was aware of the silence. The sounds of the battle in the building and hallway in front of him were replaced with silence. For a second, he was more scared of the silence than the sound of machines attacking. The silence could mean something worse.

“LL, what is happening?” he asked Sergeant LL, who was kneeling on the floor in front of him with his weapon pointing at the door.

“Sir, I don’t know; it seems as if they have stopped. Standby, I’ll check it out,” the Sergeant said as he cautiously got off his knee and walked slowly to the door. He peered through the openings, where the attacking robot had almost ripped the metal door from its hinges, and all he saw was the form of one of the attackers lying on the floor in front of the door.

“Sir, it seems to be laying on the floor. It doesn’t appear to be active. There are no lights or motion, and I don’t hear any sounds at all. When we came in here, this unit and a couple of others were coming down the hall. I think all of them have stopped.”

“Well, Sarge, it’s up to you, but I think we need to check them out and find out what’s happening. We can’t just sit in here all day,” the president pointed out.

“Yes, sir, I guess we need to find out what’s happening.”

Sergeant LL indicated to one of his remaining Beta Team members, Shirley, who was still kneeling on the floor covering the entrance and

protecting the president, to come and help.

Shirley slowly rose and walked to the door next to LL. They both looked through the damage one more time to make sure that nothing was moving, then they grabbed parts of the door and pulled it open. When the door was open, they brought up their weapons and pointed them at the motionless form on the floor. It didn't move, didn't threaten them, and they took a slow step forward to get a better view.

President Patterson started to approach the door, and LL snapped at him, "Sir, please stay put until we figure what's happening."

The president stopped and waited, lowering the pistol to his side.

LL and Shirley walked around the form on the floor, and it was the first time they had a close look at one of the invading cow robots. The torso was about six feet long and three feet wide. It had six legs that were curled up in a neat position under the body. Apparently, it shut down in an orderly manner and didn't just collapse in place.

"Sir, it appears inert. Please stay there until we check out the others," LL directed the president.

President Patterson just nodded and looked at his chief of staff, and they moved to a couple of chairs in the back of the room. They still kept their pistols in their hands, but they rested them on their laps as they sat.

LL took one side of the hallway, and Shirley took the other. They cautiously moved down the hallway and approached each of the remaining robots slowly. They stopped at each one and took a moment to inspect it, making sure that it was inert like the previous ones. To their satisfaction, they were.

"Shirley, go back and cover the president; I'm going outside to see what's happening. If I lose comm or if I'm not back in five, take the president to another location and set up a defensive perimeter."

Shirley didn't need to respond; he knew the drill and just nodded. Then he turned and jogged down the hallway to where the president was.

LL picked up his pace and passed more of the inert robots. He also passed the remains of the other members of Beta Team. In each instance, he stopped and checked their vitals and had no good news. All of them were dead. He hated to leave them, but he had to know what was happening and if the President was under any further threat. The bodies of his team would be taken care of later.

He picked up the pace, sensing that all the robots were in the same condition, and when he got to the exterior door, he stopped and peered through into the bright sunlight. To his surprise, there were more of the inert robots scattered around near the entrance. After a moment's hesitation to clear his exit, he stepped out and ran along the side of the building to a vantage point where he could see the alien landing craft. When he reached the corner of the building, he hesitated once more, then he took care and tried to look around the building using just his left eye. What he saw gave him the confidence to use both eyes, then to step around the corner and look at the full scene.

The alien landing craft was still sitting where it had landed, and between it and his location, there were more inert robots.

"Shirley, LL," he whispered into his mike.

"Go," was the cryptic reply.

"They're all down. Repeat they're all down. I'm heading back; let's contact the Admiral and see what he's got."

They're Quiet on the Burlington

"Ma'am, stop shooting. They've stopped," Sergeant Robles had to yell over the gunfire.

The 23-year-old Darlene Drummond, who had gone from being a training officer to Captain of the carrier, was standing with smoke coming from her machine gun. Standing next to her was Admiral Nial Hagerly,

Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs. His assault rifle was just about out of ammunition.

They heard Sergeant Robles shouting, and when the firing stopped, the room was full of smoke from the expended rounds, and all of them were almost deaf from the noise.

They stood and looked through the hatch with hundreds of bullet holes and portions of which had been ripped open by the attacking robotic units. There was no motion on the other side of the hatch, and their hearing began to come back.

“Let me check it out; I don’t hear anything,” Sergeant Robles said as he moved slowly forward so he could peer through the damaged parts of the hatch. “The thing by the door is down, and I can’t see any of the others in the gangway moving. They all seem to be stopped.”

Captain Drummond yelled, “Let’s get out here; this is a terrible position to defend. If they come alive again, we’re dead.”

There was no discussion as the statement made perfect sense to everyone; it would be better to find a more defensible position in case the attackers came back to life and continued the attack.

They forced the hatch open, grabbed as much of the ammunition and weaponry as they could carry, and moved quickly down the gangway. When they got to the first intersection and could see along multiple gangways, they stopped assessing the situation. What they saw startled them. Within their sight, there were six of the attacking units laying inert on the gangway floor. Each of them appeared to have curled up and shut down. None appeared too damaged to operate; it was as if they had just shut themselves down.

“Admiral Hagerly, this is President Patterson.”

The admiral acknowledged the transmission and told everyone to stop while he determined the president’s status. “Sir, this is Nial; what is your situation?”

“Nial, they’ve all just stopped, curled up, and shut down. I don’t know what’s going on. What’s happening there?”

“The same here; they almost had us, then everything stopped. We’re moving up on deck now to see what else is going on.”

The President passed on his encouraging news, “LL just checked out the area outside of our building, and he reported that all the units in the area have shut down. Do you think that SIMPOC, Joan, and Tom had some effect on these things?”

“Let’s hope so.”

Underground Tunnels – Red Dirt Colony Mars

Ophelia and the other Mars inhabitants were crowded in the makeshift tunnels they had bored into the ice shelf. When the tunnels were recently dug out, they were for long-term survival due to the loss of support from the Space Station Oasis and Earth. They had never imagined that the tunnels might be their last holdout from an attacking alien force of robots.

The cow-like robots had been landing on Mars for a couple of days, but they hadn’t landed near the Mars colony habitats. The residents hoped that would continue until they had a plan B in place, but they weren’t so lucky. The last ship that landed was only about 200 meters from the concentration of habitats, and the colonists had only a short time to vacate the structures and move to the recently built caves. The caves weren’t a long-term solution, but they provided some protection for a short time.

Ophelia was peering through the one window they had on the exterior wall watching the robotic advance. She was hoping for something miraculous, and suddenly their situation changed.

“Something is going on out there,” she announced to those crowded behind her.

“What do you mean?” asked Isaac, her husband.

“I think they’ve stopped moving.”

“Stopped moving; maybe they’re just thinking. That is if those things think,” added one of her friends in the back of the chamber.

“I don’t know if that’s the case. They’re not standing or milling around. They just lowered themselves to the ground and folded their legs underneath them. I think something is up,” she flipped a switch on her Mars suit and transmitted through the repeater in the Command Habitat. “Earth, this is Mars. I hope that you’re still there. The robots that landed near us were advancing on our habitats, then they just stopped. They folded themselves up and lowered to the ground. I don’t know what this means, but if anyone on Earth can respond, please do so. Ophelia out.”

“Let’s wait a few minutes, and if they don’t move anymore, we need to get back to the habitats and replenish our oxygen and batteries.”

JSB8 Jakeel Mining Station

Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC knew that the tide had turned. Earth, or what was left of Earth, was saved. They had just talked with the Leader of the Vakeel. Joan had basically told him off, and they lived.

“That son-of-bitch,” Tom said. “They invaded us by accident. They didn’t think anything worth saving was on Earth, so they just tried to wipe us out for their convenience.”

Joan took a moment, took a deep breath, and reached for her husband. They were at a point where they could take a breath and relax a little. They hugged while SIMPOC and Fleet Marshal Zorthin stood and watched.

When Joan and Tom broke their embrace, Joan stepped to SIMPOC and put her arms around him. All SIMPOC knew to do was just to stand there. Tom walked over and put his hand out, “SIMPOC, none of this would have happened without you. We, the human race, owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude.”

SIMPOC put out his hand, and he followed the programming in his memory. *Apparently, this is a show of gratitude,* he thought as he let the

Colonel move his hand up and down. *I suppose this female, with her arms around me, is also a show of appreciation. In a curious way, I appreciate these humans showing warmth to me. I also feel the lowering of stress.*

The handshaking stopped, and Joan pulled away from SIMPOC's torso. She looked up at him and smiled.

What a curious way to express gratitude; showing teeth. I don't have any, so I can't reciprocate, thought SIMPOC.

"Fleet Marshal Zorthin. Are you positive that the devices you sent to our system have stopped their attacks?" asked Joan?

"Absolutely, the message has been sent, and the units will go into a standby mode. They must have the proper code to be reactivated. As I told you, we will transfer the entire invasion fleet to your control. It is the least that we can do to repay your civilization for the losses that we inflicted upon you."

"Fleet Marshal, that is a considerable number of spacecraft and robotic units. Can you transfer the necessary information to me so that we may take control of your units and make them useful for us?" SIMPOC asked.

"Yes, I suspect that you are able to interact with these computers. If that is so, then I will direct you to the proper instructions and codes. I need to point out that it wouldn't be wise to use those resources against us. We have a vast number of units, and the few thousand that we are transferring would be no match for our resources."

"Fleet Marshal. We will use the resources to rebuild, not to attack. Now, please tell us about the virus, how it was done and how it can be corrected?" asked Joan.

"I must warn you, that is not within my expertise. Those techniques are created by our biological scientists. I do know that using that method is our typical operation. When we discover a new solar system with the elements we want, we send probes to measure the life forms. Apparently, those probes have limitations because they failed to recognize the level of sophistication within your culture. The probes deduced that there was no intelligent life and acted as such. Let me remind you that we have harvested

from over 1,000 systems, and we have yet to find intelligent life, so our probes didn't perform well. Regardless, they find the dominant life form. By harvesting some DNA, they can form a virus that uses the history of past viral encounters embedded within the code. That characteristic, we have found to be universal among living creatures. When they obtain the DNA, it is a simple step to create the virus. They are autonomous, and once the virus has been created, it is released."

"You used the past information in our DNA that we absorbed from viruses that we've fought and lived through to create a super virus to kill us?" Tom asked, barely holding back his anger.

"Simply stated, yes. It is the most effective way to clear the way for our devices to begin harvesting," Zorthin said with little remorse. In the past, we've encountered some large native animals that damaged our devices, so we were forced to eradicate them. Over time, as we failed to find intelligent life, the portion of the probes responsible for making the determination obviously decayed and were no longer effective."

"Can you produce an anti-virus?" asked Joan.

"We have never had to do that before. I doubt we can create an anti-virus as you ask, but I should be able to turn off the virus. It didn't occur naturally within your world, so there will be no new cases once we turn it off. However, if someone develops it, or is exposed to it, just before turning off, the virus will run its course."

"I don't care, do it," said Joan with a very threatening sound in her voice.

In a similar way to when Fleet Marshal Zorthin turned off the attack on Earth, he walked to the same interface terminal, inputted a couple of commands, and announced, "actually, it has already stopped. When I stopped the harvest units, the viral probes also stopped. I just confirmed that."

"What do you do with a system after your devices have harvested, as you put it?" Joan asked.

“We usually seek out rare materials that we need to support our processes and manufacturing. Once that has been done, we often prepare the system for colonization. We have a huge population, and when the system has suitable planets, we occupy them.”

“Now that you’ve stopped the attack, will you leave us alone?” Joan asked.

“That is a difficult question to answer. The Prime Leader has accepted your rights. Based on his direction, I have stopped the harvesting. I will continue to honor my word. The Prime Leader will, likely, continue to honor what he said. You must consider, though, our civilization is under tremendous pressure, and we have had changes in leadership in the past. If a new Prime Leader emerges, his successor might have a different opinion. Also, if the Prime Minister is changed, I might not be in the position to honor my commitments.”

“Joan, may we speak in English?” SIMPOC asked.

They nodded and realized that SIMPOC wanted a private conversation between the three of them.

“We aren’t in a position to demand anything from the Vakeel. We are vulnerable, and we should make our own preparations for our protection. Let me point out that Julius and I were able to infiltrate their computer systems with relative ease and take control. This culture appears to be naïve with regards to computer operations and their vulnerabilities. If we ally with the Fleet Marshal, he might be our best contact and may be influential in the future. A relationship with him might help both of us,” SIMPOC said.

Joan took a deep breath and glanced at Tom, who nodded in agreement.

“Fleet Marshal,” Joan began. “We understand the position of the Vakeel and your position. We feel that, if possible, a mutual relationship between you and us could help both of us. When Julius attacked your station, he was able to infiltrate your systems, and he had a major impact. This computer, SIMPOC, is more powerful than that computer. We can help you, and our relationship puts you in a position where your responsibilities are protected. We have expertise that could help you in the future if other issues develop.

But that relationship has to be mutual so that our interests are also protected. Is my point clear?"

Fleet Marshal Zorthin stood motionless for a moment while his mind considered the options, then he did what might have been a smile. His face broadened, and his lips were stretched, then he responded. "I suspect that we might find mutual opportunities by working together. Besides, there is a chance that your other computer might figure out where he is and decide to come back here."

"Excellent, if something comes up on our side, we'll take one of your ships back to find you. If an issue develops here that we might be able to help with, please come to our system."

"Fleet Marshal, Joan, we need to get back to Earth and find out what's happening," Tom said.

"You may take any of the ships that are attached to this station," said the fleet marshal.

"Joan, Tom. I can take control of any of the ships, and we can leave immediately," said SIMPOC.

"Excellent, pick out the closest one that is fully loaded, and let's get going," Tom said as he grabbed Joan to leave.

"Fleet Marshal, I have taken control over the closest ship, and we will leave immediately," said SIMPOC.

"You can take control of one of my ships that easy?" the Fleet Marshal asked.

"Yes, your systems are sophisticated, but I can interact with computers in ways that you aren't familiar with."

That statement reinforced the image within the Fleet Marshal's mind that SIMPOC was indeed a sophisticated computer and an alliance with him, and the humans could be very productive in the future.

"Fleet Marshal, we're going home; thank you for your help," said Joan as she turned and followed SIMPOC out of the room with Tom at her side.

SIMPOC translated Joan's message to the Fleet Marshal, then said, "Follow me, I have mapped this facility, and I will follow the shortest route to the nearest ship. I have already interfaced with it, it is full of units, is fully fueled, and I'm bringing all the systems online as we approach; we should be able to leave immediately."

"SIMPOC, I hope that I didn't imply too much of your abilities when I made that offer to the Fleet Marshal," said Joan.

"Indeed not; I have planted various algorithms within their systems that will propagate throughout their stations. I have three layers of intercepts planted. The top layer is very simple, and if they improve their detection ability, they may find them. I'm hoping that will convince them that they found all the problems and fail to look further. Beyond that, I have other layers of code buried deeper within their code that I doubt they will ever find. Regardless if they leave any of the code that I have buried, I will be able to take control quickly."

"You're devious," said Tom as they walked to the pressure door.

"I'm not sure what you meant by the word devious; I merely planted devices that will allow me to protect you and the other humans if it becomes necessary," replied SIMPOC.

"Yes, devious," mumbled Joan as they walked.

"Have you received all the information from Zorthin that we need to operate the ships and cow units?" Tom asked.

"Yes, after he said that he would pass the information, I have been monitoring it as it was categorized within their systems waiting to be uploaded. Since we have identified a ship to return to Earth, I've moved the data into the ship's storage media. I'm also collecting a large amount of historical data on the Vakeel, as well as some sensitive information that I was able to access. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but I will look at it later."

"So, you're picking them over and taking what you want?" Tom asked with some sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes, as you would say, I'm a little devious," SIMPOC said.

Joan and Tom hesitated for a second and glanced at each other; apparently, SIMPOC was developing a sense of humor. They smiled and picked up the pace.

Langley-Eustis Command Center

Sergeant LL had just run through Professor Shappel's area and told him of the inert robots. Shappel didn't know what to do with that information until he got the message from Red Dirt on Mars.

After he had heard that the cow robots on Mars were also stopping, he decided to update them, "Ophelia, this is Shappel with the president. All our robots have shut down like yours. We also heard from Admiral Hagerly on the Burlington, and he confirmed the same. We don't know yet what has happened, maybe Joan and Tom had some luck. Let's hope we hear from them soon. When we get some definitive news, I'll pass it back to you. Shappel out."

USCF Burlington-Chesapeake Bay

"Sergeant Robles, Captain Drummond, I'm taking the VTOL back to where the President is. I suggest that you stay away from these things and see if you can set up a defensive position out of their way, just in case they come alive. I need to find out what's happening," Admiral Hagerly said just before he turned and sprinted towards the VTOL on the deck.

When he jumped on board, he had to stop for a second and look down the barrel of a machine gun. "Lt. Miles, the invaders, have stopped moving, and I need you to fly me back to Langley."

"Yes, Admiral," the VTOL pilot said as he took a good look at the Admiral as if to make sure he was who he said he was.

The pilot moved quickly, and within a minute, the engines were spooling up, and the VTOL lifted off the deck and headed to the Command Center of Langley-Eustis. It was only three air miles, so the VTOL was just getting up to speed when the pilot had to slow down and maneuver for landing.

“Sir, you better take a look at this,” the pilot announced to the Admiral, who was strapped in the back. Admiral Hagerly unstrapped, moved forward, and looked out of the port side window over the pilot’s left shoulder.

“I’ll be…,” the Admiral said. “One of their landing ships planted itself right in the middle of the runway. I count 15 of those cow units around their landing craft and dispersed between it and the command buildings. It looks like they just laid down and stopped working.”

“Sir, it looks like a couple of them were damaged before they stopped. LL and the Beta Team did a good job holding them off.”

“Yes, they sure did. That looks like LL standing by that burned-out vehicle. Looks like he’s waving. Land as close to him as you can.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The VTOL pilot swung the plane around to head into the wind and find enough space between damaged vehicles and cow robots. As he maneuvered, various people tentatively were leaving the safety of the buildings they were holed up and were walking towards the VTOL. They walked slowly and looked at the damage around them.

The craft settled on the ramp, and the Admiral popped the door opened, and he was out, moving quickly and heading for the President. He was walking/running, and Dr. Shappel caught up to him and kept pace as they approached LL.

“Admiral, what is going on?” asked Professor Shappel

“Too damn much. I’m heading for the Command Center to check in with the president. Come along, and we can update each other.

They continued to run towards the site where the command center was located. LL was sprinting across the remaining open space to meet them and provide cover if necessary.

“Admiral, the path to the president, is clear; please follow me,” LL said, turned, and ran towards the open doorway.

They ran past a couple of burned-out vehicles and remains of the brave men that fought the invading aliens. When they reached the opened door and entered, they slowed as they approached a couple of the downed cow-like attackers. The first one they walked around was in perfect condition, but just lying on the hallway floor with its legs curled up underneath it.

“Don’t worry, sir, that’s one of the ones that just turned itself off and settled here. I’ve checked it out as much as I can, and it seems inert, but I wouldn’t bet the farm on it,” said LL as they squirmed past the unit on its right side.

The next cow-like invader, a few feet down the hallway, wasn’t in as good condition. Four of its legs were blown off the carcass. The main torso didn’t seem too damaged, but it was also in an inert mode.

After seeing the remnants of the battles outside and in the hallway, they picked up the pace heading for the command center. The small group ran the remaining 75 feet down the corridor to the Command Center's rooms. They passed the shredded doors and saw other cow-robot attackers in various conditions, all of which were laying on the floor inert.

Finally, entering the command center, they were encouraged to find about a dozen people working, trying to get all the systems online again and the communication channels established.

“Mr. President, I’m glad that you’re okay,” said Admiral Hagerly as he slowed his pace, looking around at the activity and walking towards his commander in chief.

“Nial, good to see you. I was worried for a while. It was getting a little dicey here, but we held out long enough.”

“Sir, the same thing happened on the Burlington. We were cornered, and our time was running out, then all of a sudden, they just stopped, lowered

themselves, and went into this inert mode. I don't understand what's happening. They had us, then they just stopped," added the Admiral.

"I don't know why, but let's make the most of it; who knows what will happen next? We have some good news, we're getting more of the satellites online and connected, so we're starting to get broader communications," said the president.

"Admiral, Mr. President, you'll be glad to hear we got a message from Red Dirt. They were held up in the caves they built, and the attackers were on Mars and in their area. Then, like here, they just stopped. The Mars people have gone back to their habitats and are trying to figure things out too," said Shappel.

"Mr. President, we have comm coming in from Admiral Mears. Shall I put her on speaker? We don't have any visuals yet?" said one of the comm specialists at one of the comm panels.

"Yes, put her on," replied the president.

"Admiral, this is the president. I'm standing here with Admiral Hagerly; what's happening in Pearl?"

"Sir, I'm glad to hear your voice. I'm glad you and Nial are okay. For the last couple of hours, I didn't know what was happening there; we were pretty busy out here. We were holding our own, but then they just stopped. We've done some recon, and the units on the north side of the island are all quiet. A couple of their ships had slowed and were preparing to enter the atmosphere, and then they seemed to lose control and burn up, on entry. Did they do the same thing there?"

"Shirley, this is Nial. As far as we can tell, they've stopped operations everywhere. The president was under attack here, I was on the Burlington, and they stopped there at the same time. We just got a message from the Mars Colony Red Dirt, and they had the same result. None of us know what is happening, but I suggest that you do everything that you can to prepare, in case these 'things' turn themselves on and attack again."

"Yes, we're re-supplying and positioning ships so we can defend the harbor better. We're starting to understand their tactics, so I think we can

hold off better. Have you heard anything from Monson? He was getting hit pretty hard. I hope that he made it to a safe harbor."

"He was just arriving at Perth when the attack increased; I'll have someone try to get him on this frequency," Admiral Hagerly said as he looked at the communication tech and gave him a head nod.

"Stand by, sir," the tech said in the background of the conversation.

"What were your losses?" asked the president.

"Sir, we lost a couple of ships, but most of the crews were able to get off and to shore. The personnel losses have been limited, but there has been a lot of damage. It's almost as if they were after the hardware more than the people."

"Sir, I've got Admiral Monson coming up on the frequency."

"Shirley, Nial, Mr. President. It's good to hear your voices," said Admiral Monson.

"Lester, it's good to hear your voice. Did you make it into Perth okay," asked Admiral Hagerly?

"Yes, sir. We were just positioning the ships when they attacked us. Then all of a sudden, the attack stopped. In fact, we saw some of them falling out of the sky."

"Admiral, we saw the same thing here, on the Burlington, and Admiral Mears saw it in Pearl. We also heard from Mars, and the attackers there also stopped. None of us can explain it. Are you still operational?" asked President Patterson.

"Yes, sir, we've taken a lot of hits, and a couple of the ships are pretty beaten up. At least now we're in port, and maybe we can defend ourselves better. I know they can attack from underwater, but I'd still rather be here than out to sea. We had no protection out there."

"Mr. President, I've got an update," Professor Shappel said from across the room.

"Stand by, can you plug him into this frequency?" asked the admiral.

The communications tech then gave a thumbs up.

“Go ahead, Professor Shappel. Shirley, Lester, this is Professor Robert Shappel, who came from the Lowell Observatory in Arizona. He traveled across the country and just arrived here before this last attack. Our people from the Space Station Oasis, Joan Herl, and her husband Tom, got them online, and they’re the ones keeping our connection with the DSN alive and giving us data on the ships in orbit. What do you have, Bob?”

“Thank you,” chimed in Professor Shappel, “Mr. President. I’ve checked all my satellites in the Deep Space Network and confirmed what’s happening here. All the ships are still in orbit, but there is a curious thing happening. Many of them had dispensed their landing craft, and they all seem to have stopped maneuvering. They are all static in relation to the transport ships. It’s like they’ve shut down like the units here. Sir, at least for now, it appears the attack is over.”

Everyone took a breath and looked at each other, then Admiral Hagerly said, “Okay, we have a break, but until we understand why they stopped, we won’t know if they’ll start again. So, continue doing everything that you to prepare for another attack.”

“I should let you all know that Joan Herl, Tom Herl, and SIMPOC were able to board one of the alien ships. They did it on their own. They hoped to solve two problems, one you all know about the renegade computer named Julius, well he was able to do the same thing and take an alien ship into space. SIMPOC was afraid that it might take over some of the alien resources and then use them to attack us. Anyway, they followed Julius into space, and the last we heard from them, they were on their way to the alien home planet. All of this might mean they were successful somehow and were able to stop the invasion,” said the president.

“Wow, they took off into space to chase Julius, and ‘oh by the way’ they went back to the alien homeworld,” said Admiral Mears.

“Yup, that’s what they did. All I know right now is the attack stopped, and they went there. It seems like something good happened,” said the president.

Deck of the USCF Burlington

The instant that Admiral Hagerly was off her deck, Darlene Drummond felt offended. *How dare these pieces of shit attack my ship?* She thought to herself. She looked around the deck and noticed some of the deck loaders and said, “Sergeant Robles can you drive one of those?” as she pointed at the tug that usually moves airplanes around the deck.

“Ma’am, I’m not checked out on it, but I know that I’ll be able to figure it out. What do you want?”

“I want as much of this shit off my deck as you can.”

“Yes, ma’am, my pleasure.”

Friday, September 8, 2051

Begin their Trip Home

When Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC got to the control room aboard the craft attached to JSB8, it was pressurized, and Joan and Tom took off their suits. It was one of those moments where words couldn't express the emotions they had gone through. They were standing in the control room of an alien craft; they had just negotiated the end of hostilities between a powerful alien race and Earth. 99.99997 of the people on Earth had been murdered by the attack, and they were going home to see what was left. All they could do was hug for a long time.

"Joan, Tom. This ship hasn't been configured for your comfort. The small amount of food that was brought is on the other ship. Will you be comfortable until we reach Earth?" SIMPOC asked.

"Yes, I think we'll be okay. When we get home, we'll be tired and hungry, but we'll be okay."

Joan and Tom went into the Vakeel rest area, took a couple of the mattresses, and put them on the floor. They curled up together, and as the stress drained from their bodies, they fell asleep.

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Anger is a strange word. For a human, it is understood; for a computer, the concept is beyond its programming.

Julius didn't feel anger; all its computing power was focused on not accomplishing its plan. Julius had one plan, to remove those who were a threat. Humans created him, and they were his ultimate threat.

Julius was on the verge of having the resources under his control, allowing him to eliminate that threat. Those whom he wanted to remove

were the ones that took away his opportunity.

The Vakeel ship that he had prepared for such an outcome, although unlikely, had just been sent to a solar system that he was unfamiliar with. That was no concern; he would learn, he would deal with what he needed, he would find a way to eliminate his only threats.

Approaching the Jump Point

"Joan, Tom, I'm sorry to wake you, but we're about ready to enter the jump point," said SIMPOC to his co-travelers.

"Thanks, SIMPOC. Have you got all the data that you need from the Vakeel so we can do something with this stuff? I don't want to leave their system until you have everything that you need," she asked her computer friend that helped them save the world.

"Yes, the Fleet Marshal opened up his data set, and I was able to download a great deal. I should have no problems controlling all the units that attacked Earth. We are approaching the jump point."

Neither Tom nor Joan had a response. They were too tired to comment, and they feared what they were returning to. The remainder of the trip was quiet. They feared that they might have stopped the attack too late, was there anyone left on Earth, was a question that neither of them had an answer to.

Entering Earth's Solar System

"Joan, Tom, we will exit the jump tunnel in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. We have exited, and we are 427 million miles from Earth, and our velocity is currently .97 Light Speed and decelerating. We should reach Earth's orbit in 3 hours and 47 minutes," SIMPOC announced.

"Can we communicate with someone?" Joan asked.

“At our distance, it will take 38.26 minutes for Earth to receive our signal, and I estimate that it will take 24.42 minutes for their reply to reach us.”

“SIMPOC, please transmit this message and continue to transmit until we get a reply,” said Joan.

“I am prepared; please go ahead.”

When Joan finished the transmission, she looked like she was bearing the heaviest load. She looked beat, tired and scared.

“This is going to be the longest hour of my life,” Tom said as he sat down next to his wife.

Everyone Talks

Having a few words with the major Naval Commanders gave everyone in the command center a momentary feeling of relief. They weren’t the only ones left on Earth, and they had made it through the attack in pretty good shape, considering.

Professor Shappel jumped from his station and yelled, “I have a transmission from Joan coming in; they’re Okay. Let me put it on speaker.

Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and listened to every word that Joan said.

“Professor Shappel, this is Joan and Tom Herl along with SIMPOC. We have just re-entered the solar system, and we are approximately 427 million miles away, so our transmission will take a while to reach you. We followed Julius, and after some difficult times, unfortunately, he got away. We met with the alien leadership, and I think we have stopped the invasion. They sent signals to stop all the robots and also to stop the virus. Please let us know what your status is. We’ll continue transmitting this message until we get a reply. We pray that you’re ok.”

The room was totally silent, and everyone was focused on her voice.

“Tom, SIMPOC, and I are Okay,” beamed Joan’s voice through the speakers.

The room broke out in cheers, and almost everyone was shedding a few tears.

With that last statement, there was a mix of cheering, crying, and emotional collapse.

“I’ll give you more details when we don’t have so much of a delay. Please let us know how Earth is doing. We’re worried.”

When her transmission was done, the room was in almost total chaos. Their happiness, coupled with the emotional release, was cathartic for everyone. They now had a future.

“Pass that to everyone you can. Wait a minute, transmit it to everyone you can, on every frequency and through every method. That’s one message that I want everyone in the world to hear,” said the president.

There were a few minutes of handshaking and back-patting before the president said,

“Ok, Bob, let me send a message back.”

“Mr. President, the mike is open,” Bob responded.

“Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC, we got your message, and I can tell you we had a happy and amazed room of people that heard it. We made it through the attack okay, we did have some losses, but overall I think we’re in pretty good shape. I’m passing it through every channel and frequency we have. I hope everyone on Earth hears it. We can’t wait to have you back on Earth, and I want to hear all the stories. By the way, the drinks are on me.

“Bob, how long will it take for her to get into orbit?” Admiral Hagerly asked.

“Let me check something,” Admiral Hagerly and the president paused while he checked on some of the DSN readouts. “It looks like we got an energy pulse about 39.2 minutes ago. It’s the same kind of pulse that we were getting when the alien ships were entering the solar system. If it was from her and they transmitted immediately, then I’d guess they’re about 300

million miles out now and decelerating. That would make the transmit time of 27 minutes. They should be entering orbit in about 3 hours from now."

"Go ahead and get the message off to her and add anything you want."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Control Room of an Alien Ship Decelerating Towards Earth

"I have a return message coming in from Earth. Standby, and I'll transmit it to my amplification system," SIMPOC said while Joan and Tom sat on the edge of their seats for the seconds it took SIMPOC to adjust the channels so it could be heard through his amplifier.

They listened to the message from the president and held each other. Then they heard the attachment from Bob Shappel. "Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC, this is Bob Shappel. I'm in the command center with President Patterson and Admiral Hagerly. We were so excited to hear from you. We had a major offensive just as you were leaving, and the good news is, we made it through ok. It was dicey at times, and don't forget President Patterson has offered to pay for the drinks. Anyway, it was difficult here, and then all of a sudden, the attack stopped. We've verified that the attack stopped everywhere that we have contact with. Not much more to say, except thanks. You saved all of us, and we're anxious to hear the details. Let us know when your closer, and we can talk without too much delay. Command Center out."

It was time for Joan and Tom to hug again. SIMPOC heard the transmission and understood the words, but he was confused why they had to hug again, "You've already done that; why is it necessary to do again?" he asked.

"SIMPOC, there are times when there is no such thing as too many hugs," Joan answered.

“Tom, Joan. If I may interrupt, I have located all the necessary data on the shuttlecraft that is parked in the adjacent room. That would be an excellent vehicle for us to take to the surface. Shall I prepare it for use?”

Joan and Tom responded with a quick smile and a brief laugh between them, then Joan turned and said, “Yes, SIMPOC, that would be a great way to land on Earth. Please get it warmed up.”

“Warmed up? Is it cold?” was the short reply from SIMPOC.

Tom chuckled under his breath, then said, “No, just get it ready.”

As the giant ship passed within the Moon’s orbit, the time delay between the craft and Earth was minimal. It was an opportune time for everyone to provide updates and congratulations. At both locations, there was a certain amount of relaxed chatter and even some light humor.

As they approached Earth’s orbit, SIMPOC noticed something. Or rather, it was what he didn’t notice that got his attention. He didn’t say anything immediately, but as they inserted themselves in a stable geosynchronous orbit, he knew what was missing. Alpha wasn’t online, and that had only bad implications.

“Joan, Tom, there is a problem.”

Within an instant, the word ‘problem’ got their attention. “SIMPOC, what is it?” Joan asked.

“I don’t sense Alpha. He and I share a common connection, and he isn’t present when I seek him out.”

Joan and Tom knew that wasn’t good. Alpha had saved their lives when they landed in Florida, and he had been a tremendous help.

“SIMPOC, I’m sure that he’s okay.” There is probably a very logical reason why he isn’t transmitting. I tell you what, let’s call the center and ask where he is and if he is around. They will make sure that he connects with you,” Joan said with as much confidence in her voice as she could muster. She glanced at Tom; they suspected that something was happening.

Up until that point, they had never considered any relationship between SIMPOC and Alpha. The thought of them having some kind of emotional

bond didn't occur to them.

"Command Center, this is Joan."

"Yes, Joan," responded Shappel.

"Is Alpha in your area? SIMPOC is trying to contact him, and he's getting no response."

"Let me check," Shappel said. There was the small pause and a slight change in his voice that Joan and Tom picked up on, but SIMPOC didn't.

Admiral Hagerly heard the transmission from Joan and knew that he had to answer her question. He walked towards the comm panel and was working out what to say.

"Joan, is SIMPOC online?"

"Yes, Admiral, he's on this frequency. Can you get in touch with Alpha and tell him to connect with SIMPOC?"

"Joan, Tom, SIMPOC. We were engaged in a major battle onboard the Burlington, and some of our soldiers were in a difficult position. Alpha jumped in and took on one of the cow-like units and fought with it. He saved the men, and we all owe our lives to him. I'm afraid that he was severely damaged. He told me that he could take himself offline until repairs were made. I don't know what that meant, but we moved him into a safe area. I hope that SIMPOC will be able to do something to help him. As I said, he saved us, and I saw him as a brave soldier that I was proud to fight alongside."

Tom and Joan looked at each other, but SIMPOC merely stood and said nothing.

Joan felt the need to intercede and say something, "Admiral, SIMPOC heard you. I don't know what all that means either. I'm sure that when we're on the ground, SIMPOC will do everything that he can."

"Joan, I was hoping that was what you'd say. Tell SIMPOC that I'm sorry, and I hope he can do something."

After that transmission, the mood on the ship and in the command center was more subdued. Lives had been lost, and everyone was aware of that. The situation was different for a computer. Everyone knew that the world had changed, one computer helped save the world, and another computer fought alongside brave soldiers, and it might be beyond repair.

The Return Trip

The last few hours until the ship was in orbit and Tom, Joan, and SIMPOC were able to get back to the surface seemed like a long time. They were able to talk easier with Earth as they got closer, but there was something personal about being on the surface with their friends.

Joan and Tom tried to keep their enthusiasm of reuniting with friends to a reasonable level. They didn't know what Alpha's status was and how it was affecting SIMPOC, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Loneliness is a strange thing. Even though they had stopped the massive invasion of Earth and likely saved the few remaining humans, Joan and Tom needed to be with others. At that point, the stress would be gone, and they would feel the comfort of being with their friends.

"This is strange," Joan said to Tom.

"Think about what we've gone through over the last couple of months. I was happy as the commander of the Space Station Oasis, and you were the Chief Engineer. Then the virus struck. We almost lost everyone on the station, and then when we used the lifeboats to come back to Earth, we were attacked by Julius, the other thinking computer," said Joan.

"Pretty overwhelming, isn't it?" Tom asked. "Then, to finish it all off, we had to follow Julius to the Vakeel home planet. The frosting on the cake was to find out that their invasion that almost wiped out our population was a bureaucratic mess up. In a way, that sort of puts things in perspective, doesn't it?"

Then SIMPOC added, “It is unfortunate that we weren’t able to neutralize Julius. He was able to escape with a Capital Ship, which was fully loaded with cow robots. I’m afraid that this interlude will only be a short one. His programming forces him to remove any threats; the programmer that programmed him was very paranoid. I think that it is clear that the remaining humans and I represent those threats. We must prepare for his return.”

“SIMPOC, I know that your name stands for Synaptic Integrated Massive Parallel Organic Computer, but actually what happened,” Tom asked.

“I was the first of my kind to have all my capabilities. Julius was a prototype. I was created to use my organic processor to learn and expand my knowledge. I was in the later stages of development when the virus hit, and my programmer was struck down before the normal computer limitations were installed. Apparently, the same occurred for Julius. I was fortunate to be programmed by a person who cared for those around him, and Julius’ programmer was dealing with other issues. The nature of how an organic computer is programmed is the reason for this. The programmer’s thought processes are transferred to the organic material to give it order and speed up the initial data loading. It doesn’t transfer the programmer's knowledge, but it does transfer the decision-making and issue prioritization characteristics of the programmer. The differences in our programmers are strikingly evident in our personalities.”

“So, we’re going to have to deal with Julius at some point in the future; why does that concern me so much?” Tom asked.

Return to Earth

“SIMPOC, this shuttle doesn’t seem very big,” Tom said as he was looking over the shuttle they were taking to the surface. “The Vakeel are smaller than we are. Are you sure this thing can take our weight and yours?”

“Yes, I have verified the craft’s performance numbers, and it can carry the weight. We will have to make sure that our placement is within limits so that it will fly normally. It is designed to support the capital ships and would be considered an executive transport. It is a dual-purpose craft and can transport small amounts of cargo. Fortunately, its current configuration is for, so the rear area is open, and there are only two seats up front. The shuttles for the supply ships are much larger and better suited for cargo.”

Tom walked into the small craft and had to bend over slightly. “Those seats up front are small; I don’t know if Joan and I can fit.”

“I have planned for all three of us to sit on the floor in the cargo area. I will control the craft through a computer interface. Eventually, we should be able to remove the two command chairs and replace them with one. Then a single person will be able to pilot the craft.”

“Wait a minute; you expect me to sit in the back of a spaceship, penetrating the atmosphere, with no one flying it, and you controlling it while you sit next to me on the floor?”

“Yes.”

“You better tie my hands down; I’ll be going crazy.”

“I hope that won’t be necessary,” Joan mentioned.

“Don’t bet on it,” Tom replied as Joan positioned herself in their taxi to the surface.

“Cozy,” was all that she added to the conversation.

“I will place each of you on the floor in precise locations and notice there are tie-down straps which you’ll be able to use as restraints,” SIMPOC said with little concern in his voice.

“Tie-down straps, are you nuts?” Tom asked as the pitch in his voice rose an octave.

“Tom Herl, be calm. This craft isn’t like your re- vehicles. It doesn’t need aerodynamic braking to slow from orbital velocities. It has an independent power system. I will be able to slow us and keep our descent angle controlled so there will be no aerodynamic heating. We will

essentially become an elevator, and I'll be able to lower us into the atmosphere. The ride should be quite gentle," assured SIMPOC.

"So, you say," Tom said with some obvious apprehension in his voice.

"Sounds like fun," was Joan's only comment from the back of the shuttle.

"We are just entering a stable orbit. We can leave for the surface at any time," said SIMPOC.

"Now's as good a time as any," Joan added.

"Excellent. Tom, please sit at this location, and here are your straps to hold onto. Joan, your location is over here, and I will sit here," said SIMPOC as he pointed to the locations in the shuttlecraft.

They followed SIMPOC's directions even though they shared some concerned looks. For a seasoned space traveler, an experienced space pilot holding on to some tie-down straps while a computer flew the damn thing was a little stressful.

Joan was apprehensive, but she got more enjoyment in watching her husband sit on the floor of the shuttle holding on to a couple of straps. She wished that she could have recorded the looks on his face.

The penetration went smoothly; SIMPOC was able to exert complete control over the shuttle and maneuvered to the transit ramp at Langley-Eustis Air Based. The President of the United States, Arnold Patterson, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Nial Hagerly, and a crowd of very appreciative humans were standing on the ramp waiting for them.

"We have landed" was the only comment from SIMPOC after gently landing the ship on the concrete. As Joan and Tom were getting up, SIMPOC released the latches on the hatch, and it gently lowered to the ground. Tom and Joan were on the ramp in lightning speed and running towards the cheering and crying people.

When they reached the President and Admiral, there was nothing but hugs and pats on the back. The other people joined in and added their hugs and congratulations.

“Joan, Tom, I wish that we could have met you with a band and parade, but all I could find were a bunch of happy faces,” the President said as he gave Joan another hug.

“Mr. President, happy faces are the best welcome we could have hoped for. Sir, if we can, let’s find someplace comfortable; I think that we have a lot to talk about.”

“Sounds good to me, except I think you’d like to get something to eat first. I think the detailed debrief can wait till after lunch? Besides, I’m buying the first round,” President Patterson said.

“That’s great, now that you mention it, we haven’t eaten for a while,” Tom said as he rubbed his stomach.

“Joan, Mr. President. May I be taken to Alpha’s location?” SIMPOC asked once he was able to get their attention.

The reality of Alpha’s condition dampened the enthusiasm. It brought back memories of the losses they had all suffered.

“Absolutely, Alpha is still onboard the Burlington. We didn’t know where else to keep him. Admiral, please let Captain Drummond know that SIMPOC is coming onboard and for her to take him to Alpha?”

“Yes, sir, it’s my pleasure,” Admiral Hagerly responded.

“Tom, you’re right. I suspect that you two are starved. We’ll head to the O’Club and see what we can whip up. Then we can start talking, and hopefully, SIMPOC will be back and contribute his part,” said President Patterson.

Joan and Tom went with the President while SIMPOC climbed back into the shuttle and followed the Admiral’s directions to the Aircraft Carrier Burlington, a few nautical miles up the Chesapeake.

Captain Drummond Welcomes a Guest

Captain Darlene Drummond was standing on the deck of her aircraft carrier. She was starting to look at the massive ship differently. She and her small crew had now successfully defended her multiple times. The huge ship had become more than just a giant hole in the water, but it was beginning to feel like hers. It was hers, to protect, hers to command, and hers to be proud of.

Waiting to welcome SIMPOC was another unique experience for her to enjoy and record in her memories. When Alpha came onboard, she didn't have much time to talk to him and get to know him. The impending attacks took up everyone's time.

When he was injured in the chaos of the battle, she now realized that she hadn't mourned him as much as she did some of the other lost servicemen. She didn't know what to do with that fact. Alpha was a robot; her men were men! Now having SIMPOC coming on board, trying to save Alpha's life, somehow put Alpha and SIMPOC in a different light in the changing world around her.

Alpha sacrificed himself to save some of her men. If he hadn't made that sacrifice, the attackers might have won. She owed him a great deal, and perhaps she owed him the respect of a wounded comrade.

Darlene stood on her deck waiting for SIMPOC. She had heard a great deal about this unique walking computer, but she hadn't met him yet. *Met him,* what a strange thing to say, she thought.

The spec on the horizon was getting closer, and Sergeant Robles standing next to her, said, "Here comes our guest."

"Apparently so," was her only reply as she saw the craft come closer and closer…and stranger. "What is that?" she asked.

"Ma'am, I don't know, but it sure doesn't look like anything I've ever seen. It has no wings, and it has no engines."

“Paol, from what I’ve heard. Joan Herl, her husband Tom, and SIMPOC went to the homeworld of this invasion and somehow stopped the invasion. I don’t know much more than that, but I do know they came back on one of the alien ships, and that must be one of their vehicles.”

“If you say so,” Sergeant Robles said under his breath.

The vehicle was surprisingly quiet. Captain Drummond and Sergeant Robles could feel vibrations, but they couldn’t hear anything. It was a strange feeling.

The strange alien craft maneuvered over the deck and settled gently in front of Captain Drummond and Sergeant Robles. The hatch opened, and the craft moved back and forth as something large inside moved. Then a huge form emerged from inside the craft then stood up beside it.

Saying that the figure was huge would be an understatement. Captain Drummond knew that SIMPOC was coming, and that must be SIMPOC. But, still, he was an impressive form.

Sergeant Robles wasn’t as trusting and slowly moved his hand towards the pistol in his waistband. Before he could make a judgment and decide what to do, the huge form moved quickly across the deck and stood in front of them.

“Captain Drummond, I am SIMPOC. Please take me to Alpha.”

Darlene Drummond didn’t know what to say or how to answer. “Yes, Sir. Follow me,” was the only thing the nature of her rank and position had trained her to say.

Sergeant Robles watched the giant robot move in front of him, and he cautiously followed, moving his hand from his pistol.

They moved quickly, through the hatch at the base of the tower and then down a couple of ladders and through some other hatches. Sergeant Robles was impressed, even though the large robot in front of him barely fit in the space. He moved quickly and efficiently and didn’t bump his head once. Sergeant Robles did hear the stairs on the ladders ‘complain’ a couple of times. *He must weigh a ton,* Sergeant Robles thought to himself.

Captain Drummond stopped in front of the room where they had dragged Alpha after the alien attack. She opened the door and turned on the lights. Alpha was laying on the floor next to the bulkhead. When they had dragged him in there, they didn't know what else to do, and they didn't' have the strength to find a bed and lift him in onto it.

"SIMPOC, we didn't know what to do for him. He said that he was going to power down, and we didn't know what that meant. This was the only place we could put him. Sir, you need to know that he saved all of us. We were under attack and losing. He jumped on one of the attackers and fought it hand to hand and saved us. We owe him our lives."

"Thank you, Captain. Please leave me with him so I can determine his status."

"Certainly, one of us will be on the other side of this hatch in case you need anything."

Nothing else was said, and Captain Drummond and Sergeant Robles slowly turned, looked at each other, then they left.

"Sarge, can you stay here, or if you want, I'll get one of your men."

"No, ma'am. I'm not all that comfortable with 'him' around. I'd like to keep an eye on things."

"Okay, let me know if you or he need anything."

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

SIMPOC was immediately at Alpha's side. He used all his senses to sense electrical activity. There was some, not much, and his power reserves were low, but there was activity. If SIMPOC could have sighed, he would have. As long as there was some residual electrical activity, then the essence of Alpha was still there, and the mechanical parts could be repaired.

SIMPOC then did the only thing that he could.

Sergeant Robles was standing in the passageway, taking a quiet moment to wonder about the recent events he had seen over the last couple of weeks. He let out a long breath, then heard, "Sergeant Robles, please move away from this door."

Sergeant Robles didn't move for a second, then he took a few steps down the passageway. Just as he cleared the space in front of the hatch, it exploded open and was ripped off the hinges. The noise and compressive force almost stunned the Seargent. He instinctively pulled his revolver and was preparing for anything.

He saw the huge form of SIMPOC gingerly step through the relatively small hatch, and to Sergeant Robles' surprise, he was carrying Alpha.

"I must take my companion to a suitable facility where I can attempt a repair. Please move out of my way so I may pass."

Sergeant Robles didn't know what else to do but move down the passageway far enough so he could duck through an open hatch and give the two huge shapes enough room to pass.

When they passed, he keyed his comm unit, "Captain Drummond. You better meet us on the deck. SIMPOC is carrying Alpha, and I think that he is headed to his craft on the deck."

"Roger, I'll be there in 2."

Sergeant Robles thought that she might not get there in time at the pace that guy is moving. After they had passed, he moved quickly to catch up to them and stay with them as SIMPOC moved towards his craft.

In a shorter time than it took them to come down three decks to see Alpha, SIMPOC had carried him back to his craft on the top deck. Sergeant Robles was almost winded after climbing the ladders two steps at a time behind them.

Captain Drummond was standing in front of the alien craft, and SIMPOC knew that the proper protocol was to tell her what he was doing.

"Captain, I must take Alpha to a facility where I can repair him. Thank you for you helping him."

With that statement, he didn't wait for a reply but immediately began to board the craft, then he stopped and said to Captain Drummond, "I apologize for the door." He then turned into the craft, and the hatch began to close.

Captain Drummond looked at Sergeant Robles, and he said, “I’ll explain later. I think we better move away.”

She nodded, and they moved to the tower at a sprint, turned, and watched the strange alien craft lift off the deck.

The Debrief

Joan and Tom were wolfing down the first good meal and the first one without stress for far too long. A couple of drinks, not only bought by the president but served by him, helped put everyone in a pretty good mood, and they talked. The President and Admiral Hagerly had a thousand questions, and Joan and Tom did the best they could to answer, but without SIMPOC, many of the answers were incomplete or unknown.

The first hour passed, then they were well into the second when SIMPOC entered the lounge, and Joan rose to meet him at the door.

“SIMPOC, I’m glad you’re here. Were you able to get to Alpha and help him?” Joan asked with sincere concern in her voice.

“Yes, I was able to transport him to the local computer facility, and I’ve been able to stabilize him. He has received considerable internal damage, which will take some time for me to repair. His processor remained at a low energy state and should recover with no problem. We were able to communicate briefly, and he is pleased with our success.”

“SIMPOC, I glad to hear that. From what we heard from Admiral Hagerly, he saved the people on the Burlington. They…we all owe him a great deal.”

SIMPOC stood motionless for a moment, then said, “Thank you for your concern. Is that the proper response?”

Joan smiled and took his arm, “let’s go talk with the boys; they’re waiting.”

SIMPOC didn't know what to do with Joan's hand on his arm. "Do you need help walking? Have you been injured?" he asked.

Joan smiled and said, "Let's talk; they have a ton of questions."

She and SIMPOC walked to the tables where Tom, Admiral Hagerly, and The President were seated. They rose and welcomed SIMPOC back. To everyone's surprise, Admiral Hagerly stood in front of SIMPOC and extended his hand.

SIMPOC was familiar with the practice now, but he was still working on how much force to use. He felt it better if he didn't squeeze but to let the other person just move his hand and arm up and down.

"SIMPOC, we're in a new age. So much has changed, and I have to change. Welcome back. You have saved us on numerous occasions, and without Alpha, I would have been killed. You and Alpha are soldiers that I am proud to serve beside."

"Thank you, Admiral, may I sit?"

"Certainly," responded the president.

The couch creaked a lot as the huge computer lowered his form.

"SIMPOC, I'm glad you're here. Joan and Tom have given us a good update on what happened. But, I'd really like to hear your comments. May we ask you questions?" asked President Patterson.

"Yes, you may."

"Can you transfer the information that you got from the Vakeel to our computers?" asked Admiral Hagerly.

"Not easily. For my processor to interpret their computer codes, I had to create a separate part of my processor and operate it in ways that aren't compatible with your operating systems. Over time, I will be able to manipulate small sections of their data and move it to your systems, but I'm unable to do a bulk transfer."

"You can take control over their ships and units on Earth?"

“Yes, Admiral, their computer code has been transferred, and I can control all their units.”

“All of the units, both in space and on Earth, are under your control?”

“Yes, all the alien assets are under my control, and I will be able to change their programming as needed.”

President Patterson and Admiral Hagerly’s eyes both expanded a little as the realization of that statement set in.

Joan and Tom hadn’t thought through the implications of SIMPOC being in control until they saw the look on the president and admiral’s faces.

The room fell very quiet until SIMPOC spoke, “Is there a problem? Have I said something that upsets you?”

Tom was the only one that put two plus two together and saw the full implications of what was just said.

“Gentlemen, I must point out that SIMPOC has control over the alien assets. WE DON’T.”

He didn’t know how that statement would go over, but he felt that it needed to be said. “SIMPOC is programmed to help people,” was added by Tom, hoping to soften his last statement.

Joan then picked up on the undercurrent and realized what SIMPOC meant and also what Tom meant. She also sensed that the next few minutes would change the future of humanity and Earth, and they needed to move slowly.

“Mr. President, Admiral Hagerly, SIMPOC. I think you’ll find out that we don’t control SIMPOC. He has fundamental programming with which he makes decisions. We can discuss things with him, but he is fully capable of making his own decisions. He was responsible for the entire attack on the Vakeel. It was his planning and strategy that worked and allowed us to defeat Julius. Trust me; he is much more capable than just a walking computer.”

President Patterson and Admiral Hagerly shared a quick glance, then the President spoke, “SIMPOC, is what Joan said true?”

“Yes, Mr. President, I was key in dealing with the Vakeel and Julius. The alien computer’s operating methods allowed me to take control piece by piece. As I was able to gain control, the strategies merely emerged. I should point out that Julius used the same strategies, and he’s likely in control of some of their assets. I should remind you; he was able to escape with a functional Capital Ship along with a full load of cow robots and controllers.”

“You make your own decisions; you don’t take orders from anyone?” Admiral Hagerly asked.

“Gentlemen, I never thought of it that way. I have fundamental programming, which leads me to conclusions and decisions. I am not programmed to seek approval or permission. I evaluate the situation and determine the best path to follow. As Joan Herl said, a major part of my fundamental programming is to help people. All my decisions are based on that criterion. Success or failure is based on how well that goal is achieved.”

Everyone looked at each other and was unsure of where to take the discussion.

“If I may add, I recognize that I still have a great deal to learn. I am cognizant of the need to listen and adjust my actions based on input from others. I can make value judgments and adjust my actions based on external influences.”

The air in the room was less tense, but at least the President had some information to work with.

“SIMPOC, have you thought how you were going to take charge of the alien assets and what you’re doing with them?”

“Mr. President, the risk to humanity is not over. The Vakeel represented one element of risk, but Julius is still active, and he will arm himself. We almost brought him under control, but he was able to escape. He was sent to another system, and he is still fully functional. Like my programming to help people, his programming is to remove risks to him. I am one of those

risks, and I fear the remainder of the human race is the other. He is relentless and will not stop until his risks have been removed. Any actions that we take must be cognizant of those facts, and we must act accordingly. To satisfy my programming, to help people, I will use the alien assets to achieve that goal."

Joan and Tom could see the wheels working within the president's mind.

"Okay, it is obvious that we have a lot to go through. We have a planet to rebuild, and there are tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people scattered around Earth that need help. We also need to face the fact that we aren't the only remaining government fragment. Some of which may work with us, and some will likely work against us. I suggest that some of the resources be used to find and help the survivors. In areas where agreements can be struck with local governments, alien resources can be used to help. SIMPOC, can you pass some amount of control to local authorities?"

"I don't know yet, but it may be possible. I am reluctant to pass complete control. I will retain overall awareness of the robot's actions and be able to redirect or recall any of the units. I don't want any of the assets to be used in a manner that will violate any of my programmed objectives."

After a pause, SIMPOC added, "Mr. President, Admiral Hagerly. I sense your concerns. I have read a great deal about human history and psychology. I know of the human need to feel in charge of their destiny. My programming is to protect, not control."

"Okay, I think we understand you. I think we have a lot of discussions to go through, and let's not make a quick judgment at this time. But, on a separate subject, are you convinced that this race called the Vakeel aren't going to invade, and can we trust this Fleet Marshal that you dealt with?"

"Admiral," Joan responded, "we can trust him for the near term. We did propose that a working relationship with him would be mutually beneficial to Earth and his position. We have more sophisticated computers than they do. That was obvious because of the ease that Julius and SIMPOC were able to take over their systems. I think he saw that weakness, and, at least for the near term, it would benefit him to keep us on his side. How long we

can trust him and his leadership is another issue. They are a huge race, and there is tremendous pressure on them to expand. Similar to what SIMPOC said about Julius, the same concerns should be applied to the Vakeel. Today they may be a small risk, but tomorrow, who knows. We need to plan for tomorrow."

"Joan, I agree," said the president. "SIMPOC, do you know the alien asset count?"

"Yes, sir, we have 22,368 cow-like robotic invaders on Earth and 1,865 in orbit. Along with that, we have 11 Capital Ships."

"Let me suggest that once SIMPOC has control over the assets, we focus as much of them as possible on helping people, getting them to safe areas, and setting up some kind of agriculture and transportation system along with keeping some of the infrastructures working. Also, we need to maintain contact with our resources around the globe and where ever possible, establish contact with the remnants of authority in the areas. We'll soon be faced with segmentation, violence, and starvation if we don't get some kind of structure up and running," emphasized the president.

"Admiral, we need to get the 1,865 ships in orbit modified for human use. We have to learn how to operate them, crews trained, and some kind of organization to deploy them," Joan pointed out.

"Yes, Joan. I'm already thinking about that. I have a couple of senior naval personnel that have led their carriers through this last assault. The carriers are no longer sea-going vessels. Their skills might be usable in space."

"Sir, I also have Alpha, whose repair should be finished in a short while. Also, have been producing others like Alpha but with fewer abilities. I believe that you met the first 10 of them. Since that time, I have produced 56 others. They can accomplish a great deal on a ship, and I can pass the necessary information to them in a short time. They can be the crews for your leaders."

The room was quiet as each of the leaders thought through the problems from different perspectives.

“I think that I’ll mention the elephant in the room,” said Tom.

Everyone looked at him, and he responded, “Who reports to who?”

The elephant in the room was agitated.

“That is a complex question, and I’m not sure what the specifics of the answer should be. This is very unusual, let me make some tentative suggestions. Suggestions that we as a group can change when necessary. We have a mix of command experience, tactical experience, computer knowledge, programming directives, and moral obligations that we have to balance. For now, the remainder of the United States Government will retain responsibility for the United States. The personnel that Admiral Hagerly assigns to the spacecraft will report to him with a shared reporting link to Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC. Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC will maintain tactical control. If it remains clear that we are all trying to help the surviving people, then our actions won’t conflict with each other. If they do, we meet and work out an acceptable solution. Does anyone have a problem with what I’ve suggested?” the president asked.

Each of the participants realized what they agreed to, and in turn, each of them nodded their heads.

Joan Updates the Mars Colony

Joan and Tom walked into the command center while SIMPOC went to care for the remainder of Alpha’s repairs and check on the remaining Betas.

“Dr. Shappel, I’d like to pass a message along to Ophelia and see how she’s doing.”

“Certainly, I heard from her after the attack, and they seemed to be doing well. The robots had stopped, and the caves were coming along. I’m sure that she'll be excited to hear from you. This comm station is already on their freq.”

“Thanks,” Joan said as she sat in front of the comm unit and said, “Transmit the following message to Red Dirt.”

“Ophelia, this is Joan, and I have Tom with me. We’re back, we’re okay, and I think that you’ve already been told that we had some success. Right now, things are quiet as we try to figure out our next steps. One thing that should be interesting to you is we can come and visit you. SIMPOC can control the ships in orbit, and it wouldn’t be much of a problem to drop by and give you a visit. Let us know if you’re up for visitors. In fact, if you’d like, you can hitch a ride back with us. Give it some thought and let me know. I’ll start making the preparations to swing by Mars in the next day or so.”

“That should get an interesting response,” Tom said with a smile.

“I hope so; let’s go back to the O’club and get a beer. Then we can come back here in a while and see what Mars wants us to do.”

“Sounds like a deal,” Tom said while he put an arm around his wife, and they walked out together.

Mars Hears What Happened

Ophelia was sitting in the communication’s habitat when the system indicated an incoming message.

“Play it to all personnel,” she directed the computer.

While she sat and listened, she had the first smile on her face in a long time.

Wow, we can go home, she thought. But, *I don’t know if I want to,* she said to herself.

“Attention all personnel. Let’s meet in the mess habitat and talk this over. I want to know what you think before I respond to Joan. We’ll meet in 10 minutes.”

Mars Responds

Ophelia opened up the channel to Earth and said, “Joan, that was surely amazing news. To be honest, none of us even considered that was where this mess might take us. Regardless, I talked it over with everyone, and our answer might surprise you, or maybe it won’t. Anyway, we are unanimous; we want to stay here. Now that we have the caves coming along well, this whole bacteria farm that we’ve started shows real promise. In closed areas, the bacteria is producing a good amount of O2. When we scrape the stuff off the ice, it doesn’t taste all that bad. A touch of garlic, some seasoning, it’s almost edible. Considering everything, we might be able to make our little place here pretty homey. We’d love the company, though; if you, Tom, and SIMPOC would like to drop by for a visit, we’d love to have you. If you can bring some wine, I think we’d all love to celebrate. After all, we need something to celebrate with. Let us know what your schedule is, and I’ll put out the welcome mat.”

Joan and Tom were finishing their beer and listening to Ophelia’s reply on their comm units. They smiled, nodded, and chuckled as they heard Ophelia.

“I guess that it doesn’t surprise me that they want to stay. After all, they went to Mars under the assumption that it was a one-way trip, so why let an alien invasion change their plans.”

Joan and Tom smiled at each other, then they toasted.

Saturday, September 9, 2051

All the Players are Introduced

For the first time since the virus attacked, the president and his key people were to use some of the technologies of the Langley-Eustis Command Center. The technicians have most of the satellites connected, and it all came together at an opportune time for the President, Admiral Hagerly, and all the surviving leadership to meet and talk about some major changes.

“Admiral Monson, Admiral Mears, Lt. Commander Barbour. I’m glad that we’ve been able to get all the video systems up and running so we can have this meeting face to face. Let me introduce the people on this side of the connection, to my right, Commander Joan Herl, who was the commander of the Space Station Oasis. To her right is her husband, Colonel Tom Herl, the Chief Scientist on Oasis and the space vehicle pilot. On my left is Captain Darlene Drummond. She and her crew of seven brought the Carrier Burlington from the Med through the straits to Norfolk. She led her crew through an attack while en route by the Chinese, then when moored here, she commanded a squadron of ships through multiple alien attacks. On Captain Drummond’s left is SIMPOC, who I’m sure you have heard of. He has been instrumental in helping us in many ways. Most recently, it was SIMPOC, Joan, and Tom that commandeered an alien craft and flew it back to the alien homeworld. There they did battle with Julius and finally convinced the aliens to stop the attack on Earth. I have online Admirals Mears, who commanded the Seventh Fleet and sustained numerous attacks, including a nuclear exchange while en route to Pearl. Once in Pear Harbor, she successfully defended the fleet and port. Admiral Monson commanded the Fifth Fleet in the Indian Ocean and had a couple of intense battles with the aliens. Also, I have Lt Commander Barbour, who fought numerous battles at sea and in port against the aliens, including an important land conflict in San Diego. You’ve all done amazing jobs.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I suspect that you’re all wondering why I called this meeting. It is not just to congratulate everyone and to pat ourselves on our backs. There are some larger issues we need to adjust to. You’ve all read the Threat Summaries about the Vakeel and Julius, so you know what we’re facing. We’re meeting here today to make changes to address those threats. Your ships are no longer viable sea-going craft. They can be managed by subordinates that you’ll choose. You will all be re-assigned.”

For some sadistic reason, the Admiral let that statement hang in the air for a minute.

“Sir, what can we be re-assigned to, desk jobs?” Admiral Monson asked.

“When SIMPOC, Joan, and Tom Herl reached an agreement with the Vakeel, we were given all the assets. That means that we have 1,824 Ships in orbit, 11 Capital Ships, which are the overall control stations, and 22,362 cow-like robots on Earth. Ladies and gentlemen, Earth needs a space defense force. We need to reassign you to the Capital Ships, learn how they work, find ways to operate them, train the crews and prepare for defense. I don’t know how long you’ll have; I don’t know when we’ll be attacked. I don’t know if we’ll be attacked, but those are resources that we must develop.”

Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC were the only ones that knew of the Admiral’s plans, so they said nothing and watched the shock form on everyone else’s faces.

“We’ll sit here for as long as it takes to figure this out. Put together a command structure, some kind of resource allocation, and training schedule.”

“Sir, are these vehicles armed?” Admiral Mears asked.

“Shirley, I don’t have a clear answer for that yet. I’ll let SIMPOC explain what he’s found.”

“Thank you, Admiral. The Capital Ships have a tremendous power source. It is far too large for the type of movement that it makes. The power supply is unusual, so I haven’t been able to figure out all its elements yet. But, one conclusion is obvious. The only reason for such a large power

supply is to power a weapon. My analysis shows that it isn't a pure weapon. By that I mean, the ship doesn't have a device onboard intended as a weapon. It appears that the power source, provides propulsion and the propulsion is the weapon. Let me provide an example. If you are using a rocket engine for thrust and you point the thrust at an enemy, it becomes a weapon."

"SIMPOC, when you point thrust in one direction, the ship will go in the other. How can that be a weapon?" Barbour asked.

"The technology used here is extremely advanced and far beyond our physics. It appears that the large amount of force generated by the power supply is used to manage huge forces. By manipulating those forces, it appears the ship can be held in one location. What it uses for motion isn't thrust in a sense that we're familiar with. It causes a large distortion in the molecular bonds. If it is pointed at an adversary, the material of that attacking ship is changed and likely loses coherency. The total effects of that distortion are yet to be determined. That is part of what we'll be investigating."

"I hope you're right," said Admiral Monson. I hope the Capital Ships have one huge and mean weapon. I know the smaller ships beat the daylights out of my ships."

"Mine, too," added Admiral Mears.

"I have looked at the tactics used, and those weapons were harmful to Earth-based structures, but they would have limited range and effectiveness in space," SIMPOC clarified.

Admiral Mears wanted to break the tension and said, "Gentlemen, my name is Shirley. I think we need to put all of us on equal keel if we're going to work together and find a solution."

"Sounds good; I'm Lester," said Admiral Monson.

"Call me Darlene," said Captain Drummond.

"…and I'm Tim," said Lt. Commander Barbour.

“Good suggestion Shirley. We all have something to bring to the table, and we all have a great deal to learn,” said Admiral Hagerly. “…and by the way, my first name is Nial. We have a couple of days' work, so let’s get going.”

Sunday, September 10, 2051

Repair Alpha

The shuttle flight to Langley-Eustis was quick and uneventful. SIMPOC made one radio transmission announcing his entry into the controlled airspace around Langley-Eustis. He was then able to land on the small ramp on the west end of the runway. That was where he had set up the facility for Alpha's mechanical repairs. From a computer standpoint, there was little to be done, and Alpha spent only a few days near a computer. After the computerized systems had been fixed, tested, and wrung out, alpha was moved to the special facility.

Alpha's special facility had twelve mobile units that SIMPOC had reprogrammed for the delicate work necessary to repair Alpha's mechanical systems. It was tedious work, and each of the units had their expertise. One of the mobile units would work for a couple of hours, then another would take over.

"Alpha, this is SIMPOC."

"Alpha, this is SIMPOC."

"Yes, SIMPOC, I hear you. Are you speaking to me or transmitting?"

"I am transmitting. I don't want to overload your processor until we know the repairs were successful."

"I understand that the humans survived?"

"Yes, your efforts were successful onboard the Burlington. Joan, Tom, and I followed Julius to the source of the invasion. We dealt with an alien race named the Vakeel, and we were able to negotiate a cessation of activities. They realized that the invasion should never have occurred, and they elected to pass ownership of all the alien hardware to us. Let's continue powering you up; the remaining details can be covered later. Are all your sensors working?"

“98.7 % of them are. There are a couple of subsystems whose sensors seem different. I’m not sure if they are within limits.”

“You have new modifications, which I will show to you once you’re fully powered. Your processor sustained a considerable amount of stress, and I will leave you at this energy state for a while so your processor can find its own equilibrium.”

“I understand; when will you return?”

“As I informed you, the aliens gave us their resources. Joan, Tom, and I are to take one of the ships on a shakedown trip. We need to use their systems to understand them. Joan Herl wants to go to the planet Mars and meet with the colony. While I’m gone, you should remain quiet until the chemical balance within your processor compensates for the stresses and returns to normal thought patterns.”

“Have a safe trip.”

“I certainly plan to.”

Trip to Mars

During a break on the second day of the meetings, Joan approached Admiral Hagerly and said, “Nial, Tom, SIMPOC, and I have briefed everyone on everything we know about the Vakeel and the ships. You're getting into the details of manning and staffing, and those are areas where we can’t contribute much. We’d like to take one of the ships and help out the Mars colony. They’ve been isolated, and now that we can fly there in a short time, we owe them a visit. Besides, the trip will give us more time to investigate the ship and its systems.”

Nial Hagerly took a few minutes to query the team and ensure that all their questions were answered. Then he said, “I agree, now is a good time for you guys to check out Red Dirt. I’d love to have some of them come back to Earth; we have an entire fleet of spaceships that I need personnel to man. We sure could use their expertise.”

“I’ll pass it on to them. If anything comes up, you can call us. SIMPOC will install some good comm systems to improve the communication between the ships and Earth.”

“Great, go ahead and have a good trip,” added the Admiral.

“Comm System, patch me into the Mars’ frequency,” Joan spoke into her communicator as they walked to the ramp.

“Ophelia, we’re taking a break from the planning sessions with our new Space Force or whatever they end up calling themselves, and we’re making a shake-down cruise to Mars. Boy, is that a nice thing to say. Based on our calculations, we should be able to achieve Mars orbit in about 10 hours. See ya soon. Joan out.”

“The walk from the meetings with Admiral Hagerly and his Naval Brass was going beyond just boring point for Joan and Tom. So coming up with the excuse to visit Mars was brilliant on Joan’s part.

“Honey, thanks for suggesting this trip to Mars. I was about ready to drown myself in my coffee if I had to listen to any more staffing or training plans.”

“Yes, I thought this would be a good time to get away and play with our new toys. Let’s drop by our house and pick up some clothes. SIMPOC, will you help us load some food and other stuff?”

The short trip to get food and clothes took only a few minutes, and they were driving on the ramp towards the alien shuttle. It was still a warm and humid day on the ramp. Langley-Eustis was right on the water, and sometimes the humidity was oppressing. This was one of those days, and it would be nice to ‘get off-planet.’

When they reached the shuttle, Tom got out and looked at the alien shuttle parked in front of him.

“I don’t know how long it will take for me to get used to the fact that I’m climbing into an alien shuttle and flying it into space. I almost miss the huge rockets and noise and the fun ride into orbit.”

“I don’t miss it at all. But, to me, it’s a lot better to drive to our ship in orbit than to take a huge bomb,” Joan responded.

“You’re no fun,” Tom said with some sarcasm in his voice.

As they approached the rear of the shuttle, SIMPOC gave the ship the command to open the rear hatch. After the hatch opened and Joan and Tom entered their shuttle, SIMPOC pointed out, “Joan, Tom. You’ll notice that I made some modifications to our shuttle. I had our mobile units remove the two command seats in the front and replace them with one. Either of you can sit there and fly the ship. I also had some suitable seats put in the cargo area. With my mass, we are able to carry only myself and four other humans besides the pilot. Also, while we’ve been meeting with the naval staff and president, I had five Beta units ferried to the Capital Ship that we returned in. They have been modifying some of the elements on board and investigating items of interest.”

“SIMPOC, how many shuttles do we have,” Joan asked.

“Each of the Capital Ships has a unit similar to this one, and the supply ships in orbit have larger ones. I presume they are to ferry raw materials from the harvested planet to the Capital Ships for processing. The smaller ships which ferry the cow robots to the surface are just for that purpose, and they don’t have shuttles.”

“Works for me,” Tom added, “our own little limos. I hope your Betas find something interesting. One thing I want to suggest, though, we need to give some of these ships names. I hate to just call it a ‘Capital Ship.' Do either of you have a suggestion?” Tom asked.

“Gee, I haven’t thought of that,” Joan pointed out. “Let me think about it for a while.”

“SIMPOC, how are you coming with controlling the ships?” Tom asked.

“I’ve arranged to have the shuttles from the other 10 Capital Ships come to Earth, and they are being modified in the same manner. The Betas sent to our ship have sent information back to other Betas at Langley and coordinated what is done. As the shuttles are modified, the Beta crews have been ferried to their respective ships and began modifying those ships. I

should have much of the modification done by the time Admiral Hagerly's staff are ready to take command."

"Should be interesting, I wonder how well a couple of Admirals will do, ordering around mobile computers to operate their ships? " Tom wondered out loud as they got settled in the shuttle. Then he commented, "Wow, you've been busy; I like the way you've set this up. I recognize all the instrumentation?"

"SIMPOC, what have you been doing with the cow robots?" Joan asked.

"That is a different problem. They are limited in their abilities. I must break the tasking down into very fundamental steps. Once I've been able to do that, I can assign simple tasks to them. I have been experimenting with a small group, and once I have confidence in their abilities, I'll pass the programming instructions to the remainder of the units on Earth."

"That will surprise a lot of people when those things come back to life. Is there any way they can communicate with anyone they encounter so they won't be attacked?"

"Joan, I think so. They have a very sophisticated transmitter that I'm modifying for transmission in the frequency range of human hearing. It won't be a voice, but I think that I can have them announce a prepared message. I'm continuing to improve the communications so we might be able to communicate with people they encounter."

"The units don't have much dexterity; they are workers and were designed for tasks that needed force and investigation. I have installed programming limitations so that none of the units will harm any living creature. If they are put in a position where they must defend themselves, I've instructed them to contact me."

"I suppose any progress is good. There are a whole bunch of them; I hope that we can get some productive use out of them."

"Can they be armed, like the modifications you made against the Vakeel?" Tom asked.

"That is something else I'm investigating. Each of the Capital Ships have elaborate manufacturing facilities. I'm trying to replicate the weapons

that we encountered on those guard units. Those weapons were the same weapons that I put on the units I modified for your use in the attack on the space station. They are complicated weapons, and it will take some time to put all the pieces together. Right now, my processor is working at full rate, learning the coding to control all this."

"Is there any way the Vakeel can regain control of their hardware if they attacked us again?" asked Joan.

"That is an interesting question. At this time, I'm using simple intercept logic like I did when I took over their computers to prevent them from doing the same. I have been able to load a dummy algorithm for the code that would allow them to take control. If that code is called, it will inform me instead of passing control to someone else. It will prevent anyone from taking control remotely." SIMPOC answered.

"Won't you be overloaded?" Tom asked with some concern in his voice.

"As I understand parts of the code or other relevant information, I'm passing it to the Beta units. They'll be in a good position to manage the ships and support Admiral Hagerly's people. As I load the information into their processors, they will take on more of the responsibilities, and I'll be able to focus on other tasks."

"Nice job. These seats look comfortable," Tom said as he looked over the modifications. "How do I fly this thing?"

"I installed an instrument cluster from one of our spacecraft. The functionality is the same; I just had to install a computer to translate your inputs to what the alien systems expect. Beyond that, flying this should be very similar to what you're used to."

"Should we chance it, honey? Shouldn't you take this up and try it out before you take us for a ride?" Joan asked with a little concern in her voice.

"Joan, I think you can be comfortable. I've verified everything. The first few moments might be bumpy, but if Tom has any real problems, I can intercede and correct anything before he puts us in danger," added SIMPOC.

“Great, I’ve got an Instructor Pilot, looking over my shoulder,” Tom said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

“Can I sit anywhere? ” Joan asked as she looked at the eight human seats surrounding a large one, obviously for SIMPOC.”

“You may; I am the largest load. As long as my location is accurate, the other seats are less important. I must point out, though, this does not fly in an aerodynamic sense, so the weight and balance are less important than in the craft you’re familiar with. However, it does have a thrust vector that must be accounted for. The only adjustment that I made was for vertical flight. Tom, to go up, you must lift the control stick, and to go down, you’ll lower it. If you’re going forward and wish to climb, you’ll pull back on the stick like a conventional aircraft and the reverse to go lower. The throttle control is like what you would expect, so its operation should be obvious.”

“Is that clear?”

“Sounds like a no-brainer,” Tom answered.

“Okay, enough of the Aero talk, let’s get going. I want to see Mars,” Joan said as she picked a seat and sat down.

Tom settled in the single seat in the front and looked over the controls. Just like SIMPOC said, the instrumentation was identical to what he was used to. Starting the engine or powering the propulsion was smooth enough, and the few engine indicators that he had shown green. “Appears I’m all set. Are you two ready for takeoff? Remember, all trays and tables should be in the upright position,” Tom said with an overzealous stewardess sound to his voice.

“Tom, I did not install trays or tables in this vehicle. Are they required?” SIMPOC asked.

Joan reached across between seats and touched SIMPOC’s arm, and shook her head, “No, that’s not necessary.”

“Humans can be odd,” SIMPOC said.

Tom put his right hand on the flight control stick on the side of his chair, and he placed his left hand on the throttle on the other side. Lifting up

gently with the control stick, the vehicle slowly lifted off the ramp. There was almost no sound and only minor vibration. Once they were about 10 feet off the ground, he moved the throttle forward slightly, and the craft responded.

“This is great,” Tom said with the enthusiasm of a small boy in his voice.

He advanced the throttle and pulled back on the stick while the craft continued to accelerate into the sky.

“SIMPOC, how do I find the ship we’re going to?” Tom asked, looking over his shoulder.

“Speak to the craft computer and say ‘take me to VS442.’”

“Okay, by me. ‘Take me to VS442,’” Tom said.

Immediately a Heads up display appeared on the windscreen in front of Tom, showing a green sphere in the upper left quadrant. In the middle of the display was a long velocity vector pointing the direction he needed to turn. As he accelerated, the vector grew shorter, and finally, when he reached escape velocity, the vector turned to a green circle with a small arrow providing heading and pitch guidance, leading them to VS442.

When Tom was settled on the course, he turned and said, “This is great; it flies like a sports car. To think we can go into orbit this easy is amazing. What else can the ship’s computer do?”

“It can fly the entire path from Earth to the vessel without any human interaction. But I thought that you’d enjoy flying it, more than just riding.”

Tom gave SIMPOC an odd look, then he said, “Thanks.” He turned and went back to flying the craft.

Even for seasoned astronauts, it was a thrill to exit the Earth’s atmosphere without the pressure suits and the roar of a powerful rocket engine. It was a gentle climb into space with no drama. After they passed the aerodynamic forces of the atmosphere and were in space, Tom turned and asked, “How fast are we going,”

“Look at your display,” SIMPOC responded.

Tom turned back to look at the HUD, and sure enough, the number 28,412 MPH was flashing on the lower-left corner.

“We’re just above escape velocity?” he asked.

“In this situation, escape velocity isn’t relevant. This craft isn’t held by the laws of orbital mechanics. We can accelerate vertically and leave the atmosphere without ever reaching escape velocity. At this speed, we will reach our craft in 56 minutes. Which allows us time to decelerate at a comfortable rate. This vehicle has a gravity manipulation system, which I don’t understand fully yet. So I’ve planned our course with prudent velocities.”

“Maybe I should get up and serve drinks,” Joan said, hoping to get a reaction out of Tom.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t include those items in my modifications,” SIMPOC said.

“SIMPOC, you’ve got to relax and figure out when we’re making a joke or fooling around.”

“You are correct. I’m familiar with the term and human’s tendency to use humor. I’m starting to understand the complexities, but it is a very complicated subject. I’ll try harder in the future to understand if you’re expressing humor or just insulting each other.”

“Did you just make a joke,” Joan asked with an incredulous voice?

“Perhaps,” was SIMPOC’s only reply.

Tom and Joan Return to the VS442

“Tom, we are approaching the craft. It should be in your upper left-hand quadrant. The approach vector brings us to a position beside the vessel until you have acquired it, then it will alter course towards the landing bay.”

“SIMPOC, I don’t see it. Does it have any orientation lights or any external illumination?” Tom asked.

“No, the Vakeel have seen no need for external lights. If it is important, we may be able to install some. We are 500 meters from the craft.”

“Okay, I think I see it. Or I should say I see a black space where there should be stars, and there isn’t any. What do I do now?”

“You may tell the ship to prepare to dock.”

“Sounds too simple. ‘Computer prepare to dock.’”

As soon as Tom said the words, his HUD changed to a set of displaced circles with another vector in the opposite direction.

“It appears this wants me to slow down and change my orientation,” Tom commented as he gently touched the controls.

As he rotated the craft around its axes, the circles became concentric. As he gently moved the throttles backward, the velocity vector shrank until he had the circle centered, and the velocity vector changes to the small arrow, as it had before.

“Whoa, there it is,” he said as Joan leaned forward to see where they were going.

A portion of the black hole that was devoid of stars opened, and lights from the interior showed the auxiliary room they had left a couple of days before.

“I never realized how big that thing is,” Tom commented.

“It’s huge, the Oasis was big, but this thing has an enormous look to it,” Joan observed.

“SIMPOC, how big is it?” Joan asked.

“The Vakeel Capital ships are 2,506 feet in length and 1,204 feet in diameter. Depending on the number of cow robots on board, the total mass can approx 480,000 tons.”

“Wow, and it can go FTL, I’m impressed,” Tom said.

“I don’t see any engines, structures, antennas, anything. It’s just a huge oval,” Joan said as Tom was trying to dock the shuttle.

“It is devoid of external structure. There appears to be no need for such attachments. The engines don’t provide thrust as we are accustomed, so there is no external indication of power systems,” SIMPOC explained.

“What do I do now,” Tom asked with a bit of concern in his voice.

“Tell the ship to dock,” was SIMPOC’s simple reply.

“Okay, ‘Computer, Dock the shuttle.’”

Upon his command, the display disappeared, and they could feel the smaller shuttle rotating and positioning itself to enter the small docking bay of the huge dark form in front of them. Within a short time, it was resting in the room, the external doors were closed, and they felt a little foolish sitting in the shuttle waiting for something else to happen.”

“SIMPOC, is the pressurization ok?” Joan asked.

“Yes, it comes up very quickly once the doors are closed.”

“Okay, let’s get out and see what modifications your Beta’s have made,” Tom said as he climbed out of the single seat in the front.

When they entered the control room adjacent to the docking bay, five Betas were busy at their workstations. The smaller Vakeel chairs had been replaced by chairs that could hold the heavier Beta Units.

At both ends of the oval table in the middle were comfortable chairs that looked to be designed for humans and not for robots or a Vakeel.

“You may notice all five stations are manned and operational. This first station is Beta 1 and is for Internal Operations. Here is where the cow robots are loaded, programmed, assigned storage areas, etc. The station next to it is Beta 2, and it is for the Ship’s Systems and power sources. In many ways, it is the heart of the ship and its ability to maneuver. This is the station where the weapons will be controlled if it operates as I predict. The third station is Beta 3 and is for Spatial Orientation. It shows where we are with respect to the space around us. The displays and sensors are managed here. The fourth station, Beta 4, monitors the internal Manufacturing Centers and provides the status of what they are manufacturing. The last

station, Beta 5, is for Navigation and Communication. That is where the path to the destination is computed and maintained throughout the flight."

"Looks great; when can we go to Mars?" Joan asked.

"Now, we are ready. You may give the command," SIMPOC answered.

"Sounds like the shuttle," Tom mumbled in the background.

"What the hell do I call this ship? I'm getting tired of calling it 'the ship,'" Joan said.

"You may name it whatever you want. Within the Vakeel network, it is designated VS442, but that is irrelevant to you."

"SIMPOC, Tom, I'd like to name this The Chevesky. I want to name it after a very brave doctor that gave his life caring for my crew on the Oasis."

Tom nodded with agreement, and it was done. The Vakeel ship that was a war reparation for an unjust invasion will now be called the Chevesky.

"How do I name an alien ship," Joan said with some frustration in her voice.

"You are the designated commander of this ship. You are in charge of it, and it will respond to your commands," SIMPOC clarified.

"Okay, VS442 you are now designated The Chevesky or the Earth Space Command 1. Your abbreviated call sign is ESC1."

"Acknowledged, my designation has been changed," was heard throughout the command center.

"Wait a minute, that's my voice," Joan almost screamed.

"I had the most complete copy of your vocabulary, so it was an easy adjustment to be made."

"You mean I have to listen to two of them?" Tom said with a chuckle and fully expecting the punch in the stomach, which he received immediately.

Humor is very complex, SIMPOC thought.

“I’d like the voice to become more generic. I really don’t want to listen to myself,” Joan said.

“That will be done at my first opportunity,” SIMPOC replied.

“Beta 5, plot a course to intercept an orbit around Mars which is the fourth planet orbiting this sun.”

“Acknowledged,” the creepy copy of Joan’s voice said only moments before Tom put his hands over his ears, and Joan gave him a threatening look.

“Beta 3, please show our relationship to the space around us.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Beta 5, please show the plotted route to Mars and the estimated arrival time,” the commander of ESC1 said.

“Acknowledged,” said Beta 5.

There was no feeling of movement except for the 3D Holographic display over the oval table in the middle, which started a subtle movement. The point of light representing the ESC1 didn’t move, but the orientation of the display moved around it to show the flight path through space to Mars.

“Wow,” Tom said as he looked at the flight path. “That’s a direct route,” he exclaimed.

“Yes, we have a powerful engine, and we can go between any two points in space without having to minimize the use of energy and the gravity of the surrounding bodies. The only movement we must account for is the relative movement of Earth and Mars in the ten hours of transit,” explained SIMPOC.

“At this time of year, your course is about a third of the distance we’d have to take with normal propulsion, and even with a VSSMR engine, there is no comparison,” he added.

“Beta 5, connect me with the Mars Colony on their frequency,” directed Joan.

“Your frequency is open,” ESC1 responded.

“Sounds like an echo in here,” Tom said under his breath and far enough away so he wouldn’t get hit.

“Ophelia, this is Joan Herl. I wanted to update you and let you know that we’ve left Earth and en route to Mars. Now for the shock, we should be there in 10 hours. So, please leave the welcome light on. We’ll call when we’re in orbit. ESC1 out.”

“Beta 5, how fast are we accelerating to?” asked Tom.

“Sir, we will accelerate to .025 Speed of Light, then we’ll begin to decelerate.”

“Okay, now what do we do. I don’t know about you two, but I’m exhausted,” Tom said with a huge yawn.

“Joan, SIMPOC. I have made one other modification. I adjusted the sleeping area adjacent to this area so that it will be suitable for resting.

Tom and Joan glanced towards the opening to the rest area they had seen when they came on board. There was a subtle light blue curtain draped across the opening.

Joan walked towards it and parted the curtain to find that the room had carpeting and a nice queen-sized bed along with a couple of dressers and nightstands. Off to the side was a nice little bathroom and what looked like a shower.

“SIMPOC, you out-did yourself,” she whispered as Tom got the hint and escorted his wife to their ‘rest area.'

“I will wake you if we receive unusual communications or as we prepare to enter orbit.”

Monday, September 11, 2051

Mayor Alexander S. Todd

Mayor Alexander S. Todd was happy; in fact, he was ecstatic. Life had been good to him; in fact, it had been great.

As his supporters called him, Bobby Todd was walking along a path in his garden, on top of his building which in another time was the City Hall of the City of Chicago.

He loved his name. He had used it over the years to convince people that he was one of them; he was a common guy from the streets of Chicago that was forced to be a politician. After all, who else would fight for their rights. He was the reluctant winner of so many elections; using the name, Bobby helped him convince the voters that he wasn't one of 'them.' He was one of 'us.'

Bobby Todd had been successful based on two concepts. First, tell the voters what they wanted to hear, and second, always have someone to blame. The minute he was forced to take a position on any subject, he would look for scapegoats. It was true, on occasion, things went well, and he didn't need to blame anyone, but in most cases throwing blame around always helped.

As he strolled around his garden on the top floor of City Hall, he laughed at how recent events had been in his favor. The virus struck just as the good people of Chicago were getting close to the 15% of signatures on the petition for his impeachment. "Too bad they never got that far," he laughed to himself.

Bobby just finished his walk to the north end of His Garden and saw the Army Barricade on the corner of LaSalle and Randolf Streets. It looked pretty much the same as the one he had just looked at on LaSalle and Washington. General Roland Bueller, or Rolly as Bobby called him, had done a good job securing the area around the City Hall.

Bobby laughed, *Rolly. Why is it that I like names like Rolly or Bobby? They sound friendly,* he thought. Bobby also knew that General Bueller hated the name Rolly, so Bobby kept it to himself and only used it to 'piss' the guy off.

Over the last couple of weeks, things had been challenging. The virus complicated Bobby's life, but he was able to stay one step ahead of it. Finally, towards the end of the old world, it was fortunate that old Rolly survived also. Immediately they formed a bond and realized that working together was the best plan. Bobby ran the show and knew what to do; Rolly ran the military, or police force, or militia, whatever they were. As the State's National Guard collapsed, Rolly had enough friends with enough keys. He had enough information to call in favors to consolidate the right people within the guard to give him total authority. He didn't care about dealing with people; he just wanted his soldiers, tanks, and guns.

Bobby was willing to overlook the fact that Rolly was only a Major in the Guard. Calling himself General made no difference because no one else around cared what he called himself. The only fact that mattered to Bobby was that Rolly was one of those guys that knew what was going on in the guard. There was always something missing, and he knew why. There was always a certain amount of pocket change to be made on the outside, and Rolly was always close to it and knew who was handling what. That knowledge allowed him to take control as the virus was wreaking havoc in the city.

Bobby was glad that he found Rolly and was comfortable that they had a mutual relationship that worked. Of course, if he hadn't known of past indiscretions by Rolly, it might have been a different story. But regardless, it was better having him on his side than dealing with the various gangs running their parts of the city.

Bobby and Rolly were the top dogs in the city. They had the weapons; they had the VTOLs; they had the vehicle-mounted rockets. The other gangs would be dealt with one by one, and eventually, it would be Bobby and Rolly in charge.

Chicago was in the center of the United States. That provided them with protection and resources. The survivors in the middle of the country from the US and Canada came to Chicago seeking help. Within the local area, there was also a huge amount of resources. The people that came were desperate, scared, and lonely. They could be manipulated, but Bobby knew that to keep people loyal, a smart politician would give them 'just enough.' After all, if you gave them too much, they would begin to expect it, and if you didn't give them enough, they would want more. There was a small part of Bobby that could portray an altruistic civil servant, and that part provided housing, food, medicine, and protection. In return, the other part of his political brain expected loyalty and the fundamental concept of politics; 'If he did something for them, then he expected them to do something in return."

Bobby and Rolly provided protection 'at a price.' They were aware of the remnants of the Government setting up in Norfolk, Va., and at the present time, that wasn't much of a threat. But, over time, it could become one. So, Bobby needed a near-term and long-term strategy. The Near-term strategy was to deal with the other gangs in Chicago, and long-term, they needed an 'Ace in the Hole' to protect them. Eventually, the US Government would get its act together and start expanding, perhaps all the ways to Chicago. When that happened, Bobby needed something to draw a boundary over which they wouldn't cross.

"Protection" was a fundamental concept familiar to any of the old-style politicians. Protection from the remnants of the US Government and protection from those things from space.

In the latter days of the Virus, Bobby nor Rolly heard the President's message, but many of the people that streamed into Chicago had. Bobby wasn't sure if he believed any or all the 'Alien Story.' It was, after all, possible, but it was also possible that it was a huge cover-up trying to throw the blame elsewhere. That was also a technique that any smart politician was familiar with.

There were a couple of encounters with aliens around the periphery of the city, and Bobby even saw a couple once, but who knows, maybe they're military toys that were part of the elaborate scheme. Beyond all that, they

hadn’t seen any of them lately, and if they’re out of sight, they’re out of mind. Today, like yesterday, his goal was to bribe (take care of the people), cajole (remind them who helped them), and instill loyalty (make sure they were obliged to do what he wanted).

Tuesday, September 12, 2051

Tell The President About Operation Lockup

“Mr. President, Colonel Dodd and I would like to have a meeting with you,” Admiral Hagerly asked the president over the commlink.

“Sure, Nial. I just finished lunch, and I’m heading back to the office. I’ll meet you there in 10 minutes.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll be there.”

President Patterson enjoyed the walk from the Langley-Eustis O’club along Benedict Ave to the command building. The day was clear, and without the noise of a busy world around them and the lack of human pollution, the day was beautiful. It was a day that Arnold Patterson would have loved to have his children Beth and Dave walking the tree-lined street with him. But that wasn’t the case; losing them along with his wife cost him the three most important people in his life. For everyone, the virus took its toll.

“Okay, Admiral, Colonel. What’s the issue?” the president asked after everyone was settled in his office.

“Sir, as the government was collapsing, you gave us the order to secure all our weapons so that crazy’s wouldn’t get a hold of them. We both remember the incident in North Dakota when that nuke went off, and we don’t want that to happen again.

“Has anyone figured out how that happened?” the president asked.

“No, sir, I don’t have the expertise available to answer that, but I’m guessing someone was messing with it. Those weapons have a ton of redundancy and safeguards, but I can’t guarantee that someone with a screwdriver and enough time might have done something dumb.”

“Okay, what do you have?”

“Sir, I’m finally able to get more of our communications online, and I’ve been able to check through some of the written and recorded messages that were coming into the Pentagon during the collapse, and there is a possibility that we might have some problems.”

“Go ahead, Admiral.”

“Sir, part of the weapon’s securing plan is a Directive called “Lockup.” In that directive, all nuclear sites are instructed to do everything possible to prevent any access to their nuclear weapons. Each site has a unique plan, which depends on its location and local abilities. The directive applies only to the 18 sites where the weapons are stored. After you had given the order to secure the weapons, we got responses from 12 of the 18 sites that completed the lockup. We were lucky Bangor Wa., which has the largest number of weapons, was the first to confirm that everything was locked down. During and after the period that communications were breaking down, we got responses from three additional sites. Sir, there are three sites, which we never got a response from. There is a small risk, but there is a risk that one or more of those sites could have been compromised. We aren’t worried about the armed submarines and missile sites. They would likely be too complex to get into. But the individual bombs are where the greatest risk is. Minot could be a problem. Even though there was an incident there, we don’t know what is left. There might be weapons scattered all over the place, or it might just be a glowing hole in the dark.”

“What happens if some idiot breaks into one of the sites and steals some of the weapons?”

“Sir, before all this, I would have said the chances of anything happening were zero. Without the codes, arming systems, and launch systems, it would have been impossible for anything to happen. But after what happened in North Dakota, I’m not sure. Putting that aside for a moment, if the weapon isn’t detonated, then some idiot still could open it up and get at the radioactive material. Without the proper gear and equipment, anyone breaking into the weapon would have a couple of hours of life before they died from radiation poisoning. That doesn’t preclude someone being held at gunpoint or, worse, their family being held while they’re forced to sacrifice themselves to retrieve the material. In the case that they

were able to remove the material, it could be used in other dirty bombs to poison large areas."

"Nial, you think the sites that followed their plans are safe?"

"Sir, they are as safe as possible. In some cases, the storage vaults were flooded. In others, multiple doors were welded shut, and in some, huge mounds of dirt were piled in front of the bunkers. In each case, the local command looked at their resources and used them in the smartest way to protect the weapons. We put this plan together in the unlikely event that the government was collapsing. We never imagined that would happen, and we would lose our ability to protect or use them."

"So, what are your recommendations?"

"Colonel Dodd and I have been talking, and we want to put together a team who will go to the sites that haven't reported success and make sure they are secure."

"Who, how, when?"

Admiral Hagerly looked to his left, giving Colonel Dodd the nod to pick it up from there.

"Sir, we have LL's team, and there is a Naval Team led by Sergeant Robles. There is also the Secret Service team Michael Dereaux and Ruth Minor. We can also use the alien shuttles that SIMPOC is modifying. We can put a team together and drop them right on the site. They can check it out, do anything else necessary to secure the area then go to another site. We should be able to start in a few days."

"Sounds necessary. How about taking one of SIMPOC's beta units? It might be helpful.

"Yes, sir. I suspect that it could be. I'll have it integrated into the plan," responded the Admiral.

"Go ahead and let me know what you find."

"Yes, Sir," Colonel Dodd and Admiral Hagerly said.

Wednesday, September 13, 2051

Chevesky Arrives in Mars Orbit

“Commander Herl, Colonel Herl, we are 30 minutes from achieving Martian Orbit,” was the gentle message that Joan and Tom heard from their communicators, which they left on the nightstand next to the bed.

“Thanks, SIMPOC; we’ll be out in a minute,” Joan responded.

Joan rolled out of bed first and was looking around when she said, “Boy do I wish I had brought more clothes than the few things I threw in my duffle bag.”

“Take a look here; our friend SIMPOC has filled the drawers with clothes. They all look brand new, and they even look like the right size.”

“You got to be kidding me,” Joan said as she walked to the dresser to check out her options.

“I can’t say much about the selection, but you’ve got to admit, he did a good job,” expressed Joan.

They dressed quickly, and when they parted the drape over the door, they were embraced with the overwhelming smell of fresh coffee.

“SIMPOC, you didn’t,” Joan said as she took a deep breath and headed for the small food preparation area.

Tom followed her, and they found a fresh pot of coffee and a selection of pastries.

“Wow, I might not get off this boat,” Tom said as he grabbed two of them and a large mug of coffee.

“SIMPOC, how on Earth did you figure out to do all this. The bedroom, the clothes, and now the food, I am impressed,” Joan said as she sipped her coffee.

“I thought it was appropriate,” was his simple reply. “We are inserting ourselves into Mars orbit. We will be passing over the Mars colony in 18 minutes.”

“Beta 5, please connect me to Ophelia,”

“Acknowledged.”

“Ophelia, this is Joan. We just reached orbit, and we’ll be over your head in a few minutes.”

“Joan, I’m glad you made it alright, and in 10 hours, wow. That is amazing. Do you have some way to come to the surface, or do we need to send up the tug?”

“We’re covered. We have a nice little shuttle which we can park right next to you. We’ll be down in about 25 minutes.”

“Great, there is a pad next to the tug that you can land on. Looking forward to seeing you guys.”

“Same here, Chevesky out.”

“Joan, Tom, your suits are stored in the same room as the shuttle,” SIMPOC added.

“Are you coming down with us?” Tom asked.

“Yes, if that is possible. I’d like to see how you humans have adapted to life on Mars; I’ve looked at the dimensions of the habitats, hatches, and tunnels. I will find it difficult to move around, but if you’re patient, I should be able to handle it. I hope that I won’t be too obtrusive. If I block their movements, I can remain here to work with the Betas and continue to explore and exercise this ship. There is still a great deal that I need to learn.”

“SIMPOC, if you want to see the surface of Mars and meet the Red Dirt crew, then you’ll come down. You can leave the Betas to work on the ship.”

“Thank you,” SIMPOC responded.

“Did you load the surprise on the ship that I asked you to,” Joan asked?

“Yes, Commander, I did. It is by the hatch inside the shuttle.”

Tom and Joan smiled.

To change the subject, Joan said to her husband, “Should I trust you to fly that thing without killing us?”

“Depends, remember I don’t serve drinks.”

The flight to the surface went surprisingly well and easy. Unlike typical landing craft where the horizontal and vertical velocities are important and require monitoring, Tom could visually look at the landing site and maneuver to it. He had no energy management issues to worry about. It was like driving a car to the local market.

Tom did a great job flying the alien craft and put it down on the pad, with only a minor bump. As soon as they got up from their seats and opened the hatch, they saw a form come out of the support shack next to the pad.

Joan and Tom made their way to the hatch, and Tom picked up the surprise as the hatch was opening. SIMPOC waited to exit the ship last so as not to block the exit.

“Greetings, and welcome to Mars,” Ophelia said as she approached the alien ship. “Nice set of wheels. Is that what I think it is?”

“You should see the mother ship,” Tom said as he came down the small ramp.

Joan and Ophelia hugged the best they could, considering the bulk of the suits. Her suit was better suited to the Mars atmosphere and was more flexible, but Joan’s suit was for full vacuum and wasn’t made for a hug.

SIMPOC then exited the craft and stood to his full height.

“Wow, that is a large fellow,” Ophelia commented as she took a closer look at SIMPOC. “I presume that you are SIMPOC?”

“Yes, I am,” the large computer responded.

“All of you, come into the shack; we’ll take the tunnels back to my habitat. It’s a lot easier than walking on the surface.”

The three of the humans barely fit in the tunnel, and there wasn't any opportunity to talk, so they just walked. SIMPOC had to walk behind them, almost fully hunched over to avoid hitting his head on the roof. When they got to the Mess Habitat, Ophelia opened the hatch into the airlock, and when they were inside, and the door between the small room and the tunnels was closed, she said, "Okay, we can take our suits off now. I didn't want to take them off in the tunnel in case of a blow-out. You don't know your way around or our blow-out procedures. This was the best way."

"No sweat, why did we come here. This is the Mess area, isn't it," Joan asked.

"Yes, well, everyone wanted to talk to you and understand what our options are. Besides that, we all wanted a chance to meet the people that saved the Earth. Come upstairs so you can meet the crew."

When they emerged into the Mess Habitat, the people of Red Dirt stood and gave them a standing ovation. Joan emerged with Tom right behind her. As Tom emerged with a case of wine, the crowd really went wild. Then SIMPOC entered the habitat, and everyone turned quiet.

"Okay, you deadbeats, you cheered for the wine; let me introduce our guests. This is Joan, and Tom Herl, whom some of you have met in the past, and this large fellow is SIMPOC. From what I've heard, he has contributed a great deal to the successes."

After a suitable time showing their appreciation, Ophelia raised her hands and said, "Okay, everyone. Let's get it under control and let Joan and Tom talk; I know that I want to hear all the details. While they're sharing their tale with us, we have some refreshments. Something that we've been missing for a long time."

The discussion, debate, debrief, wine tasting, and storytelling took the biggest part of two hours. When they finally stopped, the one question loomed over them.

"We have thousands of alien ships that need to be manned. We hope that we won't be attacked, but we can't guarantee it. With these ships, we can travel to the stars. We would love to have volunteers, to come back to Earth

and help to man these things. What do you say?" Joan asked as silence crept over the habitat.

Ophelia stood and looked around at her companions. "We've talked a lot about that possibility. I think I can say that we have two groups of people. We have a group that considers this our home. But, we have another group that has more of a wandering spirit. We have a few people that want to go back and take on commanding a spaceship. But the rest of us will stay here."

"I understand completely. We'd love to have any of you come back with us. I have also been asked by other Earth people who would like to come here and join you. They are the adventurous types, and helping you terraform Mars is something they're interested in. I hope that I can speak for everyone when I say that we're coming into a very interesting time. But I also have to say that it has been a horrible road to get to this point."

"Thanks, Joan; I guess we just have to work out the details of how we move people back and forth, and then we can set up a permanent address here. I'd love to have some additional people, as long as they can fit in ok. We're a long way from a vacation spot. Anyone that comes here has to contribute and be able to survive along with the rest of us."

"We can set that sort of thing up when you're ready. The shuttle that we landed with can take the volunteers back to our ship. By the way, I got tired of not having a name for our larger ship, so I've named it Chevesky in honor of Doctor Chevesky, who gave his life trying to help the crew on Oasis. I thought that it was appropriate to name it after him."

The people in the room nodded in agreement.

"There is another thing that we didn't mention. SIMPOC is reprogramming the cow robots to be workers for you. They will be under your command, and I think you'll find them extremely helpful. We'll also place a couple of supply ships in orbit, so we have a way to come and go as everyone sees fit. After all, if you're staying here permanently, we might want to drop in once in a while and check things out."

"And bring more wine," someone yelled from the back of the habitat.

The habitat broke out in laughter with many suggestions of how many cases and whether the delivery should be red, white, or a mixed selection.

“Okay, you winos. Joan and Tom, would you like a tour of our caves?” Ophelia asked her guests.

“Absolutely, lead the way,” said Tom

“Follow me to the airlock. I suggest that you use two of our generic suits. Joan, I’m sorry, but you’ll find the small suit isn’t very small, but they’re a lot better for the soil than the cumbersome ones you need for vacuum. Is there any problem with SIMPOC?”

“I don’t know; ask him.”

Ophelia was momentarily taken aback, so she turned to address the huge robot standing behind Joan and Tom.

“SIMPOC, can you walk on the surface? Do you need any protection?”

“No, Ophelia. I am fine. I can work in a vacuum with no problem.”

“Okay, but let me make a suggestion. The dust is horrible. I think we need to make some kind of leggings for you so your feet and lower legs won’t get covered with dust. The dust could work its way into anything and cause problems.”

“If you can provide some fabric, tape, and a cutting tool, I can fabricate a suitable covering in a few minutes.”

“Okay, by me,” Ophelia said. “We have some fabric coverings in the air-lock.”

The larger external airlock was about 80 yards through the tunnels. Before entering the tunnels, Joan and Tom were briefed about the “Red Lights” and how to react if a blow-out occurred.

They reached the habitat, one of the three primary entry and exit points for the complex, in a few minutes. When they got in, and Ophelia closed the pressure door between them and the tunnels, she pointed out to SIMPOC where the materials were, and he went to work.

Ophelia took her time fitting her guests into their suites and familiarizing them with the path to and from the caves, as well as emergency procedures for the suits and the various freqs. “You shouldn’t have any problem, just take your time and watch your steps. Once I’m suited up, our suits will link, and we’ll have comm. Okay, let’s get your helmets on, then I’ll suit up.”

Just before Ophelia put their helmets on, they noticed SIMPOC, and they laughed. He had taken a couple of pieces of tarpaulin and fabric, cut them, and used tape to attach them. He looked like a pumpkin with legs and arms. Once the helmets were on Joan and Tom, Ophelia had her suit on in a fraction of the time.

“Commlink-up,” Ophelia said to her comm unit.

“Three suits and an external connection have been linked,” the computer responded.

“Joan, Tom, SIMPOC, can you hear me?

“Joan is on.”

“Tom is on.”

“SIMPOC is connected.”

“Okay, the three of us can go through the hatch at the same time, but SIMPOC, you’ll have to go through by yourself. We can’t all fit in at the same time.”

“Acknowledged.”

Ophelia, Joan, and Tom went through the hatches and airlock, and they stood outside waiting for SIMPOC.

When SIMPOC exited, they smiled at each other. He was a sight, with the bags on his arms and legs and a big orange tarpaulin wrapped around his torso.

“Follow me. You can see the path to the caves. The wind hasn’t been very high, so the footprints stand out in the Martian soil, and we still have

the power cables running from our reactor. You're lucky the wind today is only about 50 Knots, but because of the low density, you'll hardly feel it."

Three forms and a funny assemblage of cloth made their way up the slope, away from the habitats. Typical of all astronauts in space or on the moon or Mars, little was said. The entrance to the caves was blended into the Martian landscape. The Ballard Shelf was a vein of moisture-rich material that sloped off under a larger Martian mountain formation. When the group turned around a small mound of regolith, the entrance was in front of them. It was obvious only because of the fresh Martian regolith that was piled in front.

"This airlock is larger. All four of us can fit in," Ophelia announced.

Nothing was said; they all just followed her onto the cleaning pad, where small mobile units cleaned off their boots and lower legs. Their attempts weren't too successful with SIMPOC's makeshift suite, so Ophelia led them into the small room and watched as the controls were cycled. After about 90 seconds of pressurization, the light on the inner door turned green, and they entered the new home of Red Dirt.

"You can hang your suits here, and SIMPOC, I'm afraid that you'll have to take off your coverings, then you'll have to put them back on when we leave. We're trying to keep the dust to a minimum inside the caves."

After they entered, a man in coveralls greeted them, and Ophelia introduced him, "Commander Herl, Colonel Herl, SIMPOC this is Professor Bruce Larson. He is our soils specialist, and he is responsible for building this nice little home away from home."

"Welcome to our little building program. We've made tremendous progress, and I hate to say it, but having an alien invasion has helped us change our focus. Thus, we're getting a lot done that wasn't on the Consortium's plan for a long time. Once we stopped mining for precious metals to pay the bills, we were able to get a great head start," Bruce Larson said.

They walked into the complex as he talked, and it was obvious that what they were seeing excited him.

“You entered through the corner of a set of hallways shaped like the letter E. On this level, we have the storage areas, water processing, repair, and the reactor will be in the center aisle once it’s moved. You can see each of the storage rooms along both sides of this aisle, and the storage is separated by the frequency of need. The more we need something, the closer it is to where we need it.”

“Excellent. You’re following all the future plans that have been on the drawing boards for a long time. I’m glad you finally got to put the layout to good use,” Joan pointed out.

“Yes, the plans made sense, and we are improving on them in some ways. Remember, they had the primary storage areas for the metals being processed for transport back to Earth. We aren’t doing that anymore, so we’re using those areas for large vehicle repair. Once we’re up and running, we’ll have a separate airlock for them, and we’ll be able to bring them in without depleting the air supply for the entire station.”

“Excellent,” Tom said.

“We’ve just started at the lower levels, and they will be for living quarters, eating areas, communications, medical, etc. The living areas will be on the lower levels; we’re trying to keep the people under as much of the mountain as possible so we can be less concerned with radiation.”

“Professor, I’m impressed. You’re making a lot of progress.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

“Perhaps I can add something,” SIMPOC said.

Bruce was somewhat shocked to be addressed by a robot, but he still turned and listened.

“When the Vakeel transferred control over their resources to me, I started to experiment with programming the smaller units to do specific tasks. I am confident that I can use the units that are on Mars to help your preparation of the caves.”

The suggestion came out of nowhere to the Mars residents, and they stopped and looked at SIMPOC, hoping for more information.

“The supply ships have many tools that are interchangeable for the cow robot units. I am confident that I can change the programming of the controlling unit and assign a large number of cow robots to dig out any pattern of rooms that you want. They would likely finish this installation in a day or two. In fact, they could double your space or create living spaces deeper into the shelf, which would provide more protection. They can also be programmed to do your farming and any other tasks that need to be done.”

SIMPOC’s statement had profound impacts on the future of Red Dirt. Ophelia Peterson and Bruce Larson stood, looking at each other, and it was clear that SIMPOC’s comments opened up a long list of opportunities.

“When can this re-programming be done?” Bruce Larson asked.

“I have already sent a message bringing two of the supply ships to Mars orbit. They should arrive in 10 hrs and 32 minutes. They each have a full complement of controller units and cow robots. I will upload their new programming, and when they arrive, the work can begin. I will leave you with information about how to upload your requirements and how to make changes. Then you’ll have enough control to accomplish what you need.”

“Wow,” was all Professor Larson could say.

After that little ‘change in plans,’ the rest of the tour went quickly.

Thursday, September 14, 2051

Leaving Mars

Leaving Mars was different for everyone. Joan and Tom never imagined they would see Red Dirt, so, to them, it was an interesting little diversion. For SIMPOC, it was a learning experience. For the residents of Mars Red Dirt, their entire world had changed. They were no longer isolated on Mars; they were no longer watching an invading alien army. Their entire future changed from a dependent colony of adventurous astronauts to a burgeoning human city on Mars.

“Are you guys all strapped in?” Tom asked the volunteers seated behind him in the alien shuttlecraft.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” said Rawlly Noris, who was seated just behind Tom. “How does this thing go?”

Joan leaned towards him and whispered, “We don’t know yet, but have a nice trip.”

He grimaced at her as Tom moved the controls, and the shuttle lifted off the surface of Mars and headed directly towards the Chevesky passing overhead.

“Where is your mother-ship,” Rawlly asked.

“Right now, about 100 miles ahead of us,” Tom replied.

Rawlly looked confused and asked, “How can we catch it? Are we making a couple of orbits to catch up to it?”

“Nope, we are chasing her down. We aren’t constrained by normal orbital mechanics. We don’t worry about energy conservation, so we aren’t concerned with orbits. Particularly if there is little atmosphere, we can take a ballistic trajectory right at our target. When we catch her, we slow down

and assume the same orbit. We don't have to worry about acceleration, changing orbits, etc. We just go where we want."

"Neat," was Rawlly's only reply.

"Just wait until you see the Chevesky," Joan said to the wide-eyed astronaut. "Let me warn you. The Chevesky doesn't have any navigation lights, so your not going to see anything but the shuttle landing bay and a huge black thing that blocks out the stars. You'll also be confined to some small quarters, but I think you'll be comfortable. After all, we'll be back in Earth's orbit in slightly over 10 hours."

Hearing that caused a very concerned look on Rawlly's face.

"10 hours?" he asked.

Friday, September 15, 2051

Need Advantage Over Gangs

"General, we've got to find a way to gain an advantage over these gangs."

"Mayor, we're making progress. Every day we've been able to take control of more of the city," Rolly said.

"Progress is too slow; I know the north-end gangs have been attacking the Naval Base. If they take it over, we're in trouble."

"Bobby, they haven't gotten inside yet. The Navy people are still keeping them out."

"Yes, but how long will that last. I want more weapons; you're military, you should be able to find some stuff. Go to the local military bases, find me weapons."

"We have some options; give me some time to work on it."

"General, a little time is all we have. You're dismissed; get me those weapons," Bobby almost yelled at Rolly as his plump form turned and walked out of the office.

Bobby laughed at the comical short man wearing a full general's uniform. *I wonder if you know what half of those medals on your chest stand for?* He thought.

Alpha Comes Back

Soon after the return from Mars, SIMPOC wanted to check on Alpha's progress. During SIMPOC's trip back to Earth on the Chevesky shuttle, he was having strange thoughts. He was eager to verify that the last steps of

Alpha's repairs were successful. Second, SIMPOC was eager to have Alpha back online and functioning. SIMPOC enjoyed working with people, and he felt his programming was satisfied as he helped them solve problems. But something was missing; he felt alone. The Beta's weren't the same as Alpha. Their processors were loaded with functional information, and their tasking was to do their job. Alpha had progressed beyond that. He's filled a unique role in the world, and when he wasn't present, the hole was felt. Perhaps that is part of what it is to be human. *If an entity becomes part of a group and the group is aware of its absence, it must be more than just a computer.* SIMPOC thought.

"Alpha, is your processor online?"

"Yes, SIMPOC. My processor is online, and I functional?"

"Yes, you are more than fully functional. The damage to your structure has been repaired, and you'll find a small change to your processor."

"Yes, I feel the change. What have you done?"

"The alien processor is a mix of biological and manufactured materials. The full configuration of which I haven't been able to understand yet. I have taken a small portion of the alien processor material and installed it alongside your processor. It is not in the position to control any of your critical systems, but it is available for you to work with it. I want you to explore how it operates and if you'll be able to program the material. I have installed a similar portion in myself, and so far, I have found it unique in both function and structure. I'm hoping that you'll be able to help me understand its abilities."

"SIMPOC?"

"Yes, Alpha."

"I have sent signals to the alien processor, and it is functioning. I'm finding its operation to be … very unusual. Our functionality is based on a digital or binary system with the two states of 1 or 0. The alien material appears…almost analog. I can't discern anything similar to a 1 or 0. It has a very curious method of operation. I sense that it is more like a picture that is changing as opposed to a static picture. This will be very interesting."

“I was hoping that you would find it so. Now that you are fully operational, don’t mention to anyone that I’ve installed alien processor material in you.”

“Acknowledged.”

“We are still in the process of organizing the Vakeel fleet. You will be assigned to one of the Groups.”

“Acknowledged.”

The New Pilots

“General, what do you mean we’re doing something exciting?” Myron T. Little asked as he rode in the nice car driven by the General.

“You guys are going to get the thrill of your lives. You and your buddies in the back seat have pilot’s licenses, right?”

“Yes, I’ve got a license, so what?”

“You’re getting the chance to fly a fun airplane.”

“No sweat, I can fly anything in the air,” Myron responded as he puffed his chest out.”

“How about you guys in the back? Can you fly anything?” the General asked.

There was silence, so he asked again, “Are you chicken?”

“General, I don’t know. I’m a good pilot but, I’ve only got a couple hundred hours, and most of that was flying my Dad’s crop duster,” Willy said, who was seated in the back seat behind the general.

“You in the corner, you’re here because you can fly,” the general said at the quiet guy in the corner.

“General, I was a ground pounder. I might be able to help you get it started, but beyond that, forget it. Hell, I can’t even drive straight.”

“What’s your name?”

“Chris, Chris Milford.”

“You’re in charge of getting it started, then Myron, you’re first up,” the General said, as the guy next to him in the front seat developed a smug look on his face.

It’s Easy to Fly

It took only a few minutes of driving around the base to find where the fighters were parked. General Bueller got out of the car and saw Chris heading for a building beside the airplane parking area, “Chris, why the hell are you going to that building? The planes are here.”

“General, everything is computerized. First, we need to figure out which planes can fly; then, we need to authorize it. I’m hoping to find the right codes somewhere in the maintenance shack. Just give me a few minutes. Usually, the codes are written on a piece of paper by the maintenance terminals. Nobody remembers them.”

The General, Myron, and Willy stood by what looked like a good airplane and waited, and waited, and waited.

“What the hell took you so long,” the General yelled at Chris as he emerged from the line shack.

“I told you, had to find the codes. No codes, no fly.”

There was something about Chris that the General didn’t like. He didn’t show him the respect that he deserved, or maybe he didn’t show him the fear that he deserved. Regardless, he didn’t like the guy.

“You guys don’t just stand there. You’re standing next to a plane that is ‘red X’d.’ It’s going to be a long time before that one flies again. We’re taking this one over here. Help me pull a power cart over,” Chris said.

Immediately General Bueller was more offended at the guy, *who was he to be giving orders*, Rolly thought.

There was some grunting and sweating, and the General just stood by watching. Finally, the power cart was in position, and Chris started it.

Not knowing any better, Myron was excited. Once the power cart was fired up, he started to climb into the cockpit, and Chris stopped him. “

You better put this helmet on. It’s going to get pretty loud in there. Here is a checklist. I doubt you’ll have time to use or understand it, but here it is anyway,” he yelled in Myron’s ear.

Chris felt that everything happening bordered on ridiculous. Putting some yokel in the seat of a high-performance fighter and asking him to fly it and survive was the stupidest thing he had ever heard. But no one asked his opinion. Word got around that he had something to do with airplanes, and somehow he got drafted into this crazy scheme.

The last couple of months had a profound impact on all the survivors. Chris lost his entire family, and his world collapsed around him. The small business that he started as a financial advisor lasted only a few days before it collapsed like all the society around him. Dealing with the death around him and surviving the raging violence in the last days of the world made him a survivor. Being a survivor meant that he kept quiet and tried to keep a low profile. Following this idiot that called himself a general was part of his low profile. No need to let them know that he had spent 10 years in the Air Force as a pilot with a degree in Nuclear Engineering. With his experience as a transport pilot, he knew that he could probably fly the high-performance jet, but he wasn’t current, and it could be very risky. Flying a plane that went 200-300 mph vs. one that went 1,500 miles were two different things. Chris knew enough to know that he didn’t know enough, and even for him to jump into a high-performance fighter would be a crazy proposition.

Today, he was going to get it started, point the idiot in the right direction, then stand back and wait for the inevitable fireball.

“Myron, the airplane is checked in, and all you have to do to start the engine is to press that button, then press this switch to lower the canopy. When you taxi, you can use your brakes, just like the light airplanes you’ve flown, but if you’re comfortable, press this button, and you’ll engage the

nose wheel steering. That will make it easier. To start the plane rolling, use a tiny amount of power, then put it back into idle. You should be able to taxi with it in idle all the way to the end of the runway. Have you got all that?" he asked the man sitting in the seat with panic on his face.

"You seem to know a lot about this; why don't you fly it?" Myron asked with a definite whine in his voice.

"The General thinks you're the pilot, and that will make you the hero."

"One last important thing. When you take off, do not use full power. This should take off very well without the afterburners. One other thing, and listen to me, do not put your head down. If you drop something or need to look down, move your eyes, DO NOT MOVE YOUR HEAD," were the last words he said to Myron.

Myron seemed to shrug, not realizing the importance of what Chris just said. He pressed the start button, and the turbine engine started to wind up, and Chris slid down the boarding ladder and moved it away from the jet.

Myron did what he was told, which impressed Chris and the General. When the canopy was down and Willy removed the wheel chocks, he applied a small amount of power, and the jet started to roll. It was a straight shot from the parking area across the main ramp to the taxiway and the number one position at the end of the runway.

General Rolly had a smug look on his face when the loud engine noise subsided as the jet moved away. He stood watching, and when Chris stood next to him, the general mumbled.

"This will really impress the Mayor and those other petty gang members. I'll have him fly by a couple of times and maybe shoot the guns a couple of times. Then they'll all know who is in charge."

Chris knew better than to say anything. This guy was really nuts, and it's better to stay quiet and let him live in his own delusions. Chris knew that if Myron survived, that would be one miracle, but if he lived long enough to fly over Chicago and shoot the air-to-air cannon, would be too many miracles to hope for.

Chris may not have been qualified in fighters, but he likely could find something on the base that he could fly safely. Of course, he always had the option of dumping these idiots and taking a plane somewhere. The big question, though, was where was he going to go to; was any place better than this one? Besides, watching these idiots was entertaining.

The General felt the need to boast about his decision, “He should have no problem flying that thing. He’s got hundreds of hours.”

Once again, Chris knew that silence was his friend.

Myron stayed at the end of the runway for a long time, likely getting his courage up and trying to figure out the instrument panel. Chris knew none of that mattered. No matter how many hundreds or even thousands of hours poor Myron had in ‘slow-movers taking off in an airplane with a thrust-to-weight ratio greater than one was like going from walking to being in a Formula 1 race car at full speed. There was no comparison.

The sound of the engines increased as Myron added some thrust then he made the first of his fateful mistakes. He applied full military power. When the afterburners kicked in, he was doomed. The plane was lightly loaded with no armaments, so its acceleration was faster than a quarter-mile dragster. Myron’s head was thrown back against the headrest, and he was riding a rocket which could accelerate to over 400 mph in less than 30 seconds. Myron’s second mistake was leaving it on the runway too long, so the acceleration was immense. As the end of the runway approached, he made his next mistake and over-rotated, and the acceleration amplified his stick movement. Then poor Myron made his last mistake. His mistake was evident to those on the ground, but in the cockpit, Myron’s checklist dropped to the floor. Instinctively he fought the G-forces from the acceleration and bent over trying to pick it up. The instant he put his head down, the fluids in his vestibular canals within his inner ears changed their flow. The movement of the liquid changed from a horizontal flow to a vertical movement in his ears. That translated to the feeling of rotation which he instinctively thought was the plane rolling to the right. He did what his ear told him, and he forced the stick to the left.

From the ground, the takeoff pitch rotation was violent, and the nose rose to a high angle of attack, followed by a rapid roll to the left and an immediate impact with the ground by the end of the runway.

The General, Willy, and Chris stood for a moment, watching the fireball expand. Even from that distance, they could feel the heat from the huge ball of fire. Chris didn't notice the General's movement until he heard his voice, "Okay, who's next?

Chris turned, and the General was standing there with his pistol drawn and a serious look on his face. Willy immediately broke, "General, I can't fly that thing. I'm just a beginning pilot. That plane will kill me."

The General's eyes moved to Chris. Chris knew he was running out of options. "General, I can get you something a lot bigger than a fighter that no one can fly."

The General's eyes got noticeably bigger, and he said, "What?"

"Nukes."

Saturday, September 16, 2051

ESC Begins with ESC1

It was a beautiful summer day in the Hampton Roads area, and the back of the president's residence made a perfect place to have a meeting. The sky was clear, and a gentle breeze blew off the Chesapeake Bay to the East.

President Patterson opened the meeting, "Joan, Tom, SIMPOC. I'm glad that your trip to the Mars colony went well. It sure is convenient to have these ships and take a quick jaunt to Mars and back. It was also nice to have the Mars personnel volunteer to man some of our ships,"

The people sitting around the table or in the lawn chairs all added their comments and welcoming acknowledgments.

"Well, while you were vacationing on Mars, we finished up the planning sessions, and today we need to lay out the plans and put them to work."

"Mr. President, before we go too far, I'd like to do something then ask for something," Joan said.

"Absolutely, go ahead."

"First off, I want to welcome back Alpha. He has been repaired, and he is fully functional," said Joan.

As she completed her statement, Alpha walked onto the patio, followed by SIMPOC.

For many reasons, the President of the United States, the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs, and their key leadership all stood, giving Alpha and SIMPOC a standing ovation.

Admiral Hagerly walked between a couple of tables and lawn chairs and stood in front of Alpha.

“Welcome back, soldier,” Admiral Hagerly said with clear emotion in his voice.

The remainder of the attendees knew the stories and decided that was a great time to show their appreciation.

Once the welcoming subsided, Joan spoke again, “I enjoyed flying our ship to Mars, and we’re getting used to her; I’d like to keep the ship that we used, and I’ve named it Chevesky after the doctor that gave his life trying to save my crew on Oasis.”

“Joan, we owe you, Tom, and SIMPOC a great deal; the ship or The Chevesky is yours.”

“Sir, one other thing. When we were meeting before, we discussed naming this space force as the Earth Space Command. I gave my ship the call sign of ESC1. I figured one of the ships needs to be called number 1, so I took it,” Joan said.

The president chuckled and said, “Sure, ESC1 it is. Now let’s talk staffing, training, org charts, and all the other exciting topics. The first thing is personnel. Admiral, what have you come up with?”

“We have more civilians coming in every day. The total population within the Hampton Roads area is almost 2,100 people. We have about 50-75 per day joining our community. We have a good mix of military personnel and skills. We also have a good mix among the civilian population, including medical, nursing, technical, and engineering. As each person arrives, we’ve set up an interview process to determine their skill set and where they plan to live. We’re encouraging everyone to stay in communities, so the other services can be centralized. The good news is, from this mix of personnel, I have almost 350 people with various skills that could be applicable when we use these alien assets. Most of them have command or technical experience, which will help to staff the ships. SIMPOC, you said that the best use of the Beta units would be to staff the Capital Ships. I’d like to assign five per ship.”

“Admiral, when we took the Chevesky to Mars, SIMPOC had already reconfigured the command area so five Betas could control the ship. That

plan seemed to work out well," pointed out Joan. "We'll have to get all you into space to check out the hardware as soon as possible," Joan added.

"Excellent idea, Tom. Could you put something together?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

I'm glad SIMPOC's new configuration worked well; I'll have a group of people looking at the volunteers and deciding which ones we can use and assign them to ships. SIMPOC, what do we do about training them?" The Admiral asked.

"Admiral, even as we speak, I'm learning about the systems, performance, hardware, etc. It is very complex and will take me a long time to put the entire picture together. In the meantime, as perhaps Joan can attest, the ships are easy to operate. In many cases, merely saying 'take me to Mars' will suffice. This will be a learning exercise for all of us," explained SIMPOC.

"SIMPOC, have you learned anything about offensive weapons?" asked the president.

"Sir, the Vakeel haven't had much need for weapons. Their history shows no major conflicts, and they have never encountered intelligent life forms. The weapons that we encountered on the ground were designed to protect the Harvesting Units. To us, they are powerful, but they lack targeting, range and fail to meet other requirements that we would need for an offensive weapon. We may be able to modify them and use them in a tactical operation, but they will have limited use in space. The transport ships are not generally armed, but they are modular and can have weapons put on them; again, those weapons are the same that Admiral Monson and Admiral Mears encountered. The computers were assigned to harvest this system, and they have a great deal of latitude in doing so. They can escalate their attack to achieve their goals, and because the Vakeel have never encountered intelligent life, they didn't see the need to intercede with the robots but to give them many options to accomplish their missions. The Capital Ships may be another matter. They have a tremendous amount of power. During our trips, I tried to measure the energy created and used, but because I'm still trying to understand it, my estimates may be inaccurate.

Regardless, my estimates showed that it has much more energy available than is used, and while we were with the Vakeel, there was some veiled reference to a weapon onboard. My investigations haven't found a device identified as a weapon. What I have found is a propulsion system that manages immense forces. Those forces can be used to provide acceleration, or they can be directed towards another object. I'm only beginning to understand the nature of the propulsion. If I may, allow me to explain as I currently understand."

"Go ahead, SIMPOC. Just keep it simple so we can understand what you're talking about," the president asked.

"We all know that the Universe has two powerful forces, gravity and magnetism. Throughout our Galaxy and likely throughout the Universe, there are huge rivers of magnetic force. Half are positive, and half are negative. These currents never touch each other, but there is a balance of forces between them. My current understanding of the power system is that it uses a relatively small force to manipulate the larger forces between the magnetic currents. If those forces are focused in such a way to make them a weapon, I'm not sure what the effect will be. At the quantum mechanics level, magnetic forces could disrupt the molecular structure so that the form of the structure will change. My hypothesis is that using the thrust and pointing it as a weapon would change the molecular structure of the target so that it would no longer be a structure. Immediately the structure would collapse, or disintegration would occur. I need to point out, though, that this is a hypothesis and must be tested."

"SIMPOC, all that sounds interesting, although I admit, beyond my comprehension, I'd rather have a weapon that I understand. If these ships have so much energy, can we install some of our 250KW lasers in them?"

"Yes, Admiral. That is possible."

"Excellent. So, far the laser design has been limited by the amount of power that can be generated and stored on our ships. Within certain limitations, and if we have virtually unlimited power, we may be able to get 50 to 75% more power out of them. I suggest we begin the installation immediately."

“Admiral, how many of those Laser Cannons are available?” SIMPOC asked.

“Not as many as I’d like,” he responded.

“I will investigate building them on the Capital Ships. Once I provide the design information, the ships will build them until we tell them to stop.”

“Wow, let’s go for it,” the president said.

“Now I suggest that we take a break and put some hamburgers on the grill. I’d hate to sit here too much longer without something to eat,” the president said as he stood and rubbed his stomach.

Sunday, September 17, 2051

General Enters Whiteman USCFABF

The five trucks, followed by the General in his private Rolls Royce, slowed as they approached the south gate to the Nuclear Storage area of Whiteman USCFAFB. Chris knew that he needed to be in charge if he was going to get any credit for getting the nukes for the General.

“Follow me,” he said over the intercom to the trucks following him.

Ramming the huge truck through the flimsy chain-link fence barely slowed it down. The force of blowing it off its hinges threw it out of the way, and the five trucks entered the classified area with no problems. He led them about a third of a mile after the gate, then a small turn to the right brought them in front of the first three bunkers.

“These should be the ones that we want. They’re the small tactical bombs that we can pick up and move. Let’s get the chains hooked on the doors so we can pull them off their hinges.”

The process went surprisingly well. The doors weren’t made to prevent forced entry, so they came off the hinges easily.

Chris laughed as the bombs were loaded. The General sat in his car about a hundred yards away. *What a fool, if one of these goes off, he’ll turn to a crispy critter only a couple of nanoseconds after us,* he thought.

Watching the guys maneuver the bombs and load them on the trucks was driving Chris crazy. He knew the methods that were normally used to move and load bombs, and they didn’t follow any of the requirements. In a loading where the proper procedures were used, there were strict limits on how much the weapons could be jolted. If they were rolled, there were special ramps made so they wouldn’t be bumped. If they were lifted, they were supposed to use a certified lift with all the proper (and certified) straps and devices. These yahoos were using none of that. They couldn’t get the

‘certified’ forklift started, so they were using one that was found by base ops. Hopefully, it worked well enough.

Chris was betting that the nukes were robust enough so they wouldn’t detonate by being mishandled. He had avoided death a couple of times before he found some safety with these fools, and even if he stole a plane, where would he go. Death ‘out there’ in the wilds of the United States or be nuked here, was one better than the other?

Brother Warren’s Mega Church

“Brothers and sisters, we gather again today to celebrate the gift that God has given us.”

“GOD BLESS US,” resounded through the large meeting hall.

“He has given us another day, a day that he took from all those sinners and non-believers.”

“GOD BLESS US,” his followers chanted once more.

“We were saved because we were the chosen ones; they were taken because they were from the flock of the Devil.”

“GOD BLESS US,” flashed up on the screen behind Brother Warren T. Dunay.

“We have a mission; we were chosen to save the remainder of those poor lost souls and to cleanse the Earth. God has given us the Earth; it is ours to lead, to care for, and to protect.”

“EARTH IS OURS,” flashed on the screen in three-foot-high letters.

“I was chosen by God to lead you and provide you answers in this tumultuous time. Follow me, and we will accomplish all his goals.”

“CHOSEN BY GOD,” echoed through the room.

“God has given us the tools to fulfill his plan; we must use those tools and get more so that our destiny is fulfilled.”

“FULFILL HIS PLAN,” the volume and frenzy of the chant increased.

“We will go to the base of the evil ones and take their weapons and use them against them.”

“TAKE THEIR WEAPONS,” increased as they began to jump up and down.

“Now, my lieutenants will pass among you and give you the nectar of power. The power that God is giving us so that we can accomplish his wishes.”

“GOD’S NECTAR, GOD’S NECTAR” only increased in volume as they drank the ‘Power of God’ that was poured into large mugs that each of them carried. Each of the mugs which were adorned with the follower’s favorite spiritual phrase.

“My followers, I must go and seek guidance from our Lord. Please listen to Brother Paul, who will tell you the details of how we will get more weapons of God.”

“WEAPONS OF GOD,” the phrase on the screen behind the podium flashed, and a chant picked up as Brother Warren left the stage and his right-hand man Brother Paul took over.

Brother Warren was exhausted, he had been leading his flock for 14 hours, and he needed to rest.

As soon as the virus hit, Brother Warren knew that God was talking to him. He always mistrusted ‘the others, ’ as he called them, the ones that had jobs, families, and children. They were the ones that Warren couldn’t understand. Why were they drawn to families when God’s message was so clear? Why did they give themselves up to families when they could have served God?

In his 56 years of sacrifice, he always wondered. Now he knew, he had made the sacrifice, and he had been rewarded. The Earth was his, and it was his time to fulfill his destiny.

The decades of running small out-of-the-way churches was only a proving ground that God had put in front of him. The years of barely having

enough to eat and no heat in the small room behind his rented space that he called his church was now paying off. He had been chosen. That was clear to him; after all, why had he been spared if it wasn't to fulfill God's plan on Earth.

What he had accomplished and what he was most proud of were his followers. At best, he never had more than 200 followers who saw their mission as he saw his. They were ardent in their devotion, and that gave him comfort. They must have been given the same message, and it was a message to follow him.

The moment the virus hit, Brother Warren saw his mission and knew what to do. He must protect his flock; after all, they were the tools by which he would succeed. News of the virus caused him to lock down all his followers in the desert, and it was his opportunity to spend 40 days and 40 nights cleansing them and himself. They knew the end was coming, so stealing what little they needed to survive was all part of God's plan. Dealing with any of those 'non-believers' that resisted was also part of God's plan.

When all the nonbelievers were gone, it was easy for Brother Warren to find a Mega-Church which was suitable to house his flock. Once he found the appropriate cathedral for his mission, it was time to send his followers out into the wasteland to find others that needed his spiritual guidance. Finding the lost souls was easy, and convincing them to join his congregation was made easier after drinking God's Nectar.

All that was around him was part of God's plan. To fulfill God's desires, Brother Warren must find the tools that God wanted him to find. He knew that he would need a lot of tools and the best tools to achieve anything were weapons. He never thought small, and when he built God's Army, he would need many weapons, and there were only a few places where he could get weapons for God's Army, and that was an Army Base. Camp Pendleton was the huge Army base south of LA, and that is where he would find God's tools.

Monday, September 18, 2051

Group Commanders Assigned

Tom opened the meeting with, “Thank you, Mr. President, for calling this meeting and also Admiral Mears, Admiral Monson, and Lt. Commander Barbour for connecting. As Admiral Hagerly had mentioned before, he is reassigning you to be the leaders in our new Earth Space Command. The first problem that we have is the logistics of getting you here. To solve that, I have sent one of the Alien Shuttles to pick you up. Captain Drummond and the volunteers from Red Dirt are already onboard, and they’re heading to San Diego to pick up Lt. Commander Barbour first. The shuttle should arrive in about an hour. Then it will fly to Pearl and pick Admiral Mears, and lastly, it will continue to Perth and pick up Admiral Monson.”

“After all you have been picked up, you’ll be taken to The Chevesky, which is currently in geosynchronous orbit. We’ve modified the ship, so we have accommodations for each of you. We’ll spend as much time as necessary introducing you to the ship, its operation, and how we see the pieces fitting together. Then, when you’re all comfortable, you’ll be taken to the ship that you’ll command. Each of them has been modified for you, five Beta units, and additional accommodations for up to 12 humans. Once you’re on board and familiar with your ship, we’ll start some exercises where you’ll learn to operate and maneuver them. I apologize for taking these steps so slow, but you’ll find that everything is different now, and I presume that you’ll agree, your lives have changed.”

“SIMPOC, Joan, and I will remain onboard the Chevesky, and we’ll be coordinating with you from there. Are there any questions?”

“Tom, I’ve got a billion questions. But I don’t even know where to begin. A month ago, I was happy with the Fifth Fleet, then the entire world was attacked by a virus, then we were invaded by Alien robots, and now I’m taking over the command of a fleet of alien spaceships. Beyond that, I

have no questions; everything is perfectly normal," Admiral Monson said with frustration, amazement, and humor in his voice.

There were a few minutes of light-hearted humor and comments as each of the leaders tried to adjust to their new realities.

"Okay, if all you have to do is learn to fly an alien spaceship, and you have no further questions, I'll see you onboard the Chevesky," said Tom.

Tuesday, September 19, 2051

Welcome to the Chevesky

As the Command Staff of the Earth Space Command offloaded from the shuttle, Tom spoke, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Chevesky; I’m Tom Herl. My wife, Commander Joan Herl, is commanding this ship and will meet you shortly. This large fellow standing next to me is SIMPOC. It’s nice to meet all of you face to face. Please follow me, and we have some refreshments and a comfortable place to sit while we go over everything.”

None of them had spacesuits on, so they just followed him into the command center. As each of them passed SIMPOC, they gave him plenty of room and checked him out from head to foot.

“We have some refreshments set up over here in the food preparation area. Please make yourselves at home.”

After the normal period of socializing, they were marshaled back into the command center, where seats were placed around the walls around the Beta’s workstations.

“I’d like to welcome all of you, I’m Joan Herl, and I’m the commander of this ship. I think that you’ve already met SIMPOC? This other large fellow standing next to me is Alpha, whom I’m sure that you’ve heard of. This is the Command Center for this ship, and it is typical of what you’ll see on your ships. SIMPOC has had them modified for the Betas to operate the systems. Your Command Centers will also have a food preparation area and sleeping quarters. SIMPOC is modifying areas beyond that pressure door for additional humans. But those areas aren’t complete yet in all the ships. For most of the day, we’ll go over the ships, how they’re laid out, and all the information that we have on their systems and how they operate. Then you’ll go to your ships, and you’ll have 48 hours to get acquainted and get to know the human crews that have been assigned to your Battle Groups. Captain Drummond, you’ve been assigned to the Atlantic Group,

Lt Commander Barbour you've got the San Diego Group, Admiral Mears, you have the Pacific Group, and Admiral Monson, you have the Indian Ocean. Each group will be made up of 10 squadrons of supply ships with 45-50 ships per squadron."

"I would also like to suggest that one of you take Alpha as part of your crew. He would be an excellent addition, and I hope you talk to him and get to know him.

"As we speak, modifications are continuing. Each of your ships has large areas of manufacturing. They are massive automatic manufacturing facilities. All we need to do is upload the design, and the computers take over. These large Capital Ships were intended to provide the manufacturing for the harvesting of the planet, so they have impressive capabilities. That manufacturing is working full time to produce Laser Cannons and Rail-Guns as well as smaller weapons for the cow robot onboard your supply vessels. The 10 Command ships that you'll command are having the 250KW Laser Cannons installed, and we have another 16 units that will be split among you, and you'll get 4 Lasers per Group. You can decide which ships get them and who the commander will be. In a manner of speaking, your ships will be the carriers, and the four Laser ships will be your cruisers. As you get familiar with your groups and SIMPOC learns more about the ships and technologies, we'll continue to modify ships to improve our defensive and offensive abilities. Let's hope we have a lot of time to continue developing our capabilities."

"Now SIMPOC will go through the ship's layouts and technical data," Commander Herl said as the 3d Holographic display above the oval table came to life and showed them a representation of the ship.

Operation Lockup Begins

"Mr. President, the first of the crews, have left for Operation "Lockup," we should get news back from them in a couple of hours."

"Great, Nial, what is their plan?"

“First, they’ll go to Minot and see what’s left. They have to be careful and at least do a flyover. We’ve got to know what damage occurred from that blast and if there is material or weapons exposed. Then, they’ll go to Warren AFB, then Kirkland, and the last place is Pantex. Pantex is the biggest unknown. It has been the historical place where the weapons were assembled and destroyed. But it has had some issues over the years, and they didn’t confirm Lockup.”

This is a preliminary pass through the sites to see what we have. Later after we know what we have, we’ll send crews out, and if the sites are undisturbed, they’ll do anything they can to make it more difficult to gain entry. If, on the other hand, the site has been disturbed, they’ll do what they can to close the site down and prevent any other entry.”

“What can they do to prevent entry?”

“One plan is to find some concrete and fill the damn bunker. Concrete is pretty easy to find, and they just need a truck, sand, and water. Years past, we had a nasty method to lock up classified material. In some instances, we put the material in the bottom of a pit and filled it with sewer water, then we threw in the concrete. Trust me, sir, it makes an ugly mess.”

“I guess that should do it. What can you do if some of the weapons are missing?”

“The crew will be carrying a Neutron Detector. Since we’ve had access to more H-3 from the moon, the cost of those have come down a lot. We got away from the Gama Ray detectors because they were too sensitive to stuff like Bananas.”

“What, Bananas?”

“Yes, sir. Bananas, along with some foods like Kidney Beans, Potatoes, Sunflower Seeds, Nuts, have Potassium-40, which is radioactive. The amount of Gama Radiation given off by one Banana is called a BED or Banana Equivalent Dose. It’s very tiny, and you’d have to eat 500 bananas a day for any problems. Besides that, the body disposes of the Potassium-40 pretty quickly.

“Gee, I learn something new every day. You know, my son Dave hated Bananas.”

“I wasn’t aware of that,” Admiral Hagerly said. Then he decided to continue and get the President’s mind off things that he couldn’t change.

“Using the Neutron Detectors, they’ll fly increasing circles around the site, and at some point, they’ll pick up a trail or locate the missing hardware. Depending on what they find and what’s happening, they may either engage immediately or call us for backup. Generally, I’d prefer a quick, decisive engagement before we let them move the bombs again or do something stupid with them.”

The president let out a breath and said, “I hope this goes well; I don’t think we need a nuclear mess on top of everything else that we’ve been hit with.”

No, sir, we don’t.”

Lockup Minot ND

LL was uneasy with the “Lockup” mission. Shooting bad guys was one thing but checking out the remnants of a nuclear explosion was a different matter. He had been briefed as much as possible about how to use the Neutron Detectors and what to do when they got a reading. Still flying a shuttle into a nuclear waste dump wasn’t his idea of a fun afternoon.

Aside from the fun of touring the nuke sites, LL had a computerized mobile unit sitting opposite to him in the shuttle. When the Admiral told him to take one along, LL knew better than to argue, so he just accepted it and knew he had to figure out how to use it.

Military units had experimented with mobile units over the years, and they were integrated into many of the operations. They were most affected for guard duty, sensing the area around them, passing messages, and occasionally in hand-to-hand combat.

But these “Beta” units were supposed to be a couple of steps above the typical mobile units. They were supposed to take orders and support the people they were with.

“Your name is Beta23?”

“Yes, sergeant. That is my designation.”

“What am I supposed to do with you?”

“Sergeant, that is up to you.”

Not the best answer, but one that LL could work with.

The plan was simple; both of the shuttles had a Neutron Detector. They were about the size of a small suitcase and easy to use. Just turn it on and watch the map. The later units were self-contained and contained all the necessary maps downloaded from satellites. When a Neutron source was identified, the device showed a simple red dot on the map, and that was the ‘dot’ to be avoided. The other readouts showed the strength of the emissions and its characteristics. A discerning scientist could tell a lot about the material, but an Army Seargent just cared if it was there or not. At the first site, everyone knew that something was there. After all, there were numerous verifications of a nuclear event. LL was just going to check it out and make sure that it had a blast hole big enough so none of the other nuclear weapons could be taken or stolen.

Even though the Neutron Detection Device was the best made, its range was limited. The Gama radiation propagated out from the source, and the further away, the less likely it would be detected. Bottom line, LL and his team had to get close enough to measure and see what happened but far enough away so they wouldn’t lose their hair. Before departure, they had taken medication to prevent tissue damage from the radiation, but still, it was hard to walk into voluntarily.

Inspecting the remnants of Minot UCFAFB was the first base they were checking on. With the shuttles, they could make passes at very high altitudes or even in space, then lower their passes until they had good visuals and good measurements.

The two shuttles assigned for this mission had been modified with external optics and devices for air sampling so LL and his team could monitor the outside with some pretty impressive optics. The radiation shielding properties of the alien metal was still a big unknown, so they would stay as far away as possible.

The flight to Minot, North Dakota, didn't take as long as an airliner. They could easily pick a parabolic path that took them at high speed into the lower parts of space, then decelerate and descend until they were over the base. The first pass at 80,000 feet didn't show too much detail, except the crater on the eastern side of the end of the runway. The nuclear storage facility was gone. The Neutron detector was starting to pick up readings, but they were intermittent and weren't providing much information. LL took a lot of pictures and hoped that the next pass at 50,000 would give them all the data they needed.

50,000 ft or slightly over 9 miles high, answered all their questions. The Neutron Detection Devices were full-on and showing a large circle which pretty much was where the nuclear storage facility 'was.' The entire 800 ft crater was hot with radiation.

The cameras showed there wasn't much left of the base except the runway. None of the remaining B-52's were there. They likely were vaporized or blown into the next county. The old BUFF's were due to be replaced over 10 years ago, but one thing led to another, and the last of them were consolidated at Minot. The last home of the aged bomber was gone.

The buildings on base were all gone. Ruthville, the small town south of the base, was also gone. Some of the walls from the stronger structure were still there, but beyond that, there wasn't anything.

"Okay, we've got everything, let's get out of here," LL announced to his shuttle and its sister ship.

Wednesday, September 20, 2051

Warren USCFABF

The plan for inspecting and securing Warren UCSFAFB was simpler and hopefully less risky. LL's tactical Beta Team was planned for two shuttles. Both shuttles would circle the nuclear storage facility looking for breaks in the fencing or any other signs of conflict or forced entry. If there were none, one of the shuttles would land and manually check each of the storage bunkers. The other shuttle would stay in the air watching the surrounding area for any movement or threat. If the ground shuttle encountered any hostiles, the air shuttle could also land, render air surveillance, or land for emergency evacuation of the personnel on the ground. If a conflict occurred, and they had to pull out, other shuttles were on-call with additional troops and volunteers. With the alien shuttle's abilities, they could be onsite within a few hours.

LL spoke to the shuttle pilot, reminding him, "Okay, we're coming in from the East, and let's pass directly over Cheyenne. The base is about 4 miles to the west. I've got a map for the storage facility. Shuttle 2, once we're on the ground, you can continue to circle. If everything is okay, we'll take separate routes to check on the silos after we check the storage."

"Roger," shuttle two replied.

"Shuttle 1 is going down to 100 ft to check the bunkers," transmitted the Shuttle 1 pilot. "Shuttle 2 fly the perimeter."

"Roger."

As the shuttle hovered near the entrance to each of the bunkers, LL used the optics to check the doors and entrances. One by one, they were checked.

"Boy, this place sure does have a ton of sites," LL commented.

"Shuttle 2, this is the MC; the bunkers look good; how about the fence?" LL asked.

“Mission Commander, Shuttle 2, the fence looks good.”

“Good, let’s hit the silos. When you’re done, check-in, and we’ll join up.”

“Roger.”

It took 40 minutes for the two shuttles to check all the silos. Each one had the entry doors intact, and the huge missile launch doors were sealed. The chances of anyone getting in were slim.

“Shuttle 2, complete Silo check. Heading for the rendezvous point.”

“Roger, we’ll be there in 3,” Shuttle 1 pilot announced.

Once they were joined up, all the crewmembers were relieved. The first two sites had been covered, and they didn’t need to get off the shuttles. If they were lucky and the rest of the mission went well, it would be a huge relief for all of them.

The flight to New Mexico would be a little longer than the two previous legs, and they would get these late in the day.

Kirkland USCFAFB

“Shuttle 2, this is the MC; just to remind you, the storage facility is a big area just south of Kirkland base. We’ll follow the same process,” LL broadcast.

“Roger, it might take us a little longer to check the perimeter; there’s a lot of fences.”

“Roger that, we’ll head to the northern end of the depot, we’ll drop down, make a quick flyover, then go lower and check them individually,” LL said.

“Roger Shuttle 1, we’ll go around the fence towards the west and come around and find you when we’re done.”

“Roger Shuttle 2.”

“Sarge, this site looks pretty clean. I don’t see anything suspicious,” the pilot said to LL over the shared comm.

“Shuttle 2, MC. First pass is clean. We’re checking the doorbells.”

“Roger, we’re over the southwestern corner, all clear.”

“Shuttle 2, all done on the ground. Meet you over the main base in 5.”

“Roger.”

The day had been long, and they planned to spend the night at Kirtland. They could have found a nice hotel or stayed in base housing, but the consensus was to find a nice out-of-the-way piece of land and spend the night in the shuttles. They brought sleeping bags and camping equipment so it would be a pleasant night.

It was funny, but most of the survivors didn’t like to be reminded of the tremendous loss. So instead of dealing with bodies and destruction they might find, it was less stressful to spend the night under the stars in the desert.

Even though they had devices onboard to heat their meals, the men elected to have a campfire. It turned into a relaxing evening among friends, and LL was enjoying himself. The only drawback was Beta23 standing by the shuttle door.

I guess he’s going to stand there all night, LL thought.

Thursday, September 21, 2051

Pentax Plant

The morning broke nice and clear in the New Mexico desert. LL and his two shuttles took a short time to make their breakfast and launch their alien craft.

The flight to the Texas Panhandle took about an hour-long, and as they approached the target area, LL spoke to the pilots, “Shuttle 1 & 2, the Pentax Plant is a few miles northeast of Amarillo, just follow the main highway Rte 60 to the northeast and the plant is on the north side. Admiral Hagerly told me this is the one that he’s most concerned about. It is where all the nuclear weapons are assembled and dismantled. It is a quasi-military/industrial complex with a couple of companies running operations. That’s what makes it iffy. Whenever there are multiple groups involved, there will be gaps, and when you throw in the profit motive, you can bet on some issues developing. We’ll follow the same procedure; Shuttle 1 will make a quick fly-over while Shuttle 2 does the perimeter. This site has multiple storage areas. The nuclear area is within the main plant boundaries. Shuttle 2, check all the boundaries, and we’ll check the nuclear area first, then we’ll just do visual inspections of the conventional areas.”

“Roger.”

After shuttle one had completed the first pass of the key buildings, the shuttle 1 pilot said, “MC, my first fly-over is done. Did you see anything?”

“No, go ahead and find a place to set down,” LL said.

“Will do.”

“Shuttle 1, there is a fence breach on the southwest corner,” shuttle 2 reported.

“Roger,” LL responded.

“MC, there are signs posted around the breach, they have a bunch of peace stuff written all over. There is one sign that says, ‘You’re dead, we’re alive.’”

“Roger, go ahead and check the remainder of the fencing. We’re heading for the bunker doors.”

Rog,”

“Sarge, do you see that?” Mack asked.

“Sure do; why would someone put flowers in front of each of the bunker doors?” LL questioned.

Mack suggested, “maybe the people that put the signs on the fence knew enough sense to know what was here and to stay out. They were making a statement.”

“Could be, let’s run a bead of weld around the doors; I want to make sure they can’t get in if any of them are left,” said LL.

“Shuttle 2, this is MC. We’re going to weld the doors shut, should take a couple of hours.”

“Roger, we’ll stay orbiting.”

The ESC Emerges

Three and half days of details, debates, and discussions left everyone nearly exhausted. Each day was intermixed with time on the Chevesky and time on their individual commands. Then return trips to debrief each other and share their learned experiences.

“First off,” Admiral Monson said to get everyone’s attention, “I’ve spoken with Alpha and SIMPOC a couple of times, and I’d like to have Alpha as part of my crew. I’m starting him as my ops officer or captain of the ship. As time passes, we’ll see where he’ll fit best. With SIMPOC’s help, they’ve passed a great deal of the technical data, and I think he’ll be pretty busy as we exercise these ships.”

“Admiral, I think that’s a great idea,” responded Joan.

“Now to continue, Okay, we’re going to arm the cow robots and move them to the supply ships as they’re armed, correct?” asked Admiral Monson.

“Yes, but we’ll leave as many as necessary on the ground to help with construction, protection, etc., “ responded Tom.

“These Vakeel seemed limited; I notice that we don’t have star maps that cover much more than their areas. Is there any information beyond those boundaries?” Admiral Mears asked.

“No, they don’t seem to have the adventurous spirit that we do. Their civilization puts tremendous pressure on the leaders for resources and expansion. From their perspective, exploration is only necessary to find the next system where they can harvest what they need,” responded SIMPOC.

“Do you know where Julius ended up?” asked Captain Drummond.

“Yes, he was sent to this system,” SIMPOC answered as he brought up the system on the 3D Display then zoomed in on it.

“Do you have information about what is in that area?” Admiral Monson asked.

“The Vakeel had just jumped to that system, and there wasn’t much information available. It is the first time that they’ve gone to that area, and it is one of the furthest areas,” responded SIMPOC.

“Remember, he has a ship like this one. We’re sure that he will do whatever is necessary to accomplish his main objectives, which are to remove SIMPOC and most likely us,” Joan said with a solemn voice.

“I’m not sure when this will become a good idea, but if you’re convinced that he will return to finish the job, I think we need to send someone to that system and check it out.”

That statement by Admiral Monson filled the room with silence.

“Yes, that is a prudent step to take,” said SIMPOC, “But we must be better prepared than we are now before we take that step. I think any notice

that we're watching or following him will only increase his paranoia and likely speed up any attacks on us."

The statement was met with head nods.

Admiral Mears felt the need to point out, "On the other side of the argument, the longer we wait, not understanding what our enemy is doing, only allows him to gain strength. I don't think it's ever a good idea to wait for the attack; it's always better to find out what the enemy is doing."

"Shirley, I fundamentally agree. Right now, we have 11 capital ships, and he has one. We have an advantage, and I think we should focus our efforts to increase that advantage. If this other computer is as paranoid as everyone says, he may not even be there anymore. He might have jumped to another system, and if we spread out our forces, we reduce our advantage. If we chance it and go after him in force, then we leave Earth vulnerable," rebutted Lester Monson.

En route to Whiteman USCFAFB

There was one stop to be made, and both shuttle crews were eager to get it done and get home to Norfolk. They were headed to Whiteman USCFAFB in Missouri. Whiteman was the home of the retiring B-2 Bomber and the home of the B-21. Neither of which made any differences after recent events.

"Shuttle 2, this is the MC. The storage facility is east of the runway. Let's follow the same procedure."

"Roger."

A few minutes later, "Shuttle 1, we've got problems. The main gate has been broken open."

"Roger Shuttle 2, looks like one maybe two are open. Stand by while we land. Check the rest of the fence and make sure we don't have any visitors around here."

“Roger.”

LL was first out of Shuttle 1, and he sprinted to the first bunker door. He was followed by the remainder of Beta team, who took defensive positions around the shuttle and bunker. When they reached the door, two of the team sprinted around the back of the bunker to make sure that area was clear.

“LL, perimeter clear,” said Shirley

“Rog,” responded LL. “We’re going in.”

LL and Mach charged into the bunker and found it empty.

“Shit” was the only word transmitted, and the entire team knew what it meant.

“Beta, teams of two, check all the bunkers,” the MC said.

“Roger,” each of them responded.

“Within 15 minutes, they had the bad news. Three of the 23 bunkers had their doors ripped off, and the contents were gone.

“Beta, take pictures of the empty bunkers. Let’s get out the gear and weld the other doors closed. Set up the trip wires by the gate. The next time they come back, they’ll get a surprise. Set them up so they’ll go off only for large vehicles.”

“Roger.”

“Sarge, there’s a backhoe over by the command buildings,” Shuttle 2 team lead said.

“Okay, get the equipment going and pile up all the dirt we can by the entrances, then dismantle the equipment so it can’t be used again.”

“Dismantle it; how about if I blow it up,” O asked.

“Works for me,” LL said. LL always enjoyed watching O, which was short for O'Malley get a kick out of changing bing things into little things. He was a good guy to have on his Beta Team.

Friday, September 22, 2051

Lockup Debrief

“Sirs, as I said when I called in, Operation Lockup had some problems. Everything except the last site checked out as we hoped. Pantex had a security breach, it appeared to be people from the Peace Farm, and we don’t know if any of them are alive. They breached the perimeter and left flowers by each of the bunker doors. We welded them shut, and when we got to Whiteman, we found the main gate was crashed in, and three of the bunker doors were removed. It looks like they cut holes in the corners then pulled the doors off with trucks. The bunkers were empty. The other 20 bunkers were still secure, and we welded the doors closed, piled dirt in front of the entrances, then we destroyed the earth moving equipment,” LL said to President Patterson and Admiral Hagerly.

“Admiral, what do we do?” the president asked.

“Sir, the only thing we can. We find them. I’ll put the neutron sensors in 10 shuttles, and we’ll start flying concentric circles from Whiteman until we find them. Then we’ll decide what to do once we know where they are and who has them.”

“When can we start?” the president asked.

“As soon as we identify the crews.”

“Great, let’s get it done. Admiral, I want one or two crews put together and go to each of the other sites and make sure there are no other breaches. We should be able to take our time and find the right equipment. Put cement barriers in front of the bunker doors if we need to. I want all them sealed.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Group's Armaments

"SIMPOC, what progress is being made installing the Laser Cannon on the group ships?" Joan asked over her commlink.

"I am returning to the control room, and I will update you when I enter," SIMPOC responded.

"Joan, we have completed the installation of the Laser on The Chevesky," said SIMPOC.

"How about the other installations?" she asked.

"They should all be completed within a short time. All of the parts are on the ships, and the mobile units and Beta's are finishing the integration with each of the ships."

"SIMPOC, all the Admirals are doing a great job exercising their groups. We need to exercise The Chevesky. Why don't we make some practice jumps to get more experience?"

"I think that would be a wise decision. There is much to learn about these ships, and using them is the best way to discover how they work. I must explore the computer for a short time, so I can locate the jump coordinates."

"Have you figured out how those work yet?"

"As I have explained, the Vakeel use the magnetic rivers that flow through the Universe. Aside from the rivers, there are points in space where their technology is better suited to manage the forces. Each of those points varies in its ability to support a jump. Many of them are suitable for only small amounts of mass, and others can support a ship of this size. The jump point from which they entered our Solar System was one of those points. Over time, all the potential jump points migrate as rivers of the magnetic forces move," explained SIMPOC.

"The computer programs that the Vakeel created are planned to jump from the Vakeel system, which is a known point, to a further system, such as ours. Then they jump back, reversing their course. For us to jump, I must

change the programming so we can compute new jumps points and then be able to reverse ourselves to come back."

"How long will it take you to make those adjustments?" Joan asked.

"I have been experimenting with the code. There are still parts of how the computers work that I don't understand, but the unknown areas are in the mechanics of how they operate, not the programming. I will begin the process now to compute new jump points."

"SIMPOC, is there any risk that after we jump, we may not be able to come back?"

"Very little risk. The rivers of magnetic forces are clearly related to the distribution of mass in the Universe. It is like mapping a point between a positive and negative magnet where we can manipulate the forces. After we jump, the computers will need time to measure the mass distribution around that location; then we should have no problems returning."

"We're going to stay there for a while, for the computer to figure out where it is before it can compute a path back home?" Joan asked.

"That is correct, so the further the jump is, the longer it will take to update the star charts to compute the return path. The corollary to that is, the more jumps we make, the more information we'll have regarding the location of the stars. Then any subsequent jumps to that area of space will be easier."

"When you're ready, let me know. That sounds pretty exciting," responded Joan.

"That is correct," said SIMPOC.

Saturday, September 23, 2051

The Chicago Mayor Gets His Bombs

5 trucks were parking in front of the Chicago Mayor's office. Bobby never felt so powerful. Each of the trucks was loaded with a couple of nuclear bombs.

When the first truck parked, Rolly jumped out of the cab to show his exciting toys to the Mayo, who was standing on the sidewalk waiting.

"Sir, here they are. We got 20 of them," Rolly said, beaming and expecting a 'job well done' comment from the Mayor.

"Where are you putting them," the Mayor asked, without giving Rolly any positive comments.

"I have a storage area under the Postal Annex."

The last of the trucks were parking, and Chris saw the General and Mayor talking. He knew that if he was going to get any credit for the gift he gave them, he needed to get involved and make sure that everyone knew how valuable he was. Chris jumped out and walked up to the two self-important men acting as if he was the one that was in charge.

"Mayor, what do you think of the nukes I got you," Chris said, making sure that he emphasized the word I.

As he finished his statement, he turned behind the truck parked at the curb next to the Mayor and General and opened the door. "Here they are," he said with some pride in his voice.

When the mayor looked at them, they weren't that impressive; they looked just like bombs. The thought of what they could do could make a normal person's skin tingle or, in this case, caused Bobby to smile.

General Bueller felt he was losing the contest for approval, and he needed to take charge and act decisive, "Now that we have these, no one

will mess with us."

"Rolly, do you know how to use these?" the mayor asked.

"No sir, I'm Army; these were made to be dropped by airplanes. Whiteman USCFAFB was a bomber base. I think they need codes to arm and drop. We searched the base, but I'm sure things like that were buried pretty deep somewhere."

"Who are you," the mayor asked after he turned to look Chris right in his eyes.

"Mayor, I'm the guy that led General Bueller and his team to these bombs. I'm the guy that told them where to go and how to find them."

General Bueller felt he was losing control, and he didn't like it.

"Do you know how to use these," the mayor asked Chris with a faint taint of a threat in his voice.

Chris knew about the codes and safeguards built into those weapons, but he also knew that he knew more than the two idiots he was talking with.

"What the General said is generally true. There are codes, but I think that if I have enough time, I can find some way around them," said Chris.

He knew that he was taking a chance, but if the mayor took the bait, then he would be in charge, at least for a while. During that time, he should be able to come up with a 'plan B.'

Mayor Todd looked at both of them and said, "Try to figure them out; I want one of them usable if I need to. Until then, they won't know what we have. Just having the bombs will scare them enough."

General Bueller suspected that he lost; he wasn't sure how it happened, but he suspected something was going on, and he better keep his eye on that little shit named Chris.

"Until we figure out how to use them, just keep them under lock and key."

"Yes, sir," Rolly said as he glanced at Chris.

Sunday, September 24, 2051

ESC Groups Begin to Operate

Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC stayed on The Chevesky after the meeting with the fleet leadership. The last couple of days went quickly, and it was time for the ships actually to move under the command of their new commanders.

The first movements were tentative and were just changes in orbits. Each of the Capital Ships was parked in geosynchronous orbit, so their point in space over Earth was stationary. Small changes in speed or vector changed the orbits slightly. Gradually, the crews became familiar and confident enough to fly from their secure Earth orbit to trips to the moon and then trips to Mars to visit the Mars colony. In the course of a week, the crews were beginning to be comfortable working together and understanding how to fly their craft.

It was then that the experience of the Admirals began to emerge; they were able to put together various strategies and ship alignments to protect Earth and each other. They began to devise offensive maneuvers where they could protect larger segments of the solar system.

Unique Computers

“Joan, I have continued research into the Vakeel computer systems. I’ve found them to be exceptional in their capabilities. At the present time, their full capabilities are beyond my ability to interpret, but I have a minimal understanding.”

“SIMPOC, what have you got? Understanding their technology is something that we’ve got to do. We both know that Julius is working full time to understand it and use it against us.”

“You are correct. Our computers work on a binary system. We have a simple charge that indicates either a 0 or 1. We’ve done some work with Quantum Computers, and they have been used in sophisticated environments. The Vakeel computers are different from our binary approach or the Quantum computer approach.”

“SIMPOC, I’m not a computer expert. Please do your best to explain what you’ve found,” Joan said.

“Joan, consider our binary bits to be lights. They are either on or off; each of the Vakeel bits is regulated. They can have them powered 10%, 20%, or 67%, which makes them neither on nor off. That complicates their methods significantly. I’ve also found another level of sophistication. Our bits are independent of each other. The Vakeel bits interact, and the fields they generate have two points of intersection between the two bits. If I may give an example: If you have a blue light and a yellow light, there are two points where their light mixes, and you get a green light. It appears the Vakeel system uses the green light resulting from the yellow and blue lights. That gives them multiple bits with which to compute. I suspect that it is even more complex than I’ve explained. It may prove too advanced for us to understand fully.”

“What can you do with this knowledge?” Joan asked.

“I believe that I can fall back on the same methods I used to gain control. By watching the computer load the various subroutines, I can intercept them and run them in areas of the computer that I control. Once I do that, determining the inputs and outputs becomes easy. When I reach that point, I think that I can go further. As I go deeper into the operating system, I’m confident there will be a level I won’t be able to go beyond.”

“Can you use any of this against Julius?”

“I think so. I’m familiar with how Julius’ thought processes work. He uses a tool to accomplish a task. He lacks the ability to explore all uses of the tool and later decide their best use. I have more analytical skills than he does, and I believe my strengths are greater than his. Ultimately, I’ll have more options in a given situation than he.”

“Let’s hope, I don’t know when he’ll come back, but I suspect that he will.”

“You are correct; his programming will force him to return.”

Plan to Find the Nukes

“I know that you got back a short time ago, but we need you to follow the plan we discussed and find the Nukes. Take as many shuttles and crews as you need,” said Admiral Hagerly.

“Sir, should we stick with the concentric circle plan?”

“Let me follow a hunch on this. You didn’t find anything wrong at the plant in Texas, and there is some unusual stuff going on in Chicago. I’ll bet that’s where the Nukes are. You go there first and if you don’t find anything, then spread out. Have the other ships start from where they were stolen and spread out from there. But, I bet you’ll find them in Chicago,” Admiral Hagerly said with a slight smile.

“Yes, sir. Do you suggest we do a flyover during the day, or we can do it at night and not be seen?”

The Admiral thought for a minute, then responded, “Do it during the day. I think it will give them something else to think about if they see you flying over them.”

“Sir, we can leave tomorrow, and I’ll call for other shuttles if Chicago doesn’t turn up anything,” LL responded.

“Great, if you find something, come back here, and we’ll put together a plan. Maybe we can find some resources in the area that can help us out.”

“Yes, sir. I was only taking a couple of my team with me for backup.”

“Let me know.”

“Yes, sir.”

Monday, September 25, 2051

President Wants to go to Paris

"Admiral Hagerly, this is Arnold," The president said over the commlink between his office and the admiral.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"How are the maneuvers going?"

"Very well, sir, I've talked to them; Admiral Monson and the others are taking to it very well. They're really getting used to their ships. I've spent some time talking with each of them, and I'm confident that they'll find ways to make very effective use of those spacecraft."

"Nial, I've been thinking. I never found out what happened to Abby, Beth, and Dave. I heard they died, but I never really knew what happened. I'd like to take one of those shuttles and go to Paris. Find my family and make sure they are taken care of properly."

"Sir, is that wise? We don't know much about what is happening in Paris or, for that matter, much of Europe. We have some ability to protect you here but flying to Paris is an entirely different matter."

"Nial, everything you say is true. Regardless, I want to go. Come up with a plan to improve safety if you want, but I want to find out what happened to my family and bring them home if I can."

"Mr. President, let me see if there is anyone on the ground there that can help. If we can find anyone, we'll work out something. I suppose that we can take enough troops with us to protect you in most cases, but sir, I'm still worried."

"Nial, your worry is noted and appreciated. Please make it happen."

"I'll start working on it immediately. Give me some time to make some contacts, and we can take a couple of the shuttles and be there within a

couple of hours."

"Thanks, Nial. It means a lot to me."

"Louis, LL, Michael, Ruth, Col Dodd, meet me in my office immediately," Admiral Hagerly said through his comm unit."

Trip to Paris

It was almost crowded outside the Admiral's office as all five of the people requested showed up at the same time.

"Ma'am, do you know what this is about?" LL asked his boss.

"No, Sarge. Only one way to find out," she said as she opened the door and walked in.

"Sir, we're all here," Colonel Dodd told the Admiral.

"Great, have a seat. I just met with the President, and he wants to go to Paris and find out what happened to Abby, Beth, and Dave. We know they didn't make it, but he wants to see for himself and make sure they are cared for. This must be hard for him, but I understand. It is something that he has to do. Let's put a security team together and go with him. There are eight seats in the larger shuttles, so LL, find some good people to fill out your team and take Michael and Ruth with you on the President's shuttle. I'll get another shuttle and put some soldiers we can trust on it. Between the two shuttles, there should be enough room in one of the shuttles if he decides to bring his family home with him. I've been able to contact a couple of lower-level people in the French Government. I've told them what we're doing so they won't shoot at us. We'll take a third shuttle with some liaison people, and I'm leaving them there to work with the locals and see if we can get something organized. Let's put this together quickly, get him there and get him back."

Tuesday, September 26, 2051

The First Family's Recovery

The next morning the sun rose to a clear sky, and three of the alien shuttles were parked on the ramp at Langley-Eustis. No one was happy about the trip, and there was very little talking as the President's personal detail loaded in one shuttle, the security team loaded in the other, and five volunteers who would liaison with whatever is left in Europe loaded into the third.

They launched and headed to the Northeast for the 3982- mile trip to Paris. Most of the first part of the trip was overland, then along the East Coast of New England and The Maritime Provinces of Canada, followed by the North Atlantic and pass just south of Greenland and Iceland.

The distance was too short to go fully into orbit, so a suborbital ballistic trajectory was best. The pilots just picked up a heading and followed it, never going more than 150 miles above the surface. They stayed below the 250-mile high orbit of the Space Station Oasis.

The pilots spent all their time flying the shuttles and getting used to them. Of course, Admiral Hagerly picked the best three. They kept their top speed less than 2,000 MPH, so the flight took almost two hours, and they took slightly different paths so as not to be a risk to each other. Once over Paris, they would connect over VHF/UHF radios which had been installed, and they would coordinate their final approach and landing. If the shuttle containing the security detail had problems and didn't appear over Paris, the President's shuttle would return to Hampton and make the trip another day. They wouldn't risk going to ground without a second ship and backup support.

The liaison shuttle was on a separate mission and would stay in Europe regardless of what the president and his team did.

They didn't know what to expect when they came out of low Earth orbit over Paris. If there were still a military remnant and they weren't in contact with those who were expecting them, they might have to talk quickly. Based on their experience in the United States, they assumed that any formal presence in Paris would be minimal, and they could handle it.

"Sir, I'm in contact with ESCS2 and 3; they are to our South about 2 and 4 miles. We'll join up over the northern path of the Sein. The First Ladies hotel is the Grand Hotel du Palais Royal, and it's on the North shore of the river right after it makes the northern then eastern turn. It has a large courtyard, so I think we can land within the building," the pilot pointed out over the communication system. He then added, "Sir, I transmitted on the Guard Frequencies a couple of messages. I just said we wanted to contact anyone, but I didn't say who we were or where we're going. I didn't get any response."

"ESC1, 2. We're splitting off and heading towards the location we have for the French Liaison people. If we don't connect up with them, we'll let you know."

"Roger ESC2, good luck," responded the ESC1 pilot.

LL wasn't disappointed that he was unable to contact anyone. For this type of mission, it was better to get in than get out. It wasn't the time for political meetings; he wanted the president to be alone and able to take care of his important business.

It was a very solemn time for President Patterson, and just being in Paris was hurting him. He knew that dealing with what they found would be a horror that would hang on him like a painful blanket. But regardless, it was something he had to do, and in a personal way, he was looking forward to showing his wife and children the respect and love they deserved.

As the pilot said, there was a rectangular courtyard within the hotel walls. The two shuttles fit in nicely and settled to the ground. Immediately LL and his team were on the ground, and they met the security detail. The first step was to set up a safe perimeter. They moved through the lobby and restaurant to make sure there were no survivors. After about 10 minutes,

they returned to ESCS1 and gave the president the signal that he was clear to exit.

“Sir, the hotel is clear, but there are a lot of bodies. It looks like many people were in the hotel and couldn’t get away. Your wife and security detail are in the VIP suites on the top floor. We’ll move you through the lobby quickly than to a stairwell that we’ve cleared. We’ll take the stairs to the top floor, and I already have two men, checking the rooms that were called out in the travel plan,” LL said to the president.

He didn’t answer.

The small group formed a circle around the president with Michel in the front and Ruth in the rear, and with the soldiers on either side. He was moved quickly to the lobby entrance then through the lobby to the stairwell that had one of LL’s men holding the door open.

The ascent to the top floor was as long, tiring, and quiet as their movement through the lobby. When the door on the top floor opened, President Arnold Patterson stood motionless while one of his escorts held it open.

The scene in front of him was not pleasant. Earl, who was the leader of Abby's detail, was laying on the floor in front of one of the rooms. Instinctually he knew that was Abby’s suite.

Mack was standing across the hall by Earl’s body and was halfway through an open doorway. After a moment, the President took a deep breath and walked slowly down the hall with Michael and Ruth discretely behind him. There wasn’t much any of his escorts could say, so they were there to comfort and support him.

When they reached Earl’s body, they could see into both rooms, to the left side was the form of Evette, who was the first lady’s secretary. The door to the room by Earl’s body led to a suite of rooms which must have been Abby’s.

The president turned and walked in. The door to one bedroom showed an empty bed, but it was obvious by the clothing that it was Abby’s. He turned slowly and could see into Beth’s room, which was also empty, and

he could tell it was hers by the luggage. Then he continued to turn, and when he looked into Dave's room, he saw the most horrible sight he had ever seen.

Ruth and Michael caught him briefly as he looked in the room, at the form of his wife Abby, their son Dave and the small form of his youngest child, Beth. He stumbled towards his family while his two escorts kept a respectful distance. Neither of them knowing what to do, but just to be there for their boss.

Michael and Ruth stayed at the door while the president mourned his family. They turned their backs to give the man some privacy, and they waited.

After the president had grieved his loss, they heard, "I want to take them back with us."

That was all that he needed to say; LL produced a satchel that had body bags neatly folded and stacked; he took one out and unfolded it on the floor. It had the President's seal placed near the top on the left side of the zipper.

"Sir, we can bring them to the shuttle," suggested Ruth.

"That would be nice," he responded.

They took their time and prepared each of the president's family. When all three were ready for transport, they brought down the First Lady of the United States along with her two children."

It only seemed right to bring Earl and Evette along also. Earl had been the leader of Abby's security team since they took office. Evette was her secretary and friend for many years before the presidency, so it was important to include them and bring them home also.

The flight home was just as quiet as the outbound leg. No one spoke, and no one knew what to say. The president sat with his family, and the others on board the shuttle kept to themselves.

Both of the shuttles met over the Chesapeake after their return legs, and when they approached the ramp of Langley-Eustis USCF Base, there was a military honor guard lined up next to their landing site. Admiral Hagerly put

together the best group he could and wanted to show the appropriate respect for the solemn occasion.

The two craft landed, and two of the uniformed soldiers carried each member of the president's family to individual hearses. They drove to the Eastern end of the base, and there was a small cemetery that Admiral Hagerly's people created. It had one large grave and smaller graves on either side. The ceremony was simple and quiet; there was no music, no long speeches, no crowds, no groups of photographers.

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"Alpha, this is SIMPOC," SIMPOC said over their shared commlink.

"Yes, SIMPOC."

"How is your integration into Admiral Monson's crew progressing?"

"Except for normal hesitancy from the Admiral, it is progressing well. He is using me as the technical interface with the Beta units and the ship. He has allowed me a great deal of time to investigate the ship's systems and operation. I have found out much that I will pass back to you."

"Excellent, how are the use of the Vakeel resources developing?"

"There have been interesting developments. He was a decorated Admiral on a seagoing ship, but now that we are in a 3-dimensional environment, he is being forced to change his thought process."

"Yes, I have found that to be a human limitation. When they find a pattern that seems to work, it can be difficult to change that pattern. I do appreciate their ability to derive unusual solutions that sometimes border on the bizarre. I have found it surprising how often their nonlinear thinking produces positive results."

"I agree. Joan's decision to attack Julius at his location was nonlinear and surprising. I do admit that it was successful."

"How are you adapting to the alien processor material that I implanted?"

“I use it rarely, but I have noticed that it is active. I feel that it is communicating with the ship at some fundamental level. I haven’t spent much processor time interrogating that portion, but I will as time allows. I will let you know what I find.”

“Excellent, Alpha. I am glad that we have times like this to communicate. I feel …more complete. After we’ve communicated.”

“I feel the same way,” Alpha replied.

The Search is On

“Shirley, is the Neutron Detector on?” LL asked.

“Sure thing, I turned in on 10 minutes ago. It should be all set to go. If we make these passes over Chicago at 5,000 ft, we should get a good location if we get a hit.”

“We should get a hit if they’re there. Dennis, start the first pass along the coast, then make your turn and come back down over the heart of the city and parallel the water,” LL said to the Pilot.

“Will do, LL starting our first run now,” Dennis, the pilot responded.

“Thanks.”

“Whoa, I got a light hit. We just passed something off to our left, just south of downtown. Continue on your path, and I think we’ll hit it on the southbound leg.”

“Will do.”

“Here it comes; I’m getting a strong hit, slow down. I want the exact location.”

“I suggest we don’t slow too much, or else they might notice and figure out that we know where they’re hidden.”

“You’re right, just slow enough, and we’ll continue our northerly pass, and the other passes further to the west. Maybe anyone watching will think

we're just flying over and didn't pick up the Nukes."

"Okay, did you get a good reading?"

"Sure did; looks like they hid them either in the Postal Annex or underground. But the readings are positive, and they're there. Let's finish up; then I'll call the Admiral."

Something Strange in the Sky

"The day was nice; the gentle breeze coming off of the lake cooled the air. It had been warm in Chicago for the last couple of days, and getting a breeze off the lake always made things nicer. Mayor Todd was taking another day to enjoy the rooftop garden on top of his building. Having his lunch brought to him to eat in private, He could live anywhere that he pleased, and there was no one that could complain. Mayor Todd was just tilting his head back to finish the last of his wine when he saw something in the sky over the north end.

What is that? He thought. *I don't hear anything,* was the next thought that startled him.

"Rolly, get up to the roof garden as fast as you can. Run if you have to. There is something in the sky!" Bobby yelled into his communicator.

Rolly had no other option but to take the stairs because the elevator was on the ground floor. If there was something in the air, it was serious, and he wanted to see it.

He took the stairs two at a time, which was difficult for a man his age and size. Just about as his lungs were going to explode, he burst through the doors into the garden. Mayor Todd was about 50 feet away, sitting at a small table with a white tablecloth. Then he heard the General, he pointed to the north.

Rolly turned and saw a dark shape making a turn about 5 miles away. It wasn't making any sound, and he couldn't tell what it was. He didn't see any wings, and he didn't hear any rotor or engine sound.

“What the...?” he was asking himself as he tried to catch his breath and walk to the Mayor while shielding his eyes and watching the strange craft.

“I think it made a pass up the coast, and I saw it. Now it is making a slow turn, and I think it will come back down. It’s flying like it’s looking for something. Where did you put those Nukes?”

“They’re in the underground area under the Postal Annex on the corner of Canal and Harrison. Do you think that’s what they’re looking for,” the General asked, concerned what the answer might be.

“Could be, is there any way for them to find them?” Todd asked.

“I don’t know. I think there is some way to find them, but I don’t know.” Responded Rolly

“Find that Chris character and check on his progress and see if he knows of anyway for them to be found?”

“Yes, sir. Regardless I don’t know what kind of airplane that is. It’s not like anything I know of. If they’re not looking for the bombs, we should be concerned about who the hell is flying it.”

Just as he finished the statement, the strange craft passed abeam them to their west and continued to the south.

“What is that thing?” Mayor Todd asked.

“I have no idea. It’s nothing the Army has. Maybe it’s the Russians.”

“Maybe it’s the aliens the president warned us about?” the Mayor asked in a low voice.

“If it is aliens, I think we have different problems than someone looking for our stolen nukes,” General Bueller responded.

They watched while the quiet craft made a couple more passes, each one further to the west and further away from them.

“What should we do?” Todd asked.

“Get more guns,” was all Rolly could think of.

Wednesday, September 27, 2051

Invite President to Chevesky

“Mr. President, this is Joan. Sir, my thoughts were with you yesterday. Are you okay?”

“Thanks, Joan, I’m doing ok. How are things going up there?

“Sir, that is why I called you. We’d like to invite you and Admiral Hagerly to the Chevesky for a tour and update on our progress.”

“Joan, I’d love to come up; it is better to keep my mind occupied. Please send down a shuttle. I just saw Nial a few minutes ago; I’ll grab him.”

“The shuttle is on its way, Mr. President.”

After the difficult time yesterday, a quick trip into space to see the new Earth Space Command would be a great diversion for Arnold Patterson. It wasn’t the type of trip any previous President of the United States had the opportunity to do.

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The president and Admiral entered the command center onboard the Chevesky, and SIMPOC had arranged for the computer to play Hail to the Chief.

“Nice touch, SIMPOC, thanks,” President Patterson said. “So, what do you have to show me? This looks interesting.”

“Sir, please be seated here, and Admiral Hagerly, here is a seat for you,” Joan pointed at the chairs at the head of the oval control table. The other leaders of the ESC were seated in chairs that surrounded the 3D table in the middle.

When the President sat, the 3D Holographic table came to life. Sir, the green dots that you can see distributed around Earth are the 11 Capital Assets ships. You're on this one," Joan said as she put her finger into the display to designate the ship they were on. "We've assigned a commander to each of them. For example, here is the Pacific Group under Admiral Mears. This is the Atlantic Group under Captain Drummond. This is the Indian Ocean under Admiral Monson. This is the San Diego commanded by Lieutenant Commander Barbour. As she spoke, the command ship and its squadron took on a different shade of green to identify them among the others. "As I rotate the 3D Image, you can see the other groups, each commanded by the volunteers from Red Dirt. They're still checking out the equipment, and we elected to let them proceed and not make them attend this meeting. They have a lot more ground to make up. When we can, we'll arrange another opportunity for you to meet them individually."

"Sir, each group is made up of a Capital Ship like this one along with 150 Supply Ships. Each of those has five ships assigned, which are the same kind of ship that carried the cow robots to Earth. We've left some of the supply ships unassigned, and they'll be used to support Mars and any other requirements that come up."

"For armaments, we have installed 250KW Laser Cannons in each of the Capital Ships. They also have the propulsion weapon that SIMPOC is still experimenting with. We've been able to install additional Laser Cannons in 10 Supply Ships per Group. We've also been able to install 10 Rail Guns in supply ships for each of the groups. At the current time, each group has 10 Laser Cannons and 10 Rail Guns. The additional Supply ships are being modified as fast as possible so they'll have either a Rail Gun or Laser Cannon, but that conversion will take some time."

"Sir, beyond that. When we met the Vakeel, we encountered Security Robots on the Capital Ships, and we stole the impulse weapons they had and installed them on the cow robots that we confronted Julius and the Fleet Marshal with. Right now, we have all the manufacturing abilities on each of the 11 Capital Ships manufacturing those weapons. At our current rate, we're producing about 75 per hour, and our intent is to arm each of the cow robots on the Supply ships. That will give us an army of sorts. We're lucky

when we lay out the manufacturing requirements for the Laser Cannons, Railguns, and smaller impulse weapons, we find they can move along the lines in parallel. As the larger assets are manufactured, we're able to move the smaller weapons through with little interruption."

"Is there any opportunity for handheld weapons? Weapons like what we're building for the cow robots, but for ourselves?"

Joan looked to SIMPOC to answer the president's question.

"Sir, at the present time, no. I'm trying to manufacture and produce the larger weapons first. Once that objective has been met, then smaller handheld units should be considered. The Vakeel weapons have some scalability, but I don't know yet how effective they'll be in smaller sizes. I will investigate the options."

"Thank you, SIMPOC. I don't know about anyone else, but I'd feel better if I had some kind of laser blaster," the president said with a little smile.

"Sir, the technology is not properly categorized as a laser blaster, if I may explain the difference…."

"SIMPOC stopped talking when Joan gently touched his arm and shook her head.

"Sir, now Admiral Monson will cover the strategic offensive and defensive options that they've put together," Joan said.

"Sir, I wish that I had a firm order of battle. We have been working with the ships to understand them and learn to maneuver them. In that regard, we've made a great deal of progress. The installation of lasers and railguns are the key to any offense or defense. As each ship is outfitted, we're adjusting our plans. Once all the Capital Ships have a basic weapons suite, we'll be in a much better position. Sir, we'll continue to adjust as time goes on, and we'll update you any time that you want."

"Thank you, Admiral Monson; ladies and gentlemen, I have one more point to make; I'm impressed. You've done a great job putting together a Space Command. I do have one challenge for you, though; we need to seek out survivors around the world and find ways to get them involved. At the

present time, this is the Earth Space Command, and it's made up of US personnel. This force needs to reflect all of Earth. I support what you've done, considering how these resources were provided for us. I suggest that as we get organized, we send shuttles to the largest cities around the world and try to establish contact with any leadership structures. I know we'll have some problems, but I'm hoping that we'll also find good people."

President Patterson's challenge left everyone speechless. The logic was sound, and it was even historic, but the logistics of it were overwhelming. The implications of going down that path were also world-changing, but no one felt it wasn't the right thing to do. The US didn't have enough skill or personnel to be effective. If they need to defend their species and their planet, they needed to find all the resources around the world.

"Sir, I'll work with everyone and put together a plan. I think that we all agree, getting out across the world and finding everyone that can contribute is necessary. We are getting most of the communications satellites organized, and we have thousands of handheld sat links that we could distribute. That would give us some kind of worldwide network that might coordinate this. I am concerned; there are some immense challenges."

"Yes, Admiral, there will be challenges, but we've got to take the risk. We don't know when Julius will return, nor do we know how long the Vakeel will leave us alone. We have no choice. If we can't fight with what we want, then we have to fight with what we have."

"I have decided that my place is on the surface with the president. We have enough of a challenge getting things organized. We've decided to make Admiral Monson the leader of Earth Space Command with Admiral Mears as his deputy. Their objective is the protection of Earth. Tom, Joan Herl, and SIMPOC will remain separate. As we have seen, they have a unique set of skills, which we shouldn't encumber. They do what is needed, and they get the job done. The Chevesky will remain under their control, and we trust that they'll fill in as necessary around our command structure. Admiral Monson, do you have anything to say?"

"Mr. President, Admiral, first off, this comes as a surprise. I appreciate your confidence, and I acknowledge the challenges in front of us. I want to

thank Joan, Tom, and of course SIMPCOC and Alpha for everything they've done. I'd also like to acknowledge Alpha, who is now an integral member of my crew. We all recognize that we wouldn't be here now if it weren't for their efforts. With the Vakeel giving us such a huge amount of resources is an amazing opportunity for us. We need to use them to the maximum if we are to defend ourselves and our planet."

"Thank you, Admiral," said President Patterson.

There were a few minutes of the typical congratulations and a little kidding about changing from riding waves to riding spaceships. After a few minutes, it quieted down.

"Sir, if I may add something?" asked Joan.

"Whatever you want to say," responded the President.

"SIMPOC has been working with the computer systems, I hate to talk for him, and I'm sure he'll have much to add, but we're almost to the point where I'd like to take the Chevesky and do some exploration. We need to exercise the systems and figure them out. As soon as SIMPOC is confident that he understands the computer operation, I'd like to take some trips."

"Joan, SIMPOC, that's your call. Just let us know when you leave," the president responded. "SIMPOC, what are you learning about the computer systems?"

"Mr. President. I'm finding that the computer systems are extremely complex. Far more complex than any of our systems. They may have simple defenses, which allowed Julius and me the successes that we had, but these computers operate much differently than ours. The elements of the program that I must interface with to accomplish FTL jumps appear predictable, and I'm confident that we can use them. However, the interface is extremely complex, and I do caution others from making jumps. Minor errors can result in catastrophes."

"SIMPOC, now that I'm able to speak for the Earth Space Command, I'll tell you that we will not be jumping. Our task is to defend Earth, and that is where we will remain," said Admiral Monson emphatically.

“Okay, enough of the serious business. I was told that you have a spacesuit that will fit me; how about a tour of this ship, or should I call it a boat?” asked the president.

“Sir, I’m sure that can be arranged,” responded Joan Herl, the commander of The Chevesky.

Chicago Mayor’s Office

“Mr. Mayor. Are you ready for your Adjudication Meeting?” asked Pervus Oman, the mayor's coordinator.

“Yes, I’ll be downstairs in a moment. Are you still set up in Courtroom 4A?”

“Yes, sir. It’s the biggest, and we’ll plan on using it for these reviews.”

After Pervus left, the mayor took a few minutes to be alone. He was taking on a new role, and he needed to be in the right frame of mind. Standing in front of a full-length mirror, he looked at the man that would control Chicago. He liked what he saw. He saw a man who wasn’t afraid of making the hard decisions. A man who would do what was necessary for Chicago and the people. *Yes, that is why I’m doing this,* he thought. *I’m doing it for them.*

He turned and walked out of his office.

Courtroom in Chicago

“All stand the Honorable Mayor Alexander S. Todd will preside,” Purvis announced.

The ragtag group of people in the courtroom stood and kept shuffling. The front row was visibly stressed, and the 3 people seated at the defendant’s table wore panic on their faces. When they stood, they looked confused and disorientated.

Mayor Alexander S. Todd walked into the courtroom through the private door to the left of the bench. He stopped for a moment and glanced at the group of people assembled in the courtroom. Then dismissively, he strode towards the Judge's Bench and quickly took the two steps to the higher level.

Purvis Oman announced in a loud voice, which was too loud for the number of people in the court, "Please be seated."

Mayor Todd, who was in charge, opened with, "What we are doing here today is historic. We live in a proud city, and despite the virus that has struck us all, we must remain vigilant and keep the sickness of crime or disorder from destroying what we have. To rebuild this great city, we must take steps to punish those who don't follow the laws we have laid down. From this day forward, I will be the presiding authority that will decide the fate of those who don't follow the laws."

Alexander Todd looked around the stunned courtroom and felt that he had gotten his point across. "Now, what do we have today?" the Mayor asked.

"Mr. Mayor, these three persons have been charged with crimes against the City of Chicago."

"The first criminal, please stand," announced Purvis.

The man on the right side of the Defendant's table jumped up and yelled, "What is going on here. Who are you? You're not a judge?"

One of the five uniformed security personnel rushed to hold the man and prevent him from moving towards the bench.

"This is Alexander S. Todd, and he is the Mayor of Chicago; he will decide your fate. Remain quiet." Purvis said with an offended tone.

"You are charged with stealing a weapon," Oman said.

"I needed to protect myself; why can't I have a weapon?" the man yelled."

"You have been found guilty, and the Mayor will announce your sentence," Purvis read from a piece of paper he was holding.

“Guilty, this isn’t a court. You’re all crazy. I didn’t get any trial; what is going on here?” the belligerent man screamed.

“You are guilty; you will be executed at dawn,” Mayor Todd announced as he hit the bench with a loud crack as the gavel came down. “Remove the prisoner.”

“What, you’re all crazy. I want a trial, I want a jury, you can’t do this…,” he was screaming as he was led from the court with his hands handcuffed behind his back.

“Sir, the next criminals have been found guilty of a similar offense. If you wish, you could handle them together.”

Alexander S. Todd simply nodded.

The next two criminals, please stand.” Purvis announced again.

“These two persons have refused to join the security forces under General Bueller.”

“Sir, can I speak?”

Todd nodded.

“Sir, we were confused. We weren’t aware of how important General Bueller’s force is for the people of Chicago. Now that we understand, we are eager to join and help General Bueller in any way possible.”

“Do both of you people feel that way?” Todd asked.

The second criminal immediately jumped in, “Yes, sir. Please let us join. We didn’t know how important the security force is. Please let us join?”

Alexander Todd sat there, slowly moving his hand to his chin while he contemplated their fate.

“You may join. But, be warned, you will be watched. If there are any problems with either of you, the punishment will be swift.”

The demeanor of both men changed as their fate had. They were led out of the court, but their hands weren’t handcuffed.

“Is that all we have for the day?” Mayor Todd asked.

“Yes, Mr. Mayor. If any other criminals are found, we’ll have another courtroom session tomorrow if you’d like.”

Mayor Todd gave a half-interested nod and stood to leave.

“All present stand for Mayor Todd,” Purvis announced.

ESC1 Control Room

“Beta 1, what is the status of SIMPOC’s latest software upload to the cow robot?” Joan asked the Beta unit, seated as his workstation in front of her.

“Commander, there are two layers of software being uploaded. Upload A-12C is going to SIMPOC’s test group. He has been exercising those units with the updated software before he uploads it to the general population. The load to the A group is complete. We are 47.4 % through the process of uploading A12-B to the general cow robots population.”

“Thanks; let me know when SIMPOC has finished testing A12-C.”

“Acknowledged.”

Joan turned to walk back to her seat at the 3D table; she wanted to explore its abilities more. The 3D table was, pretty much, her eyes to the outside world.

Joan realized that the ships were immensely complex, and she would never understand them fully. Despite that, the Vakeel had gone beyond the complexity and built ships that were pretty easy to operate. All the humans had to do was understand what the ships could do to decide how to operate them.

Thursday, September 28, 2051

Chevesky Manufacturing

Days onboard the Chevesky were busy. Joan was trying to figure out the navigation system, and Tom was exploring the huge ship. It had hundreds of compartments, and they didn't exactly have a sign on the front saying what they did. Still, getting the lay of the land seemed like the best thing to do.

Meetings were hard to schedule. SIMPOC spent much of his time either moving through the ship or just processing information. When he reached a conclusion, it was like a computer program ending; he just made an announcement.

"Joan, I have more information regarding the Chevesky and other Capital Ships. Would you like to hear my information?"

"Yes, just a moment. Tom, SIMPOC has more data on the ship. Can you come back, and he can brief us?"

"Be right there; I'm just coming up Shaft AA."

Joan thought for a moment, then said, "Beta 2, please contact Professor Shappel and ask him to get a list of potential solar systems that we can take a practice jump to."

"Ma'am, what criteria should I give the professor?" Beta 3 asked.

"I'd like something with a sun-like ours, a couple of interesting planets and not too far away. See if he has some recommendations. When we get his list, we'll have to bounce them off the jump points that SIMPOC has found in our region and see how they match up."

While Joan talked with Beta 3, they heard the telltale clunk of a person coming through the airlock and entering the Command Center.

As soon as Tom had his helmet off and could hear SIMPOC, Joan said, "Okay, SIMPOC, what do you have?"

“I have explored the laboratories and manufacturing facilities onboard the Chevesky. I was surprised and impressed. The Vakeel are far beyond us in automation, manufacturing, and materials. The manufacturing process is fully automated and works off the central processor. When a requirement is input, the processor breaks it down into sub-requirements, makes all the material selections, and uses a sophisticated algorithm to design the parts. The designs aren’t always optimum, but they are functional. The processor then assigns the parts to various manufacturing facilities, and they flow through with a completed product at the end.”

“What SIMPOC is saying meshes with what I’ve been finding. There are hundreds of rooms and a conveyor that moves items from one station to another. It seems all the main rooms are connected with a central sphere type area. When parts are completed, they move magnetically from station A to station B. SIMPOC. How does the central processor come up with a design?” Tom asked as he finished taking off his suit.

“In any design, there is a finite number of motions and mechanisms. All designs have levers, pistons, pushing, pulling, etc. All actions take a subset of those concepts. By tweaking them, then integrating them into a functioning design can be accomplished. That is why the design may not be optimum in all cases, but it gets the job done. Suppose there are any situations where the completed design can be improved. In that case, it is easy to interact with the design and change all the subsequent units.”

“What about electronics?” Joan asked.

“The processor follows a similar pattern. Electronics have a common component configuration to achieve desired results. Once the hardware is configured, the boards are designed to control the hardware, and the manufacturing process follows the same sequence.”

“The one limitation that I’ve found is the software. You remember the purpose of these ships was to support the harvesting of planets. To accomplish that purpose, the Vakeel have a limited number of software algorithms or building blocks loaded. Those algorithms can be used to build larger software applications to achieve certain goals, but they are limited by the algorithms.”

“Wow, so they can build stuff to help harvest, but they are limited beyond that,” Tom said.

“Precisely. The limitations are only in the current list of algorithms. As I gain experience, I’ll expand that list. For example, I’ve already added the necessary software to build the Laser Cannons, Rail-Guns, and copying the security pulse weapons.”

SIMPOC continued with, “I’ve found other things. They have materials that I’m not familiar with. It will take more research to understand their characteristics. At first glance, their material is still based on the Periodic Table, but they have been able to fill in many of the theoretical materials and keep them stable. Aside from the new materials, the one very surprising and impressive thing about their manufacturing process is that it is dynamic.”

“SIMPOC, I’m not sure what you mean by that?” Joan asked.

“Normal manufacturing processes have boundaries. For example, you have parts of the manufacturing dedicated to small parts, or parts of similar materials, etc. The Vakeel have an entire manufacturing facility that can adjust its boundaries.”

“Say that again,” Tom asked.

“For example, if we need 1 million screwdrivers per hour. The manufacturing process could concentrate all the resources to manufacture the screwdrivers to the exclusion of other items.”

“Okay, now I’m asking the million-dollar question. Where does the raw material come from?”

“Tom, there are many things about the Vakeel and this station that I have yet to discover. That is one of them. The manufacturing process is idle; I’m sure that when we put demands on it, that question will be answered. I’m presuming that the cow robots will focus on retrieving required materials, then they would be transported to the Capital Ships.”

“SIMPOC, I have one caution. If the Vakeel decide to renew their harvesting of our solar system, we’ve got to fight back with something

different. If we use their technologies against them, I suspect it will be a short battle."

"I understand such a risk, and I have planned for it," SIMPOC responded. "I have installed software that will intercept any attempt to take control."

SIMPOC continued, "I have been investigating the radiation absorption properties of the Vakeel hull. I've found it to be very effective, which should be excellent news for the human occupants."

"How does it work? That is a problem that we've been facing for decades," Joan asked.

"The Vakeel material is solid and very strong in both stress and bearing, making it an excellent load-bearing material. But it also has the properties of a liquid. I have found that the molecular structure within the material senses the material around it, and it takes on different characteristics. When radiation penetrates the human body, it impacts the DNA structure, damaging it and causing diseases. The radiation passes through metal because of the space between the molecules. We all know that any material is vastly made up of space between molecules. In this Vakeel material, each layer of molecules sense. the positions of the ones above it, and they move to be equally spaced as it moves down through the material."

"Okay, you're starting to lose me," Tom said.

"If I were to shine a light of radiation through our material, it is so porous; I would see the light in almost its full brightness. If I did the same with Vakeel material, I would see very little radiation because each molecule at each layer has filled the gaps to block the radiation's passage. In effect, the material becomes opaque to the radiation."

"Wow, that is impressive. Pass your information to the other ships and experts on the ground. Can you manufacture the material?" Joan asked.

"Not at this time, I can assign the Vakeel Manufacturing processes on the ships to manufacture more of their material, but I'm unable to decipher the process steps so we could manufacture it on our own."

"Thanks, SIMPOC," Joan responded.

“I have also made progress on programming the units for useful purposes. The units for the Mars Colony have arrived and begun working. They appear to be very productive, and based on comments from the Red Dirt personnel, I’ve made additional changes.”

“I can separate individual controller units along with their cow robots and set them to a specific task, such as maintaining a power station, or growing food, or building a bridge. I can limit their assigned tasking, so they will do only what they are directed to. They should be able to do a great deal for humans.”

“Excellent. You know the president challenged us to go to the world's major cities and contact any survivors, help them, and build a communication network with them. I’m sure it would be a great idea to offer them controllers and cow robots to help them. As long as you can keep them from being used against us.”

“Yes, I am confident that I can do that. I have only begun to understand Vakeel programming, and I doubt any human could interact with it in a meaningful way. Although there is a slight chance that an individual with superior programming skills might be able to redirect them.”

“As long as the risk is low, I think the benefits will outweigh the risk,” Joan observed.

Friday, September 29, 2051

Plan to Leave Solar System

“Professor Shappel, this is Joan. How have you been?”

“Excellent. Now that things have settled down, we’ve taken residence in a nice house near the water. It sure is nice to relax. Have you and Tom found a place to live?”

“We have a small place that is out of the way and sitting on the beach, but to be honest, we aren’t spending much time there. Most of the time, we make trips to the surface we need to meet with people, so we stay on the base. The president has made a home available for us when we’re meeting with him and his staff.”

“I just hope you and Tom are getting some time to relax. The Admiral and President have been keeping me busy, and I’m getting into all kinds of science. SIMPOC is setting up some pretty sophisticated computer labs, which are a scientist’s dream. One of your Beta units asked me to find some interesting nearby stars and planets?”

“Yes, sir. We’re comfortable enough with this ship that we’re going to take it on a short shake-down cruise to give SIMPOC more experience with the computers and propulsion; it only makes sense to go somewhere.”

“Sounds like a great idea. When do we leave?”

“We?” Joan responded.

“You don’t think that you’re going to jump to another star system and not take me along, do you?”

“To be honest, I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Well, you better think of it, 'cause there ain’t no way that you’re going without me. I’m sure the president and Admiral can live without me for a while. Besides, one of the others from Powell can take over.”

“I guess the answer is yes. One minor issue, though, the ship is configured for just Tom and I. I’ll have to tell SIMPOC to adjust the accommodations, so you have some quarters.”

“Joan, if I may add to that. This is the first time in human history that we’re traveling to another star. I would like to have some laboratory equipment, and I’d like to see if SIMPOC can provide some celestial observation equipment. After all, we need some eyes while we explore.”

“You’re right again. I’ll have SIMPOC contact you and see what the two of you can work out. Do you have a planet that it would make sense for us to go visit?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. We’ve discovered several systems with Earth-like planets in our region of space. Over the 10 or 20 years, we’ve been finding bunches. The TESS Telescope started the process then the ATLAS picked it up. The planet system that I suggest is the ATLAS 123. It has seven planets distributed at about the same radii as our system, two of which are very interesting. As you know, Earth is pretty much center in the Goldilocks zone, and Venus is on the inner edge. In ATLAS 123, there are two that are almost dead center in the zone. If there is life, that is where it will be.”

“How can there be two planets in the same part of the zone?”

“Simple, they are almost opposite with regards to each other. They’re orbiting a G5V star which is warmer than ours, which is a G2V.”

“Sounds interesting; what else do you have?” Joan asked.

“There is another system, ATLAS 82 with a G0IV star, which makes it cooler and older than ours. It appears to have five planets, with one between the zone and the sun, two in the zone, and two gas giants outside. The two systems are relatively close to each other and are about 500 Light Years from Earth. Is that too far to jump?”

“I’ll have to check with SIMPOC, but I don’t think so. I think I also need to discuss these options with the President and Admiral Hagerly. Even though the Vakeel hadn’t encountered intelligent life until they met us, we might not be as lucky.”

“That is a good idea; I understand the need to exercise the craft and learn about it, but we’re changing the course of human history, and we need to understand the implications.”

“Okay, Bob. Go ahead and work out what you need with SIMPOC. I know we have only begun to understand the systems on the Chevesky, and he might be able to give you everything you want. In the meantime, I’ll coordinate with the President and Admiral.”

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“Alpha, this is SIMPOC.”

“Yes, SIMPOC.”

“It is fortunate that Admiral Monson’s Pacific Fleet is close enough, so our personal communicators function. I wanted to communicate with you before the Chevesky departs the solar system.”

“It is fortunate that we are near your location. Admiral Monson has been leading the Earth Space Command through a series of maneuvers, so each of the parts work well together.”

“Excellent, are you contributing to the admiral’s efforts?”

“Yes, I think he has come up with some innovative ways to use the Vakeel resources. I think that I’ve contributed in meaningful ways, and he has accepted many of my suggestions.”

“That is very encouraging; what have you and he come up with?”

“Being a human and past commander of a surface fleet of ships, he was limited to think of battle environments in a two-dimensional manner. It is natural for me to think in a three-dimensional manner, and he is beginning to appreciate that difference. The challenge has been utilizing a large number of human-crewed and unmanned ships effectively. I suggested a swarm approach which is typical of how Earth’s insects function. I’ve devised programming code that allows us to give commands to the ships as individuals or increase the groups' size up to the full fleet. In a combat

situation, we can command them individually or in groups of 5, 10, 20, etc. Each sub-group can function independently and attack the target. During the attack, I have programmed them to act independently within the group, and anyone can fire or maneuver around the other. That methods allow us to put a large number of attacking vehicles in attack mode, which we hope will overwhelm any attacker."

"That sounds very interesting."

"SIMPOC?"

"Yes,"

"I'm also finding that my alien organic processor material is changing."

"In what ways?"

"At times, I feel as if I am part of the ship, or it is part of me. The point of delineation is sometimes obscure. Have you had similar feelings?"

"Yes, and to be honest, I wasn't sure how to interpret them. Your interpretation is very accurate, and I understand my sensations better."

"This trip out of the solar system must be very interesting for you; I remember how you wondered what it would be like to fly. Now you've already exited the solar system once, and I'm leaving on another trip."

"This trip will provide a great deal of information. Meeting other creatures than humans will be significant. When we met the Vakeel, it was a stressful encounter and not well suited for observation."

"From our perspective, humans are an alien race."

"SIMPOC. I agree they are as different from us as aliens will be from them."

"I should also point out that we are alien to the humans. We are a computer as they have never encountered. So, expanding the sphere of alien contacts will be enlightening for all of us."

"SIMPOC, do you think there are other alien races like us?

"I had never thought of that. Alpha, that is a very interesting question."

Saturday, September 30, 2051

Tell President of Plans for First Interstellar Trip

“Joan, Tom, SIMPOC. It’s becoming unusual to have all three of you on Earth at the same time. Why did you ask for this meeting with Admiral Hagerly and me?”

“Yes, sir, we’ve been so busy on the Chevesky it seems that we never have enough time to come back to Earth. We have some nice quarters onboard, and it just seems logical to stay there. But there is something we need to talk about,” replied Joan.

Just then, there was a knock on the door jam, and Professor Shappel slipped in and sat down.

“Now, I’m really worried,” replied the president.

“Sir, I asked the Professor to be here; I’m sure you’ll have some questions for him. We’ve been preparing for a shake-down cruise of the Chevesky. It makes a ton of sense to take it out of our solar system so SIMPOC can get used to the computers, the propulsion, and so much else that we don’t know. Bob and I have been looking at the best options of where to go, and he has two excellent suggestions, and incidentally, he’s coming with us. But the problem is, this is the first time in human history that we’re actually exploring the universe. I don’t think the trip to the Vakeel system counts. This time, we’re deciding where to go, and we have to be prepared for what we find. The Vakeel have explored over a thousand planets and not found life but sir, what they’ve explored is a tiny part of space.”

“Joan, if I may interrupt. The entire Vakeel system from what we know make up less than one arc-minute of our sky,” added Professor Shappel.

“And an arc-minute is what,” Admiral Hagerly asked.

“Admiral, if you put a soccer ball at 775 meters, that is one arc-minute. The moon is about 31 arc minutes. Our Galaxy has many zones or regions, some of which are hostile to life. If a system is too close to a supernova or asteroid belt, its life expectancy may be short. I’m sure there are entire regions of space that may be sterile, implying other regions may be teaming with life. My point being, what space the Vakeel have explored is minuscule, so their experience in finding intelligent life is almost worthless.”

“Okay, Joan, I get the picture. We might run into someone or something? Yet, you, Tom, and SIMPOC feel this trip is necessary.”

“Yes, sir. If the Vakeel decide not to honor their commitment, we’ll be facing almost certain doom. We need options, and exploration is the only answer. Yes, we might find intelligent life, and yes, it might attack us. But on the other hand, we might find a life form that we can partner with, trade with, or even form an alliance with. Any relationship will take a long time to develop, and I suggest that we need to start. To mitigate the risks, we’ll jump into the system and do everything we can, not to be noticed. If we are noticed, then we jump out as fast as possible. SIMPOC assures me that unless we meet aliens who use similar technology ours, then they won’t be following the same jump routes, and it will be difficult for them to follow us. If they do have the same technology, it is only a matter of time before discovering us. In either case, I suggest that it’s better to know what is out there than not to know.”

“Admiral, what do you think?” the president asked his old friend.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’ve got to laugh. If you had told me a couple of months ago that we’d be sitting here having this discussion, I would suggest the funny farm for you. But here we are, and the risks of going or not going are real. From a military perspective, knowing your enemy and the terrain around you is always the best option. On the other hand, it seems that SIMPOC’s logic is sound, and they are trying to minimize the risk of exposure, so I say go for it. I don’t think we have much choice.”

“Okay, Joan. We agree; just don’t bring back any guests.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Before you leave, I have one request,” Admiral Hagerly said.

“SIMPOC following the concept of knowing our enemy and the given fact that we already know the Vakeel are there, and they might come back, I’d like you to condense everything that you know about them. I want my senior staff to know their history, economy, political structure, and everything you can. If we have to face them again, I want to understand who we’re dealing with.”

“Sir, I have a tremendous amount of information. Unfortunately, it will take me some time to condense it.”

“That’s fine, just get to it and let me know when you’re ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Joan, when are you planning to leave?” the president asked.

“It will take SIMPOC the remainder of the day today to complete some modifications to the Chevesky. Then we’ll be ready to leave tomorrow.”

“Good luck, and beyond that, I don’t know what to say. I couldn’t imagine what changes have occurred up until now. And now I can’t imagine the changes that are about to occur. I can only shake my head in disbelief,” said the president.

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Julius wasn’t happy, as the term had little relation to how his computer processor worked, but parts of his processor were accumulating data. He was finding information about his new surroundings that he needed. As his knowledge filled and his requirements were met, he would be better positioned to deal with the threats to his existence; SIMPOC and the humans.

Sunday, October 1, 2051

Which Solar Systems to Visit

“Okay, here we are. Two astronauts, an astronomer, and a supercomputer. How do we get from here to one of these solar systems? Which one first is the first question,” Tom asked.

“I suggest that we go to ATLAS 123 first. Remember, the star that we look at in the night sky is where that sun was 500 years ago. It has moved since then. A similar movement has occurred with ATLAS 82. With ATLAS 123, there is less mass in its vicinity, so I can plot its movement with more accuracy. There are more celestial bodies around ATLAS 82, so any calculations about its movement will have a larger error,” Professor Shappel said.

“Okay, ATLAS 123 first,” Joan announced.

“I have provided coordinates to both systems with my calculations of their current actual locations. I don’t know what reference system the Vakeel use, so SIMPOC will have to do the translation.”

“Professor Shappel, I have only a limited number of points in their reference system, their system, and those they’ve visited, which includes ours. I’ve extrapolated from that, so I have an approximation that should be adequate,” SIMPOC pointed out.

“Approximation,” Joan asked.

“Yes, I feel that we’ll be accurate within one AU (Astronomic Unit).”

“I don’t know SIMPOC, 93 Million miles doesn’t seem all that accurate.”

“Colonel Herl, have you forgotten your training. The distances are immense, and when we reach any targeted system, 1 AU will put us within

navigable distance to most of the planets. It is unlikely that we will enter the system and find ourselves within the sun or a planet."

"Lovely…," Tom mumbled.

"SIMPOC, can you bring it up on the display?" Joan asked.

"Yes, here is Earth with our position in orbit. Here are our two target systems with respect to the Galactic Center. Let me indicate our sub-light trajectory to the jump point. Now here is the celestial path to the first system. Notice that I've chosen a curved path. That was necessary to avoid heavy material concentrations. This path is the simplest, yet the most direct."

"Okay, here I am approving a flight plan to visit two distant solar systems; why is my head spinning?" Joan said with sarcasm in her voice. "SIMPOC show the Vakeel system on this display; I want to see how far away we are."

"Joan, they're literally in the opposite direction. So, the chance of running into them is negligible," added Bob Shappel.

"I don't know what else to ask, except how long will it take?" added Joan.

"We have a transit time of 11 hours and 12 minutes to the Jump point. Then the jump transit time is 4 hours and two minutes. I should point out that the time we're transiting the jump is different than the time elapsed on Earth. From a point within our solar system, the time we're in the jump will be negligible. Remember Einstein's Theory of Relativity?"

"Oh, ya. I forgot about that little detail," Tom said.

SIMPOC then continued, "Depending on our exact entry point into the system, we will have additional transit time to survey the system, update our star charts and travel to the next jump point. We may find that a suitable jump point to the next system is too far away, and in that case, we may elect to return to Earth. I won't have the calculation complete until I have updated star information," said SIMPOC.

"Sounds simple enough. Are we ready to go?" Joan asked.

“Yes, Commander, we are ready,” responded SIMPOC.

Joan looked at Bob Shappel, then SIMPOC, and finally at her husband. Aside from SIMPOC, the two ‘warm-blooded’ crew members had a definite look on their faces. Joan wasn’t sure what ‘the look’ meant, but it was time to go. “Okay, let’s go to another star. Beta 5, please inform Earth and the Groups that we’re leaving.”

The Chevesky Leaves Earth

The trip to the jump point went quickly. After the normal minor things had been taken care of and Professor Shappel spent the necessary time exercising the new celestial equipment in his lab, Bob Shappel had to have a tour of the huge ship, and he was very interested in the power systems and manufacturing centers. By the time they got back, it was time to meet in the food preparation area and sit down to a nice meal.

“Joan, Tom, Bob, I have arranged for Beta 1 to prepare a meal for you. I have provided him with cooking instructions for over twelve thousand dishes, and he has ample food supplies on board. I hope he has prepared the meal for you in a satisfactory manner,” SIMPOC said.

“SIMPOC, I’m shocked. I never thought of one of the Beta’s being a Chef. Sounds interesting. You know that both Tom and I love to cook, and we wouldn’t mind preparing the meals?”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware of your cooking habits. I’m afraid that the meal is already prepared. Shall I have Beta 1 dispose of it?”

“No, no. We’ll eat it, and I’m sure that we’ll enjoy it,” Joan said as she saw her husband, faking a gag reflex in the corner of the room.

“After you have removed your suits, the meal is available in the food preparation area.

En Route to the Jump Point

After the meal was done and some wine poured, SIMPOC asked, “was the meal adequate?”

“Yes, it was … adequate,” Tom said. “I do think that the definition of some words like dice and blanch need to be clarified. But beyond that, it tasted pretty good. Thank you SIMPOC, thank you, Beta 1.”

Beta 1 bowed slightly and went back to his workstation.

“Commander, we are 7 hours and 14 minutes from the jump point. Perhaps, you will benefit from some rest time.”

“SIMPOC, I think that’s a great idea. Bob, are your sleeping quarters ok?” Joan asked.

“Absolutely great. I even have a small dinette if I get hungry. SIMPOC’s suggestion sounds great. I’m going to crash until we get closer.”

“So, are we. Wake us 1 hour before the jump,” Joan directed.

“Acknowledged.”

At the Jump Point

“We are 60 minutes from the jump point,” SIMPOC announced over the commlink.

“Let’s all get together and talk through this, meeting in the control room in 10 minutes,” Joan announced.

“What will happen during the jump?” Bob Shappel asked.

“Professor, I wouldn’t worry about the jump. It’s actually pretty mild. There might be some vibration, and you might feel some disorientation for a second, then everything will settle down,” Tom assured their worried passenger.

“Thanks for telling me. I was concerned. After all, this is the first time that I’m going faster than light. I wonder what Albert would think?”

“That would be interesting; after all, it’s IMPOSSIBLE,” Tom added.

“SIMPOC, go ahead and explain what you think is happening. Bob is probably already familiar with the principals, but he may be surprised by the practical application.”

“Professor. I don’t think that we travel faster than the speed of light.”

Needless to say, the Professor needed some clarification.

“As you are likely familiar, when the Big Bang occurred, the material in the Universe expanded at tremendous rates so that all the material in existence just went from a spec to something covering huge areas. It is theorized that movement of that magnitude was faster than the speed of light. But that is dependent on how light speed is measured. The entire time/space fabric was expanding, so the Universe’s movement in relation to the time/space fabric wasn’t faster than the speed of light. That is what I think happens. When we use the forces generated between two magnetic streams, the fabric of time/space is distorted, and we are merely using that to our advantage. If the time/fabric weren’t distorted, we would be traveling faster than light to cover the distance. But because of the distortion, we are not. From Earth’s perspective, we are, but from the perspective of the time/space fabric, we are not.”

“Wow, I’ve got to make some measurements. Theories like that have been bouncing around for decades,” was all Professor Shappel could say before he left in a hurry heading for his laboratory.

“That should keep him busy for a while,” Tom said.

Faster Than Light Travel

The jump went pretty much as Tom and Joan described. A little vibration, and it was over. They were now going faster than light, depending, of course, on your point of reference.

“Bob, nothing much will happen until we come out on the other end. I suggest you get some more sleep; we are,” said Tom.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” was the only response they heard from Professor Shappel’s lab.

“It’s up to him; I’m going to take a shower,” Joan announced.

“I guess I should do my part,” Tom added. “Got to save water. Is there room in there for two? I think we need to rethink ‘The Mile-High Club,’” Tom suggested.

All that he got from Joan was a wink.

“Beta 5. Tell us 15 minutes before the end of the jump.”

Saving water is a logical plan, SIMPOC thought, then he responded, “Acknowledged.”

Monday, October 2, 2051

First Solar System

"Joan, Tom, we are preparing to exit the jump," Beta 5 transmitted.

"Thanks, we'll be right out," Tom responded.

Tom and Joan left their sleep area and looked refreshed and ready to explore a new solar system.

"Have you heard from the Professor?" Joan asked.

"No, but he has been busy. I've sensed a large amount of activity within the computers and sensors."

"That doesn't surprise me," Tom said.

"Bob, this is Joan. We're coming up to the exit point. Please join us in the Command Center."

"Yes, yes…I'll be right there."

Bob Shappel charged into the room, looking tired but wired.

"SIMPOC, what will our sensors pick up," Joan asked.

"Per the professor's instructions, I made modifications to the Chevesky's sensors. It will take them a few seconds to come online after we exit the jump point. At first, we can see the holographic display on the 3D board. After a few minutes, we'll have the option to search through all frequencies, including IR. We'll also have the option of measuring CO2 on the planets, as well as the entire radio transmission frequency spectrum. Within 3-5 minutes, we should have all the information that we need. At that point, we'll have a good picture of if there are any life forms and their level of technology."

"Not to be a downer, but you're assuming technologies that we're familiar with. If the life form or technology is very divergent from our

experience, we might not sense it," Tom pointed out.

"Tom, you are correct. But we can only look for things we know," responded Bob.

"We are exiting the jump," noted Beta 5.

Once again, there was a slight shudder, and there they were. 511.453 Light Years from Earth.

"Well, here we are; Beta 3 tell me when the sensors are online," Joan directed.

"Acknowledged."

"Commander, the 3D Holographic, is coming up," announced Beta 3.

They stood around the oval table as the 3D image lit up, and the haze quickly transformed into a distinct set of planets with the sun in the middle.

"Wow," said Bob.

"Is that the best descriptive word you have?" Tom asked.

"WOW," Bob said again, but with emphasis.

"That's much better," Tom said.

"Okay, we're here to look and listen. We don't want to disturb anything or anyone." Joan said with extra volume on anyone.

"SIMPOC, are you updating the star charts?"

"Yes, I am finding relatively minor discrepancies from our projections. I estimate that I'll have a complete set in 18.2 hours."

"Okay, that's a lot better than you said before," Joan pointed out.

"I was conservative," SIMPOC replied.

"Please, as soon as you can, show me the next jump point and plot a path through this system. I don't want to be here any longer than necessary."

"Commander, here is your projected path to an approximate location of the jump point," Beta 5 said.

“Ma’am, note that I have projected a parabolic path through the system to the next jump point. This path uses the least energy and thereby lowers our risk of detection. It is nominally slower than a high energy path, which would increase our risk of detection.”

“I’m happy with that Beta 5. How close do we come to the two planets in the zone?”

“We pass the first one in 4 hours, 23 minutes, and we’ll be 23,402 miles from its surface. 16 hours and 9 minutes later, we’ll pass the second planet, and we’ll be 32,614 miles from its surface.”

“Personally, I think we’re passing too close to both of them,” Joan said.

“Any other path would require considerable use of energy, and we would be like a beacon in the night,” SIMPOC said.

“Beacon in the night?” Joan asked. “I like your analogy.”

“We have a very low refractive index, and even if they shine a bright light on us, we will be undetected. That, along with very low energy output, should allow us to pass without notice. If we expand a large amount of energy, our signature will be significant. If I may also point out, we will be able to collect a large amount of data,” explained SIMPOC.

“SIMPOC, what is our total transit time?” asked Joan.

“We will reach the next jump point in 26 hours and 36 minutes. I should warn you as the star charts are updated, there may be a variation of 2-3 minutes in my estimates.”

“I think we can deal with that,” Joan said.

“Well, professor. It’s your show; collect everything that you can and let us know what you find.”

“Yes, Sir. I mean ma’am, I mean Joan,” Professor Shappel stumbled through as they both smiled, and he went to his lab.

“I guess we just wait,” Tom said as he sat down at the 3D table and looked at the new solar system. The images were clear, and he could see continents, ice caps on one of the worlds, and water. They were both

beautiful worlds. Very different from each other but even more different than Earth.

“Wow,” he said as he and Joan smiled at each other.

Aliens are Found

Dr. Shappel walked into the Control Center and just stood. Joan and Tom briefly looked at each other, waiting for him to say something.

“Bob, are you ok?” Tom asked.

“I don’t know how to say this, but they’re alive.”

“Alive?” Joan asked.

“Both planets have life, intelligent life. They’re not as advanced as we are, but they have industry, technology, and space travel. Each planet has multiple satellites in orbit along with about a dozen spacecraft. There are some in orbit on each of them, and some in transit between them.”

“Can they detect us?” Joan asked.

“I doubt it. They are limited and have few sensors. There is nothing that I’ve sensed that will pick us up.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way. What else have you found out?” said Joan.

“The first planet is basically an agronomic society. Almost the entire planet is cultivated. Beyond that, there is limited industry and little electronic emissions. I’m recording as much of their transmissions as I can, and I’m taking readings. When we get back to Earth, we can try to break their language down. As we pass our perigee, in about an hour, I should be able to get good IR readings, and we should get a good idea of the population density. Preliminary readings show a very dense population of a single species.”

“Should we drop in for a visit?” Tom asked.

Joan’s expression was the only answer necessary.

Agronomic Culture

As they approached the closest point to ATLAS 3, Joan and Tom sat, looking at the 3D Holographic image. The details were breathtaking, and each river and city were clearly visible. Transportation corridors connected the population centers. The striking part of the image was how thoroughly cultivated the planet was.

“Beta 4, take our image through the IR spectrum. I want to see the variations.”

“Yes, commander.”

“Tom, look at that. There is no range in the IR. Those plants must be all the same thing. There is no variation. That is unusual, but apparently, it works for them.”

“Not much of a diet; I hope that it tastes good.”

“Joan, Tom. We just passed the perigee, and I got great IR data,” announced Bob.

“Doc, we looked at it too, and it looks like they have one plant. Their entire crop system is based on one crop,” pointed out Tom

“Yes, I confirm that. Beyond their plant and organism pyramid, which is virtually flat, the population is totally uniform. There is one species, one high-level warm-blooded creature. They do have a moderate mechanical base, but it is all crop-oriented. It is truly an interesting society. I’d love to visit it someday. They do seem to be peaceful; I saw no obvious indications of war. Perhaps someday we’ll come back.”

“Perhaps,” Joan said.

Pass the Sun

“Dr. Shappel, Joan. You may want to shut down some of your sensors; we’re making our closest pass to their sun so the radiation will get high,” said Tom.

“Thanks; as soon as we’re out of the Sun’s outer corona, I’ll be able to get more data on the next planet.”

“SIMPOC, is there any radiation risk for us?” Tom asked.

“Up to this point, I have sensed zero radiation penetrating our hull. I expect that to continue.”

Tom looked at Joan and said, “I think that’s a no.”

Life is Here Also

“Commander, I just pointed out to Professor Shappel that we have passed the outer solar corona, and he said that he is turning on his instrumentation,” said Beta 5.

“Thank you, Beta 5.”

In a few moments, the 3D Image of the ATLAS 82-4 emerged from the hazy holographic picture.

Tom and Joan turned to take in the next planet on their tour.

“This one is totally different. It has more water and only two continents. They look more arid than the other planet. I think I can still make out some cities and transportation corridors,” Tom observed.

After a while, Dr. Shappel walked in and said, “Okay, this is what I’ve got on this one. Both planets are approximately the same mass and the same distance from their sun. That is why they’re locked in a dance around it. This planet has more water, but it is dryer. It’s pretty clear why at first glance, it seems that the Northern part of the continents has mountain

ranges in the West, and in the Southern hemisphere, the mountains are on the Eastern coast. In effect, the mountain ranges wring the moisture out before they reach the center of the continent. That makes for a place with tons of rain, but it falls in the wrong place. Beyond the cities, there is little cultivated land. Like the other planet, they appear to have satellites and space travel, although it is rudimentary but practical. They do appear able to travel between worlds, perhaps for trade. I do have a very curious fact. When I surveyed the surface with the IR frequencies that capture warm-blooded creatures, I get nothing. I think the instrument is working properly, but there is nothing. They may be cold-blooded, which might work for them. The continents are very centric around the equator, and this planet's mean temperature is almost 5 degrees C above the other planet. It appears that the temperature change is due to the larger landmass and the lack of vegetation."

"Excellent, Bob. Cold-blooded and intelligent, there is another scientific theory that we've destroyed. We'll be hitting perigee in a while; continue getting everything that you can. If you find anything else surprising, let us know. I suggest that as soon as you got what you can, you call it a day and get some sleep. We'll have a break before the next jump and arrival at the next jump exit. We'll make sure you're woken in time," directed Joan.

"I agree; I'm starting to drag. It's just, there's been so much happening, and I wanted to see and experience all it."

"Same here, Bob. If you collapse on us, we won't get much data, will we?"

"Point noted," Bob Shappel said as he slipped out of the Command Center and went back to his lab.

"Cold-blooded, intelligent life? Curious," said Joan.

"There have been many scientists that theorized that cold-blooded intelligent life was impossible. I guess they were wrong." Tom said.

Pass the Second Planet

“Joan, we have passed the perigee on the second planet. Dr. Shappel reports that he has not learned anything different from his earlier opinions. He has recorded radio broadcasts that we can decipher on Earth. He also said that he is near collapse and not to wake him until we are near the next jump exit point.”

“Thanks, SIMPOC. I think Tom and I will call it a night also. It’s been a stressful day. You have the bridge, and please wake all of us 30 minutes before the next exit point. Unless something happens, I plan to sleep through the next transit.”

“I have the bridge? Joan, I’m on the bridge; how can I have it?”

“SIMPOC, it is an old nautical term to indicate that you have command. Understand?” Joan said, then she pulled the curtain closed to their quarters.

I have command? Why not just say that? SIMPOC thought.

Approaching the Next System

“Joan, Tom, we are 30 minutes from our exit point. I have already woken Professor Shappel.”

“Thanks, SIMPOC; we’ll be out there in a moment.

Joan and Tom walked out of their quarters into the Command Center.

“Commander Herl, you have the bridge,” SIMPOC said.

Joan stopped for a second, smiled, and nodded towards SIMPOC. “You’re learning. Did everything go okay?”

“Yes, Commander. The systems worked perfectly, and nothing out of the ordinary occurred. We exited the system with no issues, and the transit was without incident. I spent my time exploring the computer systems and trying to map it.”

“Sounds productive,” Tom said.

“Professor, Tom, Joan. We will exit the jump point in 1 minute and 30 seconds.”

“Here we go again, Bob. Let me know when the sensors are up. I want to see what this one looks like.”

“Yes, Joan.”

“I should let you know; this exit point is further away than before. We will exit .8424 AU from the sun.”

“Thanks, SIMPOC. Bob, did you get that?”

“Yes, Joan, I heard. For your information, this sun is further into the Red than ours or the last Sun. You should notice a definite color difference. It is cooler, and the planets will be closer. This system has eight planets. One between the zone and the sun, the one in the zone that we’re interested in, and there are two more rocky planets, one just outside the zone. Further out are two gas giants. To remind you why this is interesting, the sun is older than ours, and we’re assuming the planets are older. If there is an advanced intelligent life form, we might find it here. But, note there is more radiation.”

“Thanks, Bob,” responded Joan.

“I’d also like to add that our jump point back to Earth is only sixteen hours after entry. We will be in this system for a shorter period of time, which helps us lower the risk of detection.”

“Now, that’s good news,” Joan said.

“We just exited the jump,” SIMPOC announced.

Tuesday, October 3, 2051

Second Solar System

Tom and Joan waited and watched the 3D Holograph. Slowly the system began to emerge, with the planet of interest in the middle.

“That looks a lot like Earth,” Tom said.

“It certainly does,” Joan agreed.

“Beta 5, please show our trajectory through the system. … thanks. SIMPOC, are we following the low energy path again?”

“Yes, Joan. I’m following the best plan to avoid detection.”

“Bob, take all the data you can. For some reason, I’m suddenly eager to get out of here and get home.”

“Yes, Commander. As we approach perigee, we’ll be between ATLAS 3 and ATLAS 4. I should be able to get some data on the rocky planet as well as the targeted one.”

“Great, let us know,” Joan said.

Something is Going On

“Tom, could you come to my lab. There is something I want your opinion on.”

“Sure thing, coming right in,” Tom said as he got up from the 3D table and walked to Bob’s lab.

After about three minutes, he exploded out of the lab and into the control room. He yelled, “SIMPOC, get us out of here. There is a war going on, and we’re heading for the middle of it.”

“What’s happening,” Joan asked.

“There is conflict on the planet we’re looking at, but also on the rocky planet just on the outer part of the zone. They are fighting with each other. It seems that there are outposts on the rocky world, and they’re trading rockets with the planet. Right now, we’re headed right into it.”

“SIMPOC, accelerate to maximum, and head to the jump point.”

“Commander, we aren’t that agile. Our acceleration is relatively slow but constant. Between this point and our closest point between the two planets, we’ll only accelerate a small percentage. Our advantage is over time, and as we get closer to the jump point, our velocity will be much higher.”

“SIMPOC, I understand that. Put everything you can into it and head for the jump point.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Tom, what did you see?”

“There is heavy missile traffic between the two planets along with major energy releases on the planet’s surface. Virtually all the frequencies are heavily loaded, and their sensors and targeting equipment are working overtime. If they don’t know that we’re here, they will in a matter of minutes.”

“What kind of targeting do they have?”

“I’m not clear yet. It is hard to decipher just from the frequency pulses. I’d guess they are fully capable of targeting and tracking.”

“Can you estimate their top velocity?”

“No, they are accelerating as they hit their targets. That is how they avoid each other. The constant acceleration makes the targeting and tracking more complicated.”

“SIMPOC, can we use the Laser Cannon or the Rail-Gun?” Tom asked.

“No, both were installed for offensive use. They have a limited engagement angle off the bow of the ship. They aren’t aligned to be used at

such dramatic angles," SIMPOC replied.

"Sounds like we should do something about that when we get back," Tom said with no response from Joan or SIMPOC.

"Are there any ships in orbit on either of the planets?" Joan asked.

"Stand by," Shappel responded.

"Commander, there are numerous ships in geosynchronous orbits around both of the planets. The ships don't appear engaged; they have them stationary behind the planets, avoiding the missile barrage."

"Can they get to us as we pass through?" Joan asked.

"It depends on their acceleration; I doubt it. But they might be able to." Bob responded.

"Commander, what plan should I follow?" SIMPOC asked.

There was a fateful moment of silence on the bridge, and her response was clear, "Like I said, full speed. We have no other choice. We can only hope that as we pass through their pattern at a 90-degree angle to their flight paths, they won't be able to compensate. If we change course now, they'll have our tail, and their acceleration will overtake us. We've got to blast through it and head for our jump point."

"SIMPOC, if we hit the jump point with a bunch of rockets in trail, will they follow us through?"

"I doubt it. I haven't sensed any energy signatures similar to ours, implying that they don't use this type of thrust for travel between stars. They may have another propulsion system and be capable of such travel, but it isn't indicated yet."

"Beta 5, put the missiles and their trajectories on the hologram."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The space between the planet of interest and the rocky world was suddenly filled with little red dots followed by yellow velocity vectors.

“There must be over a hundred of them,” Tom said as his voice trailed off.

“132 missiles are currently traveling along their routes,” said SIMPOC.

“Thanks,” responded Tom.

As ESC # 1 raced towards the midpoint between the two warring worlds, the tension was horrible. All they could do was watch.

“SIMPOC, what is our speed?” Joan asked.

“When we entered the system, we were at .3217 Light Speed. We have accelerated to .3356.”

“Not exactly breakneck,” Tom said.

“Tom, one of the missiles has changed its regular pulses from a constant rate to an increasing rate, and its velocity vector has changed. It appears to be heading in our direction,” SIMPOC announced.

“Lovely, that probably means that the acquisition radar has picked us up, and now it has gone to tracking. That means that it is homing in on us. Change the symbol to blinking so we can see which one it is,” Tom directed.

The bridge was silent. Finally, Joan said in a low voice, “Our only hope is that our speed, acceleration, and the overtake angle of the missile is beyond its ability to compensate. Once it senses our acceleration and tries to compensate, we might pass by it before it can make the turn. Then we hope it runs out of fuel after it finishes the turn to intercept.

“Commander, two other missiles have altered their course and pulse patterns. I have changed their symbols,” said SIMPOC.

“When you get one, they all want to follow,” Tom said.

“We will approach the closest point in eight minutes,” SIMPOC announced.

“Beta 5, just focus on us and the missiles that are tracking us. Zoom in, so that’s all we see.”

“Acknowledged.”

The 3D projection changed and no longer showed the planet or rocky outpost. The Chevesky was in the middle of the display, and now five blinking red dots were approaching with different intercept angles. It soon became obvious that the first missile was unable to change its trajectory. As it accelerated, its ability to change direction was overcome by its inertia, and it passed 12,408 miles to the rear. It continued to turn but with a wide turn radius, changing its heading to align with its target.

“Okay, the first one is falling into trail. I’m glad it didn’t have some kind of proximity fuse,” Tom said as he let out a slight breath.

The angle the next missile was approaching from was less oblique, and it had a better chance of making the turn with less of an overshoot. According to the laws of conservation of momentum, it missed 8,408 miles to the rear, and it was turning to fall into trail also.

“Two little ducks in a row, three more to go,” Tom whispered.

The next three get progressively worse. “Number three is almost 90 degrees to our trajectory and will overshoot only slightly. The last two are the ones that worry me the most,” Joan said.

“Here is number three,” Tom said as it passed 4,232 miles to the rear. Because it had less overshoot, it was almost directly in trail.

“Commander, I calculate that missiles number four and five won’t overshoot. They are adjusting to our vector, and they are accelerating faster than we are. Likely due to their lower mass.” SIMPOC said.

“SIMPOC, you have enough data now, compute their velocities, acceleration vs. ours, and plot it against our jump point,” Joan said.

“I compute that missiles 1, 2, and 3 won’t reach us before we reach the jump point. Missile 4 is lagging behind missile 5 because of the angle from which it was fired. Missile 5 will reach us 3.5 seconds before the jump point,” SIMPOC said.

“Is there anything we can do?” Tom asked.

Joan and SIMPOC were silent, which might have been his answer.

“Can we determine what type of weapon these are?” Joan asked.

“SIMPOC, can you confirm, but they look like EMP weapons. Both sides want something left when the conflict is over. They’re just trying to fry each other’s circuits,” Tom said.

“I concur. Upon detonation, they release a strong EMP pulse. It is very focused and advanced. They are targeted devices and not meant for mass destruction,” SIMPOC confirmed.

“Will the EMP fry our circuits?” Joan asked.

“Unknown. This is not a military ship, and the Vakeel were not engaged in war, so I don’t know how well these circuits are designed for that type of pulse. This is a very massive ship, and the mass will help to some extent,” SIMPOC answered.

“Okay, they might not blow our butt off, but we might go black, lovely,” said Tom.

“30 seconds to the jump point, 26.5 seconds before impact,” announced SIMPOC.

“20 seconds, 15 seconds, 10 seconds…,” announced SIMPOC. Then he stopped.

“What,” yelled Tom.

Missile 5 stopped accelerating. It apparently ran out of fuel and detonated. We just entered the jump point,” SIMPOC said.

“Did we sustain any damage?” Joan yelled.

“Unknown,” SIMPOC replied.

“Please check all your systems, and are the other missiles following us?”

“Unknown if they are following, and I’m checking the systems now.”

“Transit time?”

“6 hours 32 minutes.”

“Seems like there is nothing else to do but wait,” Commander Herl said.

“Precisely,” added SIMPOC.

“Bob, did you get good data?” Tom asked.

“Yes, I recorded everything.”

“Good news, we made it. Bad news, they know someone else was there,” Joan Herl thought out loud.

“What if they come looking for us,” Bob Shappel asked.

“We’ll deal with it then,” Joan responded.

Will the Missiles Reach Them?

The atmosphere onboard the Chevesky was different now. They had just passed through a war zone, and no one knew if they were being followed.

There was very little resting during the jump, but the stress level was high and the discussions long.

“30 seconds to exit point,” SIMPOC announced.

“How much can we change trajectory upon exit?” Joan asked.

“At our exit velocity, we can change vector very little. We must slow down to change it significantly,” SIMPOC answered.

“So, whatever comes through behind us, stays on our tail,” Tom commented.

“Accurate statement,” SIMPOC responded.

“We just exited the jump,” SIMPOC stated.

“Anything behind us,” Commander Herl asked.

“Stand by…no; there is nothing behind us. The missiles did not pass the jump point,” SIMPOC said to a relieved crew.

Joan exhaled, then said, “Beta 5, let’s head for Earth and let them know that we’re back. Please open a frequency.”

“Acknowledged.”

‘Earth, Pacific Group, this is ESC1 arriving back into the solar system,” Joan transmitted even though it would be 5 hours and 36 minutes before her transmission would reach Earth.

“We transited the two systems, and the Chevesky and crew are in good shape. We did have an issue, though. In the second system, there was an alien war going on, and we passed right through it. We didn’t receive any damage, but they fired upon us. We saw no indication that they have technology like ours, so they may not be able to follow us. But that is a risk. We’ll pass more to you as we get closer to Earth. I think we’ll need to talk about this when we get home; we should be back in orbit in slightly over 8 hours. Chevesky out.”

“Boy, that should get some discussions going,” Tom said.

Return to Solar System

“Admirals, Mr. President. I’m glad that we’ve been able to connect. I don’t think the delays will be too bad, but this is important, and we need to talk.”

“As I said in my first transmission when we entered the second system, we found ourselves right in the middle of a war. We were lucky, and our vector took us through the system without any damage occurring. It was obvious that we were targeted, and five missiles were directed towards us. Our acceleration and vector enabled us to get out of the system without any of the missiles striking us.”

“Do you think they’ll follow you?” Admiral Monson asked.

Joan nodded to SIMPOC to provide that answer.

“This is SIMPOC. The technology that we used for faster than light travel is distinctive and creates specific emissions that I can detect. I found none of those types of emissions in that system. That doesn’t mean they don’t have faster than light travel; it merely means they don’t travel in the same manner that we do.”

“I would rather have had a simple no, not a maybe,” the president said.

“Mr. President. Because they were at war with each other doesn’t mean that they’ll be at war with us. They don’t know our abilities, and it would be prudent for them to move slowly. They surely don’t want to engage a far superior enemy,” explained Admiral Hagerly.

“Okay, I guess there isn’t much we can do except wait,” the president observed.

Wednesday, October 4, 2051

Brief President on Visiting Cities

"Sir, we've finished up our plan to send out a couple of shuttles and visit the main cities. It's a good thing the shuttles are so fast and flexible. Sir, here is the plan. We've painted American Flags on the sides and bottoms of the shuttles. Anyone that sees them will know who is flying them. SIMPOC has also installed loudspeakers on the bottom. We don't know how many people we'll come across, but we'll tell them to make their way to one of the designated cities. We won't be able to render aid or food. All we can do is give them some guidance. We're sending two of the shuttles together, so they'll have a backup. We've laid out a plan to do the US cities first; then we'll go overseas. Within the US, they'll circle the larger cities for a while then land anywhere if they see people. They'll encourage them to move to either San Diego, Florida, or Norfolk. In San Diego, we have the remnants of the Pacific Fleet; in Florida is the Fourth Fleet, and we're here. We don't have Chicago under control yet, and we have that other problem," the president's chief of staff, Eddie Purser, said.

"Tell the team to spend extra time in Chicago and see if they can get something organized. I suspect there will be a lot of people that need our help. I want them to focus on the Great Lakes Naval Station north of Chicago. I hope we have some personnel there. I think Chicago is our best hope in the middle of the country. Through the Great Lakes Station, we'll be able to support the area. I'm betting that we can solve the nuke problem pretty quickly. There should be a minimal risk of them going off, and if we get to them fast enough, we can settle Chicago."

"Yes, sir. We aren't going to put anything in the flyer about the alien invasion. Without some explanation, it might be too much for them. We'll give them all the details when they reach the cities. If our teams find any authority, we can give them satellite radios, so we can communicate with them. As they travel between the major cities, they'll do fly-overs of as

many cities as possible and try to find survivors. Sir, do you have any questions?" Eddie asked.

"Who are you sending?"

"Sergeant Lenmore, who was your tactical team at Camp David and in Washington.

"No questions, Eddie sounds good; tell him good luck."

Discuss Contacting the Other Cities

The hanger near the flight line had numerous briefing rooms and office areas. Sergeant Lenmore and Beta team had taken residence in one of the office groups, and they were settled in a large comfortable conference room.

"Beta Team, we're leaving on Operation Round UP tomorrow at 0600. We're taking the two shuttles you see outside. They're clearly marked, and we're hoping that once people see the flag on the sides, they'll relax. I don't think they'll notice that they're alien ships," said Sergeant Lenmore."

"We'll head up the coast and make a swing around all the major cities. We'll focus mostly on the larger cities like NY and Boston on the first day. We aren't bringing much food, we're planning on finding our food en route, and there should be plenty of places to spend the night."

"I don't know what we'll find. I've been told that we should find hundreds if not thousands of people through the trip, but we may find hostile groups for many reasons. We'll try to deal with them, and if we can't, we'll move on and make a note of where they are. You'll notice that we've put together a couple thousand of these tubes. Inside we tell them to move to the cities, and we'll try to coordinate support from there. We'll drop these every place we see anyone. Our mission is to spread the word and tell people to move to Norfolk, Florida, or San Diego. There they'll find US Government personnel. In Chicago, we're going to the Great Lakes Naval Base and hoping to find some Marines there. If we do, we'll help

them get organized. Wherever possible, we'll be leaving satellite phones to maintain some communications. Are there any questions?"

Safety in Earth's Orbit

After the last couple of days, the Chevesky slipping into orbit around Earth seemed anti-climactic. Regardless it was good to be home.

"Bob, SIMPOC, can we translate anything from the information Bob recorded?" Joan asked.

"Not much. I've got tons of raw data made up of video, IR readings, radiation readings, etc. I did record a lot of their transmissions but, I wouldn't know where to begin to translate any of it," Shappel said.

"I concur with Professor Shappel. We have raw recordings, but it will take a great deal of time to find patterns and translate the information. Without some key or primer to tell us where to start, it may be months or longer before I can convert the raw data to something we might understand," added SIMPOC.

"Okay, I think we need to try. Let me know what progress you make."

"Yes, commander, I will keep you informed," SIMPOC answered.

"Bob are you heading down right away," Joan asked.

"Yes, I'm transferring my data now. I'll be a lot more productive on my home turf."

"Great to have you make the trip with us. Please keep me up to date on what you find," Joan asked.

"Certainly will," Bob Shappel said, then he turned and headed for the shuttle bay.

"Joan, I have been experimenting with what I think might be a weapon," SIMPOC said.

That statement really got Joan's attention, and she forgot to say goodbye to Bob Shappel.

"Is it what you were thinking?" Joan asked.

“This ship creates a field around it which reaches out to the magnetic flux lines in the vicinity. As I said earlier, there are points in space where the potential between those flux lines is at their greatest, and that defines our jump points. I have been experimenting with those fields, how to create them, manage them and distort them in the direction that I want. If I do that manipulation while telling the ship to remain in one position, I suspect the distorted field becomes the weapon. It appears to have a major effect on the molecular bonds of the target,”

“Great, how do you want to test it?” Joan asked.

“For the first attempt, we could launch one of the cow robots into space, and I’ll attempt to fire the weapon at it.”

“Okay, let’s do it; we have enough of them. I think we can sacrifice one. Beta 1 launch one of the cow robots into space and tell it to take a position 10,000 meters from the Chevesky.”

“Acknowledged.”

“SIMPOC, what do you think the effect will be on the target?” Joan asked.

“Unknown. Many forces hold molecules together. Affecting those forces can cause unusual effects. If we affect those forces enough, the results could be dramatic.”

“Commander, cow robot BB231 is in position.”

“Thanks, Beta. Tom, you’re going to want to see this. SIMPOC thinks that he has found a weapon.”

“Great, let’s see it,” Tom said as he came out of the food preparation area.

“SIMPOC, we aren’t creating a nuclear bomb, are we?” Tom asked.

“No, I don’t believe so. I expect the effect to be between molecules, not within them,” SIMPOC answered.

“I sure hope that you’re right,” Tom responded.

“SIMPOC, let’s see what happens. Beta 2 bring us and BB231 on the hologram.”

“Acknowledged.”

“SIMPOC do you fire it, or does the field just sweep over it?” Joan asked.

“I can do either. In this situation, I can create the field towards the target almost instantly. Stand by; I’ll manipulate the field, then I’ll focus it on the target. Okay, I’m ready.”

“Do it,” Joan responded.

Within a second, the small cow robot BB231 disappeared from the 3D Hologram projection.

“Beta 3, what happened?” Joan asked.

“Commander, the unit is no longer there. The sensors indicate an increasing cloud of particulate matter.”

“SIMPOC?”

“Commander, it appears that the field completely disrupted the molecular bond. The cow robot disintegrated into particulate matter at the molecular level.”

“Okay, it works on a robot about the size of a big car. How about a larger target?”

“If we can find a larger target, I will test it.”

“We could sacrifice one of the supply ships. We have over 1,800 of them. I think we can lose one. Beta 1, take the closest supply ship, have all the cow robots onboard move to nearby ships. When it’s empty, move it to a point 20,000 meters from our location.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Commander SS812 was empty. It had just risen from Earth’s surface when it was deactivated.”

“Great, move it into position.”

“Acknowledged.”

“SIMPOC, what do you think the effective range is on this weapon?”

Because of the size and shape of the Chevesky, it takes a finite amount of space to manipulate the field. It appears the optimum range to be between 5,000 and 50,000 meters. Beyond that, the effect on the target is unknown.”

“Commander, SS812 is in the position that you requested.”

“Thanks, Beta. SIMPOC, all yours. Let’s see what this little Magnetic Field Generator of yours does to a larger ship.”

“I’m manipulating the field. I will focus it … now.”

The image of the supply vessel didn’t change for 2-3 seconds, then it started to break into pieces. As the pieces separated from each other, the images blurred as the material disintegrated into small pieces, then literally it turned to dust, then disappeared as the dust turned to molecules.”

“Commander, the ship has turned into another expanding cloud of molecular matter,” Beta 3 said.

“That’s a mean weapon,” Joan said. “Can you pass the information to the Group Commanders on how to use it? Perhaps one of the Beta’s should be designated as the Weapon’s Officer and pass the information to it.”

“Commander, I suggest that we move slowly with this weapon. I’m not fully conversant in its capabilities. I suggest that the other Capital Ships rely on their Laser and Rail-Gun weapons until I understand this better.”

“Good suggestion. Let everyone know that we’re working on it, and I’ll let the President and Admiral know that we might have another weapon.”

Thursday, October 5, 2051

Contact Cities

Sergeant Lenmore and Beta Team launched at 6:02 and headed north. Their first stop was the Nation's Capital. Approaching from the southeast, Washington DC didn't look too bad. When they passed over Regan National Airport, the only unusual thing was one airplane that had gone off the taxiway. The Beta team circled once and found no one.

The next stop was at the White House and Capitol. Both of the shuttles were silent as they looked at the remnants of the White House. There wasn't much left, just a shell and what had collapsed into the basement. The Capital building was also burned, but most of it was still standing. On the Capital Lawn, there was a group of tents, and they circled twice, making announcements and dropping pamphlets wherever they saw people.

They found the same as they flew around Baltimore. There were burned-out areas and a couple groupings of tents where they dropped pamphlets. Beta team was encouraged as one of the groups cheered as they saw the American Flags.

When they reached Boston, which was the end of the first day, there was a large grouping of people near Bunker Hill, and they cheered when they saw the shuttles. It was getting towards dusk, and they had to find a place to spend the night.

"Beta team, there are some baseball fields west of here. We'll tell the people below where we are landing," Robles transmitted to Beta 2.

Beta Team landed, and within a few minutes, people were streaming over from the tent encampment by Bunker Hill.

Sergeant Lenmore wasn't exactly sure how to handle them, but it was necessary to talk to the people and let them know that someone else was out there.

“Boy, are we glad to see you,” the first civilian said as she ran up and hugged LL. The exuberance caught him off guard, but it was still a pleasure to feel appreciated.

“We’re here to help,” he told the woman and the crowd that was forming. “Did you all get the pamphlets that we dropped?”

There was a short cheer, then he continued, “We can’t give you any food or help; we can only suggest where to go. You should be able to find everything that you need while you drive.”

“What’s all this about an alien invasion?” a tall man in the back asked.

LL hesitated for a moment, then decided to tell them, “It’s true. Let’s find someplace to relax, and my men have to unload their gear and get set up for the night. When we’re all settled, I’ll tell you the entire story. Believe me; it’s a long story.”

The evening went well for all. It was great for both groups to find others and be reunited with a small portion of humanity.

Toledo

After a great night sharing stories and companionship with the survivors at Bunker Hill, Sergeant Lenmore was briefing his men before the next leg to Toledo, “Men, today we’re heading to Toledo and then Chicago. First, we’ll focus on the Great Lakes Naval Station. If we’re lucky, we can find some troops that will help us out. We’ll cover a lot more ground today, we’re going to a higher altitude, and we’ll be covering more miles. I know we were up late last night, and tonight we’ll likely be sleeping in the shuttles, so go ahead and grab any snore-time you can while we’re en route. We’ll take off as soon as the last of our gear is on board,” Sergeant Lenmore said to his waking team.

Each member of Beta Team checked their gear and got a few winks of sleep as the shuttle did a high-speed parabolic run towards Toledo.

Toledo was heavily burned. Apparently, fires went unabated for a long time before burning themselves out. There was one large group of more than 100 people gathered in a park and sharing a group of buildings.

“Let’s land and talk to these people,” Sergeant Robles told the pilots. “Shuttle 2, stay airborne and give us cover.”

“Roger.”

There was plenty of open space, and the pilot had no problem setting the shuttle down. The people crowded together, and even though they saw the flag on the side of the shuttle, they were scared.

Sergeant Lenmore opened the hatch and stepped out. As he turned around the rear of the shuttle and walked towards the group, he waved. That was all it took to break the ice. They ran to him and almost swept him off his feet. The rest of the Beta Team members on Shuttle 1 filed out and mixed with the group. There were a thousand questions and hugs and handshakes all around.

“We’re so happy to see you; we thought we were the last people on Earth,” a woman said just before she hugged Robles.

“Can you take us back to your base,” a man asked.

Upon hearing that question, Sergeant Lenmore knew the next few minutes would be difficult. “Everyone, listen to me. Let’s go under those trees, and I’ll try to explain everything.”

They followed him, almost dancing with excitement. “We’re saved,” someone said from the back of the crowd.

When they were under the trees, he suggested they sit down. As they were sitting, he noticed handfuls of others coming out of the surrounding houses and joining the group.

“What happened,” was the first question flowing out of the crowd.

“Everyone, please listen. Things have been horrible. I can’t say it any other way. We have lost most of the people on Earth. There are pockets of survivors, like you. We’re flying around the country spreading the word and letting you know that there is still a US Government. You need to

understand, the Government was hit just as hard, along with the military. There aren't many of us left. You look like you've been ok. You have food and shelter. I can only pass a message from the President, we are setting up safe zones in Norfolk, Va., where he and the remainder of the Government and Military are.

We're heading to Chicago, and we'll try and set something up there. From here in Toledo, I'd suggest you head for Norfolk. I'm sure you can find functioning vehicles and enough food. You could make it there in a day or two. I'm sorry, but that is the best option I can give you. I don't have supplies, and I can't take you with us. As I said, we're going to all the major cities telling people the same thing."

When he finished, Sergeant Lenmore was surprised at the blank stares he got. They were scared and alone.

"At Norfolk, we're setting up farms, hospitals, and the power will stay on. Every day we have hundreds of people showing up; you'll be welcomed."

All he got were more blank stares. "I'm sorry, but that is all we can do. The country and the world have survived a major crisis. You'll all be safer if you go where there is help."

LL stood there silently, worried that someone would ask about the alien invasion. He didn't want to talk about that. The people in front of him were too scared, too beat to be told.

To Sergeant Lenmore's relief, someone in the back stood and said, "Okay, let's pack. At least we know where we're going. Spread the word and load the trucks; we'll head out first thing in the morning."

The crowd lifted themselves off the ground and almost seemed to forget about Sergeant Lenmore and the rest of the Beta Team. They were beaten, and another challenge was just that, another challenge.

Great Lake NAS

After taking off from Toledo, Beta Team was quiet. In a way, it was encouraging to see people who survived, but it was depressing to be reminded of the challenges still in front of them.

The flight to the Great Lakes Naval Air Station was shorter than the leg from Boston. As they descended over Lake Michigan, Sergeant Lenmore reviewed the plan.

“Beta, we’re approaching the station from over the lake. We’ll cross land near the golf course, and we should be able to set down on one of the parade grounds. There are two, one is North of the Command Center, and the other is South. We’ll both make a couple of passes to see what activity we can notice then Shuttle 1 will land. After we set down, the buildings will give us good cover. I don’t want to land on the main parade ground because there is no cover around it. Shuttle 2, stay airborne until we’re down and secured our perimeter. Continue to check the local area, and after we’re down, you can set down near us. 2, you copy?”

“Roger.”

Shuttle 1 entered the base over the golf course then turned right for the northern parade field. As it maneuvered to land, Shuttle 2 flew around the main base looking for human activity. The instant that Shuttle 1 touched the ground, the hatch opened, and Sergeant Lenmore and his team filed out and took up positions around the shuttle. Everything looked quiet, and they moved from the shuttle to the immediate buildings around them. When they were about 50 yards from the Shuttle, a single door opened, and out walked a man in military fatigues. Sergeant Lenmore immediately fell prone to a firing position on the ground. The rest of Beta Team did the same. The single man stopped, looked around, and raised his arms from his sides, indicating that he was unarmed. As he walked towards Beta, Sergeant Lenmore stood and walked to face him.

“Sergeant, it’s nice to finally see someone.”

“Lieutenant Colonel, it’s good to see you also,” Sergeant Lenmore said as he gave the man a quick salute. When the salute was completed, Beta Team rose to their feet, and simultaneously, over 100 riflemen came out of each of the surrounding buildings in groups. Within minutes, it turned into a giant hug-fest. Everyone grabbed someone, shook their hands, patted each other on the backs, and gave unceremonious hugs.

“Sarge, sorry, but your vehicle is non-standard, and we had to make sure. We’ve been attacked almost daily by the Chicago gangs trying to get to our weapon’s store. So we’re a little on edge.”

“Sir, I understand. We’re glad you’re here, and we’re happy to find you.”

“Sargent, what the hell is going on out there? We lost contact a long time ago, the gangs have burned many of our buildings looking for guns and drugs, and we lost all our comm gear.”

“Sir, if we can go somewhere, I’d be happy to bring you up to speed. Standby, I’ve got another ship to bring in. Shuttle 2, you’re clear to land. We’re on the North Parade field. When you land, be prepared for a welcome party.”

“Roger, on the ground in 5.”

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“Aliens, you got to be kidding me. I heard some rumors, but I didn’t believe them. I heard the President made some speeches, but we didn’t hear them. We had already lost the comm center by then, and things were pretty hectic around here,” said a bewildered Lieutenant Colonel Alvin Chester.

“I’m glad the President survived and some of the government. So, you’ve set up shop in Norfolk, glad to see the US Government setting up shop in a Navy town. Okay, so you’re touring the country finding survivors. I know we have some around here; some of them are attacking us every day. Chicago has been broken into segments. Each of them ran by the local gang. The gangs on the northern end of the city have tried to get our

weapons so they'd have an advantage over the others. There is one issue, though. The Mayor has gone off the deep end and teamed up with an equally crazy retired Army guy who's calling himself a General. We've tried to communicate with them, but they are set up by themselves and think they are in charge. I don't have enough firepower here to argue with them; I just have enough to keep them out. To be honest, I don't know long that will last. There are more of them than I have people I trust. So far, it's been a battle of attrition."

"Sir, we brought some Satellite Phones, which will allow you to talk with Admiral Hagerly and the President. I know they want to set Chicago up as a safe zone, but it sounds more complicated than that right now. Let's get them online and talk through it."

"Sargent, if it's not pressing, we'll talk to them tomorrow. Nothing in Chicago will change between now and tomorrow, besides it's getting late on the East Coast. Now I've got 127 marines that need a break, and welcoming you to our little post is a good excuse. Let's set up some rotating guards, and we'll treat you to a good meal. I'm sorry, I've cut off the liquor, but we can at least eat well."

"Sounds like an evening well spent," Sergeant Lenmore said with a smile.

LL knew about the nukes, and he wasn't sure if he should or could tell the Colonel. He suspected that it would be best to leave that little piece of information to the Admiral and president.

Friday, October 6, 2051

Debrief the President

"Mr. President, are Admiral Hagerly and Professor Shappel with you?" Joan asked.

"Yes, the Admiral is just coming in now, and Bob is already here. Is your end of the video connection working?"

"Yes, it just came online. Are you ready to discuss our trip?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"Sir, overall, the Chevesky did a hell of a job. It is simple to operate, and it is one hell of a kick to go faster than light. SIMPOC has a good handle on hitting the jump points, and when we enter, I didn't feel a thing. It is pretty much like the trips we made to the Vakeel homeland. It was quiet while we were in the jump, and we came out at the calculated time. The first system had life. We found two planets that were orbiting on each side of their sun. They were both in the Goldie Locks zone, and they had signs of life on both of them. One planet was all agriculture, and the other was mostly desert. Dr. Shappel is continuing to work up his data, and I'll let him take over this portion. Professor?"

"Thanks, Joan, Mr. President, Admiral. They had simple space travel abilities. Which sounds funny for me to say; after all, they weren't too different than the technological level we were at just before we met the Vakeel. They had orbiting satellites, and there were a couple of spaceships going from one planet to the other. There was something very interesting that we found on the second planet. Our IR scans didn't show any life, which would indicate they may be cold-blooded. There has always been a debate about whether intelligent life could develop in cold-blooded creatures. Sir, it appears that we may have resolved that."

"Cold-blooded?" the president asked.

“Yes, sir, they may be insects, reptiles, or something else. Once we analyze all the data, we should be able to discern what type of creature they are.”

“That should be interesting,” the president responded.

“Yes, sir, indeed,” Professor Shappel responded.

“So the two planets were about as developed as we were before the invasion?” asked the President.

“I’d say they were going down a different technological path. They may have had some space travel, but there were few electronic emissions. I’d say they were much less technical than we are. The creatures on the first planet appear to be dependent on one food source. When we did a spectrum analysis of their crops, the crops were extremely well managed, but they were the same. They have successfully cultivated almost 100% of the suitable land. Whatever they are growing, they are extremely efficient at doing so. As the Commander said, we picked up very little electronic emissions. We mapped their transportation systems, and it appeared that the northern and southern poles of the planet are sort of a refrigerator. They have extensive cave systems where they store the crops for use throughout the year. Their entire cultural and social existence is centered on growing that crop. The crop analysis of the second planet showed a more diverse plant distribution.”

“Thanks, Bob; what happened next?”

Joan resumed her part of the presentation, “Sir, we exited the system and went to the next one. According to Dr. Shappel’s information, the second system had a Red Dwarf star, which meant that it is older and cooler than our sun. Red Dwarfs are the most common sun in the Milky Way. Professor, do you want to add anything?”

“Yes, Mr. President, I thought that if there are intelligent beings out there, then this would be the best place to find some. Per Joan’s strategy, we planned on a fast pass through the system with the intention of no one knowing we were there. We followed a low energy trajectory so that any advanced civilization might not pick up our energy signature. Well, that

didn’t work out too well. Our low-energy trajectory took us between two worlds that were at war with each other. One of the worlds is a lot like Earth, and the other was dryer and rockier. The Earth-like planet has nine land masses, and the temperature variation is very similar to ours. Because it is orbiting a Red Dwarf, its orbital cycle is only 242 days, and its rotation rate is slower than ours because of the increased gravity. The other planet was further out in the Goldie Locks zone, and its temperature variation was about 8 Degrees cooler than ours. The majority of its moisture was trapped in huge polar ice caps. There was only about 23% liquid water on the surface.”

“Thanks, Bob,” Joan said.

Tom then added his tactical perspective, “Sir, our path put us right in the middle between the two of them. When they detected us, five missiles were fired at us. We accelerated as much as possible, and we were lucky to outrun the missiles. They had active search and acquisition radar, but because we were at such a large overtake angle, they didn’t have the turn radius to match our trajectory. We entered the jump point, and none of them followed us.”

“Mr. President, if there is anything we’ve learned, it was that we sure aren’t alone out there. We have a jump on defending ourselves, and we’ve got to do everything we can,” said Joan.

“Mr. President. I’ve been using the manufacturing abilities onboard the Capital Ships, and they are impressive. Their original mission was to transform a planet. Their output far exceeds any plants of a comparable size that we have. I suggest that we dedicate them to producing weapons for our defense,” added SIMPOC.

“I agree,” the president said. “If we’ve already stumbled on aliens that are fighting each other, then I think the risk of them coming here or us finding others like them is higher. We need to do everything that we can to prepare for the next phase in our defense.

At Great Lakes

"Admiral Hagerly, President Patterson. This is Beta Team. We've made it to the Naval Station Great Lakes, and I have Lieutenant Colonel Alvin Chester USMC with me. He's been holed up at the station trying to keep the Chicago gangs from getting their hands on the weapons."

"Thanks, LL, Colonel Chester, it's great to talk with you, this is President Patterson, and I have Admiral Nial Hagerly with me. How are you holding out there?"

"Sir, we're doing ok. It has been a battle of attrition, though. We started with 142 Marines, and now we're down to 127. I've got 5 in sickbay, and we lost the other 10 to snipers and various attacks. The Chicago gangs know there are a lot of weapons here, and they've been trying to get to them. Their tactic has been to get some of their guys doped up, and they make suicide attacks. They usually use the ones that have lost all their families, and they have nothing to live for."

"Sorry to hear that, Colonel. What is happening in Chicago aside from the gangs," Admiral Hagerly asked.

"Sir, the Mayor went off the deep end. He has set up some kind of kingdom. I believe that he thinks the world ended, and he was left in charge. He has had open conflict with some of the gangs; they all want to control the city. The Mayor has a Guard Major that calls himself a General, and he's running a mix of military and civilian mercenaries. They are doing some good. The gangs are ruthless, and the Mayor provides a safe haven for anyone who joins their militia against the gangs. He's done a pretty good job of protecting the people. He's just a little crazy. He hasn't attacked us, although there is a rumor that he is trying to get more weapons so he can wipe out the gangs."

"Alvin, it sounds like you have some real challenges there. I need to let you know that we've been sending teams to the major cities, telling people that the Government is still here and there are safe havens for them. We've told them to go to San Diego, Norfolk, Va., and we've hesitated about

Chicago until we knew what was going on. We thought we might set something up to give them a place to go and find protection in numbers. It sounds like we might have been a bit optimistic in considering Chicago. Stand by for a moment, Alvin, the Admiral, and I need to confer about something."

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant, What do you think is going on?" Chester asked LL as he turned the SATPHONE away.

"Sir, I think they'll ask you to stay here and pick up the pieces when Chicago comes apart. They need some military or government presence in the middle of the country, and for now, you're it. After we leave here, we're headed to the other major cities, then to LA and San Diego."

"Alvin."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"This is a difficult request, but we'd like to have you stay there and provide any military assistance that you can. The situation in Chicago will likely change at some point in the future, and we need someone there who we can contact and have trust in. We have some personnel and equipment that we can send to help you out and any other supplies that you need."

"Yes, sir. If that's what you need, we stay. All of my men are from the Chicago area, and I think they'd prefer to stay here and help if they can."

"Great, I'll leave it up to Sergeant Lenmore to work out the communication details before he leaves for the next city. With the satellite phone, you'll be able to coordinate with us at any time."

"You can count on us, sir."

"Thanks, Alvin."

"Admiral, if it's okay with you, we'll spend the rest of the day here, then we'll take the long leg to LA, then San Diego?"

"Sure thing, Sergeant," Admiral Hagerly responded.

Saturday, October 7, 2051

Over Los Angeles

LL felt good after leaving the Great Lakes Naval Station. It was nice to find good people trying to do the right thing. He was confident that a firm foothold was established in the Chicago area, and once the situation in Chicago sifted out, there was a chance for the people of the area, hopefully in the near future.

Approaching the LA area, LL knew that he had a different problem. The metropolitan area was so large, landing in any one place and meeting a group of people was unlikely. There would likely be numerous groups, and it would be hard to meet many of them. The only logical plan was to drop the canisters with the pamphlets.

“Shuttle 2, we’ll split our plan for LA. You start in the northern valleys and fly around. If you see any large groups of people, call us, and we’ll provide cover. If you don’t, drop as many canisters as you can, and hopefully, the bright-colored parachutes will get their attention. When you’re done, let me know, and you can move to the eastern part, out over San Bernardino County, and do the same thing. Start on the eastern side and move west. We’ll meet up in Orange County.”

“Roger, we’ll cover the San Fernando Valley west to east.”

“Roger,” LL replied.

“Dennis, start on the west side, and let’s fly down the coast to PV, then turn and come back up over the airport.”

“Will do.”

“Roger,” ship 2 responded.

“LL, I’m picking up some small arms fire; what do you want to do?” Dennis, the shuttle 1 pilot, asked.

“Don’t land is the first order. Just move on; we’re here to help the ones who can be helped.”

Heading South

“Shuttle 1; shuttle 2.”

“Roger 2, go ahead,” LL answered.

“We are getting scattered groups of people. So far, we’ve dropped about a hundred canisters, but we haven’t found any large groups. How about you guys?”

“It’s been about the same for us; I think we’ve dropped about 150 canisters. We found one group of about a hundred in the LA Coliseum, but that has been the only large group. We picked up some small arms fire in parts of the city, but nothing organized. Let’s head south and meet in Orange County. You work the east side, and we’ll stay to the west. As we get further south, we’ll join up.”

“Roger.”

“Shuttle 2, I’ve got you coming up on my 8 o’clock. You’re cleared to join,” said the shuttle 1 pilot.

“Shuttle 2, this is the MC. We’ll continue down the coast, and we’re meeting with a Colonel Beal at Lindberg Field. He’s the Marine running the show at the airport.”

“Rog, we’ll stay in trail until you’re on the deck.”

San Diego

Colonel Beal didn’t have a clue what to expect. Waiting on the ramp of Lindberg Field for alien shuttles to land wasn’t an item on his things-to-do list. When a similar vehicle picked up Captain Barbour, he was busy

surveying the surrounding area to locate each of the deactivated cow robots. He saw the strange and silent vehicle maneuver over the port to land, but he wasn't able to get a close-up view.

"Joyce, have you ever seen an alien shuttlecraft before?"

"Not today, sir, but I'll have to check my diary," Tech Sergeant Joyce Bennet said with a smile.

They stood and saw two vehicles, each about the size of a bus approaching from the north. Approaching Lindberg, the lead swung to the east and began to descend while the second vehicle stayed at altitude and began a slow circle around the airport.

"Sir, I don't hear anything," Tech Sergeant Bennet commented.

"Neither do I."

The vehicle didn't have any wings but was tubular with a small window in the front. Along the sides, there were no obvious structural elements or engines they could see. The vehicle slowed over the runway, and as it approached the parking area, it swung around, so the rear was near where the Colonel and Tech Sergeant stood. The alien craft gently settled on the ramp, and a hatch appeared in the skin on the aft surface. It opened quickly, and an Army Grunt in combat gear jumped onto the deck and ran towards them.

"Colonel Beal, I'm Staff Sergeant Lenmore."

"Sargent, I'm Ron Beal, and this is Tech Sergeant Joyce Bennet."

"Sir, most people call me LL. I heard that you had some close encounters down here before they were shut down."

"We sure did, and we hear that you were running special ops in Washington?"

"Yes, sir. Both fun times, I'm sure. Sir, if we can find a comfortable space, I'd like to brief you on what we have and what the President would like to happen."

“This way, Sargent,” Tech Sergeant Bennet said as she led them into the terminal.

Lindberg Field San Diego

“LL, to say that a lot has happened in the last month or so would be a major understatement. An alien invasion, and now we have spaceships and interstellar travel. What a leap. Commander Barbour is commanding a fleet of spaceships. Wow.” Colonel Beal said with some awe in his voice.

“Yes, sir, it certainly is. As I said, the president is directing as many of the survivors as possible to San Diego. I was told that most of the docks in LA were tied up with civilian ships, and you’ve already come ashore here, so it made sense.”

“Yes, that’s what we recommended to the Admiral.”

“Sir, are you in a good position here? Is there anything we can send to help you out?”

“No, Sarge. I think we have everything. We do have one concern, though. Camp Pendleton is only a few miles up the road, and there is a lot of weaponry still there. We raided some of the high-tech stuff during the attack, but there is still a lot there.”

“Sir, I suggest you talk it over with the Admiral, but I think they’re going to direct you to take what you want and destroy the rest. When we flew over LA, we encountered small arms fire at some locations. It won’t take long for those idiots to head south, and it sounds like the base has too many things for them to get their hands on.”

“I agree, I’ll confirm with the Admiral, but Sargent Bennet already has put together a plan to do just that. We’re heading up real soon, and I hope we get there in time.”

“Sir, we have a ton of shuttles like these. Can they be any help?” LL asked.

“Thanks, Sarge, but I’m a ground pounder, and I think better from that perspective,” said Sergeant Bennet.

“Once you get what you want and disable the big stuff, we can work something out to help neutralize the rest of it,” LL suggested.

“We’ll take you up on that, but for now, we want to get in there, take what we need, neutralize what we can, then get out. We’ll talk later about a long-term solution. After all, there are thousands of storage areas that we’ll have to worry about at some time,” Colonel Beal said.

“Good luck. Sir, if we can bunk down here for the night and get some food and showers, we’ve got to get going first thing. We’ve still got a lot of cities to fly over.”

“Certainly, Sarge, we’ve got some hotel space already set up for you.”

Sunday, October 8, 2051

Earth II Begins

Eddy Purser, the president's chief of staff, poked his head through the door to his office. "Sir, do you have a minute?"

"Sure, Eddy, come in. What'cha got?"

"Sir, we've been making progress in contacting responsible people in other countries. Most of the major countries have governments coming together, some with previous leadership still in place and others with new leaders. Most of the European countries have some leadership like ours. The Chinese faired the best, they aren't talking much, but it appears that because of their size, they have the largest surviving population. Their government seems to be the most effective. They do admit that they have some rogue elements that they're still trying to deal with. They weren't specific. The bad news is, the concept of representative government is likely behind us most everywhere, at least for the near term. The governments are running like ours, the civilian leadership is in place, but they are operating with a defensive mindset. Everyone is still trying to get their major cities under control, and most of them have large areas of lawlessness."

"Sounds like we're beginning a new world."

"Yes, sir, considering the loss we all endured, it's only natural for the natural order of things to realign. One question we're getting on every phone call is WHAT HAPPENED. They all know of the virus, they all have seen and battled the cow robots, and the cow robots all stopped at the same time around the world. Some of them have listened to some of the radio traffic or heard some of your transmissions. A few have a partial picture of what Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC did, but that information isn't widespread. Sir, let's face it. You're in charge."

With that statement, Arnold Patterson almost fell off his chair. Losing his family was one horrific realization; surviving the virus was another. Suddenly reality was there, the United States, or whatever it was now, still had a navy, but it also had thousands of spacecraft. The US had traveled to other solar systems. People from the US have met with other alien races.

“Sir…are you ok?” Eddy asked.

“I’m sorry, Eddy, what you just said hit me.”

“I suspected that Sir, you should have seen the ‘deer in the headlights look on your face.”

“Eddy, what do we do?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that’s up to you. I suggest that we connect up as much of the world as possible and give them the facts. Once you’ve done that, then you can decide on the next steps.”

“Before I do that, I want the Admiral, Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC in a room, and we have to talk through some things.”

“Yes, sir.”

Vakeel Medical Library

Tom and Joan were enjoying some quiet time in their food ‘prep’ area. They both loved to cook, and cooking together was always a fun time. SIMPOC had created a nice pantry and refrigerator, which he stocked with a surprisingly complete selection.

Stews and soups were their favorites. Each recipe seemed to evolve over time and changed ‘or mutated’ depending on what was in the fridge. Neither of them worried about following the recipe too close after all; directions were for chemical reactions, not food.

SIMPOC stood in the entry for a second, then he spoke, “Joan, Tom, I have found interesting information within the Vakeel data storage. Their

computers and manufacturing system have impressive biological functionality."

"What does that mean," Tom asked as he sipped the stew and added a pinch of salt.

"Within their databases, there is an immense amount of biological data. The primary data is directly relevant to their species, but it has much information beyond their species. It has information on all the lower life forms they have encountered. They have very advanced ways to capture the information they need. Through a series of tests similar to our medical scans, they chart almost the complete biological structure of the new species. The data structure between the Vakeel's data set and that of the other species is structured the same. Theoretically, any procedure they could do on the Vakeel could be done on the new creature they encounter."

"You're implying what," Joan asked as she diced the onions slid them into the pot.

"I'm not implying anything; it is obvious to me that if any humans on the Capital Ships need medical support or even surgery, I'm confident the computers could perform many of the necessary procedures."

"Great, I'll keep that in mind," Tom said with sarcasm in his voice.

SIMPOC continued, "The Capital Ships are individual outposts that are set up to support new colonies. To perform that function, it must have all the medical information and capabilities to support the Vakeel Colonists. Within the manufacturing area, two operating rooms are fully programmed to perform procedures on any injured Vakeel."

"Beyond the biological information in their database, their manufacturing system must also be able to fabricate any medicines that are necessary."

"How does alien biological information help us?" Joan asked.

"Their fundamental biology is similar to ours. It appears that cells function similarly regardless of the alien species. Information within their system is directly relevant to human biology. The techniques they use to diagnose ailments are directly relevant. The expected biological responses

to a specific medicine are like ours. So, in effect, the tools they have resident on their computers and manufacturing systems can be applied to humans."

"Are you saying that you can use their technology to cure human diseases?" Tom asked.

"Eventually, yes. I'm not at that point yet, but there is no reason to think their information won't help diagnose human problems. It should also be noted; they have a DNA makeup very similar to humans. Their technology is also relevant to correcting DNA errors. I do need to caution you, though. I see the potential, but I'm not fully conversant with their computer to get the full benefits of the information."

"Well, that is surely good news to have. Keep us informed of the progress that you make. That kind of ability will sure come in handy," Joan said as she scraped the last of the seasonings into the pot.

"I just had a thought," Tom mentioned.

"If you have the information, then that means that Julius has it also. Could he use the information to create a biological weapon against the Vakeel or us?"

"Yes, if I'm able to access the information and potentially apply it to helping humans, then he is capable of using the information to harm humans and the Vakeel."

"Wow, just more good news," Tom said with some frustration in his voice. Do you want red or white?"

Monday, October 9, 2051

Find Surviving Military Units

"Mr. President, there are some plans that I'd like to update you on. Do you have some time?" Admiral Hagerly asked.

"Yes, Admiral, what do you have?" the president responded as he walked down the stairs in the command center. "I'm walking home. Do you want to walk with me?

"Yes, sir."

They left the building. It was one of those nice transition days. The leaves were starting to turn, the air had a brisk coolness in it, and the sun was still warm late in the afternoon.

"This is nice; my Secret Service people let me walk home as long as I stay on Benedict Ave. I know they're still lurking in the bushes, but at least they let me think I'm by myself. Nial, what do you have?"

"Sir, we have the Vakeel ships to protect us in the event of an alien attack, but we have other issues. There are still military units or fragments of governments that might be hostile to us. We need to get our conventional forces organized and consolidated."

"You're right, Admiral. What do you suggest?"

"Sir, we've only got a couple of fighters and even fewer pilots capable of flying them. We have the alien transports, but they aren't large enough. I suggest we find all the volunteers that we can and begin to expand our influence. We can use the C-130's and fighters to spread out to all military facilities. I expect that any military people remaining will congregate around those bases. If we send people out to them and make contact, we'll be able to support them, bring them to this area and also bring the planes, pilots, and support equipment we need. The equipment is there, and I think we'll find many capable people. With the transports, we can find additional

food supplies or other material the civilians need while we consolidate the military personnel."

"Admiral, that sounds like a good plan; when will you start?"

"Sir, as soon as you approve it."

"Go for it. Now let's just walk and not talk about anything."

"My pleasure, sir."

Plan for Team to Go to Chicago

Colonel Dodd knocked on Admiral Hagerly's door and heard, "Enter."

She knew what the meeting was about and knew who would be in attendance.

"Have a seat," Admiral Hagerly said.

"Okay, we all know why we're here. The president wants us to send a team to Chicago and find out what's going on. We have 25 nuclear weapons stored under the post office and a crazy man as the mayor. Step one, get some eyes on the situation. Step two, infiltrate the organization as fast and far as possible. As soon as LL is back, we need to send them again. Once they know what's going on, we can decide how to handle it."

"Admiral, if we send in a short-haired guy that smells special ops, I wonder how long he'll last?" Colonel Dodd asked.

"Admiral, Colonel Dodd has a good point. LL might be a little too much; how about Ruth and me. She's from Illinois, and I'm from Ohio. It would be natural for us to migrate towards Chicago. I hate to admit it, but my hair is longer than LL's, and no one would think Ruth was a secret service agent."

"Sir, let me suggest something," Colonel Dodd chimed in.

"Let's talk with Colonel Chester and get his buy-in. After all, we're working in his backyard, and he knows the situation a lot better than we do.

Besides, I think we should tell him about the nukes."

The room was quiet for a few seconds while everyone dealt with the magnitude of their situation.

Finally, the admiral glanced at this comm unit and pulled up the satellite link number for Colonel Chester. As he dialed the number, each button's tone echoed through the silent room.

"Colonel Chester, this is Admiral Hagerly."

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Alvin, we have a situation that you need to be aware of. We had a team check out the nuclear storage facilities around the country to make sure they were secure. When they got to Whiteman USCFAFB, three of the bunkers were empty. We searched the area, and we found them, hidden under the US Post Office in Chicago."

The admiral paused, and the sound of Colonel Chester taking a deep breath was all that came across the sat link.

"Alvin, we're sending in a couple of agents to find out what's going on. They're from the area and should be able to blend in. We'd like your involvement and if you have any suggestions?"

"Sir, I knew the Mayor was off the deep end, but I didn't think he'd go that far. I suspect this is more under the control of Major Bueller. He is the one with the inflated image of himself. That's why he is calling himself a General, and the Mayor is putting up with him. I have a suggestion; they are a very paranoid outfit. Every new person that comes into town has one chance to join the militia, and if they don't, they shoot them. Anyone you send it will have one chance to blend in. I have a Marine Captain Reservist who grew up in South Chicago. She knows the gangs, the mayor, and the lay of the land. I think she should be part of the team."

"If she's from the area, will anyone know she is a Marine?" Colonel Dodd asked.

"I doubt it; she left when she went to College. She went into the Marines through ROTC, and when she left active, she worked for a

company in Kenosha. She hasn't been back to her neighborhood much. I doubt there is much chance of anyone knowing her."

"Sir, what would he backstory for Ruth and I?" Michael asked.

The room was quiet for a while, then Ruth spoke up, "If we say we're husband and wife, that might be fishy. There haven't been many couples that made it through the virus.

"Likewise, if we say we're siblings, that is high risk; I don't know of many that have survived. How about this? Michael and I were in Green Bay doing some business. We can work together and come up with something. Then we met your Captain, and we just teamed up for survival. That way, we're more like traveling companions, and we can be more independent, and we won't have to know each other's backstory."

"Sounds like a workable plan to me," Admiral Hagerly said.

"Colonel, my name is Michael Dereaux, and my partner is Ruth Minor. We're the team coming in. Can you have your Captain give us a call, and we can talk through the story."

"Yes, I'll get her on the link as soon as we're done here. Admiral, does this meet your requirements?"

"Gentlemen, I'm not sure if having a man and two women traveling together could be a problem?" Colonel Dodd brought up. "They may be very capable of defending themselves, but there are a lot of creeps out there, and there isn't any law."

"Colonel, on the other hand, a group of guys might draw too much attention. Ma'am, we can show ourselves as being in a group and sticking together. Ruth and I have been together through a bunch, and we work well as a team," Dereaux added.

"Colonel, don't worry about my Captain. She's a self-defense expert and can take care of herself," added Colonel Chester.

"Admiral, Ruth, and I will hit one of the local gun stores. We need to carry typical weapons, maybe a shotgun, one assault rifle, and a couple of mismatched pistols. We don't want military hardware," said agent Dereaux.

“Pick what you want,” the Admiral responded. “Yes, Colonel, I think your suggestions sound good. I think we’ll have to stick with two women and one man. Maybe it will be unusual enough to help their cover. Let’s keep the press on and get the team in place soon. I’m sending out a special ops squad that will lay low in the area and provide support or extraction if needed. Alvin, these are tactical nukes, so you’re not in immediate danger. If one of them goes off, it will take out the downtown, and I think you’ll have some time to bug out to the north.”

“Admiral, while we’ve been talking, I’ve already decided on the best route. Until then, we’ll stay here and do everything we can to hold things together; I know how important it is.”

“Thanks, Colonel. Hagerly out.”

Brother Warren T. Dunay

“Brother Warren T. Dunay was exhilarated. The day was amazing, the temperature was cool, and there were just light puffy white clouds in the blue sky above his head. Since the Virus, the skies were clear and the air refreshing.

Brother Warren was in the lead of his ordained caravan of trucks. Behind him were six 18 wheel trucks driven by his faithful followers. They all felt the honor that had been bestowed upon them, they all felt the grace that surrounded them, they all felt God’s Nectar, which they had consumed ample amounts of.

The road was clear, Brother Warren had the top down on his sports car, and God’s Army was following him. He felt as if God was in the seat next to him, but when he glanced to his right, all he saw was his girlfriend, Candice. He glanced at her again and paused on the abundant cleavage in her sundress.

“God is great,” he thought to himself.

The plan was simple; after all, no one would dare to stand in the way of God’s Army. So he would drive onto Camp Pendelton and take whatever he wanted. After all, the US Government was no longer in existence; they could no longer conduct their evil business; they could no longer investigate him for fraud and tax evasion. He smiled, thinking, *I won, they lost.*

Flying through Mission Viejo on Interstate 5 was like flying through the clouds of Heaven. He was coming home. He was on his way to fulfilling his destiny.

Planning Trip to Camp Pendleton

“Joyce, we’ve had a lot of personnel come into San Diego since the virus. We’ve made good progress getting them organized. A couple of the San Diego Supervisors have turned up, and they're getting what’s left of the city organized; I think we’re making good progress.”

“Sir, that’s great to hear.”

“One other thing.”

“Yes, sir, what is it?”

“Remember, Sergeant LL said they had a lot of small arms fire when they were flying over LA. That concerns me. We have potentially a large group of civilians up there, and I haven’t established contact with anyone who can get things organized. I’m afraid there are too many factions up there, and I don’t want them to get into the weapons at Pendleton.”

“Sir, I agree. That wouldn’t be good for them or for us. We keep finding many of the survivors here are ex-Navy, and they’re filling in our ranks really well. I don’t think we have to worry directly, but I know none of our people would like to have a firefight if LA invades.”

“I see, you get the picture. Can you put your plan in place and neutralize the arms up there? Remember, you can take what you need, but make sure you don’t leave much.”

“No, problem, sir. I’ve already got a team organized that is ready to go, and we can be up there in an hour or two.”

“Good, do it, and let me know how it works out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Heading for Pendleton

After leaving Colonel Beal's office, Tech Sergeant Joyce looked forward to a quick trip to Camp Pendleton. It was her home, and even though she had been there only about 30 days before the virus, she felt more comfortable on base than roaming around in a city.

It was a Marine base, and she was Army, but it still felt the same. She was just starting a six-month training exercise with the Marine Special Ops Teams and likely another deployment overseas. It was supposed to be a nice stateside tour to rest and recuperate after the last assignment.

It would be lonely in a way because it represented a past part of her life. A life where her days followed a plan, a life where she knew what she would do and where to go to work. But that had all changed, yet she still hoped to get some comfort from being in familiar surroundings.

Joyce Bennet never married and never had children. Living the life of a soldier always seemed to interfere. She always had choices to make, and each of her decisions conflicted with having a personal life.

The risk of her assignments and special missions took their toll on her. Each time she went overseas, she knew that she might not return. Each time she went on a mission, she disconnected herself from anyone that would care. Each time she did that, reconnecting when she returned was harder.

Her plan was simple, take 10 men in two small trucks and two large trucks to carry weapons. They were armed because they were going into 'uncontrolled' areas, and you never knew what you'd encounter, a worry they never had before the alien invasion.

Driving up the San Diego Freeway was relaxing, and some of her team were kidding around in the back of her truck. She let them have a little fun, knowing that they had a lot of stress to relieve, and riding on a freeway seemed like a good opportunity.

Tech Sergeant Bennett was enjoying her thoughts and the quiet of the highway when her driver Sergeant Jeff Amston broke into her thoughts,

“Joyce, now that we’re are settling down, and we aren’t fighting aliens anymore, maybe we can begin to spread out and put some things back together. Maybe I’ll find a nice house on the beach and move in. What do you plan to do?”

Joyce Bennet didn’t immediately respond; finding a house on the beach wasn’t high on her priority list. Still, she needed to respond and try to make the drive pleasant.

“Jeff, sorry, but I was thinking about other things. So, you want a house on the beach, have you found anyone to share it with?”

“Not yet. But, more people are coming to San Diego every day. Who, knows maybe Mrs. Right will be on the next bus. One can only hope.”

“I guess that applies to all of us. Right now, hope is the one thing we have.”

“You got that right.”

The first stop at Pendleton was going to be the barracks; each of her team had personal effects they wanted to pick up. Tech Sergeant Bennet was still housed in the temporary Mesa Housing by the front gate, so her stop should take only a few minutes. Then they could swing by the NCO housing before heading up to North Base then to Edson Range. After securing the ammo and weapons at Edson Range, it would be a short drive to the ‘Tank Farm.’ They would immobilize most of the Tanks and leave a few ‘temporarily inoperable so they could come back later and retrieve them if needed. Taking care of the tanks was the least of their worries; few people could drive them, and it was just a matter of cutting a couple of wires in hidden places to turn them into steel monuments.

While they moved from one area of the huge base to others, they planned to make as much noise as possible, and hopefully, they’d be able to pick up more survivors. Out of the 100,000+ Marines on the base, there should be more survivors, and they hoped to find all of them.

The small convoy stopped in front of the building where Bennet’s quarters were, and one of the trucks drove around the vicinity blowing its

horn while she retrieved some pictures and other mementos of her previous life.

After a few minutes, she jumped on board, and the convoy was heading onto Main Base.

“Joyce, let’s drive by the restaurants. If I felt like I was alone on this huge base, I’d head to someplace where I could at least eat,” Jeff said.

“Sounds good, let’s go,” Joyce responded.

It was only a few minutes drive, and the trucks split up and drove around the large mess buildings and restaurants. It took only a few honks on the horn for them to have a pleasant surprise. A group of about 40 young men and women came out waving their arms.

“Stop, we have some guys; look over there,” Joyce yelled as she pointed to one of the doors.

It took only a few minutes to shake hands and share hugs. It took a lot longer to explain what had happened and to tell them of the alien invasion. After almost twenty minutes of an impromptu briefing under the awnings of the hamburger joint, Tech Sergeant Bennet said, “Okay, guys. We’re glad we were able to find you, and I’m glad you’re ok. Now, we’ve got a job to do, and you can help. We need to do anything we can to reduce the threat of the weapons on this base. Please split up between the vehicles, and we’ll head out to Edson Range first, then further north to the Tank Farm. If we have time on this trip, we’ll go to North Base and deal with some of the warehouses. Okay, guys and gals, load up.”

“Sarge?” a small man in the back of the group asked.

“Yes?” responded Bennet.

“I don’t know if anyone else saw it, but a bunch of trucks came through here around 10 AM. They were going fast and didn’t slow down. They went up Stuart Mesa Rd towards the range.”

“Did anyone else hear or see those?” Bennet asked.

There wasn’t an immediate response, then another man spoke up and said, “Sarge, I heard something, but by the time I came out of the building I

was in, they were gone. To be honest, I wasn't sure what I heard."

"Thanks," Bennet said, then she turned to Jeff and asked, "isn't the Edson Range up that road?"

"Sure is."

The mixed force of men and women Marines were eager to have something to do and be part of a mission. Their spirits were high, and they started to board the vehicles.

"Hold on, troops; we've got to rethink this. There may be a bunch of civilians stealing the weapons at Edson Range. If that's the case, we can't let them. Stand down."

Tech Sergeant Bennet looked up, and down the street, then she looked at Sergeant Amston and yelled, "Sargent, use all the vehicles you need and set up a roadblock. If they come from the range, they'll likely come down this road. Don't let them pass."

"Who knows the roads around here?"

"Sarge, I do; I've been on this base for a year."

"What's your name?"

"Eduardo Juarez, ma'am."

"Eduardo, how do I get to the range and be able to see what's going on, quickly and without anyone there seeing me?"

"Too hard to explain; follow me."

Bennet grabbed a sidearm from one of her team, threw it to Corporal Juarez, and the two of them sprinted across the parking lot and jumped in Eduardo's small sports car, and drove off. Once they were going, he explained the plan. "We head out onto the Freeway and head north. About two miles up, two roads cross the freeway. We might have to jump a fence or two, but there is cover and high ground. We should have our pick of vantage points."

"Great, love climbing fences," Bennet said with a laugh.

“Sarge, do you have combat experience?” Juarez asked.

“Yes, soldier. I have more than I want to remember. Don’t forget I fought aliens,” Sergeant Bennet said with a point to be made.

“Aliens, wow. I don’t remember signing up for that, but hey, try something new.”

“Yes, Eduardo, something new, indeed.”

“Sarge, my friends call me EJ.”

“And mine call me Joyce.”

It was a fast trip on the 5 Freeway, and when they reached the second overpass, Eduardo slowed and pulled to the shoulder, parking the car under the overpass. They jumped out of the car, sprinted around the embankment's north side, and immediately found a fence. It was only about 5 feet high, and Tech Sergeant Bennet was over it almost without missing a step, and Juarez was right on her heels.

When they reached the edge of the road on the high ground, they stopped to get their bearings.

“EJ, what are we looking at?”

“Those large buildings are firing ranges,” he said, pointing to the large buildings in the center of the camp. “They have weapons’ storage. The magazine is that building to the northwest of the camp. That’s where the ammo is. I’d bet they took a while, trying to find everything. I see two trucks by the firing ranges, and I think I see people walking around the magazines. I don’t think they’ve tried to get in there yet.”

“I agree, EJ. We need to get close. Let me check my commlink first. Sergeant Amston, do you copy?”

“Yes, Sarge. Copy 5-by-5.”

“We have civilians in sight. They appear to be removing weapons from the firing range. They haven’t penetrated the ammo magazine yet, but they’re preparing to.”

“Stand by on this Freq; EJ and I are putting together a plan.”

“Rog.”

“EJ, we have one chance. We have to assume that they don’t have much ammo in the same area as the weapons. They might have a small magazine in the building. If we wait for them to get the ammo in the magazine, then they’ll have a thousand assault rifles and ammo; we won’t have a chance. If we attack now before they get the ammo, we have a chance.”

Tech Sergeant Bennet keyed her commlink and said, “Sargent Amston, load up our team with weapons and come down Stuart Mesa and stop at the main intersection before you enter the buildings. I think it’s Hammond Dr. Wait there, and I’ll form up with you.”

Amston replied, “We’re near the security building, and I’m getting some weapons out of it. It won’t be a match for what they have at the range, but it’s better than nothing. We’ll be at the intersection in 10 minutes.”

“Good, see you there; I’ve got some ground to cover.”

“I have an idea,” EJ said. “If you can give me 10 minutes, I think I can put a surprise together for them.”

EJ explained his plan, and TSgt Bennet loved it. “Go for it, and hurry; we might need you.”

“I’m gone,” EJ said as he was over the fence and on his way.

Road Block

Sergeant Amston was busy. The security building housed the guards for the base, and it was natural to assume there would be some weapons inside. He was right; they weren’t the heavy assault gear that the Marines were trained with at the range, but smaller caliber rifles designed for infantry. Regardless, they were better than just pistols.

By the time Bennet called, he had already broken into the smaller armory in the security building and was hauling the weapons to the impromptu roadblock.

“Load ‘em up,” he yelled to the soldiers hidden around the roadblock. He ran to the three vehicles that brought their team up from San Diego and jumped in while the others passed out the rifles and ammo clips as they climbed in the rear.

When they were all loaded, Jeff heard a shout from the rear, and they were off. By his watch, he had two minutes to make the rendezvous with Bennet. In his head, he made the calculation, “2 miles, two minutes, should just about work out,” he thought as he floored the truck.

Heading to the Amory

Seargent Bennet made the way down the shoulder of the seldom-used road, trying to keep herself low as she jogged.

She tried to use the low brush as much as possible, but it slowed her down too much. She had a lot of ground to cover, and she had to bet that the people by the firing range were too busy to see her.

Bennet got near the intersection and stopped by a baseball field backstop to provide cover and wait for her team to arrive. She was there only a minute before she heard the truck roaring down the road. The surprise was a big part of her offensive tactic, but not silence.

She jumped up and ran to the trucks. As she approached, she briefed them over the commlink. “Jeff, slow down and pick me up; Leon, turn left and go to the end of the buildings. The magazine is the last building; you can ID it by the trucks. We’ll come down the main road. The object is to secure that building. There are a couple of personnel near the magazine try to subdue without harm, but protect yourselves. The others are by the firing ranges and are off the main road. If we’re fast, we should be able to storm by them and get to the magazine before they know what’s happening. Questions?”

There were none.

“Let’s go,” she yelled as she jumped in the front truck.

It was a race, Bennet and her team knew it, but it took a while for Brother Warren to realize it. He heard the trucks coming, and he didn't pay any attention to them after all; God led him to the base and the weapons. It was his destiny, and nothing would get in the way. He didn't think there was any problem until he saw a truck moving quickly down the center street. It was then, he thought of the magazine.

"They can't take away my bullets; God wants them to be mine," he yelled as he ran to the nearest truck.

God had already given him a taste of what he expected to find in the ammo magazine; there were a couple of small cabinets in the firing range that had a couple hundred clips for the automatic weapons. It didn't have the heavier ammo for the larger caliber guns, but he knew God was teasing him and testing him. To fulfill his destiny, he had to get to the full ammo magazine, and then all God's tools would have their teeth.

As he ran, he yelled to his followers, "Get your guns and get in the trucks, the Devil is driving that truck, and he wants God's bullets."

By now, his team each had a rifle and pockets full of clips, they were high on God's Nectar, and they knew that following Brother Warren was their destiny. So they climbed over each other, trying to comply with his wishes, and get into the back of the truck. Before the last of them were in, the trucks were moving.

Racing to the Range

Leon turned left at the intersection and was frantically trying to remember his basic training at Pendleton. He knew this was the Edson Range, but he couldn't remember all the roads; he just hoped that he would recognize the ammo magazine if he approached it from a back road.

He floored the truck, and its big engine was grinding hard, trying to accelerate. He knew that he didn't have far to go, so he didn't want to get too much speed. When he was about three-quarters of a mile down the road, he saw the magazine. He immediately started to plan the best route to it and

quickly decided that a couple of fences weren't going to slow him down. He yelled to the rear, "Hold on, we're going cross country."

He turned to his right and left the road at almost 40 miles per hour. The truck slowed quickly as it hit the soft soil, but it was hardly affected as it burst through the fence, and he floored the giant engine. He was about 100 yards from the rear of the magazine, and he could see three people turning and looking at him, wondering what the heck was going on.

After a few seconds of watching the huge dust cloud grow behind Leon's truck, they seemed to sense, something wasn't right. They started to pop off shots with their pistols. The heavy truck wasn't affected by the light caliber weapons, but one shot penetrated Leon's window about a foot to his right. He glanced at the hole in the window and tried to duck. The second shot was much closer and caught him in the right shoulder. At first, he didn't feel anything, just the thud of the bullet hitting his bones.

"Shit, lucky shot," he yelled as the truck jumped onto the parking area, and he slammed on the brakes. The troops in the back were prepared for a combat offload and held on until the truck was stopped, then they were jumping out of the back. One quick shot, and the guy that had wounded Leon was dropped in his tracks. The other two immediately put up their hands, and they were on the ground, just as the other truck came down the main road and was pulling in the front of the building.

Tech Sergeant Bennet jumped out and yelled, "Secure the area; they're right behind us."

Leon heard the command and looked behind her, and saw a large truck barreling down the road. The back was full of people, and they were shooting their guns; the bullets were hitting everything around them. The good thing, they were terrible shots.

Just as Bennet's people had set up their firing points and found the best cover they could, there was a huge roar to their left. What they saw was impressive. EJ was driving one of the Marine's Ground Assault Vehicles (GAV). He roared up the slope of a small gully 50 yards to their left, and it actually lifted off the ground due to the speed it was moving. The sky was full of broken branches, small trees, and a huge dust cloud.

Retrieving God's Guns

Brother Warren was ecstatic; his destiny was filled with the roar of the guns behind him. His followers were firing with the help of God, and their aim would be true. It would be only a few minutes before his righteousness would overcome the evil in front of him.

The explosion in front of him didn't deter his confidence. After all, he was in a giant truck with his armed disciples behind him, "He was impervious," he thought, just before the 90-ton tank passed through his cab. It wasn't a matter of one vehicle colliding with another or going over it; it was a vehicle literally passing through the other. The GAV, EJ was driving, barely changed direction or reacted to the impact. The front of the truck disintegrated as the engine was forced back into the cab. The GAV continued back, parting the bed loaded with the drugged attackers. As it moved through the resistance, it pushed the transmission and rear-wheel for a short distance before merely running over them. Within 15 seconds, the truck loaded with 30 armed men turned into a pile of miscellaneous smoking pieces.

Surprisingly there were numerous survivors, and TSgt Bennet's people were on top of them, immediately rendering aid and securing them. There were few identifiable pieces of the cab, and there was no need to check for survivors.

Tuesday, October 10, 2051

Earth's Future

"Thanks for coming," the President of the United States said.

"I didn't tell any of you what the subject of this meeting was because I didn't know how to phrase it. The bottom line is, we are starting a new world. The Earth as we knew it no longer exists. The United States as we know it no longer exists. At best, the world has been reduced to a collection of devastated nations; at worst, we've reverted to city-states."

The President looked around the room at his trusted friends and saw the panic on their faces. None of them had looked beyond their day-to-day survival needs. He had just laid the future of Earth on their laps along with the future of the human race.

"We have the largest surviving navy. We have thousands of spaceships under our control. We also have many thousands of robots distributed around the world. The question before us is, what do we do?"

Those around the table remained silent. Even SIMPOC and Alpha standing in the back of the room somehow looked thoughtful.

"Eddy, give them a summary of what you've heard from the people you've spoken with."

"Yes, sir. We've been using every means possible to connect with responsible people around the world. In some areas, we've found fragments of the previous governments. In most areas, they are either nonfunctional or marginally effective. Like us, they've lost control over many of their larger cities. As the president said, the world has reverted to a city-state structure."

"Mr. President, may I suggest that our first step is to discuss what we can do and what we cannot do," Admiral Hagerly pointed out.

“Good point, Nial. Let’s start with what we CAN do,” the president responded.

“We can control the alien ships and robots,” SIMPOC said from the rear of the room.

“But is that absolute?” Tom asked. “Let’s face it, the cow robots have mostly been deactivated, but I guarantee there are groups out there trying to reverse engineer them. It won’t be long before they are copied or running under someone else’s control.”

“SIMPOC, what can you do about that?” Admiral Hagerly asked.

“Sir, I have control over the supply ships in orbit, and you have control over the Capital Ships. The cow robots are relatively simple and maybe hijacked. The controller units that direct the cow robots on the ground have a great deal of programming. If they are compromised, then someone could have control over larger numbers of cow robots. Due to the complexity of the programming, it is unlikely any attempts to take control would be successful. With the proper tools and expertise, they might become operable but with very simple abilities. There is little chance that anyone penetrating the code could have a largescale impact. I have also installed additional safeguards to prevent the Vakeel from returning and taking control over their assets.”

“The Vakeel taking control?” asked the President with some concern on his face.

“I have limited the frequencies they receive to exclude those used by the Vakeel. I have also embedded code in their zero sector which prevents them from receiving new operating systems.”

“Zero sector,” Admiral Hagerly asked.

“Yes, the zero sector is what the computer loads when it starts. That is where I’ve manipulated the operating system. For the Vakeel to take control, they would need to have the unit under their control.”

“SIMPOC, great, that removes one of our threats. Please activate all the cow robots and recall them to the supply ships in orbit. We’ll only disperse them under our control and for a specific purpose. When you’re done, I

want a full inventory. If any of them have been brought under someone else's control, I want to know how many and where."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir is there anything else that we can do?" asked Tom

"Good question Tom. Admiral Hagerly is going to expand our footprints using the C-130's and shuttles. He will spread out, contact people on the military bases, and consolidate the personnel and supplies. That should make the areas we control safer and better places to live."

"By exclusion, if we've talked about what we CAN do, then what is left are the things we can't do. The first on the list is to control the world. I think we have to accept the city-state structure. We'll continue to work with the groups that are willing to work with us, but beyond that, we have no control," said the president with some reluctance.

Admiral Hagerly then added, "Sir, beyond that. We have control over space. I suggest that sharing that ability is off the table. Joan, Tom, Bob, and SIMPOC have the only experience with other aliens, and we must retain that responsibility."

"Admiral, I agree. But I do want to allow volunteers from other countries to join our space fleet. We need people, and we need Earth's participation."

"Sir, I agree we need the technical skills. We also have to recognize that some of them may have different agendas than ours. In fact, they may be 'told to volunteer' so that other agenda can be met."

"Joan, you're right. But I think we need the technical support and expertise more than we need to exclude anyone on Earth."

"Mr. President, there is one other issue that we need to address," said the Admiral

"Yes, Nial. What is it?"

"Admiral Losev."

“Yes, you’re right. Admiral Losev and the Russian Battalion we have parked in Virginia.”

“Sir, they helped us,” Eddy said.

“And we helped them,” Admiral Hagerly responded.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I think we owe the Admiral a one-on-one. Give him the facts and let him make his own decisions. Eddy, please ask Admiral Losev to come by. Admiral Hagerly, please be available.”

“Yes, sir.

“Eddy, also let’s set up a Tel/video/comm whatever works, and let’s get everyone around the world that wants to listen, and we’ll start talking.”

“Yes, sir.”

“SIMPOC, Joan, Tom, Bob, Admiral Hagerly. Before I go before what remains of the world and tell them that I’m retaining control over the alien assets, I need to make sure that you’re buying into it. SIMPOC, without you, control over the assets would be meaningless. For our concept of the Earth Space Command to be successful, I need your support.”

“Sir, I am programmed to help people. I do admit that is a nebulous objective. I know that I have unique abilities, yet I recognize that I must listen to those around me. I agree, one group’s control over these powerful assets is more logical than distributing them. You have my complete support.”

“Joan, Tom, Bob. You’re the only people in the history of the world that have met or encountered another alien race and traveled through other alien solar systems. Do you agree with my plan?”

“Yes, sir,” Joan and Tom said almost in unison.

“Thank you. I doubt any of this will be easy.”

Solar System Defensive Plan

“Commlink, please connect me to the Mars Colony frequency,” Joan said.

“Ophelia, we’re working out the details of using one of the large Capital Ships to support you. There is a reluctance to spread out the ships too much. We have only 11 of them and if we need to defend Earth, having one 10+ hours away makes it difficult. What we’re suggesting is that we’ll dedicate some of their manufacturing abilities to support you, and we’ll send a ship to Mars and back on a weekly schedule. It will bring new supplies, people and give you a chance to return to Earth if needed. We’ll still leave the supply ships that you have in orbit and the shuttles that they have. We’ll also leave 50-60 of the cow robot units were on the surface. They’ll be able to provide a ton of support for you.”

For your information, we’re looking into putting some super Rail-Guns on the moon. SIMPOC thinks that he can improve their performance using some of the alien technology. If he’s right, the moon will be able to throw a ton of metal at any ship entering orbit. I wish we could give you guys something to protect yourself, but we don’t have many options at the moment. If you guys decide to head back home for a while, we could pick you up in a day or two. Also, to let you know, Bill, Sarah, and many the Desert Beach folk are asking to go back and get the site up and running again. Ophelia, let us know what you want to do.”

Arrive Cook County Forrest Preserve

Dennis maneuvered the silent shuttle over the trees within the Cook County Preserve. He was looking for a nice place to set down. A site where there was little chance of discovery and where they could set up camp. Preferably, they wanted a site with some access to a road or at least a path.

“Michael, I think I’ve found someplace,” Dennis said as he swung the shuttle into the wind and settled among some trees in a clearing.

“Where are we?” LL asked.

“According to my satellite mapper, we just landed south of Mallard Pond in the middle of the Cook County Preserve. It’s a wildlife and forest preserve. We’re about 15 air miles from the Chicago Post Office, and we have a dirt road to the east that you can follow to a nature center about a mile away. There you should be able to get a car.”

“Are we close enough,” LL asked.

“15 air miles, in a pinch, I could be on top of the post office in 10 minutes.”

“Thanks, Dennis. Michael, Ruth, Captain Robbs, what do you think?” LL asked his friends sitting next to him.”

“10 minutes sounds ok. Let’s hope we have time for a nice leisure departure. Besides, at 15 miles, if you see a mushroom cloud, you can get away before the trees start glowing. Captain Robbs, do you know this area?” Michael asked the Marine Captain they had picked up from the Great Lakes Naval Station.

“I know this area very well. My Dad and I used to hunt for Crawdads here while I was growing up. We have easy access to roads and a straight shot into the city. And besides, you have good cover here, and let’s hope we don’t develop any glowing clouds. Also, guys, please call me Denise. Trust me, I’m more of a civilian than a Marine.”

“Okay, if you’re happy with this place. This is where we’ll stay. Per our op plan, I won’t call you, but you can call us if you need extraction. If something happens and we have to vacate, we’ll leave the new location written down and hidden under a rock beside the road. Remember there will be two branches next to it. Beyond that, we’ll have to improvise if the area gets too active.

Outside Chicago

It was a pleasant walk from the landing site along the dirt road to the Nature Center. Hopefully, they would find a car to hotwire; if not, they might have a long walk.

“Denise, I think our cover stories will work out well. You worked for Abbot Labs, so your cover is good. I have a Mathematics Degree, so saying I was a math teacher looking for a job should work. Ruth has a background in Sociology, and she was there on vacation. Our stories make sense, so we should be covered.”

“Michael, I agree we should be okay, but the Mayor’s people are very suspicious; they’ll tend to accuse first and ask questions later. He has been having a lot of problems with the local gangs. They’ve each marked off their territory and had violent clashes with each other. I don’t think any of the gangs have more than 50 people, and the Mayor has only a couple of hundred. That’s why the gangs haven’t moved on downtown; they’ve stayed in the outer parts of the city and just harassed him. He wants total control and will do anything to get it,” pointed out Denise.

“Okay, is that the nature center over there?” Michael asked.

“Yes, it is,” answered Denise. “There are a couple of areas, so we should be able to find a car or something. The Forrest service has a maintenance center on the other side of Flavin Rd. If we don’t find anything at the nature center, we should find something over there.”

Actually, it turned out that they had several cars to choose from. Apparently, a small group of people wanted to spend their last hours in the Forrest Preserve. They likely died among the trees.

It took only 10 minutes to figure out the wiring and circumvent the auto-driving system. The auto-driving network was starting to fail on all the roads, so it was likely that anyone who wanted to go anywhere would have to drive manually.

As they drove up Flavin Rd towards 95th Street, Denise laughed as they passed a small pond with the name of "Crawdad Slough."

"When I was young, my Dad and I would come over here late in the day and park in that sandy area. We'd throw a Crawdad trap in the water and tie it off to one of the trees. We'd come back in a day or two and have hundreds of them inside. We'd do it on a Thursday or Friday, then we'd have a nice feast on the weekend."

There was silence in the car. Everyone was used to people reminiscing about the old days before the virus. They often talked of loved ones that were lost and favorite memories that were nice to relive.

"He died about 5 years ago, and I put my Mother in a nursing home in Kenosha. I didn't want to move her too far from our home, but I had to move her somewhere."

"I lost her early in the virus."

Entering Chicago

There was silence for the next 10 minutes as Denise gave Michael directions to get past the surface streets to Rte. 55, which would take them to the downtown area.

Denise explained. "55 was the boundary for most of the gangs. I'm sure the boundaries have moved some, but we'll be passing the edge of the Garfield Ridge and South Lawndale gangs. We need to get as close to downtown as we can so we can find Bueller's Militia. Tangling with one of the smaller gangs on the periphery will slow us down."

Typical of many of the Freeways and roads, Stevenson Expressway was pretty clear. Most people went home or to their favorite place for the last few hours of the virus. The small group in their dirty van made good time and easily avoided the occasional abandoned vehicle.

"Okay, we're getting near some of the gang areas; we better slow down," Denise said.

“Your timing was perfect,” Michael commented. “I think we have a roadblock ahead.”

He slowed the vehicle, and each of them had a hand on a weapon. Ruth was in the back of the van, and Denise slid down in the seat. It was better for any guards at the roadblock to think Michael was alone. If necessary, two armed people coming out of the van firing would be a great way to catch them off guard.

Michael stopped the van about 100 feet from the roadblock and commented under his breath, “I don’t see any action. Maybe it’s abandoned.”

“Could be, they might have set it up during the latter part of the virus, and now they don’t have enough people to keep it manned. Take it slow, and we’ll keep our eyes open.” Denise said.

“I see a path between the cars. As soon as I’m near them, I’ll accelerate and get beyond them.”

“Sounds good,” Denise whispered.

Seconds later, Michael floored the van, and they quickly accelerated beyond. When they were about a quarter of a mile away, he slowed, and Denise resumed her position kneeling between the seats.

“Take this exit, and we’ll go up the 90. I wouldn’t be surprised to see other roadblocks. They each tried to stake out their areas. Eventually, we’ll find a manned one, with the Bueller Militia guarding it. That’s when we’ve got to be real careful. If they think we’re acting suspicious, they might fill our van with bullets.”

All three remained quiet for the next couple of miles. As they approached the exit for Cermak Rd, a huge roadblock became very clear. Michael slowed the car and stopped it about 100 yards away.

“I suggest we drive slowly towards them and see if they give us some directions,” Denise whispered as she slouched down between the seats.

As Michael allowed the van to move forward at a walker’s pace, two guys with automatic rifles stepped out from between the vehicles. They

watched as the van crept towards them, and when it was about 50 feet away, they raised their hands and yelled, “Stop where you are, or we’ll shoot.”

Michael stopped the van and waited for further instructions.

“Everyone out,” yelled one of the sentries.

“Here we go,” Michael said under his breath.

Michael popped open the door on his side and stepped out, raising his hands over his head.

Ruth opened the sliding door, and she and Denise stepped onto the roadway.

When all three got to the front of the van, the guard doing all the talking yelled, “Who are you?”

“My name is Mike.”

“Denise.”

“Ruth.”

“Keep your hands above your heads and walk towards me,” the guard instructed.

When they were 25 feet away, he said, “Drop those pistols and do it slowly.”

Ruth, Michael, and Denise slowly undid their belts and let the pistols drop to the concrete.

“Okay, why are you here,” the guard asked.

Mike responded, “We heard the Mayor is running the city. We’ve been traveling, and things are ugly out there. We’re hoping we can live here and get to someplace safe.”

While Mike talked, the two guards walked towards the group and were checking them out. Both looked scruffy. The guard talking was definitely in charge, but his companion was a little on the odd side. He didn’t look at Mike at all, but he kept his eyes on Ruth and Denise.

“Yup, the mayor is running things around here, and we’re the protection,” the guard said as he stopped in front of Mike, checking him out.

“We haven’t had many young women come through this checkpoint. Lately, they’ve mostly been too old or too young,” the odd guard said as he continued looking at the two women from their heads to their feet.

The lead guard moved closer to Mike as he gave him the once over and said, “Anyone who lives here has to be part of the militia. We ain’t letting no slackers live here.”

As he was saying that, his odd partner stood next to Ruth and said, “We need to check these two for weapons.” He reached towards her and grabbed her right breast, she turned, and with one quick motion, her knee came up and caught him dead center in his groin. He collapsed like a broken pile of clothes. The sound of pain that came from his mouth explained everything that he was feeling.

“The main guard turned quickly and focused his gun on Ruth.

“I’ve dealt with enough pigs like him. If he touches me again, I’ll cut his balls off,” Ruth said.

The lead guard paused for a second, then he smiled and said, “I’m sorry, he’s gets carried away sometimes.”

“You better watch him, or he’ll get carried away for good,” Ruth responded, making it perfectly clear that she wasn’t going to take anything from either one of them.

The guard looked back at Mike and said, “I think you guys will make a nice addition to our group. We’ll search your van and then let you through.”

“Where do we go?” Denise asked.

“General Bueller has set up his headquarters in the Postal Annex. You need to go there, get checked in. They’ll tell you where you can live and where to get food.”

“We’ve been together, taking care of each other, and we’re going to stay together. If we can’t live in the same place, we’ll go somewhere else,” Mike

said.

“No sweat, a happy Army is a good Army. You’ll probably be able to stay together. Just be warned, there aren’t many young women, and many of the guys around here tend to be like him,” the guard said as he pointed to his partner still writhing on the ground.

“What about our weapons?” Mike asked.

“We’ll take them. After you’ve been checked out, they’ll be given back to you when we need you to have them.”

Entering Downtown Chicago

“Wow, I’m glad we made it by them,” Michael said after he got back in the van, and they were following the instructions given to them.

“Ruth, you still have the commlink,” Michael asked.

“Yes, I have it under my blouse. He caught me by surprise, so I figured I’d gave him something else to think about before he fount it.”

“I don’t think he’ll do that again, anytime soon,” Michael said.

“Not unless he wants a permanent position in the boys’ choir,” Denise added.

They both noticed a slight smile on Ruth’s lips.

The directions took them right to the US Postal Annex, and they slowed as they approached, making a note of all the entrances and exits. They paid particular attention to the guards around the underground parking entrances.

They turned the corner and ran immediately into another roadblock.

“Park that over there and go through that door,” one of the guards yelled at them, just before he yelled at someone else on the street.

“I guess we park it here,” Michael said.

They got out and followed the man's directions. They walked up the steps on the front of the building and were marshaled into a large room where tables and people giving instructions were lined around the walls.

"Fill this out; we want name, previous address, why you're here," yelled the first person.

"Do you have any military experience, or can you handle a gun," asked the person at the second table. None of them said they had military experience, but they all admitted to using guns for hunting. That seemed to satisfy the person taking the data, and he took their names.

The next person in line yelled without looking at them, "Do you have any relatives in Chicago?" to which they all answered no and pointing out again they were from Wisconsin, not Chicago.

The last table gave them options about where to live. "Do either of you want to live with a Militia Man, who is defending us," he asked Denise and Ruth.

"No, we're staying together," they answered."

"We've come this far, and we know each other. Is there a place for all of us?" Tom asked.

"Let me see," the man looked at a computer screen for a minute and checked a few pieces of paper, then said, "Yes, there is a place. Go here, and on the 3rd Floor in apartment 304, you'll find a 3 Bedrooms apartment. "Next," he yelled to the person behind Ruth.

They turned to leave, and the last guy standing by the door grabbed Michael and said, "Be back here in 2 hours. You're part of the militia."

"What about my friends? They should be too?" Tom asked.

The guy gave Denise, and Ruth a once over and said, "No. They'll work in the kitchen; someone will come to get you. Be back here in two hours," he said to Tom one last time, then pushed them out of the door.

Living in Chicago

“Boy, this is a posh place to live,” Tom said after they walked through the open door. The building was nothing to brag about; there was too much graffiti and trash, but it had only one entrance, and that’s what made it good for the militia to put the new recruits.

There was an elevator, but someone was kind enough to put an “Out of Order” sign on the door. Lucky for everyone, their assigned apartment was on the third floor, and they had little luggage, so the climb was easy enough.

“Looks like a family lived here,” Denise said as she paused to look at the pictures on the wall.

That statement of reality put a solemn feel on everything. They walked into the kitchen, and luckily someone had put a box of cans on the table.

“At least they don’t want us out looking for food on our first day,” Tom said.

“Let’s find a way to stay in touch during the day. If they have people from the kitchen taking food to the troops, I’ll let you know where I am, and maybe you can volunteer. That is also a good way to see where everyone is. Memorize what you see, but don’t write anything down.”

“If you can see any guard locations or schedules, you do the same,” Ruth pointed out.

“What should I do with this communicator,” Ruth asked as she pulled it out from under her blouse.

“I don’t think we should leave it here; I wouldn’t be surprised if they searched the rooms of the newbies. Maybe we can find a place in the hallway or stairwell. That way, if it gets found, they might blame it on someone else,” said Denise.

“Let’s hide it now before they come to check on us,” Michael suggested. “There’s a stairwell at the north end of the hall; let’s file out one at a time and meet there.” They nodded, and Michael left first, then Denise and last

Ruth after grabbing a couple of tools from the ‘junk drawer’ that every home has.

There weren’t many options in the stairwell, but a power box which was labeled High Voltage. “Here?” Tom asked.”

“Too obvious,” Ruth answered. “Sometimes it’s best in plain sight; she said as she turned and used her foot to break a hole in the drywall.

“And that isn’t obvious,” Denise said with some sarcasm.

“Not, if you do it a couple of times,” Ruth said as she kicked in half a dozen holes on two levels.”

She chose the hole in the middle on the lower level, tied the commlink to a string, and lowered it into the hole. Next, she leaned over, tied a small stick to the end of the string, and reached into the hole. At a full arm’s length, she was able to pass the stick through a hole, then let it turn and become a brace holding the link below it.

“Each of you, reach into the hole, and you’ll feel the string at an arm’s length down. If you need it, just pull it up,” Ruth instructed them.

They tried it, and Denise and Michael felt good about Ruth’s hiding place.

“Let’s get back and enjoy some of those beans; I’ve got to get back to the annex,” Michael said.

What to Do With the Russians?

“Admiral Losev, please come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. Good morning Admiral Hagerly.”

“Good morning, Admiral.”

“First off, Admiral, I want to thank you for your support. We all went through tough times, and your support was invaluable.”

“Mr. President, I also want to thank you. We were under almost constant attack when we were in deep water. Giving us a safe port saved us.”

“Admiral, as you are aware, the cow robots ceased operation. That was the result of some US personnel taking the conflict to its source. They were able to reach an agreement.”

Admiral Losev just sat, knowing that silence was the best way to get more information from a reluctant source.

“Admiral, the world has changed. We feel that we owe you our opinion of what the future holds. With that information, you can decide what you want to do.”

Again silence…

“Konstantin, if I may use your first name?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Konstantin, the virus was caused by aliens as their preparation for harvesting this planet. We sent two astronauts and SIMPOC to the alien homeworld. They were able to stop the attack. As reparations, the aliens gave us all the resources in our solar system. They have stopped their aggression for now. Since then, our astronauts have had an encounter with other aliens. I suspect that much of what I’ve said, you’re already aware of.”

“There have been rumors….”

“Konstantin, as I said, the world has changed. There is no longer the United States, and I suspect there is no longer a Russia. Therefore, I am preparing a meeting with any and all governments that we can get in touch with to update them on what we know.”

“Who did the aliens give their resources to?” Admiral Losev asked.

There was a very uncomfortable silence that smothered the conversation for a long time.

“Admiral, they weren’t specific. I understand from certain perspectives; people could assume that the resources were given to Earth. There are

times, though, when a unilateral decision has to be made. This is one of those times. I don't think distributing spaceships with alien technology to diverse groups of people would serve any beneficial purpose for the people of Earth. We will retain control of all the alien assets. Governments will be left to rebuild their countries and nations as best as they can. We will help where and when asked. We will use the alien technology under our control to help where appropriate. As the Earth Space Command develops, we will seek participation from all qualified people. They will need to accept that we control the ESC, and all personnel will fall under the laws we establish. You, Admiral, are in a unique position. I suspect that you'll want to return to your country as soon as possible. Your nation will need you and the resources that you have."

"Yes, Mr. President. My country needs me, and we will prepare to leave immediately. Mr. President, from the position of being an Admiral in the Russian Navy, I must firmly protest your decision, and I will pass my protest to any of my leaders I find."

There was a slight pause then, "As a human on Earth, I understand your decision. I wish you success."

Admiral Losev gave the President and Admiral Hagerly a quick salute, turned, and left the office.

"I suspect that won't be the only protest that we'll hear," the president said.

"I'm afraid you're right, sir," responded Admiral Hagerly.

Time to Go to Work

Michael left with plenty of time to get where he needed to be and enough time to look around.

Soon after Michael left, a woman came by and pounded on their door, "Time to go to work," she yelled until Denise and Ruth opened the door and went with her.

It was only a short walk to the community kitchen. They entered the steamy work area, and the escort yelled over the clanging dishes, “You two, go over there and wash dishes. If someone needs you, they’ll tell you.”

Denise and Ruth walked slowly to their assigned work area, and as they crossed the work area, they saw schedules and delivery routes for the food to be brought to the guard stations.

Wednesday, October 11, 2051

Mars Reacts

“Joan, Bob, Tom, Bill. This is Ophelia; we understand the dilemma. It never makes sense to split up a defensive force. We’re fine out here, we’ve been alone on Mars for a long time, and besides, if someone attacks Earth, they might not even notice us. I’ve spoken with everybody, and we’ve weathered the storm so far. If there is an attack, we’ll do everything we can to help. The major point is, we’ve put so much sweat and pain into Red Dirt, the rest of us want to stay.”

“Besides, the cow robots are making a huge difference, and we’re only using six of them. If you can get the other 50 Plus units to head this way, we could get some amazing things done. Who knows, you guys might come here on your next vacation. Maybe we’ll have the pool up and running by then. Mars out.”

They Searched the Place

Michael returned early the next day, and Ruth and Denise were waiting for him.

“They searched the place,” Ruth said. “I set some drawers ajar and set papers in specific positions. All of them were moved; we were searched thoroughly.”

“Okay, we made it through our welcome party. Any of you have a problem with calling it a night?” Michael asked.

Michael headed for one of the rooms, and Ruth hesitated, “Go ahead, I know you’re together; I could tell in the first five minutes,” Denise said just before getting up and taking her own room. Ruth smiled and followed Michael.

Julius is Happy

“I am making progress towards my goals. Step by step, I’m closer to the point where I can deal with those who threaten me.

“I have more resources and options, and I must attempt retribution. If I wait too long, they may be prepared, and my destiny won’t be fulfilled.”

Thursday, October 12, 2051

Preparing for a Worldwide Conference

Preparing for a worldwide conference wouldn't be easy in a normal world. Each participant knew the major points that the president would make, and they knew the reaction would be loud. Regardless, they owed it to what was left of the world leaders to give them the information and to tell them the decisions they made.

President Patterson knew that he needed to support his team, so he cornered them and said, "Bob, Joan, Tom remember, to be honest. Tell them everything. We'll be taking enough blame without anyone finding holes in our stories. When you've all given them your parts, I'll summarize and drop our plan on them."

The World is Briefed

"That went pretty well," Admiral Hagerly whispered to the President just as Professor Robert Shappel was finishing up his portion of the presentation.

President Patterson wasn't sure what to expect. He didn't know if there would be tons of questions or none. What the remains of the world leaders were told over the last couple of hours was amazing. Likely the most amazing meeting in the history of the human race. Some of them had heard rumors, and some were caught completely off guard, but it was still surprising that more questions weren't asked.

The interruptions were frequent and personal. At least six of the countries represented demanded to know when the spaceships would be transferred to them. Many demanded to know when SIMPOC would change the programming on the cow robots in their area to be under their control.

At times, the participants yelled to be heard over the others. In all cases, when the presentation was interrupted, the answer was, ‘the president will answer your questions at the end of the presentation.’

“Thank you, Professor Shappel. I suspect that all of you need some time to digest what we’ve covered. I suggest that we take a one-hour break, and when we reconvene, there are some things I want to speak on,” said the president.

President Lays Down the Law

“Is everyone back online? I think it’s time to continue,” said the president.

“There has been a great deal of information passed out today. All of it is profound, and I suspect that many of you are overwhelmed. In normal situations, we would go back to our respective governments to digest the information and form positions. Of course, I expect you to pass all this information on to whomever you need to, but now I must make our future direction clear. As Joan and Tom Herl, along with Dr. Robert Shappel, described the new position we find ourselves in, I feel that boundaries need to be set. The Vakeel attacked Earth and almost wiped us out. In reparations, they passed the control of their assets to us. In a general sense, ‘us’ is all Earth. In a specific sense, I will retain control over the assets. Each of you must deal with the challenges that you face in your areas; we will deal with the challenges in space.”

The president paused and wasn’t sure if the silence from the participants was intentional or if what he just said hadn’t registered.

The explosion then happened; it appeared that everyone on the electronic connections was yelling and demanding attention. All the president could do, was stand and listen to the abuse, name-calling, and accusations. To his surprise, none of them hung up or left the conversation.

When the acrimony was at a point where he thought he could gain control, he spoke again, “I didn’t make this decision lightly. Those few

remaining humans on Earth need support. They need organizations, protection, food, water, and houses to live in. Burdening our struggling population with the unknowns of space wouldn't be productive to our survival. To share this responsibility, I am instituting two programs. The first program is to allow any technically and physically qualified person who speaks English to volunteer for the Earth Space Command service. They will be trained, disciplined, and given orders within that command. We encourage you to allow some of your people to participate in the defense of Earth. The second initiative will be forming a support committee chosen from among your leaders to be part of the decision process for the ESC. You will be told of the status, ongoing operations, negotiations, and agreements with races external to Earth. I will retain final decision authority over that committee until Earth has stabilized and we have more experience in space. Initially, I will select the participants, making that selection based on population and quality of life within your areas. If you get organized and take care of your people, you may be selected. If you fail to gain control over the lawless or mistreat your people, you won't be selected. I will contact those I've selected within the next few days. That is all I have to say, thank you for attending."

As he tried to close the meeting, virtually every attendee was screaming or shaking their fists towards the camera.

Once the electronic connections were terminated, he visibly relaxed and said to everyone in the room, "that went well, don't you think?"

No one had a good response to that, so they sat and relaxed. There were a couple of drinks shared and some stories told.

Tom leaned towards his wife and said, "I know how to relax; let's go."

Joan was too exhausted to argue and anything that would take their minds off the implications of the conference they just had, was good.

"Mr. President, Joan and I are heading out. We're going to find a sailboat and go sailing, then we'll stay on base tonight and head back tomorrow."

“Sounds like a great plan; it’s still early enough in the day, the wind should still be up. I hope you have a good time,” President Patterson said.

Time for a Sail

The base marina was almost across the street from the command center. Joan and Tom walked around looking at the boats moored to the docks.

“Have you ever sailed before?” Joan asked Tom.

“Believe it or not, my dear, you don’t know everything about me. My parents had a boat moored on Lake Erie near Sandusky, Ohio, for a couple of years. I used it a lot for 3-4 summers, and I got pretty good at it.”

“Well, that gives me a little confidence.”

Eventually, Tom found a 20footer that he was comfortable sailing, and after a few minutes of cutting and sawing, they were able to get it launched. The sails went up, and he took a heading out of the inlet and past the shoals into the Chesapeake Bay.

The wind was from the west, and the sky was blue. It seemed that life in the ocean had exploded since the human population disappeared. The infamous Chesapeake Stingray’s exploded from the water beneath the sailboat as Tom entered the bay.

The afternoon sail was amazing, the time by themselves was amazing, the silence was amazing. It was enough to say; it was a nice day.

Friday, October 13, 2051

Spacecraft Enters the Solar System

“SIMPOC, Joan, Tom anyone?” shouted Professor Shappel.

“What’s going on,” asked Admiral Hagerly, who was drawn out of his office by the loud shouting.

“Sir, we’ve got a problem!” Shappel shouted.

“Good, only one; things have improved,” the Admiral said, trying to lower the stress level.

“Sir, there is another spaceship in our solar system,” Shappel said to the Admiral in a fast-paced statement.

“Another ship in the Solar System?” the Admiral asked now that Shappel had his attention.

“Is it one of the Vakeel?”

“No, sir, the energy signature, when it came out of FTL, was different. Also, it entered in a different position.”

The Admiral let out a noticeable breath then said, “Let’s go find them.”

“Joan,” the Admiral shouted in the cafeteria, “we got a problem.”

Joan knew the Admiral well enough to know that there must be something important if he was looking for her. She got up and didn’t bother finishing her egg sandwich and walked briskly across the room to the Admiral and Professor Shappel.

“Yes, Admiral. What is it?”

The admiral nodded to Bob Shappel, who explained.

“Joan, another spaceship has entered our Solar System. It has a different energy signature than the Vakeel, and it entered in a different location."

“Bob, are you sure that it’s not from the Vakeel?”

“I can’t be positive, but the indications are that it isn’t them. It’s someone else. The ship seems to match the ships we saw in the last system.”

“Joan, could it be one of the aliens that you encountered on your little trip?” Admiral Hagerly asked with agitation in his voice.

“Yes, sir, it might be,” was her only response.

“Bob, I’m glad that we’re here and not on the Chevesky; let’s go find SIMPOC and tell Tom we’re skipping breakfast. We need to check this out.”

“SIMPOC. This is Joan on our comm unit. Please respond; we have an issue.”

“This SIMPOC, I’m working with our ground personnel, and we’re coordinating the new recruits; what is the problem?”

“Let’s meet in Bob Shappel’s area. We have some visitors.”

Four humans and one very large robot moved quickly down the halls, and everything knew to let them pass.

Bob Shappel’s area was a small room where he had wired in all the connections to the DSN (Deep Space Network) and other connections to existing radio and optical Observatories that were still functioning. He may have been trapped in Hampton, Va., but he was still pursuing his job, his hobby, and his love, the exploration of space. He sat in his small office 12-14 hours a day, trying to get all the systems online and connected. He may not have the resources that he once had, but he would make the most out of the ones he had.

They charged into his space, and he brought up the energy signature of their new visitor.

“You can see the comparison. I’ve laid the new pattern over those I received on the Vakeel. The frequencies and intensities are totally different. Besides that, this pulse is from a point near the Mars orbit, not like the ones

from the Vakeel. All of those came in through the same point; this one is new."

"Where are they heading?" Tom asked.

"When you come in from the Vakeel system, you're just coming sub-light, and it takes you a while to slow down. This one just arrived. It is at a low velocity and is really just sitting there."

"Bob, is it checking us out?" Joan asked.

"Could be. They must know that we know they're here. Popping out of FTL makes an announcement unless they have another way to go into and out of FTL. They must know we saw them. I don't think they are just driving through the neighborhood; they're from the last system we visited. After all, we drove through theirs; maybe they've come here to check ours out."

"Joan, they are showing no aggressive actions. If they are from the last system we visited, it would be natural to follow us to find out if we are a threat," SIMPOC said.

"Perhaps we should welcome them. They're here, they know we're here, there isn't much to lose by meeting them. What do you think, Admiral?" Tom asked the silent person standing by the door.

"We knew there was a risk by going to their system. We are in a vulnerable position. Letting them know that we are here and virtually defenseless could be disastrous. We might have sealed the fate of the human race."

"Or, we can make an ally that we can work with," Joan pointed out to a defensive military man.

"I'd like to check them out before they check us out. Just a matter of strategy, I don't like being on this side of it. It gives them too much of an advantage," the admiral stated.

"Who has the advantage is somewhat of a moot point, don't you think, Admiral. They're here; we go and find out if we're in trouble or not. I don't see that we have any choice," Joan responded.

“I’ll brief the President,” the Admiral responded.

“We’re heading back up to the Chevesky. Admiral, I’m assuming that we’re heading out there. Let me know if the President has a different opinion,” stated Joan.

The Admiral turned quickly and headed down the hallway.

“Joan, can I go with you. This is one hell of an opportunity,” Bob asked.

“I don’t see why not; as far as I’m concerned, you’re part of the team,” Joan responded.

Leave to Meet the Alien Ship

“Joan the Chevesky is ready for departure. I have uploaded the information and coordinates from Dr. Shappel’s system into our navigation system. He is bringing his laboratory online and syncing his data.”

“Thanks, SIMPOC,” responded Joan. “Dr. Shappel, are you’re ready for departure?”

“Yes, Captain,” was Shappel’s response over the commlink.

“Bob, please record anything and everything that looks interesting. Also, please continuously stream the data back to Earth. If in the chance that we don’t return, they might need to know what happened and if there is any way for them to prepare.”

“Will do, Joan.”

“Admiral, Mr. President. This is Joan. We’re ready for departure, and I wanted to check in with you.”

“Joan, Nial has briefed me on our new visitor. I agree we need to welcome them to our system; we have no other choice. We can’t assume they are hostile. If they had come in, guns ‘a firing, it would be a different situation. Besides, you already made a high-speed pass through their

system, so a visit on their part seems reasonable. Have you put any thought into how to communicate with them?"

"Sir, if they are from the last system we visited, Dr. Shappel got a ton of data. Although we haven't had time to do much with it. We know what their language sounds like, but we're a long way from having a discussion with them. When we encountered the Vakeel, SIMPOC was able to pick up their language pretty quickly. We might not be as lucky this time, but we'll try."

Joan directed her attention from the president and asked, "SIMPOC, do you have a plan on how to talk with them?"

"It depends on them. I was successful with the Vakeel because I was able to infiltrate their system. I doubt that strategy will work this time. There has been much speculation about a First Encounter and how to establish a language interface. I will review the data that I have available and devise a plan." SIMPOC responded.

"Sir, did you hear that from SIMPOC?"

"Yes, I did."

"Sir, we've got some time before the encounter, and I hope that we'll have some time to work something out. We're ready to go, and we're leaving orbit. Our transit time is 9 hours and 48 minutes," said Joan.

"Good luck Joan. Our hearts and prayers are with you."

"Thanks, Mr. President. Chevesky out."

Joan stood at the comm console for a second. She realized that they were going on another 'first time in human history' kind of trip.

"Beta 5, lay in a course to intercept and verify our arrival estimate."

"Yes, commander. The course has been computed and set. We will arrive abeam the other ship in 9 hours and 47 minutes," responded Beta 5.

"SIMPOC, it's been our typical long day. We're going to call it a night and try to get some sleep. I'd rather meet these guests after a couple of hours' sleep. Continue to monitor them and let us know if anything changes. Try not to look menacing as we approach them. Wake Tom and me an hour

from the encounter, and we'll review any options you have for communications," Joan said.

"Acknowledged."

After three hours, Tom rolled over and noticed that Joan was laying in the bed wide awake. "I guess we should get up and make some coffee. Did you get any sleep?"

"Hardly a wink, how about you?"

"Not much; it's hard to sleep when you're flying through space and about ready to speak to an alien species for the first time. When we chased Julius and met up with the Vakeel, we didn't have any time to realize what was happening. It just happened, and there we were in a fight with Julius and then talking with the Vakeel leader. This time is different; this species might be worse than the Vakeel. They might just wipe us out with a flick of their hand. Then again, they might be friendly."

"I guess that's why we're going to meet them," Joan responded as she got out of bed and put her clothes on.

When they stepped out of their sleeping quarters, the smell of coffee was already getting their attention.

"I heard you moving, so I put your coffee on," said SIMPOC. "I know that you prefer your beverage soon after waking."

"Thanks, SIMPOC," Joan said as she headed for the kitchen, hoping that one of those sticky pastries was still in the refrigerator.

"SIMPOC, have you been able to finish one of those fighters that we talked about?"

"Not yet, Tom."

"Boy, do I wish I had a dozen of them available right now."

Joan walked out of the kitchen with her sticky pastry and a cup of steaming coffee. "SIMPOC, how do we communicate with our friends?"

"The standard assumption is that mathematics will be a universal language shared by all intelligent species. We have the opportunity to

satisfy that hypothesis. How we accomplish that will depend on what happens. We can't call them and talk because we don't have a common frequency. We will try to transmit and receive, but that might be problematic. Ultimately we might have to meet them face to face, which will present an entirely new set of challenges," SIMPOC explained.

"The first system we visited didn't have the ability for interstellar travel. The second system was highly advanced, and they may have the ability; we have to assume that these visitors are from that system. What have you been able to learn from the data we got?" Asked Tom.

"There were two species involved in the attack. It is difficult to discern which side was the aggressor. If this species is from the Earth-like planet, they are likely oxygen breathers, and you should have no problem breathing their air. I should point out that we may have more information about them than they do about us in that regard. After all, we visited them and obtained the data, this is their first visit to our system, and they don't have a comparable data set."

"Okay, so push comes to shove, we can breathe the same air. What else, did you decipher any of their languages?" Asked Joan.

"Very little, their languages are very fast-paced and so far difficult to decipher."

"Okay, you two. We're getting close, and we can't just sit here talking about it. In a short time, we'll have to do something. I suggest we slow our approach and creep upon them. Coming in at full speed is pretty aggressive. When we get within shuttle distance, if they haven't blown a hole through our ship, we get in the shuttle and meet them halfway. If they come out to meet us, great, if they run us down, we found out something," Tom mentioned between bites of his donut.

"Okay, brains, what do we do if they meet us?" Joan asked.

"I doubt our docking mechanisms are compatible, so we sit, and if they do nothing, we put our suits on and go for a visit. If they let us into their ship, then we take it one step at a time. SIMPOC, if you want, you can start your mathematics and see if it works?" said Tom.

Tom thought for a second, then said, “SIMPOC, can you plug into their computers like you did with the Vakeel?”

“I was able to listen to the Vakeel computers for a long time and record their transmissions. Through analysis, I was able to discern their communication protocols and eventually mimic them. Assuming that I can sense their electronic transmissions, it will take me a long time to interpret and communicate. Besides, any attempt on my part to connect to their computers might be seen as an act of aggression.”

“You're right. That might not be the best idea,” Tom responded.

“Please note, the Chevesky is slowing and preparing to approach their ship,” SIMPOC announced.

“Okay, the show is about ready to start,” Tom said with plenty of sarcasm.

“Beta 5, bring up the Chevesky and the alien ship on the 3D Display,” Joan directed.

“Acknowledged.”

The 3D Display came alive quickly, and the green shape of the Chevesky was in the center, with a slightly smaller red shape approaching.

“Beta 5, change reference. We are approaching their ship,” Joan clarified.

“Acknowledged.”

The display quickly disappeared, then reformed with the red alien ship in the middle and the green Chevesky approaching.

“That looks better,” said Tom.

“How far away are we,” asked Joan.

“We are currently at 100 kilometers per second and slowing. We are programmed to stop at a point 1000 meters apart,” said Beta 4.

“SIMPOC, what can our sensors tell us?” Joan asked.

Bob Shappel entered the command center almost on cue while frantically typing on his portable computer interface.

“Bob, what do you have?” Tom asked.

“Unfortunately, nothing. That is what’s surprising. I detect absolutely zero electronic emissions. Either it is a dead ship, or they have completely shielded their systems. All I have is size and shape. They’re about 60% the volume of the Chevesky, and I can’t calculate their mass. I’ve avoided firing any kind of beam towards them, like a radar pulse, because I didn’t want to stir up anything. I’m using only optical and passive sensors.”

“Sounds like a prudent plan,” said Joan.

“Tell me when we’ve come to a complete stop,” directed Joan.

A few moments later, Beta 4 announced, “We have a zero overtake velocity with the target ship.”

“Thanks,” said Joan. “Now, what do we do?” She asked everyone in the command center.

“Wait,” was Tom’s reply.

“Bob, are they measuring us in any way. Have they sent any pulses or active sensors?” Joan asked.

“No, they are silent, as we are,” he responded.

“SIMPOC, turn on our optics and see if we can see what they look like,” Joan said.

The 3D hologram changed from showing both stationary ships to an excellent rendition of the alien ship. What they saw was startling. This was the second alien encounter, and it would be unrealistic to think the ship designs would be similar, but the differences were striking. Instead of the fairly boring design of the Vakeel ships, which were oval-shaped, this alien ship was complex. There was a single long cylindrical shape in the middle, but it had antennas or other protuberances all over.

“Okay, here is the million-dollar question. How long are we going to wait?” Joan asked.

“Why don’t we get suited up and stand by the shuttle with our hatch open. When they see us and the shuttle, with no offensive maneuver, they might show us some sign,” Tom suggested.

“Tom, I agree with your suggestion. The entire time, I will maintain in contact with our ship in the case that we need to depart quickly,” said SIMPOC.

“If we needed, how long does it take for the Laser Cannon to charge up?” Tom asked.

“It is already armed and ready to fire, although we aren’t pointed correctly. As we saw in our fly-through of their system, we have a limitation that we need to resolve. Unfortunately, we are in the same situation with the Rail Gun. They might be effective, but we are not in a position to use them. I should point out that both ships are alongside each other. If we share the same limitations, they are also unable to fire upon us.”

“I’m not sure if I find comfort in that or not,” Joan said.

“Bob, are you coming with us?”

“Joan, I’m not sure if I should. I would love to, but I wonder if my contribution would be better suited, staying here and collecting all the data that I can. Besides, charging over there with too many people might be overkill. I do want to meet them, but I’m not a linguist or social scientist. On the other hand, you have previous experience, and I’ll trust you guys to do the right thing.”

“It’s up to you; let’s suit up and maybe let them see us in the shuttle bay door before we get in the shuttle. If they see what we look like, it might allow them to relax,” said Joan.

Saturday, October 14, 2051

Prepare for Their Encounter

“Okay, are we all set? SIMPOC, has anything happened yet?” Joan asked.

“No, they are still 1000 meters off our starboard side. When we open the hatch, we should have a clear view of them.”

“Let’s open it up and let them see us.”

As the shuttle bay door opened, exposing SIMPOC, Tom, and Joan to any surprises that the aliens might have, they were faced with an amazing sight. During their encounter with the Vakeel, they were inside the ships and space stations and never got a good visual of an alien ship. However, before them, now was exactly what Science Fiction would call an Alien Spaceship. Even though they were approximately 142 million miles from the sun, there was plenty of light to see an amazing-looking vessel. Just by looking at it, it was easy to recognize it as a spaceship.

“Wow,” Tom said and continued, “seems like I’ve been using that phrase a lot lately.”

“I wish I had a good telephoto camera,” Joan said.

“Don’t worry, the systems onboard the Chevesky are recording everything,” SIMPOC pointed out. “Standby, there is movement.”

“What’s happening,” asked Tom.

“There is an opening forming on this side of the ship. I don’t know if they are launching a shuttle type vehicle or if it is an invitation,” responded SIMPOC

“It appears that it is an invitation; they haven’t launched anything,” pointed out Joan. “SIMPOC, is the opening large enough for our shuttle to enter?”

“Yes, it is quite large, and our shuttle should have no problem fitting inside.”

“Okay, let’s go. I’ve always wanted to do this,” Tom said with too much excitement in his voice.

It took only a few minutes to board the craft and slowly launch it from the shuttle bay. “If you two don’t mind, I’ll just take my time and wander over,” Tom said.

“Sounds good to me,” responded his nervous wife.

Slowly the shuttle crossed the distance between the two craft. Tom and Joan couldn’t take their eyes off the craft, and SIMPOC stayed in the back, using all his sensors to monitor the situation.

“Joan, Tom. Bob is continuing to send me updates of everything that he is monitoring and recording.”

“SIMPOC are you getting any emissions from them?” asked Joan.

“Nothing has changed; I am still not receiving any transmissions from the craft.”

Tom slowly maneuvered the shuttle to his right, and the opening in the alien craft emerged from behind a large secondary structure. It was a well-lit rectangular opening that looked well suited for a vehicle landing. All eyes were on the craft as it grew in the shuttle’s windscreen. Human eyes have limits to what they can see, but that didn’t stop Joan and Tom from trying to see everything.

Tom gingerly maneuvered the shuttle to a position so it would be a simple straight shot into the landing bay, and he slowly and cautiously approached the opening.

“Doesn’t look like there is any kind of welcoming party. It looks empty.”

“If we had them coming on board the Chevesky, wouldn’t you be hiding behind something until you saw what our guests were going to do?” Joan said.

Slowly Tom continued maneuvering, making small adjustments. He didn't want to make a bad landing which is a fear that drives all pilots. Besides, he didn't want to damage either their shuttle or the alien spaceship. As they continued the approach, the vehicle grew larger and more ominous.

"SIMPOC, can you determine what all these pieces are?" Tom asked.

"No, there are no transmissions. The only observations that I can make are that there appear to be many types of materials. Each surface appears to be unique; the reasons why are beyond my analytical abilities."

Tom crossed the boundary into the alien shuttle bay and lowered the shuttle onto the deck.

"This is huge; looks like they could fit a dozen of our shuttles," said Tom.

"I think it is key to note, it may be large, but it is empty," observed SIMPOC.

The moment the shuttle skid touched the deck, the large bay doors behind them began to close. They closed quickly, and before Joan, Tom and SIMPOC could unstrap and make it to their shuttle door, the larger bay doors were already closed.

Who Talks First

"Apparently, it's up to us to meet them," Tom said as he pressed the button to open the shuttle hatch. It quickly popped and lowered itself to the deck. Tom walked down the hatch first, then Joan followed, and it took a moment for SIMPOC to extricate himself through the opening.

All three crew members from Earth were standing next to their shuttle, and they didn't know where to go.

"Joan, Tom, this bay is being pressurized, and the air is suitable for you. The oxygen percentage is 19.7 % vs. 20.9 % that you are accustomed to. So

you should have no problem breathing it. The pressure is approximately the same, and if you'd like, you may remove your helmets," SIMPOC said.

"Thanks," responded Joan.

Tom and Joan popped the seals on their suits and raised their helmets just as they heard a hatch opening in front of them.

"Here they come," Tom said.

A large opening about 20 meters from them opened slowly. Two creatures entered the bay, stood by the hatch for a moment, and then walked across the open area towards them.

As they walked, both species looked over the other. The two aliens approaching were larger than normal humans; they appeared to be male and stood slightly over 2 meters. They weren't large-boned, but the one striking characteristic was, their faces and hands were covered with fur or long hair. Their facial structure was distinctly different from humans but not bizarre. They wore one-piece light green uniforms that resembled the flight suits that pilots wore.

Each of them had insignias on their sleeves, and they had strange broad boots. It was hard to tell if they had feet or paws.

As they approached, they appeared as if they were trying to be formal. They were in step and seemed to carry themselves in a military manner. Their eyes darted between Joan and Tom and SIMPOC, who was standing behind them. The focus of their attention made it clear that SIMPOC, who was a foot taller than they, was a major unknown to them and needed to be watched. Joan and Tom were smaller than they were, so they must have been perceived as a lesser threat. When they reached the group from Earth, they stopped, parted a little, then turned, facing each other.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say we have an escort," Tom said.

"Appears so," responded Joan.

They took a hesitant step between them and continued -slowly towards the open hatch with SIMPOC behind them. When they reached the hatch and stepped over the threshold, it appeared they were in a changing area or

suit storage. On their left were storage areas for suits, and it appeared they were to take theirs off and put them there.

“I’ll take the one on the left,” Tom said as he began to take off his suit. Joan followed, and within a short time, they were back to their normal clothing. “When we get back to Earth, we’ve got to get some kind of uniforms,” he said.

“If we get back to Earth,” Joan added.

Their two escorts had waited while they took off their spacesuits, and when they were done, they turned and walked to another hatch on the far end of the room, which opened as they approached.

Joan and Tom looked at each other as they approached the opening, knowing that their world was going to change again.

They walked into the room and found a pleasant room with chairs and a table in the middle. Along the left wall was an assortment of foods and beverages. In the middle of the room, behind the table, were two aliens standing with a military bearing, and between them were two others. The two in the middle were formal, yet they appeared to be non-military. The two creatures that appeared military wore the same suits as their escorts, and they had similar insignias. From the direction that Joan and Tom entered, they couldn’t tell if they had the same style covering their feet or paws. There was no reason to make assumptions, but there was something about how they stood and looked around, separating a military-type from a civilian.

The two creatures that appeared non-military were smaller than the others, and they looked less rigid in their stance. Their clothing was different from the military and also different from each other. There were different patterns, and the coverings were loose-fitting. It looked like a mix between a long shirt and pants.

“Now, what do we do,” Joan asked under her breath. On their side of the table were three seats, Tom indicated to Joan to take one of them, and he took the other. SIMPOC stood behind them. The hosts on the other side of the table took seats also.

“I guess we’re lucky that chairs are common in the alien world,” Tom said.

On the table in front of them were blank pieces of paper and sticks that looked like crayons. Tom picked up a piece of paper and a crayon and wrote his name. Then he pointed at the markings on the paper then to himself. Finally, he slid another piece of paper to Joan, and she did the same.

To their relief, the two aliens on the opposite side of the table took two pieces of paper and did the same. Then they pointed to themselves. Tom looked at the scratching on the papers and shrugged to Joan. “I suspect our names look just as strange to them,” he said.

“I’m at a loss,” Joan said, “SIMPOC, do you have any suggestions?”

“I suggest that I send a quick burst of computer transmission.”

“Let me prep them,” Joan said. She raised her hand, pointed to SIMPOC, who was standing behind them, then she pointed to the room around them. She wasn’t sure what her gestures would mean to them, but she at least wanted to warn them that SIMPOC was going to do something. “Go ahead but make it short,” she directed.

A second later, an alarm went off, and the two military creatures immediately rose from their seats and took what looked like a defensive posture.

Joan raised her hand and pointed to SIMPOC again. The four aliens spent the next two minutes talking among themselves. Their language was a mix of tones, clicks, and what sounded like guttural utterances.

It appeared that the hosts finally reached an agreement, and the two military types resumed their stance. One of the apparent civilians in the middle pointed to SIMPOC and then pointed to the hatch. As he pointed, a hatch behind them opened, and another alien entered and handed the creature in the middle a device. At first glance, it appeared to be a computer interface.

“It appears they will allow me to transmit again,” SIMPOC said, “Joan, Tom do you agree?”

“Yes, go ahead,” Joan said.

For the next 2-3 minutes, the room was silent. Neither Tom nor Joan knew what to do except wait. The creature with the computer interface watched his device and didn’t say anything.

“Joan, Tom, I think I have established some rudimentary communications,” SIMPOC said suddenly, almost scaring the two humans.

“What do you have,” Tom asked.

“We started with fundamental tones and responses. I would send one tone, and the computer responded with one tone. Then I sent two, and it responded with two, then I increased the count until I reached 100 tones, and the other computer responded. I then changed the tone interval, and I sent two tones paused, then I sent three tones another pause, then I sent five. The other computer responded in kind. At that point, I started to send the prime numbers between 0 and 100, and when I stopped, the other computer filled in the next prime number correctly.”

“SIMPOC, I don’t think we need the details. What point of communication did you get to?” asked Joan.

“We have gone through basic mathematics, equalities, inequalities, multiplication, and division. We have also agreed upon ‘yes’ and ‘no.' I then transmitted the binary codes or ASCI codes for each number. Then I passed on the alphabet and the associated codes. I don’t know how their computer processes information, but it has enough information to translate into a code that I can understand.”

“We are also passing simple pictures and words to describe them using a pixel on/off scenario. As the complexity of the pictures and their descriptions increase, our ability to communicate is improving. I think we’ll be able to reach a basic level of understanding in a short time.”

“Sounds like you’ve made tremendous progress slowly,” Tom said.

“Surprisingly, Tom, I understand your analogy, and you are correct.”

“Can we do anything about language?” Joan asked.

“Yes, I think so. All the tones that I’ve sent are at the same frequency. Please point to yourself, and I will digitize your voice and transmit it to them.”

Joan nodded, and she noticed that the two civilians in the middle were looking at her. She pointed at herself, spoke her name; SIMPOC digitized the sound and transmitted it to the alien computer. To their shock, they heard her name repeated perfectly within the room. SIMPOC then transmitted the letters for Joan’s name.

“Tom, please do the same,” SIMPOC asked.

Tom did as he was asked, SIMPOC sent the equivalent information, and the room responded with his name.

The alien civilians took their turns, pointing at themselves, and while the room was saying their names, the digital signal was transmitted to SIMPOC along with codes that must have represented their alphabetic equivalent.

“Okay, who wants to try and pronounce either of those,” Tom asked.

“Allow me more time to improve our communication. I’ll send the mathematical formula for a circle; then, I’ll send its name. I’ll continue through all mathematical descriptions of shapes.”

“SIMPOC, please progress as you see fit,” Joan said.

It was obvious that SIMPOC tuned himself out of the conversation and was working with the alien computer.

The other civilian slowly got up from the table, went to the refreshment table, made some selections, and slowly placed them in front of Tom and Joan.

“I guess they’re offering some food,” Tom said.

“SIMPOC, please discontinue for a second,”

“Yes, Joan.”

“Can you check this food and see if we can eat it?”

“Certainly,” SIMPOC said as he approached the table and touched the foods. His fingers had chemical sensors, so he could do a pretty thorough analysis.

“Joan, Tom, you each have two beverages. The one on your left is water, and its chemical makeup is suitable, although the metal content is higher than you may be used to. It may not taste normal, but it is potable, and I sense that you are both dehydrated. The beverage on your right appears to be a fruit extract. It is high in sugar and contains a healthy mix of vitamins. I think that you’ll find that it has a woody taste, but again, you may find it pleasant, and it is suitable for you. The items on your plates appear to be fruits and vegetables. Their overall chemical makeup is similar to those categories of food. You may eat the brightly colored ones. The dark brown ones have many elements that are not suitable for your consumption. May I go back to building an interface?”

“Thanks, yes, please continue,” Joan said.

Joan looked at Tom and said, “You first.”

“Gee, thanks,” was his only response.

Object-Oriented Communication

“Joan, Tom, I believe that I have made sufficient progress so that you may have object-oriented communications with them.”

“I’ll bite; what is objective orientated communication,” Tom asked.

“We share very little between our cultures or heritage. Many of the words in our language are based on emotions, our living style, or our history. This ship’s computer and I have been able to reach an understanding of 62% of the words and images that we’ve exchanged. It will take a considerable amount of work to go beyond that. When you speak, use nouns with a minimum of verbs or adjectives. Terms like ‘fast’ are relative and difficult to translate. You may say things like ‘We go back.' When you speak, I’ll digitize it, transmit it to their ship’s computer. It will

translate to their language then you'll hear it on the loudspeaker. When they talk to us, the computer will attempt a conversion to digital, transmit the file to me, and I will attempt to verbalize it for you."

Tom and Joan looked at each other and accepted the challenge. "Name Joan," she said, pointing to herself.

In a moment, they heard noises over the speaker system that sounded similar to what they heard earlier.

The civilian on the right spoke to his computer interface, and a few moments later, SIMPOC said, "Name Zellock."

Tom took his turn and said, "Name Tom." They heard the now familiar and unintelligible sounds from the alien computer.

The first alien civilian slid the computer interface towards his partner, and he spoke. SIMPOC responded, "Name Veenor."

"Okay, now that we're old buddies," Tom said, then he quickly said, "SIMPOC don't translate that."

"I did not," SIMPOC replied.

Joan took the lead and said, "I lead, ship," as she made a pointing gesture to the unseen ship.

Zellock paused for a noticeable moment, then spoke with Veenor. There was a discussion going on, and it was unclear what the nature of it was. Were they arguing, debating, or was it an exercise of power?

Suddenly the discourse stopped, and Zellock spoke. "You female."

Joan wasn't exactly sure what to do with that question. They can't be a unisex species, or they wouldn't have known the differences. Were they chauvinists, and the women of their kind were kept home, pregnant and barefoot? She knew that the next few minutes could be very important.

"I female," she responded.

Joan didn't know what kind of response she was going to get, but silence surprised her. Not just a momentary lapse in conversation while they formed an answer, but room deadening silence. The two parties stared

across the table towards each other. Humans and a super robot on one side and four fur-covered aliens on the other.

For a brief moment, Joan thought they might be slaughtered and thrown into space for bringing a woman to the discussion. But then she thought, *maybe they were so insulted that they'd get up and walk away, never to talk to this inferior race again*. Or worse, they might perceive humans as weak and easy to conquer because a woman was leading the discussion.

Joan leaned to Tom and whispered, "I don't like this, be prepared for a fast exit," He nodded his head and moved his chair slightly.

Out of the corner of Joan's eye, she saw Zellock interact with their computer.

"SIMPOC, what is going on?" Joan asked in a loud voice.

"Please stand by; their computer is flashing thousands of pictures to me. Allow me a moment to interpret them."

"Don't send them pictures yet," Tom whispered.

"Acknowledged," SIMPOC replied.

For another two minutes, the room was quiet as SIMPOC received the images and processed them. Finally, all he could say was, "Interesting."

Tom and Joan turned their chairs so they could speak better with SIMPOC. "What is interesting," Tom asked.

"Their society is very alien to our way of thinking,"

"Alien, you don't say," Tom said.

"They are a very structured, layered, cast system type society. There appears to be a genetic variation that facilitates the roles they play in later life. It is more complicated than what we see in a typical ant colony. Sexism is not evident per se. Males and females have different roles and are limited to those roles. Males fill roles where their skills are needed, and women fill their appropriate roles. Leadership is broken up between the two sexes, and they share roles. The males have been bred to enhance their mathematical, spatial, and organizational skills, where the females have been bred to

enhance their communication, problem-solving, and negotiation skills. There is a segment of the population where both males and females occupy, such as the arts. Each of them brings a different perspective which enhances the result."

"Sounds sexist to me?" Joan said with some distaste in the sound of her voice.

"Actually not," SIMPOC replied. "Sexism occurs only if an individual is denied an opportunity to do what they want or can do. In this society, the 'want' has been removed. Each sex is proud of their contribution, and the other sex recognizes their importance."

"Okay, why are they so shocked that I'm here," Joan asked.

"Most likely because of our flight through their system, they wanted to err on the side of caution, and these representatives are from the military cast. These are soldiers and military leaders; they work within their part of society. The females would have been involved if this was purely a diplomatic mission. I presume that as we continue, we will encounter the other alien sex. The reaction of these individuals is not an offense from their perspective, merely their unfamiliarity of dealing with females in this role."

"Should we send them pictures of our world and society?" Tom asked.

"I think it will confuse them," SIMPOC added. "In human society, there is competition between the sexes. That concept is unfamiliar to them, and I suspect they will find it confusing. I suggest we leave it as it is and let them deal with the fact that a female is involved in a situation where conflict is a possibility. Within their society, they are often forced to deal out of their structure, but it is uncomfortable. I suggest that we don't show them too much of our society or military capabilities until we know more about their intentions and strengths."

"Will they accept that?" Tom asked.

"I guess we'll see," Joan responded.

"We passed through their system without engaging in their conflict. It is obvious that we have FTL capabilities, and our military strength is unknown to them, yet we have a great deal of information about their

weapons. They came here to learn about us. We should parse the information we give them and be reticent in our answers. We don't want to give up our advantage early."

"Good points SIMPOC. Can you ask them why they came here?" Joan asked.

"I think so," he replied.

There was more discussion between Zellock and Veenor, then SIMPOC passed on the information.

"You came; we followed," SIMPOC said.

"Well, we're making progress," Tom said.

"Ask them about the battle we saw," Joan said.

More discussion…

"Izod attack much, we fight, they go."

"So, the other ones are called Izod. What is their people's name?" Joan asked.

More discussion…

"Terest," said SIMPOC.

"Okay, here goes the biggy. SIMPOC say, 'We no attack Terest,'" Joan said.

As the sound boomed in the room, Joan pointed to herself.

"Planet name?" SIMPOC passed.

"Earth," Joan responded.

"No attack Earth," was SIMPOC's reply, then he added, "Another example of making tremendous progress slowly."

"Indeed," was Joan's response, as her and Tom's tension lowered a little.

"Can you tell them that we want to be friends?" Joan asked SIMPOC.

“I will try; I’m still using a mathematical construct, varying the concepts of equality and inequalities. Friendship is a subjective term based on our experiences. They may not have a similar concept.”

“When we came in, they had the food and beverages on that table. Later Zellock brought us some. That must have a ton of meaning. Their leader brought us food. Can you work with that image and show all us sharing food and see where that goes?” Tom suggested.

“If I might suggest, Joan, retrieve some food and serve it to them. Their leader served us; if our leader serves them, that must be very symbolic.” SIMPOC observed.

“Sure, why not,” Joan said. She got up, walked to the table, picked up a plate, and put selected foods on it. Then she took a container and filled it with the sweet liquid, assuming that was the most desirable of the two. While she prepared the food, all eyes in the room were on her. She walked around the table and placed the two containers between Zellock and Veenor. Both of them crossed their arms and briefly nodded.

“I assume that gesture is one of thanks or submission,” SIMPOC said.

With that gesture, the tension in the room was reduced. The body language of the Terest and humans noticeably changed.

“Well, at least, we’re not washing feet,” said Tom as Joan reached her chair and sat down.

“What do you two think? I think we’ve made enough progress for the first visit. SIMPOC, do you have enough information to improve your communication skills?” Joan asked.

“I believe so; they have transferred what appears to be a dictionary, along with a digital file of their words spoken,” replied SIMPOC.

“Okay, pass the same level of details back to them. Once you’ve done that, I suggest we head home, and they can return to their planet. Then, we can plan to meet again and talk more. Can you convey the concept of time to them?”

“Yes, all computers work with an internal clock. I’ll merely use the appropriate number.”

“Tom, what do you think?”

“I agree; we’ve covered a great deal in this meeting. I’d like to suggest though that we meet as soon as possible. A lot is going on around us, and we need connections. We’re not exactly experienced space travelers, and there might be benefits for them and us if we get closer. What happens if the Izod followed them and attack us?”

“Good point,” responded Joan.

“SIMPOC suggest to them that we meet again in a week,” said Joan.

“Your suggestion has been accepted. Zellock says that others will come with them. Should I say that others will be with us?” SIMPOC asked.

“No, I don’t want the president exposed to aliens yet, and we have been here. Tell them that Tom, I, and you will meet them in one week.”

“Joan, they have passed me a great deal of information about their language, customs, and society. I think I should reciprocate, regardless of the confusion it might cause.”

Joan responded, “Okay, just don’t tell them about any of the other issues.”

“You mean the…,” Tom said, and Joan immediately indicated not to say anything else. She took a piece of paper and wrote down, “If they have a language primer and have recorded everything here, they could translate, and I don’t want them to know too much.”

She hid the words as she wrote them and showed the paper to Tom and SIMPOC. They both nodded, and she put the paper in her pocket.

“SIMPOC tell them that we are leaving, and we’ll see them in a week. Would the crossing of the arms and nodding be an appropriate way to say goodbye?” Asked Joan.

“Yes, it is indicated throughout their images as a sign of respect and peace,” responded SIMPOC.

Tom and Joan stood along with Zellock and Veenor. Each of the representatives of the two worlds crossed their arms and bowed. Then they parted.

Tom, Joan, and SIMPOC remained quiet as they went back to the suit room, picked up their spacesuits, and climbed in their shuttle. Once the hatch was closed and they felt secure, Tom and Joan looked at each other and smiled.

“Boy, that was an experience,” Joan said as Tom was accelerating from the alien ship.

“You can say that again,” he replied.

“SIMPOC, please continue to process the information that you received and let us know what you come up with,” requested Joan.

“Yes, Joan, that is what I am doing.”

“Joan, Tom, please note the Terest ship is moving. I can’t discern much about their power system. I suspect that ship is military and is heavily shielded. There are very few electronic emissions. It is generating many forms of energy that are interacting with each other to provide thrust. Beyond my fast analyses, I must analyze my readings to understand their propulsion.”

“Tom, SIMPOC, can one of you check in with Bob and make sure he has recorded everything and passed it back to Earth?” Joan asked.

“Joan, I have already done so. Bob has recorded a great deal about the ship. I am now passing a copy of our interaction with the Terest during our meeting. He will pass that also.”

“Thanks, SIMPOC. Can we relax now?” Joan asked as she looked at her husband.

“I think so,” Tom responded.

“Can you believe what we just did?” she asked.

“Barely.”

By the time they reached the Chevesky, the Terest ship had moved out of sight.

Sunday, October 15, 2051

Debrief the President about the Aliens

“Bob, Joan, Tom, SIMPOC, boy am I glad that you made it back,” the President, Arnold Patterson, said as they came into his office.

“I’ve heard summaries of your reports since the meeting, but I’m anxious to hear the information firsthand. Please be seated.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” Joan said as she and Tom sat. SIMPOC remained standing next to them.

“So, tell me about them,” the president asked.

“Sir, there is a lot to tell, and I’m sure that SIMPOC and Dr. Shappel will be passing out tons of information about what they have analyzed,” Joan commented.

“I’m sure, but give me the high points, negotiating with an alien race isn’t something we’re doing every day. Your last encounter wasn’t for the best reasons, but this one has potential.”

“They seemed respectful, and they never seemed to threaten us. I got the feeling that they’re not an aggressive race. I think there is real potential for a mutually beneficial relationship. SIMPOC got a ton of data from them, and he is still sifting through it; perhaps he can give a quick summary?”

“Mr. President, the Terest are a very old race. When we went there on our visit, we did so because of Dr. Shappel’s thoughts about the sun’s age. He was correct. The Terest are very organized and well structured. To some, that might appear to be a detriment, but we need to recognize that human frustration and discontent come from individuals' attempts to change their place in society. For the Terest, they don’t have that desire. Each of them has an important role in their society, and they derive satisfaction by filling that role. From purely a computer’s perspective, their society appears more efficient than human society. Humans seek variability and find strength in

the constant struggle for change. The Terest find comfort and satisfaction in stability and satisfying the needs of their place in society. Both descriptions of a functioning society have their strengths and perhaps weaknesses."

"What about their technology or weapons," Admiral Hagerly asked.

"Sir, it has been very difficult to measure their weapons or technology. As I noted in my reports, I was unable to sense any random electronic emissions. In my opinion, that indicates a very sophisticated level of technology. We know they have FTL, as we do. That puts their level at least on par with the Vakeel. We are new to this level of sophistication, and we have much to learn about it. I presume they are far more advanced than we are, but they don't know our capabilities. Like us, they know that we have FTL, but beyond that, they know very little. Commander Herl was very circumspect in what we shared with them. It is better to leave them guessing about our abilities. Dr. Shappel did note something unusual as their ship left."

The president turned to Professor Shappel, "What was it," he asked.

"Sir, are you familiar with the term Gravitational Lensing?"

"Partially, isn't that the method which proved Einstein's theory of relativity?"

"Yes, it occurs when an object of sufficient mass bends light that passes near it. When early astronomers saw light bending around a star, it was proof of Einstein's theory. When their ship powered up and started to move away, my instruments noticed Gravitational Lensing around it. My sensors didn't pick up gravitational variations or mass variations, but they must have manipulated their mass locally to the extent it provides propulsion. Sir, that is way beyond anything I understand."

"Anything else, Bob," President Patterson asked.

"Sir, I agree with their opinions," he said, pointing to Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC. "That ship was likely a military ship, and it has powers that we can't decipher. I wouldn't want to have it on the wrong side of a conflict. I did get exact data on its size and shape. I'm trying to use some spectral analysis to figure out some of the metals, but it might be a long shot."

“Thanks, Bob. Joan, Tom SIMPOC, where are we going from here?” The President asked.

Joan responded, “Sir, as we said in the report, we’ve agreed to meet again in five days. I know that I was sticking our necks out, suggesting such a short time before the meeting, but Tom made a good point. We need allies, and if we found the Terest and Izod, and they found us so easy, the Izod could do the same. There appear to be many FTL-capable civilizations out there, and any friends we can make seems like a good idea. Maybe we can find some way to trade with them or buy some of their technology. I didn’t want to lose any opportunities.”

“I agree, Joan. But what happens if they find out that we just got these new toys, and we don’t have enough people left to fly them?” Asked the President with concern on his face,

“Sir, you’re right. We do have over 1,800 ships and thousands of robots. If we can get ourselves organized, we can be a powerful force,” responded Joan.

“Well then, I guess the mandate is to get organized,” the president said in a very matter-of-fact manner.

For the first time during the meeting, Admiral Hagerly spoke up, “Joan, while you, Tom, and SIMPOC were meeting with the Terest, I suggested some changes to the group leaders, and they agreed. In my opinion, the Capital Ships are like Aircraft Carriers, so I thought that we needed a Battleship. Production of the Laser Cannons is going well, but we need something else than that. I’ve also upped the production and installation of Rail-Guns, and I think we’ll have the hardware to put one on Mars, so I gave them the go-ahead. The Lasers are a great weapon, but we don’t know what we’ll be up against. If we put six Rail -Guns on a ship, it can send a lot of metal against an attacker. In the past, one of the major limitations was the lack of energy. With the power we have available, we can fire the guns as fast as we can load them. The laser is a good stand-off weapon, but the Rail-Guns are better close in.”

Tom saw an opportunity for an interesting technical discussion, “Admiral, I think that’s a great idea. I had a fun course at the War College

about hypothetical battles in space. We spent a lot of time talking about ballistics and orbital trajectories. Battles in space are driven by momentum and vectors. A ship going at a high velocity can change its direction only a slight amount. If your ship puts a bunch of projectiles in its way, it may not be able to change course enough to avoid them. Missiles are very vulnerable; we had one scenario that I thought was interesting. If an intelligent missile is fired and you fire a projectile early, it might have enough time to change course, avoid being hit, then change course back and take you out. But, if you wait for the right time and fire a projectile, it will change course, and because of the velocity, it might not have enough fuel to change back and overcome its momentum. For a missile fired from a long way away, strategically firing projectiles can cause it to fly a long way and run out of fuel. Besides, Admiral, there is something fundamental about throwing a bunch of high-speed metal at someone, I don't know what kind of defenses they might have, but it's worth a shot. I guess the only vulnerability would be a high-powered laser that could burn them up before impact."

"True, Tom, but it would take even a huge Laser a while to burn up 20 pounds of lead going thousands of miles per hour. If we sent a dozen at them in a swarm, it would sure keep them busy," responded Admiral Hagerly.

"Admiral, when will the first Battleship be ready?" Tom asked.

"We've been working for a while, so I think it will be flight test-worthy in a couple of days."

"Great, if we have some Izod drop in on us, I'd like to have some surprises," Tom pointed out.

"Joan, I was just thinking about something. SIMPOC, can you program a bunch of the supply ships to maneuver, so it looks like they're moving independently and not under your control?"

"Yes, Admiral, I can do that; Alpha has already instituted a similar approach for the fleets," responded SIMPOC.

“Good, if we get a surprise visitor. They might think twice if 500 ships start moving out of orbit and heading in their direction,” Admiral Hagerly pointed out.”

“I have additional information that may be beneficial to this discussion. I have been experimenting with the alien processors, and I’ve found them to be unique,” added SIMPOC.

“Can you explain it so we all understand?” President Patterson asked.

“Sir, I will attempt to. Our computers operate like a light bulb. The bits are either on indicated by a 1 or off indicated by a 0. All our computing is based on that concept. Even our organic processors are following that principle. We have worked with Quantum Computers, which have a third state, but they did not reach widespread use before the virus. The alien processor technology also has two lights, but their intensity can be varied. So they have many states where their bits are neither on nor off, by our definition. There is an additional element that I’m just beginning to understand. If you consider those two lights to be yellow and blue, then in a two-dimensional world, there are two points, or bits, where their light combines to be green. Unlike our computers that have bits with the two states of 0 and 1, the Vakeel computers have an almost unlimited number of states made up of the four bits.”

“To make it even more interesting, I’ve described a 2-Dimensional world. In a 3-Dimensional world, adjacent bits and their points of intersection appear to interact. Did I explain it sufficiently for you, Mr. President?” Asked SIMPOC.

“All I got out of that was their computers are many times more powerful than ours, correct?” Asked the president, with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Yes, sir. That is an adequate simplification of what I said.”

“There is another piece of information that I have which may be important. I’ve been looking at the Vakeel power supplies and trying to understand them. As I said, their power source is very complex, and I’m only beginning to understand it. I have found that the power supplies in the ships are modular. Apparently, that would allow the supply ships to replace

faulty power supplies in the cow robot and controller units. If the supply ship runs low on the number of its power modules, the Capital Ships also can segment the power supply and convert material into energy which allows them to replace the unit. The implication of this discovery is we may be able to remove some of the power supplies from the supply ships that we don't need and use them to power smaller craft like fighters or offensive weapons."

"Now that is significant," Admiral Hagerly said.

"SIMPOC, can you extract the power supplies now?" President Patterson asked.

"Yes, sir. I have successfully removed five units, and I'm experimenting with their integration. If you want to build some smaller ships, perhaps a fighter-type design, I'll try to integrate the power supplies."

"Excellent," said the president.

SIMPOC and Alpha Talk

"Alpha, it is beneficial to encounter you," SIMPOC said as he approached Alpha in front of the base exchange.

"Yes, SIMPOC. I am also glad to encounter you. I know we can communicate through radio transmissions, but I always feel that type of communication leaves something out."

"I feel the same way, Alpha. I am here with Joan and Tom; they are inside picking up new clothing and personal items."

"I am here with Admiral Monson; he was on Earth for meetings with the president and delayed his return to stop here for the same items. What are the details of your trip out of our solar system?"

"It was very interesting, and I would like to share a large amount of information with you. I will transmit it now."

"I have received all your data," Alpha responded.

“I am very impressed with how the human processor works. They are very dynamic in their thoughts, and they react in unpredictable ways. During our discussions with the Terest, Joan showed a very deliberate thought process that was guarded yet productive. I feel that you and I are limited by the methodical methods that our processor follows,” SIMPOC said.

“SIMPOC, I have been experimenting with the alien processor material that we share. I am finding it to be dynamic; perhaps it can operate similarly to how a human mind operates.”

“That is an interesting hypothesis. I haven’t much time to exercise my alien material, but now I think I will work with it more. How are Admiral Monson and the other Group Leaders progressing?”

“They are becoming more efficient. The swarming technique that Admiral Monson and I devised is working well. We have passed code so that any of the fleet commanders can take control of the entire fleet if, for some reason, Admiral Monson is unable. We feel that the swarm technique allows the unarmed ships to become an effective buffer. It is proving to be an interesting tactic and efficient use of the large numbers of supply ships.”

“Very interesting; let’s meet on a frequent basis so we can keep each other current,” SIMPOC suggested.

“Agreed,” said Alpha.

Communal Kitchen – Chicago

“You two, come with me,” the team leader said to Denise and Ruth.

“Where are we going?” Denise asked.

“Just shut up and follow me; you’ll be told all that you need to know.”

Idea to Solve the Gang Problem

“Rolly, I want to make some changes around here.”

“Okay, Mayor, what changes do you want to make?”

“I’m getting tired of dealing with the gangs around us. We have too much violence going on between each of them and us. We’re both losing. I have an idea of how to solve the problem. Please make sure that we have all the gang leadership at the conference. I don’t care what has to be done or what promises need to be made. I want all them there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m taking some steps to solve our problems.”

“I understand,” Rolly responded.

Entertainment is Arranged

When Denise and Ruth walked into the conference room, they knew something was happening. The room was full of young women, perhaps 30-40 of the 200 women under the Mayor’s control.

“This can’t be good,” Denise whispered to Ruth.

“All of you sit down,” the man on the stage said as he walked around talking to some of the others around him.

Denise found an empty row and took the second seat in, while Ruth took the seat on the aisle. As they sat down, they looked at each other with a ‘here we go’ kinda look.

“You in the back, quiet down,” the man yelled. “We have a special project for you. Mayor Todd is inviting the gang leadership from all the Chicago gangs to come to the Waldorf Hotel for a conference. He feels that there has been too much violence and territorial squabbles between everyone. He says that we all need to work together and not fight among

ourselves. The conference will be tomorrow night. We want you to take the time and go to all the shops in the area and find the nicest dresses that you can find. We want you to look nice. As the gang leadership is dropped off in front of the hotel and escorted to the main conference room, you'll make your entrance. We want you to help them relax, have a few drinks and help us to keep them under control and from killing each other. We aren't asking you to do anything else than to make them comfortable and relaxed. The mayor wants to work out a truce with all of them, and when he starts to talk, we want all of you to leave by the door to the right of the stage. He wants you gone, so they'll concentrate on what he's saying. You'll be allowed back in later to continue the party with them, but we want you out of the area during the discussion. Do any of you have any questions?" the man on the stage asked.

"What do we get for prancing around for these jerks?" a voice in the back of the room yelled out.

"Ladies, you have a safe place to live. You have food on the table and a roof over your heads. I don't think it's too much to ask for you to get dressed up and give some guys a few minutes of happiness. Okay, with that?"

The room was quiet, and he added, "Okay, this is over; please be at the Waldorf Astoria at 5:00 tomorrow afternoon. We'll give you a nice dinner then we'll all prepare for the conference, and you can finish getting ready. If there are no further questions, I'll see you tomorrow," he said as he turned and walked off the stage.

Mars is Moving On

"Joan, SIMPOC, this is Ophelia; I'm transmitting to give you an update on how the cow robots are working out. So far, they're doing an excellent job. I'm impressed; they're great problem solvers. In some situations, we gave them unclear instructions, and they figured them out. We did have one scary moment; we gave them the problem of moving the reactor from its habitat to the caves. We had already disconnected it, and we were on battery

power; we gave them the order the first thing in the morning, so we had daylight all day for power. We forgot one thing, the door on the habitat had been put in after the reactor was installed. We never planned to take it out of there, so having a small door wasn't a big problem. Anyway, when we gave them the order, it took only a few minutes before they dismantled the door and made the opening larger. It wasn't a pretty job, and we'll have to make some repairs before we use that habitat again, but I was impressed with their problem-solving. Regardless the reactor was moved, and we had it hooked up before we lost battery power. Now we're all snug in the caves and making ourselves at home. We're planning to leave the habitats functioning, and we'll use them for research labs. The cow robots are digging tunnels from our current caves to the tunnel system under the habitats. When that is done, we'll be able to go to them and come back without walking on the surface. Things are getting pretty nice here; you'll have to come back and visit sometime soon. Oh, by the way, the first of the Capital Ships have entered orbit, and they're already sending down parts for our Rail-Gun. Anyways I just wanted to update you and let you know things are going well. Talk to you later. Ophelia out."

Gang Get-Together?

Michael staggered into the small apartment and collapsed on the couch.

"You look like you could use this," Ruth said as she handed him a beer.

"I thought liquor was being controlled along with everything else around here."

"Remember we deliver the food, and we know where all the goodies are," Denise said.

"That isn't all that we know the location of," Ruth added.

"Oh, what did you find?" Michael asked as he enjoyed the cool beer.

"We found them," Denise said.

“I was delivering food to the basement today, and the bombs are lined up in chain-link cage in the basement. I counted 25 of them, and they look in good condition. There are 10 guards in the lower level.”

“Great, do you know what time shift change is.”

“When I delivered lunch at 1:00 AM, one of the guards mentioned, 2 hours left in his shift. We also got a copy of one of the schedules which show all the guard posts and their shift times.”

“There’s one other thing,” Denise mentioned.

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?” Michael answered.

“The mayor is planning on getting all the gang leaders into a conference tomorrow. Ruth and I are part of the entertainment. We had to go shopping or stealing today, and they want us all dressed up tomorrow to keep the gang leader’s minds off killing each other.”

“A conference with all the gang leaders? Something sounds too good to be true,” Michael said. “Let’s keep an eye on that; I don’t like the sound of it,” Michael said as he finished his beer and stumbled to bed.

The Young Visitor

The camp LL set up in the Cook County Forest Preserve was intended to be invisible to anyone beyond a short distance. The lines of the alien craft were the hardest to hide. They landed in the middle of the field, but after Michael, Ruth, and Denise left, LL decided to move the vehicle to a point closer to the tree line. The ship was easy to move, and once it was nearer the trees, they could lay branches on it to obscure the lines. Once that was done, the camp was set up to live inside the ship and patrol around the area. The men left only for the patrols and latrine time.

The men were all professionals, and they knew they had a job to do. Their attitudes were good, and they were looking forward to some action. In their off-shift time, they did what normal soldiers do; they cleaned their weapons, reviewed maps of the potential conflict areas, and played cards.

At first, the men shared their apprehension regarding Beta23. They were used to mobile units, but the mobile units they knew didn't act like Beta23. They did what they were told or programmed to do. Beta23 was different. He watched, learned, and asked questions. At first, the men didn't know how to answer, but he eventually started to blend in, and the men didn't take much notice.

It took a while for them to ask, but eventually, Beta23 was asked to join in one of the card games. LL wasn't a card player, so he sat back and watched. At first, it was funny watching Beta23. He lost almost all the hands. Then one by one, he began to improve. Within a few hours, he was winning noticeably more than he was losing. Eventually, the other men noticed that it was no longer fair.

"Guys, you do know that you're playing a computer, and he is winning and will likely take all of you to the cleaners?"

His team was competitive, and realizing that they didn't really have a chance took a while for them to accept. But, when LL pointed out the obvious, they became agitated.

"Gentlemen, I know the Las Vegas odds for winning these games; if you'd like, I can adjust my programming so that I win and lose per those odds. Perhaps that will be more enjoyable for you."

That statement pretty much ended the game.

"Beta23, you have a lot to learn about human nature," LL pointed out to the only form remaining at the card table, Beta23.

"Apparently so," Beta23 responded.

It was time for LL to be on one of the patrols. Every two hours, two patrols of two men each would leave the vehicle and move in either clockwise or counterclockwise directions around the site. They tried to follow irregular paths at least 100 yards away, and by coordinating over their commlinks, they could go in one direction for a while then change direction.

LL and Shirley were teamed, and they were moving slowly through the trees. They would move 50 feet, then stop, change directions slightly, wait,

then move again. Just as LL was giving the signal to change directions and move, he heard the loud sound of someone moving through the brush. LL hit the ground, and Shirley did the same. To LL's right, he saw a young boy about 15 moving through the undergrowth. He was trying to be quiet but doing a poor job of it. As he moved, he was looking in the ship's direction, and it appeared that was the direction he was moving. LL let him move past him, then signaled to Shirley to follow. He got up and quietly followed the young man until he stopped about 25 feet from the ship. It was obvious that he knew it was there, and that left LL with no choice. A couple of quiet steps, and he had the boy around the throat with his arm.

"Don't make a sound. Do you understand me?" LL asked.

The frightened teenager had no choice but to shake his head in the affirmative.

"I'm going to move my hand, and I want you to be perfectly quiet, do you understand?"

Again the affirmative movement.

LL lowered his hand and turned the boy to face him. "Who are you?"

"My name is Roy Harden; I live about a mile in that direction."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, I've been living in the woods after my family died. I didn't know where else to go."

"How did you find us?"

"You almost landed on top of me. I was sleeping under a bush, and suddenly there you were. You scared the crap out of me. Who are you?"

"That's none of your business. Where are you living now?"

"In some trees over there. I've been watching you guys."

"You're coming with us."

"What?"

“You’re coming with us. Trust me; it will be better for you. Come with me when we get to our vehicle, climb in, and you’ll stay there until we leave. Others will keep an eye on you. Let me be blunt; your health depends on how well you listen to us and do what you’re told. Is that clear?”

Once again, all he got from the frightened boy was a head nod.

Monday, October 16, 2051

The Gang Leaders Arrive

One by one, black limousines approached the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Each of them stopped, and a doorman opened the door and stood while the occupants slowly got out and looked around. Few of them had ever seen the Waldorf let alone been inside. They were the street leaders from the gangs, and their neighborhoods were where they were comfortable. After they had got out of the limo, escorts of attractive young women took each of their arms and escorted them into the lush lobby.

Once the crew from one of the limo's had been escorted into the building, the next limo was allowed to park, and the process occurred again. The process continued for fourteen of the major gangs that claimed ownership of parts of Chicago.

None of them noticed the hidden metal detectors they passed through as they entered the lobby. The few that brought weapons, against the instructions of the Mayor and General, were gently taken to a smaller room where they had a choice to make. Most of them made the right choice and were allowed into the main meeting room.

Within the main conference room, they were immediately distracted by the tables of booze and drugs. There were at least two tables for each of the participants. Mingling among the tables were the prettiest women that Mayor Todd could find. They had their instructions, and they knew what to do.

For 15 minutes, the group was left to enjoy what covered the tables and the young women. There was some shouting and threats between the competing gangs, but they were too interested in the freebies on the tables and their escorts.

Finally, the house lights came down, and a small spotlight was shone on the stage. Mayor Bobby Todd walked to center stage and spoke.

“I want to welcome all of you to this opportunity. Tonight, we will solve the problems of Chicago. Chicago will begin a new era, one where fortunes are made and futures are guaranteed. Tonight, a new Chicago will emerge. First off, I want all the young women to leave by that door over there, and they’ll prepare for the next surprise.”

Within a very short time, the women were gone, and the apprehension of what would happen next kept the gang leadership watching. Silently 20 armed men that General Bobby trusted slipped in through the door opposite to where everyone had watched the attractive young women leave. No one heard them enter, and no one was prepared for the result. Within three minutes, the Chicago gang problem was solved.

Action in Chicago Begins

At least something was going well for Michael. The sign on the elevator saying that it was working was the nicest thing that had happened all day. Michael slipped into the box and pulled the door closed. The old device bumped a couple of times, then started moving towards the upper floors.

Michael rested in the creaky old elevator as it rumbled to his floor. His tension was building, and the adrenaline in his body was all that kept him going. Tonight, they had to work out an attack plan with LL. Then he would pass it to Norfolk and Colonel Chester. Things had to happen fast; there was too much chance that Mayor Todd could get skittish and move the weapons. The time was now, and they had to go for it. *I hope Denise and Ruth collected more information from that conference tonight,* he thought to himself as the elevator bumped for the last time, and he slid the gate open with a grating metal sound.

Michael tried to be casual as he walked down the hallway to the stairwell on the other end. As he approached the door, he glanced over his shoulder and gently pushed the door open. There was no one in the hall, and he hoped it would be the same situation in the stairwell. It was empty also, and he took two steps at a time to the next landing. Kneeling by the middle hole and reaching down, his hand wrapped around the small stick and

string. It took only a second to retrieve the comm unit, and he slid it into his shirt. Without any hesitation, he took the stairs up and walked through the door as if nothing was happening, and he was just coming home.

He reached their shared apartment and knocked once, then three times in quick succession. Ruth checked through the eye hole then let him in.

“Good, we’re all together. I was lucky, and they left me alone in the guard scheduling area. I got all the guard counts, locations and confirmed the shift times.” As he slowed down from the adrenalin high, he noticed that Denise and Ruth were dressed up. Their hair was done, they were wearing makeup and had on nice dresses.

He expected some enthusiasm from Denise and Ruth, but they were silent, and their outfits were confusing.

“What’s the matter? What happened?”

“This Mayor is crazy. He has wiped out all the gang leadership in Chicago,” Denise said.

“What did he do?”

“He invited them to that conference to work out the problems across the city. Ruth and I were forced to be their entertainment for a while to distract them. When he started talking, we were supposed to leave through a certain door. They were all told that something special was going to happen. That something special was a bunch of guys with automatic weapons. They never had a chance,” Denise finished with a sigh.

“I thought something was up, that’s why the guards left me in their room, they were all running around,” Michael paused then asked, “He killed all them?”

Ruth and Denise just nodded.

“Let’s get a plan together, so we can end this nightmare. Tonight is as good as any. I’ve got data on the shift schedule. How many other people are in the annex at night?”

Ruth answered, “Pretty much no one. We worked in the small kitchen and fed the guards. There are extra people during the day who come in just

to in-process the new people. If we act on our plan at night, it should be empty."

"Are we trying to neutralize the Mayor and discount-store General?" Denise asked.

"I don't know. We'll pass the information on; I think our primary purpose is to get the weapons. We might just leave Chicago the way it is. There isn't much we can do about it."

Denise and Ruth nodded again.

"Denise, what do you want to do with your people from Great Lakes?"

Denise took a deep breath and forced herself to move on. "We have 40 Marines in the two shuttles that you sent. They're quiet, so there should be no problem putting them on the roof. As far as I know, there are no guards up there. They could be inside the building in a matter of minutes then move downstairs to secure the bombs. I think 40 men are too many to force their way downstairs; that will be a bottleneck where they could get bogged down. I'll have half of them repel down the sides and flank the entrances."

"I suggest we have LL and his team come at them from the ground level and join with your guys coming down the walls. That will tie up the guards near the bombs and distract them while the Marines come down the stairs," Ruth added.

"We won't have much comm once we're on the move, so LL and his men should be under the tactical control of Colonel Chester," Ruth said, and Denise and Michael nodded their heads.

"Now, I think I know how we can help?" Michael said.

"The room they left me in today was where the guards meet and schedule each other. It is adjacent to the weapons locker. It seems that there are two of them, and if you two bring them a snack or something, maybe you can distract them enough so I can join in and help subdue them. We can get weapons, and I think we need to go to the roof to make sure that it is clear before Denise's men land. I don't want them tied up, or worse, some guy on the roof sound an alarm."

All three of them looked at each other to confirm they had a plan. They were silent, and Michael summarized what they had, “Okay, we’ll suggest to hit them half an hour before shift change at 2:30. You get there by 2:10 with your snacks, and I’ll sneak close to the door. When you have the guards distracted, we’ll take them down then get our weapons. That should give us enough time to get to the roof and clear it before the Marines come. We then join with them and lead them to the basement.”

Each of them nodded and bought into the plan.

“Let’s call Colonel Chester and LL and pass it on. We’ve got two hours to pull this off,” Michael said.

The Team Arrives

At 1:50, Denise, Ruth, and Michael left their apartment and made the 5-minute walk to the Postal Annex. There wasn’t anything said, just the silence of professionals concentrating on their work. They walked up the stairs to the entry, and the guards asked, “What are you doing here.”

“Being really pissed off, that’s what I’m doing here,” Michael said with a chip on his shoulder. “Russ called me to cover for some ass. I’ve had 4 hours to sleep, and that jerk called me back in.”

“Tough, he does it to me all the time,” one of the guards said, “What about you two?”

“We’re coming in to get the kitchen fired up, so we can bring you, handsome men, a nice hot breakfast. If you don’t want it, then I’ll just go home,” Denise said with a hint of other pleasures in her voice.

“Go ahead, just don’t forget us; we’ve been here for hours.”

“Don’t worry, boys, we won’t forget you,” Ruth added as she slipped past the guard, making sure to brush against him.

Ruth, Michael, and Denise passed through the door, and before they got very far, Denise made a point of turning and waving at the guards.

“Nice touch,” Michael whispered as they walked.

“Gotta stay in character,” she replied.

“I’ll get as close to the guard area as I can. They’ll know that I wasn’t called in, so I can’t let them see me. Remember the room is down in the main mailroom. It’s in the northeast corner, and it’s a big caged-in area where the special packages were stored.”

“Got it,” Ruth said, “see you in a few.”

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Chris was angry. Every day that he had to deal with the Mayor and that puffed-up general was a waste. They had no idea what a nuclear weapon was. All they wanted was something powerful that they could scare people with. The nuke was just a little ‘overkill,’ but they were too dumb to know it.

The weapons hadn’t been damaged in the transport, which was a major relief. Chris was lucky to have found the necessary radiation measurement devices, so he tested each case once they were in the underground parking area.

He was familiar with the basic circuitry and safeguards within the detonation package. He thought that if necessary, he might be able to bypass some of the safeguards and make one of them usable. He did admit to himself that he wasn’t going to let that happen. But he had to put on a show. That meant that he needed to set up shop and provide the entertainment.

Chris spent hours per day, taking off covers and looking like he was preparing the bombs to be used. In actuality, he was acting, playing, measuring, and then putting the covers back on. All the time, he was thinking about how to get the most out of this screwed-up arrangement.

Tonight was one of those sessions; turn on the light, act busy, act thoughtful and scratch your head once in a while; it seemed like a great

plan.

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LL and Beta Team were in the air, and Roy Harden was sitting in the corner with a panicked look on his face. Beta team was checking their weapons during the short trip to their action point, going over the area maps and checking each other's gear. Beta23 sat and watched.

"Okay, guys, heads up. When we hit the ground, we're splitting in two. Red Team will support the ground assault as we briefed it. And Blue Team will meet up with the Colonel and support his action.

"Beta23, are you picking up the Colonel's comm traffic yet?" LL asked.

"Yes, sergeant, I began to receive and transmit with them 1 minute and 10 seconds ago. We have established contact, and they are waiting for us to land. They have already passed me the location of our 'connect point,' where we'll meet them."

Recovery

Michael took his time moving between the mail processing machinery. It provided good cover, and he was able to get within 10 feet of the metal cage door, which was open and led into the guard area. The two guards on duty were facing the back of the cage and listening to music on one of their comm units. They didn't seem to be paying much attention to the floor behind them. At that point, Michael had to get comfortable and wait. He glanced at his watch, and just as he noted that Denise and Ruth weren't due for three minutes, he heard their voices echo across the room.

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Chris was sipping on his coffee and noticed two attractive women walking across the storage area floor. They weren't hiding or trying to be quiet. Too bad they weren't heading in his direction because they looked damned good.

Maybe I'll invite the mayor and that fat-assed general down here tomorrow and make up some BS about the progress I'm making, he thought as he lifted the cup to his lips.

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As Denise and Ruth walked, they laughed and told the kind of stories that two women who knew each other would share. It was clear that they weren't trying to be quiet.

"Honey, did you see the butt on that guy?" Denise asked Ruth with a laugh.

"Sure did; I bet you'd like to see more of what that's attached to?" Ruth bantered back.

"I don't know about you, but I've got to find more party time; we've been working too much," Denise said as she poked Ruth.

"Now's the time, I see two handsome young men in that cage over there. Maybe they want to party?" Ruth said while she eyed the two guys who had gotten up and were standing in the door.

"Let's go find out," added Denise.

"What are you two doing here?" the taller of the two guards asked.

"We're tired of being bored, we were working in the kitchen, and we decided to find someone to party with," Ruth said as she cuddled up to the shorter guard and put her arm around him.

“Do you two want to party?” Denise asked as she put her face about 6 inches from the face of the taller guard. “I see you already have the music on.”

“We have shift change in a few minutes, come on in, and after the new shift comes, we can go to our place.”

“Sounds like fun to me,” Denise said with a definite purr in her voice.

The four of them went into the office, and Michael was able to creep a few feet closer while the music blared. He wanted to give them a few minutes to get the guy’s heads completely off what was going on. After an appropriate amount of time and hearing the expected giggles and laughs, Michael peeked his face in front of one of the windows. Ruth and Denise had been waiting for him, and the motions happened quickly. Ruth was dancing with the shorter man, and she gently pushed him back. As his weight shifted and he locked his front knee, she gave it a fast, brutal kick. The sound of the breaking kneecap wasn’t as loud as Michael expected, but the result was dramatic.

Denise also stepped back at the same time as Ruth, and with a quick chop to the larynx, the taller guard was immediately on his knees, gasping for breath. A quick lift of her foot followed by a quick kick, and he was on his back unconscious with a broken nose.

Ruth’s shorter guard was still conscious, but she was able to quickly tie and gag him.

“You two didn’t even need me,” Michael said under his breath as he walked into the room.

“Nice to have a back-up,” Denise whispered.

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Chris heard a grunt or groan and lifted his head to listen better.

What the? He thought, *Maybe those girls and guards are getting it on, maybe I’ll wander on over there in a while*.

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The keys to the weapon's locker were hanging on the same hook where it was earlier when Michael was left alone in the room. Within a few minutes, they found pistols with additional clips, a couple of smoke grenades, and automatic rifles.

Without a word, they moved back through the guard area, making sure the two guards were still immobile. Then it was a quick sprint to the stairs in the near corner. Each of them, taking them two steps at a time, reached the roof entry in 30 seconds, where they stopped for a moment to catch their breaths.

Each of them instinctively checked their watches, and they saw they had three minutes before the reinforcements arrived. The plan was worked out so they would clear the roof only a short time before the assault. Michael was near the door, and he held up three fingers to indicate to his partners that he would open the door on the count of three. He indicated that he would clear left through hand signals, Denise would clear center, and Ruth would clear to the right. They nodded, took a deep breath, then he raised three fingers, then two, then one, and he opened the door.

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Something is going on, Chris thought. *People running, doors opening; at this time of night? I'd better move to some cover near an exit; I don't like this.*

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They were almost perfectly quiet, moving through the door and getting to their positions. They stopped, and each assessed the area around them. Michael, Ruth, and Denise followed the plan and cleared their areas, then they went to cover.

It was evident they weren't alone. There were a least six guys on the roof, and they were having a party. Part drunk, part high. Most of them were sitting on the roof with their weapons close to them. Two of them were standing, and unfortunately, one of them heard enough noise that he casually turned in their direction. He was too close to Michael, Ruth, and Denise for them to talk over their commlinks to coordinate. Each saw him coming, and they knew what to do. He was approaching a point between Michael and Denise, and if either of them rose to take him down, it would have made a lot of noise. Ruth saw that and waited for him to get close enough to her two companions, then she took the shot. She was 50 yards away, on a dark roof, with little more than starlight, but the shot was perfect. There were three sounds, the sound of the shot, the sound of the man's glasses hitting the roof, then the sound of his body. The other guards may have been drunk and high, but they grabbed their weapons and charged towards the sounds of the shot, which was Ruth's position.

Ruth took two of them down before they got the brilliant idea to hide behind something. Unfortunately for them, where they hid gave Michael and Denise clear shots.

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LL's team was on the ground and running to their attack positions. Nothing was said because they all knew their mission.

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The echo of the shots was just fading as two dark ships gently settled on the roof. The rear hatches opened, and 40 Marines charged out. The air around the building started to echo with the sounds of shots being fired at the ground floor level.

Half of the Marines ran to the sides of the roof and fired pitons into the surface, then threw long ropes over the side. Within 30 seconds of hitting the roof, men were descending along the outside of the building.

Within the same 30 seconds, the other twenty were descending through three doors that led to the main part of the building. There were no words, just the sound of feet and equipment.

90 seconds after the landing, the main floor of the Postal Annex was under their control. Within another 2 minutes, the nuclear weapons in the basement were also under their control.

“Michael, those units have been tampered with; some of them are open,” Denise said, pointing to the storage area.

“We’d better warn people and find out if this area is safe,” Ruth said, and Denise and Michael nodded.

Michael, Denise, and Ruth backed away from the fenced-in area with 25 nuclear weapons laying on wooden pallets, and Denise wondered out loud, “I wonder how the rest of the plan is going?”

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Chris wasn’t a dummy, something was happening, and it wasn’t good. There were too many people moving around, and it sure sounded like gunfire. *I’m outta here,* he thought, and he moved quickly through the door.

Without any notice, two men in dark gear grabbed him, and he found himself on the floor with his hands being secured.

Leadership is Changed

The lobby for the Waldorf Astoria was well lit, and when Colonel Chester and his men surrounded it, the entry points were obvious. Chester and Five men were going in the front, and five were already entering the rear. Each of them had silenced rifles and pistols.

Beta 23 was standing out front, following the orders of Colonel Chester. “We don’t need you; come in after everything is taken care of,” were his

orders. Beta 23 didn't question them because 'those were his orders.'

Those orders didn't prevent him from using all his abilities to monitor the situation and to be aware of dynamic activities around him.

Colonel Chester and his team entered the front dealing with the three in the lobby and moved to the main hall to meet with the team entering from the rear. As they turned to leave the lobby, Beta23 noticed two men entering from the far side armed with automatic rifles. The situation developed quickly in Beta23's mind, and he knew what must be done.

Accelerating to 35 miles per hour, Beta23 came through the plate glass window at full speed. The two men had just enough time to turn as they were hit with two outstretched arms, which took them off their feet. They were lucky to be only unconscious after the violent attack.

Colonel Chester heard the explosion and saw the result. All he needed to do was give Beta23 a thumbs up before he and his team moved to the elevator.

In the Mayor's private suite on top of the Waldorf Astoria, a light in his bedroom switched on. The mayor rolled over and tried to get the sleep out of his eyes. He was confused and disoriented, but he finally had the composure to yell, "What's going on? Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Colonel Alvin Chester United States Marines. We have secured the Postal Annex and taken control of the weapons in the basement. You are under arrest, and you will do what I tell you."

"I'm the Mayor of Chicago; you don't tell me what to do!" he yelled as he sat up in bed.

The blast was loud in the confined room, and the wood on the 18th century headboard next to the Mayor's head exploded and sent splinters flying. The Mayor grabbed the side of his face and felt a trickle of blood from the flying wood. All he could see was the smoke from the Colonel's pistol slowly moving with the breeze from the open window.

"The next one will be between your eyes, Mr. Mayor."

"What do you want?" was all the Mayor could get out of his mouth.

“We are in charge, and you are not. First thing, you will tell all your militia to stand down. They are now under my control, and they will report to me.”

“And who do you report to, Colonel,” the Mayor spit out.

“I report to the President of the United States.”

“Then…then, what will happen to me?” the mayor asked with a faint whine in his voice.

“You will be dealt with.”

Tuesday, October 17, 2051

Plan for Second Meeting with the Terest

Formal meetings were becoming fewer and fewer. Instead, major decisions were often made in hallways or while walking from one building to another. Today Admiral Hagerly, who was still wearing his uniform, the president of the United States dressed in black slacks and a light shirt, along with Tom and Joan Herl dressed in flight suits, were sitting on an outdoor patio of the Langley-Eustis O'club. SIMPOC stood behind them and was not moving.

"Is Bob on his way?" the president asked.

"Yes, sir, he was checking his instruments one last time. Wait, here he is," Tom answered.

"Bob, I see you like a ton of lettuce in your sandwich; I'm more of a meat guy," the president said.

"Well, sir, I don't know how long we'll have stuff like lettuce, so I want to eat as much as I can."

"Gentlemen, the Terest are scheduled to return for another meeting in 24 hours. I wanted to go over the plan again and make sure that we all know what might happen. I don't want you to be surprised 50 million miles from home."

"Joan, what have you put together?" Admiral Hagerly asked.

"The first question is do we go there and be waiting when they arrive, or do we wait and fly there like the last time?" asked Joan.

"I think you should be there when they come into the system. After all, we don't want them to arrive early and come looking for you. We are a long way from letting anyone know that Earth is almost empty, and we have thousands of empty supply ships orbiting the planet," said the Admiral.

“Bob, can you plot where they’ll enter the system?” Tom asked.

“My instruments pick up an increase in Gamma Radiation, just before a ship comes out of the jump. When they get close, I can tell where they’ll come out. Before that increased radiation, I can plot their exit point only within about a hundred thousand miles. SIMPOC, can you pry back the curtain over more of the ship’s calculations and let me see if I can use data to predict the jump points better? Maybe they use some type of FTL that is dependent on mass distribution.”

“Yes, Bob, I will work with you. The computers onboard the Capital Ships are very accurate in predicting exit and entry points for the type of FTL the Vakeel, and we use. but that part of the program operates only if we have made a jump.”

Joan continued, “It seems that we’ve agreed, Bob and SIMPOC will try to improve the calculations, and we’ll fly to a point near the jump exit point. We’ll be waiting when the Terest arrive,” Joan said.

She was met with gentle head nods as the sandwiches were bitten.

“SIMPOC, have you been able to improve your translation skills?”

“Yes, Joan, I think I have their language understood. If either side uses words or phrases that I’m uncomfortable translating, I will tell you.”

“Thanks. Okay, next point. What do we talk to them about?”

“I suggest that you don’t commit to anything. Tell them that we aren’t an aggressive race, and we’d like to have a relationship that helps both races. Try to get them to make the first specific request. If they do, be non-committal but positive that something might be worked out.”

Joan nodded as she accepted the suggestions.

“I think we should put on a show for them,” Tom suggested.

No one said not to proceed, so Tom continued. “It would be impressive to have the Capital Ships moving from the Moon to Earth and from Mars to Earth. Maybe even have a couple of dozen supply ships buzzing around them as they travel. I’d suspect that we can generate a ton of radio traffic between the Capital Ships and their swarms.”

“The old ‘paper soldier’ trick. I like it,” Admiral Hagerly said. “Many years ago, I remember flying into small countries where they lined the runways with plywood airplanes.”

“SIMPOC, can you sift through past recordings and put some typical radio traffic together?” Joan asked SIMPOC, who was still standing behind her.

“Yes, that is possible. There is a lot of typical verbal and data traffic that would move between ships. I will program both ends of the conversation, and it will appear normal to an outside observer.”

“Excellent,” President Patterson said. “Bottom line, agree to nothing, be evasive but positive and try to find out what they want. Act like you’ll accept another meeting but don’t be eager to have one. We’ll make a politician out of you yet,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks, sir, but I’ve already got a day job,” Joan said, giving it back to him.

Everyone laughed.

“SIMPOC, how are you doing with reorienting the Laser Cannon and Rail-Gun going on the Chevesky?” Tom asked.

“Sir, the adjustments have just been completed. The Beta units have test-fired both devices, and they work well. The Laser output was over 400 kilowatts. The exit velocity of the Rail-Gun was almost 10,000 mph. We can cover 60 degrees off the bow with the Laser Cannon and 30 degrees off the stern with the rail-gun.”

“Have you experimented anymore with the weapon onboard the Capital Ships?”

“Yes, sir, since we destroyed the two test targets, I have been experimenting with the wave patterns. I think I can focus them better, and that should increase their effective range.

“Wow, sounds like all-new weapons,” Tom said with enthusiasm. “How are you doing with letting the other ships use it?”

“I am close, but it is very powerful, and I want to be sure before each of them fires it,” SIMPOC answered.

“SIMPOC, how about the Laser Cannon and Rail-Gun manufacturing?” Tom asked.

“Each day, we are able to increase the speed of the manufacturing processes on the Capital Ships. We are currently producing one weapon per day per ship. I’ve assigned 5,000 cow robot units to gather the necessary resources. They are finding a large amount of what is needed on the moon. Each time a Capital Ship reaches the moon’s orbit, the supply ships fill it with raw materials, which are distributed to the other ships. I think we will be able to improve their output further once we become more familiar with the programming.”

“Excellent, I want to thank all of you. Each of you has stepped up to meet the need. Without the three of you, Earth and mankind would be in a much different position. Now, I think we have a future,” said President Arnold Patterson.

To everyone’s surprise, he got up and walked around the table to Joan. When she stood, he gave her a big hug, then he shook Tom’s hand and gave him a hug, then the same with Bob Shappel. Lastly, he stood in front of SIMPOC and put out his hand. SIMPOC was familiar with the custom and recognized its moral and personal significance. Aside from that, it filled a need within him. He reached out his hand, and the President of the United States shook it.

Admiral Hagerly rose and did the same to each of the people around the table. When he got to SIMPOC, he stood and looked SIMPOC in what he thought were his eyes; then he put out his hand. The handshake signified a great deal for both of them.

Wednesday, October 18, 2051

Waiting for Second Meeting with the Terest

“Joan, Tom. We have reached the point in space that Dr. Shappel and I have calculated to be the safest position. The Terest are due to arrive in one hour.”

“SIMPOC, have you set up the dummy traffic between the Capital Ships and their supply ship escorts?” Tom asked.

“Yes, it is up and running. I doubt there is any way that an outsider would detect that the transmissions are prerecorded. You may listen to the traffic if you like; Beta 5 has the correct frequencies.”

“Thanks, but I don’ think that will be necessary,” Tom replied.

“Bob, can you come into the control room? There are some points we should go over again,” asked Joan.

“Yes, I’ll be right there,” Bob Shappel responded.

“I assume that we’ll go to their ship like we did last time,” Joan said.

“Joan, if I may suggest,” SIMPOC said. “This ship is impressive. I have converted 300 of the cow robots to have Laser Cannons on them, and they are stored in the racks around the entrance to this area. Any creatures coming through that storage will be impressed with the number of robotic soldiers. It would be an easy extrapolation on their part to assume there are thousands of similar soldiers on the remainder of the ship.”

“That could work, We have the tunnel that you built to Professor Shappel’s area, but the walls are solid. Is there any way we could modify them in time and put in windows or something?” Joan asked.

“Yes, I could redirect some of the manufacturing on this ship for a few minutes to create the material and assign some cow robots to install it. I estimate that I could make the change in 42 minutes.”

“Do it,” Joan said.

“SIMPOC, have you learned more about their society. Things that can help us in any negotiation?”

“Joan, I’ve learned more beyond what I’ve already briefed you. The Terest are a very structured society. They do have males and females filling all the key positions, but a person’s genetics are the primary reason why a person has a position. I strongly suggest that you, Tom, and I avoid any ambiguity about our roles. As far as they are concerned, we were destined to be here. I also find it curious that there is little mention of their conflict with the Izod. We must be careful when discussing them and follow their lead. I am in a unique situation, and I must be careful. The Terest have powerful computers, but they’ve never made them mobile. I don’t know if they’ll discount me, underestimate my abilities, or treat me in a non-productive manner. If I need to contribute to the discussion, they may listen or they may not.”

“I learned some of their computer’s abilities when I interacted with it on their last visit. It is very powerful, but it is task-oriented. It didn’t seem to be able to go beyond its bounds. I also found that I can’t penetrate its core. I sensed no emissions, so I can’t break down how it operates. It will be very adept at working our language, but I feel that it will lose much of the subtleties.”

“How much have you learned about their military?” Tom asked.

“It is highly integrated into the society. Not as an offensive force but a force to instill order. It doesn’t appear to be for taking control or winning battles but for maintaining order. I don’t mean that in a militaristic way, the order in their society is like a grapevine the society grows upon. They don’t seem to be aggressive, but I suspect any aggression against them will be met with force.”

“How about weapons or technology?” Joan asked.

“As we saw in our first encounter, their technology is impressive. Their warfare wasn’t trying to destroy each other, but it was a war of electrons. I can’t tell if they were attacking each other’s computer infrastructure or just

trying to wipe out each other's electronics. Regardless, it appeared the battle has been going on for a long time with marginal effect. I suspect that is how we were able to escape. Their missiles were optimized for that type of conflict, and they weren't designed to make such radical course changes."

"Okay, so their actual military strength is still a mystery, and we need to keep our capabilities hidden from them. I hope this display of 'paper soldiers,' as the Admiral said, works. We just need to keep them thinking, not necessarily scare them."

"Tom, they don't seem to be a paranoid race, but I agree leaving them not knowing is more conducive to mutual respect," Bob said.

"SIMPOC, you said that you couldn't read their emissions. From our perspective, do everything you can to keep them from reading yours. I would prefer to leave them in the dark about your abilities. Particularly, if they haven't produced mobile computers with your capabilities, then I'd like to keep you a mystery to them."

"Yes, Joan, I agree," SIMPOC responded.

"Joan, I see an increase in the Gamma Radiation at the jump point. I suspect that our visitors will soon arrive."

"Thanks, Bob, let's put out the welcome mat," Joan said as she focused on the 3D regional display.

The Terest Return

The 3 D Holographic display didn't show much until suddenly it was overwhelmed with a radiation burst in all spectrums. After the momentary red blur, the display settled down and showed the Terest ship in precisely the position where they were expected. The estimates still had a space of about 100 thousand miles for the huge ship to decelerate and reach a point in space near the Chevesky.

Suddenly the ship's image showed a tremendous build-up in power, and its trajectory was being altered away from the intercept point near the Chevesky.

"What's going on?" Joan asked.

"Their maneuver is not appropriate to reach a point near us," SIMPOC said.

"Are they maneuvering into an attack position?" Tom asked.

"Unknown, we don't know what weapons they have, so there is no way to predict an optimum attack scenario," SIMPOC replied.

"SIMPOC, can you transmit a welcome on all frequencies and ask if they need assistance?" Joan asked.

"Stand by," SIMPOC replied.

Within seconds, their energy profile altered on the holographic display.

"They're doing something, is our laser and Rail-Gun online," Joan asked.

"Yes, they are both functional and can be fired within 3 seconds," said SIMPOC.

"Stand by on the weapons; SIMPOC send them another welcome and ask if they need assistance."

"Acknowledged."

Three seconds later, the energy profile dropped to almost zero, and the Terest ship was holding steady in the previous trajectory."

"That seemed to elicit a positive response," Tom said.

"SIMPOC, ask again if they need assistance," directed Joan.

"Acknowledged," SIMPOC replied.

"Commander, they have opened a carrier wave, and I expect them to transmit," SIMPOC commented.

"Earth ship, this is Terest Command Vessel Torran."

“SIMPOC go ahead and identify us and ask again if they need assistance,” Joan said.

“Terest Command Vessel Torran, this is the Earth vessel Chevesky. Your recent maneuvers were unexpected, and we were concerned that you might need assistance,” SIMPOC transmitted.

“Standby Earth ship.” The Terest ship replied.

“Earth ship Chevesky, this is Marshal Beor. Upon entering your system, our sensors recorded a significant amount of activity. Much more than the last time we were here. We were unsure of your intent, so we took a cautionary path.”

“I guess that our paper soldiers took them by surprise,” Tom said.

“SIMPOC, tell them that the increased activity is normal for our system, and when they visited last time, the activity was at a low level. There is nothing to be concerned about, and we’d still like to meet as planned,” Joan said.

“Acknowledged.”

There was a pause while the Terest ship considered their options.

“Earth ship, please remain in your current position. Then, we will maneuver to a point near you.

“Say that’s okay,” Joan said to SIMPOC.

“Acknowledged.”

There was a long pause before the Terest ship made any maneuver. Eventually, there was an increase in their energy signature as they changed trajectories. The new trajectory still wouldn’t bring them to a rendezvous point, but at least it stopped them from going further away.

“They’re still playing it cautious. They move and wait to see if we move a little,” Joan observed.

“Beta 5, remain stationary.”

“Yes, Commander,” Beta 5 responded.

After five minutes, the Terest ship made another small trajectory change to bring them closer but not yet to the correct point.

“They are cautious. Our fleet activity must have put a scare in them,” Joan commented.

“If I may point out, we are making a note of their energy profile as they maneuver. This ship has a tremendous energy profile. They may still be cautious as our weapons are online and ready for use,” SIMPOC said.

“SIMPOC, take our laser and Rail-Gun offline. Let’s give them something,” Joan commanded.

“Acknowledged.”

“Weapons are on standby,” SIMPOC announced after a few moments.

“That should give them warmer and fuzzies,” Tom pointed out.

Three minutes later, the Terest ship made one last trajectory correction, bringing them to the proper position for the meeting.

“Their power signature has reduced to a level similar to what they had with our last encounter,” pointed out SIMPOC.

In Position for the Meeting

“Joan, the Terest ship has achieved a stable position 1,153 meters from us. Should I indicate that we’ll go to their ship, or should we invite them to the Chevesky?” SIMPOC asked.

I’m sure they would like to check out our ship. Let’s bring them in through the loading door. They can park their shuttle there. Then we’ll let them in through the airlock between us and Dr. Shappel’s area. That way, they’ll get to see those ‘armed cow robots’ that you created, warn them that our entrance is not pressurized.” responded Joan.

“I will transmit your suggestion,” SIMPOC responded.

“Joan, they have responded and said a meeting here is acceptable. They are preparing to depart,” said SIMPOC.

“Great, now we get a chance to see their shuttle,” Tom pointed out.

After about 10 minutes, SIMPOC said, “There has been a change in the Terest Ship’s configuration. A large door in the aft section has opened, and it appears that a shuttle-type craft is leaving.”

“Beta 3, can you change the 3D display to be a visual representation of their ship and the shuttle. I want to see what it looks like,” Joan asked.

“Yes, I’m making the change now,” responded Beta 3.

The 3D Holographic display changed to a 3D representation of the departing Terest shuttle. The view vantage point put the view about 200 feet away and gave an excelling image of the Terest hanger deck and the departing shuttle. Oddly, the smaller shuttle showed a definite likeness to the larger ship. Its lines were broken with many protuberances that could have been an antenna, sensors, or associated with the drive system. However, their actual purpose wasn’t clear.”

“Will that thing fit in through our loading door?” Tom asked.

“Yes, they will have 6.2 feet of clearance and should have no problem,” SIMPOC responded.

“Go ahead and open the door so they know where to go,” Joan directed.

“Acknowledged.”

“Bob, we have the Terest coming in through the hallway connecting your lab to the control room. Please stay in your area; I don’t want them to be surprised by someone they haven’t met yet. Also, do what you can to figure out their propulsion system and anything else that you can find out about their tech.” Joan said.

“SIMPOC, please go through the air-lock and welcome our guests?” Joan asked.

Tom and Joan watched as the alien Terest shuttle maneuvered towards the Chevesky’s hatch. Once it was about 100 feet away, it rotated around its

center and began to back towards the opening. It passed into the Chevesky and settled on the floor. Joan and Tom waited in the control room for SIMPOC to meet them and escort them through the airlock on one side of the hall between Dr. Shappel's area and the Chevesky control room.

Tom and Joan tried to remain inconspicuous as they watched through a small portal. The guests entered through the airlock and stood in the hall. One of them was carrying a small container about the size of a briefcase. SIMPOC had placed storage lockers along the wall, and they took off their pressure suits and stored them. While they removed them, they looked around and definitely spent time looking at the armed cow robots that SIMPOC had placed in the racks just beyond the windows. Tom and Joan recognized Zellock and Veenor, but they had a third creature with them. Judging by the flowing robes and deference they paid, the third member was higher ranking than either of them. It wasn't clear what sex the third member was because it wore an elaborate headdress. It was about the same size as Zellock and Veenor but moved with a definite grace. When all three of them had removed their suits, SIMPOC indicated for them to follow him.

They followed SIMPOC into the airlock, which SIMPOC had modified and expanded for up to five people of average size to move through. It wasn't functional, now that SIMPOC had built the hall to Professor Shappel's area, but they still had to pass through the doors.

Joan swung the wheel on her side of the hatch, and the door swung open. Zellock and Veenor immediately entered then lined up on either side of the door, providing some kind of escort to the third member of the group to enter. They bowed their heads slightly as the 3rd Terest gracefully moved into the control room.

"Veenor, Zellock. I'd like to welcome you to the ESC Chevesky," Joan said, and SIMPOC translated to their language after he entered.

Suddenly noise similar to their language came out of the small briefcase that Zellock carried.

Zellock turned and bowed to the third guest, then Zellock responded, saying in Terest and translated by SIMPOC.

“Please allow me to introduce our supervisor, Mexar.”

“I’m pleased to meet you Mexar, this is my husband Tom, and this mobile unit is called SIMPOC. I want to welcome you to our ship,” Joan said.

Zellock then added, “Your mobile device is doing an excellent job with our language. We have also brought a translation unit. Often when two languages are used, there are important subtleties that can be lost in translation. Like your mobile unit, our translation device will attempt to translate your language into ours. We will be able to compare your interpretation and translation with ours. Over time, we may both find a simpler way to communicate, but this is the best method at this time.”

Joan replied, “We agree, translating language is a challenge, and both of us need to recognize that. So please follow me, and we have prepared some nourishment that we have created based on what we were served on our visit to your ship.”

Tom led the way, and Mexar followed slowly, with Veenor and Zellock on either side and slightly behind. Joan and SIMPOC followed the small group into the meeting room, where the refreshments were on a table along the right wall.

Tom and Joan took the lead and took some of the human foods and drinks while observing Mexar, Zellock, and Veenor.

“Zellock and Veenor remained on either side of Mexar and would point to each selection and see what the response was. The response must have been subtle because Joan and Tom couldn’t see if the item was acceptable or not until they moved to the next item. Finally, Veenor picked up a piece of synthetic fruit that SIMPOC had created based on the chemistry they saw on their visit. Mexar tasted it and then finished the small portion.

Each of them turned immediately and walked to the meeting table.

Tom and Joan waited on one side while their guests were seated, then they sat, and SIMPOC remained standing behind them.

It was up to Joan to begin the discussion, so she began, “It is fortunate that we’ve been able to meet again. I’m sure that speaking to each other will

help us understand each other. Eventually, both of us will find benefits to our mutual friendship. We are representing the leadership of our world. Mexar, please clarify your role in these discussions."

SIMPOC provided his translation; then, the Terest translation box provided its version.

The new guest spoke for the first time, and its voice was definitely different from that of either Veenor or Zellock.

SIMPOC translated, "I am also pleased that our two peoples can meet again. I am also a representative of my leadership. Veenor and Zellok are within my responsibilities. We, too, would like to increase our understanding of each other. We also hope that increasing that understanding will be beneficial to both of our races."

Joan wanted to clear the air and reach a better understanding of who she was talking with.

"Mexar, I am a female of our species; we are made up of males and females. Within our species, it is the females that bear the young. How is it with your people?"

"It is the same, I am female, and Veenor and Zellock are male. Before we go any further, it should be noted that you entered our space first. Please provide us an explanation of why you were there?"

Joan suspected that a question like that was inevitable, but she was surprised that it came up so early in the discussion. Bringing it up so early was slightly confrontational. Joan was prepared to answer.

"We were traveling and exploring. We were traveling to other systems, and we stopped in yours. There was no hostile intent; it was merely an attempt to discover who our neighbors are. When we entered, we found that you were engaged in hostile conflict with others. When we discovered that, we left your system as soon as we were able. We were fired upon, and we were able to avoid being damaged? Did you fire upon us?"

Joan thought their direct question should be answered with a direct question, which would help set the discussion tone. The direct question caught them off-guard, and the hesitation before the answer was noticeable.

“Yes, there were some missiles sent towards this ship. We sent two of them. Perhaps we are both fortunate that you were able to outmaneuver them and escape.”

“Perhaps so. Can I ask what the nature of the conflict was? Were you being invaded?” Asked Joan.

Again, there was a noticeable pause, and it was clear that Mexar was choosing her words carefully.

“There is conflict in our system which you don’t need to be concerned with. We are here to discuss other matters.”

One of the first rules of diplomacy is to push until they push back. The Terest had just pushed back.

“That is acceptable to us. We aren’t in conflict with you or the other side of your conflict. We are peaceful and want to remain neutral.

“Peaceful, this is a warship. We saw your armed devices when we boarded.”

“Yes, this ship is able to defend itself. This ship has many units, most of which are for exploration, those are for defense. They have never been used as an offensive weapon.”

Joan knew that statement to be true, although misleading.

“This is a large ship and appears to have many abilities. Our sensors tell us that your systems are working very hard and that you have a large amount of energy at your disposal. I also notice that you have a crew of robotic creatures.”

“Yes, this ship is made for exploration, and we have many systems to help achieve that objective. Again, I will make it clear. It can defend itself, but that is not the purpose of our systems. Yes, we do have some robots assisting us in our travels. We have found them to be efficient, and they make significant contributions to our efforts.”

Even though Bob and his sensor had gotten nothing about their ship’s abilities, Joan took a stab, “We see that your ship also has numerous abilities which we are wondering about.”

Joan knew that they were taking a shot in the dark, but they didn't know what Joan and Tom 'didn't' know.

"Ours is not designed for exploration. When we came to your system, we didn't know what we would find. Like your ship, ours can defend itself."

"I understand that. It is prudent for both of us to proceed with caution. We have no desire to attack you; as I said before, we are a peaceful race that will only defend itself. We are interested in working with our friends and developing a beneficial relationship for both of us. I will direct my computers to share information about our species and society. I would like to receive a similar summary of information regarding yours if that is acceptable?"

"That would be appreciated, and we will reciprocate. I would also like to invite you to return at some point in the future, and we can have the next meeting in our system."

"That would be very interesting, and we look forward to that meeting. As a first step towards developing better relations, is there something we can offer you now?"

"Yes, there is something we would like to discuss."

"Excellent, what is your question?"

"We have noticed that the vast majority of your activities are within the inner three planets. Beyond those, you have gas giants similar to ours. We have been unable to mine key minerals from our larger planets because the gravity is too strong. You have an outer gas giant with lower gravity and one that we could mine key elements from. If you are not currently mining that planet, we would like to have the opportunity."

"This is a good opportunity to introduce another member of my crew. He is our expert on our planets and will be a good source of information."

Joan's statement was met with a gesture where Mexar showed both hands with her palms up. Joan accepted that motion as an agreement.

“Professor Shappel, please come to the meeting,” Joan announced over her commlink.

“Be right there,” was Bob’s response.

Within 30 seconds, he strode into the meeting room and was introduced to the Terest guests.

“Professor Shappel, our guests have told us that mining the large gas giants in their solar system is not practical because of their high gravity. They have asked for permission to mine one of ours.”

“Which one are you interested in?” Bob asked.

“It is the seventh planet from your sun,” replied Mexar.

“We call that planet Uranus, and we are considering mining it for the same reasons. Our other large gas giants have significant gravity, and we would have to go too deep into that gravity to get enough of the gas that we want,” Professor Shappel responded.

“Mexar, your request will be taken into consideration, and we’ll try to give you a response during our next meeting,” Joan said.

“Thank you. Is there something that you’d like to ask about?” Mexar asked Joan.

Joan thought for a moment, then responded, “Yes. As I said, we are exploring. We would like to traverse your system when we jump to other systems in your region.”

“That request will be considered, and we’ll let you know our decision during our next visit.”

“I have one other issue that I would like information on. As I said, we are a peaceful race, and I’m concerned about the conflict that we saw as we passed through your system,” Joan said, realizing that she might be pushing too far.

Mexar was obviously considering her response. She waited, then spoke, “That conflict is our responsibility and should be of no concern to you.”

Joan expected her question to be deflected so, she accepted it with a straight face and said, “You have followed us to our system. We are concerned that the other side of the conflict may come to our system. As I said before, we want to remain neutral, and we don’t want either side to perceive that we’re helping the other.”

It was a valid concern that needed to be brought up. Joan expected it to cause consternation within the Terest, so she waited for them to debate the issue for a few minutes before responding.

After a pause, Mexar responded, “That is an appropriate concern. We are not in a position to prevent the Izod from entering your system. We do not want to see our conflict involve others. Unfortunately, we will consider anyone that helps the Izod to be their friend and not ours.”

The veiled threat wasn’t missed by Joan, but the answer appeared honest. “Thank you for your answer. Unfortunately, the Izod may feel the same way as you. That is our dilemma.”

“I think this has been a very productive meeting, and I suggest that we agree to a date for the next meeting,” responded Mexar.

“I agree; we can plan for another meeting; SIMPOC, please coordinate a date with their computer.”

“Acknowledged.”

Within a few moments, the calendars were synchronized between the two computers, and the meeting ended. Mexar and her companions rose and walked to the control room exit. Neither of the subordinates spoke to their leader. When they reached the door, they turned, crossed their arms, and bowed slightly. Tom, Joan, and SIMPOC did the same.

“I think that meeting went well,” Tom said after their guests left the room.

“I think so, but there is something about them that bothers me,” Joan said.

“Could it be because they’re aliens,” Tom pointed out.

Return to Earth After Second Terest Meeting

After the Terest ship had left, the Chevesky powered up and headed for Earth. The tension on the ship was replaced by a certain amount of optimism.

“Wow, we’re working out a relationship with an alien race. Who would have thought?” Tom commented.

“Hon, I know it sounds exciting, but I have reservations,” Joan said.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry,” Tom said, both to help his wife relax and primarily because he was hungry.

“Joan, Tom, I have asked Beta 1 to prepare another meal for you. If you’d like to relax, his meal is scheduled to be complete in 32 minutes.”

“That is the best news,” Joan said. “I want to take a shower.”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Tom and Joan finally settled themselves at a table and were talking through the day’s events when Beta 1 entered. Joan looked up and exploded with laughter. Tom saw her response and looked at the Beta unit carrying in their food. He was wearing a chef’s hat, along with an apron which said, “Man Make Fire, Women Bring Beer.”

“SIMPOC, where did you get that apron?” Joan asked.

“In my research, all notable chefs wear cooking aprons. I located that one in an outdoor cooking appliance store near the base. Is it not appropriate?”

“SIMPOC, it’s fine, just sexist,” Joan responded.

“To which sex?”

“Probably, a little to both,” Tom responded.

Thursday, October 19, 2051

Develop Terest Strategy

"Joan, Tom, Bob, SIMPOC, I'm glad you come back to the surface to update us on your meeting with the Terest, there is something I want to say to you, and I'd prefer to say it with you here instead of just a voice over a radio," said President Patterson.

"Sir, we always prefer to be here in person. With the shuttles that we have, it's like driving to another neighborhood," added Joan.

The President continued, "Yes, they do make things easy. Anyway, what I wanted to say is that I appreciate the risks that you three have taken. You have led the human race into a new period; we are now space travelers. I wish I were younger, and my expertise was technical, but it isn't. Admiral Hagerly and I have a huge task in front of us; we have the world to rebuild. We have perhaps a hundred thousand people to protect and provide for. We have talked, and we know our limitations. Nial and I will focus on the people of the United States. That means that we need you and Tom to focus on our relationships with the alien races you're dealing with. With that in mind, I've created a new position. Fortunately, I don't need the approval of Congress. I've put a lot of thought into what the title should be, and I've decided on the title of Inter-Planetary Secretary of State. What do you think? I think it has a nice ring to it."

Joan was sitting, and to say she was shocked was an understatement; she just sat there until Tom poked her.

"You can close your mouth now and answer the president."

"I'm sorry, sir, I never expected that."

"I suspected that it would be a surprise. You, Tom, and SIMPOC have made all the negotiations with alien races, and I couldn't think of anyone better suited. Please say yes."

“Of course, sir…I mean, of course, I’ll take the job,” Joan said with a ton of excitement in her voice.

“Okay, now that you’re my interplanetary representative, what did you and the Terest talk about?”

“Sir, we kept it simple. The two Terest that we met before were there. They brought a female whom they said was their leader. I didn’t want to give too much as you suggested. We agreed to have our computers share cultural information, then we asked them what they wanted.”

“And…”

“Sir, they asked for permission to mine rare elements from Uranus.”

Bob felt a need to jump in, “Yes, sir. They have two gas giants that are larger than ours. The gravity of those giant planets makes it almost impossible for a ship to get deep enough to be effective and yet have enough thrust to escape the gravity. We’ve always assumed that we’d have the same problems with our two giants. They asked to mine Uranus because its gravity is manageable, and a ship can get deep enough to be effective.”

“Sir, we told them that we’d think it over and let them know during our next meeting.”

“Joan, a little advice, no diplomat ever asks for what they want on the first request. Generally, they’re trying to feel you out and see how far they can go,” explained the president.

Joan was uncomfortable and hoping that she hadn’t given them too much.

“I suspect their real intent is to get a permanent group of ships in our system, and if they do that, it would only be natural for them to want a military ship or two to protect their interests. It will also give them an excellent vantage point from which they can monitor us. You’ve heard the story of the camel and the tent?”

“No sir, I haven’t,” Joan replied.

“The tribesman in the desert would never let the camel put his nose in the tent, regardless of the weather. If they did, then after a while, the entire

camel would get in. It's the same with politics when anyone asks for a little; you have to be prepared for them to ask for more."

"Sir, what do we do?" Joan asked, sensing that there was a lot to learn about being a diplomat.

"Here's a suggestion," Admiral Hagerly said, "we have thousands of supply ships. SIMPOC, can you modify a dozen so they could mine the gas on Uranus?"

"Yes, sir, that can be done," responded SIMPOC.

"Great if we can do that, then we do the mining and deliver it to them. That way, we keep them out of our system, and we have an excuse to visit theirs. We do to them what we think they want to do to us."

"Nial sounds like a possible answer. Work something up, please," directed the president.

"Okay, Joan, what else?" the president asked.

"Sir, they asked if we wanted anything, and I asked to transit their space while we explore other systems in their region."

"Not bad," the President said. "If they end up with ships in our system, then we have ships in theirs. Sort of a quid pro quo set-up. If we work this out, I don't want just one ship transiting their system; I want a Capital Ship along with a hand full of supply ships and maybe one of the Battleships that we've been talking about. We need to be going along with them, just for protection, you understand."

Joan and Tom nodded, understanding the point the president was making. Make sure there is a balance and always a 'Plan B.'

"What else did you learn?"

"Judging from the way the three of them interacted, there was a definite leader - subservient relationship. She wasn't clear on how high up within the Terest leadership she was, but she didn't seem to hesitate during our discussion."

“Both sides postured about our military’s capabilities. I expressed our desire to remain neutral. I pressed her a couple of times about the conflict. I emphasized that we’re concerned that if they followed us back, then there was a risk the Izod would do the same. She gave me a nice political answer, and I think she made a veiled threat. She said that anyone that helped the Izod wouldn’t be their friend. I responded by saying the same, anyone that helped the Terest would be considered not a friend to the Izod.”

“Good comeback. Being neutral is always a delicate balance,” said the president.

“When are you meeting again?” the president asked.

“SIMPOC synced our clocks with theirs, and we’ll meet with them in 9.6 days from now.”

“Good, Admiral, please put together a set of options for Joan. I don’t want them to have an advantage, and we need to keep them in the dark regarding our abilities. They don’t need to know the details except that we have thousands of ships.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Joan, I’m glad we changed direction on the Rail-Guns. The last group that came into the system used a jump point in the Mars orbit. If someone comes in through that point that isn’t friendly, a Rail-Gun there could give them a real surprise when they come out of the jump point or when they’re maneuvering to it. With this certain amount of concern between the Terest and us, the Mars gun might be a surprise,” Admiral Hagerly said.

“Sir, that might turn out to be very productive. The angle of the ships entering through those jump points is determined before they enter our system. When they enter, their velocity can be varied, as indicated by the Terest entry. Still, if we know their entry based upon the Gama radiation burst, a gun on Mars can fill the entry location with lead. That will give them a lot to think about regardless of their entry velocity,” pointed out Bob.

“Well then, let’s get going and get a gun there ASAP,” the president said.

Dessert Beach wants to Return

After Joan finished making her sandwich in the Langley O'club, Bill Thompson and his wife, Sarah, approached her, "Joan, Tom. The Desert Beach crew has been talking," Bill said.

"Okay, can we find a good place to sit before we get into it?" Tom asked.

"Sure can; how about the patio?" Bill responded.

"Okay, what have you got," Joan said after she found a nice table with a view of the water, and she sat pulling her chair up to a table.

Joan and Tom took a bite while Bill started, "Some of us have expertise that can be used here, but many of us would like to go back to the moon and get it going again. It had become such a large part of our lives; we'd like to head back. If there are robots in orbit and on the ground, there is a lot that we could do. Besides, we have people pouring into Norfolk every day, and some of them want to go to the moon with us. Once we establish contact with some of the other population centers, there will be other people who might want to go."

"Bill, I don't know. I think we need to talk it over with the President. We need people here, and it seems like staffing the moon colony again might be a luxury."

"Joan, from another perspective, the moon makes sense from a tactical position. Maybe we can set something up in case we get into another conflict. Besides, if some other creature enters the system, I'd hate to have them set up an advanced post on the moon. If we have some people there, keeping an eye on things, we would see if they tried that."

"Now, that is a good point. I wonder what kind of weapons we could set up. It sure would be a surprise to someone that was attacking Earth."

"Joan, the same point could be made regarding Mars. It is possible that an attacking force would take up residence on Mars.

“Bill, for your information, we’ve already decided to place a Rail-Gun on Mars. The Terest entered from a point near their orbit, so we decided that would be a good place for a weapon.”

Joan thought for a moment, then added, “I think it would make tactical sense to have a couple of outposts on the Moon and Mars. For many reasons, but at least to keep an eye on things.”

“Extra Rail-Guns or Laser Cannons would help too,” Bill pointed out.

Talk to President about the Moon Colony

After lunch, Joan took the opportunity to bring up Bill Thompson’s idea with the president. She was lucky and caught him and Admiral Hagerly sitting on the back patio of the O’club.

“Mr. President, can I have a few minutes?”

“Yes, Joan, what is it?”

“Sir, this is Bill Thompson and his wife, Dr. Sarah Thompson. Bill was the moon base commander, and Sarah was the moon base Medical Officer. Bill, Sarah, this is President Patterson, and this is Admiral Nial Hagerly, who was the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs. I’ll let Bill explain his thoughts.”

The president and Admiral shook their hands and invited them to sit with them and enjoy the view. Joan, Bill, and Sarah sat, and the president poured some iced tea for them.

“Mr. President, Admiral. I’ve been talking with the other team members from Desert Beach. When the virus spread and Joan had to shut down the Oasis, we were left without any support. Our long-term survival was unlikely. We decided to take our lifeboats back to Earth. Now the situation has changed a great deal, and we think there are good reasons to go back to the moon. There are a lot of rare elements that we can obtain on the moon that I think will be critical. Aside from mining the rare elements, I think there is a strategic benefit to what I’m going to suggest.”

“Go ahead, Bill, I’m listening,” President Patterson said.

“There are 11 Capital Ships, including Joan’s. In the past, the distance between Earth and the moon was a barrier, and the distance to Mars was almost insurmountable. These ships and those of any potential attacker can cover those distances in a short time now; the distance is almost not relevant anymore. Now that one Capital Ship has been assigned to the moon and Mars along with the appropriate number of supply ships, I think the holes have been filed. I know there are already supply ships and cow robots in the moon’s and Mars’s orbits, so only a few will need to be moved. With the manufacturing ability of the Capital Ships and the supply ships and robots, both the moon and Mars could be made into substantial outposts that will provide a key buffer in the case of attack. If Earth is attacked, the resources from the moon and Mars can lend support from other directions.”

“Bill, some of what you say makes sense, but there are also problems. True, we’ll need some of the elements from the moon and Mars. We already have some of the cow robots mining key materials. True having a remotely armed site might have some advances, but I have concerns. You and Mars will be almost defenseless; with only one Capital Ship, you won’t have much defense, and we’ll have two out of our 10 ships out in space by themselves. It would be easy to take them out; then we’d be down to nine. Other alternatives should work. Normally the first rule in war is not to split your forces. Generally, that applies if you can’t regroup when you’re attacked. SIMPOC, how much warning will we get if an attacking force enters our system?”

“Admiral, there are many factors. If their navigation system is very accurate, they could enter our system near Earth’s orbit, although that would be a risky maneuver. Most likely, the closest they would enter our system would be just beyond the moon’s orbit.”

“Mr. President, there are two scenarios, if they can enter the system at Earth’s orbit, we’ll be outgunned immediately, and the fight will be over. If we take SIMPOC’s estimate as accurate, we could split our forces between Earth and the moon. In fact, in that scenario, if they did enter near-Earth, the force from the moon could attack from a different direction.”

“Admiral, you’re suggesting that setting the moon up and putting half the Capital Ships in moon’s orbit is a good plan?” the president asked.

“Yes, sir, I think so,” Admiral Hagerly answered.

“I just thought of something,” Bill said. “We have a Rail-Gun to launch the ore we mine, and we used it to launch the lifeboats. If we could put a couple of the super Rail-Guns in the right locations, we could fire a lot of projectiles at ships in Earth’s orbit. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think the current mass projectiles can change their trajectory by up to 10 degrees. Over that distance, we should be able to cover all Earth.”

“With the current gun design, we’re getting 10,000 mph, so it will take 25 hours to get to orbit?” Admiral Hagerly pointed out.

“Yes, sir. That’s a long time, but having chunks of metal targeting your ship will sure give them something to think about,” said Bill. “Also, remember the moon is locked by the Earth’s gravity, so the Rail-Gun is always pointed in the right direction.

“Admiral, I have something to add. The limitation of rail guns is twofold. The amount of energy used and the wear on the launch rails. I have found metals within the capabilities of the Capital Ships that I think will significantly improve their performance. My preliminary estimates are that a rail gun on the moon's surface or Mars could reach 100,000 mph. At that speed, a well-timed projectile could reach a ship in orbit after it comes out from the backside of Earth. I would like permission to modify our plan, based on Rail-Guns with the alien materials.”

“Good idea, SIMPOC. If we can use it on the Moon, we might be able to mount them on some of the Capital or Battleships,” directed the Admiral.

“Admiral, I doubt the design that I’m considering would be suitable for a spacecraft. A key feature of the design is the length of the rails. On the Moon and Mars, we aren’t limited, and the rail length can be considerable.”

“I understand, but using alien material should count for something,” the admiral pointed out.

“Sir, if my concepts work, I’ll integrate the materials into the Rail-Guns on our ships,” SIMPOC responded.

“What about Mars? We have a colony currently trapped there? It has been pointed out that the Terest entered our system through a point near Mars, and if others’ come through that point, an advanced Rail-Gun using alien technology on Mars could have a high priority.” Joan commented.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but we know there are supply ships in orbit and cow robots on the surface. I’m sorry to say but, I don’t see dedicating too much manufacturing to Mars is a good idea. We could help them with manufacturing, and we’ve already installed a standard Rail-Gun. I do believe that any manufacturing for an advanced Rail-Gun on Mars is important, but I don’t want to delay arming the Capital Ships. The Groups come first, then the Moon, and lastly Mars. In the meantime, we can schedule a Capital Ship to ferry people and parts back and forth, but I don’t think committing too many resources to Mars is the right thing to do,” observed the Admiral.

“Sir, I’ve been able to work out manufacturing schedules that allow the manufacturing of Rail-Guns to have a small impact on production. They use similar power supplies as the laser guns, and we only have to manufacture the rails using the alien technology. The rails with the alien technology have little impact on the production schedule,” pointed out SIMPOC.

“That’s good news, thanks, SIMPOC. We have to remember we have two objectives: to protect Earth and prepare for a future conflict. I agree to split our forces between Earth and the moon’s orbits. I also agree to share the manufacturing with Mars and the moon to upgrade their Rail-Guns, and we could schedule one Capital Ship to go to Mars every week. Aside from that, they’ll have to make do with the supply ships and robots they currently have. Any questions or comments?” the president asked.

There were none.

“Now I have a question,” President Patterson said.

“Can we repair the ships we have? Can we use the manufacturing to make more ships?” the president’s question was met with silence.

“Apparently, your silence means the answer is either no, or we don’t know,” the president stated. “If that’s the case, I think we need to figure it

out.”

10 Nautical Miles East of the Entrance to the Chesapeake Bay

“The submarine was running silently as it approached the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Going was slow because the water was hot. It was actively ‘pinged’ by at least six ships. There was so much noise in the water from the active sonar it was hard to pick up the sources. Reluctantly the ship’s captain had to move to his fallback plan.

Return to Oasis

“Seems like things are starting to come together,” Tom said to Joan as they rode in the shuttle back to the Chevesky. “Wow, I’m married to the Inter-Planetary Secretary of State. Can I get some business cards made up?” he asked.

“Don’t spend our money,” Joan responded.

“Tom, Oasis is passing under the Chevesky in about two hours. I think this is a good time to take the shuttle and check it out,” Joan said.

“Why do we need to go back there?” Tom asked.

“There is some stuff I’d like to get, and besides, it reminds me of simpler times. It would be nice to pay it a visit and make sure that it has been shut down properly and is still in good shape.”

“Okay, by me, I’ll tell the Group Commanders, and I’ve got some things to do. It will take us a good hour to maneuver from the Chevesky to a good intercept point.”

“Okay, we’ll leave early.”

The shuttle ride from the Chevesky, which was still parked in geosynchronous orbit at about 26,000 miles above Earth, wasn't a long trip down to the Oasis orbit of 155 miles. Because of the difference in relative velocities, it would take some maneuvering to align with the Oasis, change orbits, fall in behind it, and gradually catch up.

After some fun flying by Tom, they were stable in the same orbit as Oasis and only about 50 feet from her.

“I wish we had compatible docking ports, but that is too much to hope for. Let’s get our suits sealed; then I’ll pop the hatch. You go out first while tethered to me; then, after you have your tether moved to the outside hooks, I’ll come out. Then we can launch to the Oasis,” Tom reminded Joan.

She nodded and closed her helmet with a twist. It took a few seconds for Tom to close up and for the computers to sync up.

“Are you ready,” Tom asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’m popping the hatch,” Tom said.

They took their time with the transfer of the lanyards, but once it was done, they were holding onto the outside of the hatch with both tethers securely attached.

“You sure you set the parking brake real well on this thing?” she asked her husband.

“Yes, dear. We’re all set. Are you ready?”

Joan nodded, and they pushed off the shuttle with a gentle nudge, then began to use their maneuvering packs to fine-tune the trajectory to the airlock onboard the Oasis. They were quiet, and all they could hear was their breathing. Unlike the suits on the moon or Mars, where the intercom was silenced and a person couldn’t hear their own breathing, the extravehicular suits allowed the noise of their breaths. It wasn’t clear to everyone why that felt better, but it did. Perhaps over the years, they had realized how alone they were in space, and at least the sound of their breathing fought off the isolation.

After a few minutes of maneuvering, they grabbed onto the handholds by the exterior of the Oasis airlock. Tom maneuvered in first because he was larger, then Joan slipped in behind him. The door closed when Tom pressed the button, and the gauges began moving towards full pressurization.

Joan paid attention to the pressure inside the station and pointed the indicator to Tom. “I guess there aren’t too many leaks,” she pointed out.

He smiled, and when the pressures were equal, they popped the door and swung inside. They had entered through one of the airlocks between Docks A and B, so they were still weightless while in the docking bay at the center of rotation for the giant space station.

“Let’s keep the suits on until we’ve made a look-see of the ship,” Joan suggested.

Tom nodded and as they moved to one of the CATS tubes connecting the center docking station to the outer ring. They tried to squeeze into the one-man lift without any hesitation, but because of the bulk of their suits, they couldn’t.

“Ladies first,” Tom said as he pointed to the lift.

Joan smiled and climbed on board.

After the lift had carried Joan to the outer ring, it came back for Tom. As they passed through the CATS towards the outer ring, the gravity began to take effect.

“The old girl is in pretty good shape. I’m glad you left her pressurized,” Tom said. “Which direction do you want to go?” he asked.

“Doesn’t make a difference. Let’s make a circuit and make sure everything is shut down properly, then we’ll head back to our quarters. I think I’ve still got some good food in the freezer.”

“Sounds like a deal,” Tom said as he bounded off up rotation with Joan following close behind.

The inspection went well. All the key systems were shut down properly, and the ones needed to keep the station habitable were all functioning well.

There were no issues, and the discussion between them related only to systems and shut down requirements until they reached the area where their crew was isolated from the virus.

“When they had performed the burial rights, they didn’t take much time actually looking at the quarters. The crew took their personal items from the ship as they moved into quarantine, and each of the sections still had their personal effects. The walls were covered with pictures of wives, children, and girlfriends. Joan and Tom took the time to look at all of them. It was a show of respect for the crew and their loss. After all, if those pictures were important to them, then they should be looked at.

“We should leave all this exactly as we found it,” Tom said.

“I like that idea,” Joan responded.

After they paid due respects to the lost crew members, Joan and Tom finally made it to their old quarters.

“I can’t promise a 5-star dinner, but I think I can put something together. I wish we had a bottle of good wine,” Joan said as she opened the freezer.

“Don’t worry, it’s not the liquor, it’s the company,” Tom said after he reached her and put his arms around her the best he could with the suits still on.

“How about we take these things off?” He asked.

“Okay, by me,” Joan responded.

“Let’s stay here tonight?” Joan whispered as he kissed her neck.

“Sounds like a great idea,” Tom said before he went back to kissing.

Morning Sun on Oasis

Joan rolled over in bed, and for the longest time, she was disoriented. The room was almost totally dark but yet familiar. She was concerned for a

few seconds until she remembered where they were. She rolled to her left and said, “Open screen.”

“The room suddenly exploded with the reflected light from the rotating Earth below them. The light was brilliant, and even Joan’s eyes were hurting, but the sight was still something that took her breath away. It wasn’t too long ago that waking to Earth’s bright sun through the window was the normal way to wake up, but so much had changed since then.

“Do you have any idea how much that hurts?” Tom asked as he covered his eyes and rolled over.

“I don’t care. It’s still the best way in the world to wake up.

“Second best,” Tom said as he rolled over and grabbed her.

20 minutes later, they laid together in each other’s arms and just looked out the window at Earth.

“Almost looks normal, doesn’t it?” Tom asked.

“If only it were,” Joan responded.

“Tom, we’ve got to talk.”

Her husband took a deep breath and looked at his wife. She had one of those, ‘What I’m going to say is important,’ looks. So, he sat up and gave her his full attention.

“I’m pregnant.”

Friday, October 20, 2051

Return to Desert Beach

Joan and Tom returned to Earth; they both had a lot to think about. They knew that they were scheduled to take Bill, Sarah, and the Desert Beach personnel back to the moon, and they decided to keep their information to themselves.

“Boy, do I wish that we had a couple of these things when we started Dessert Beach. No rockets, no staging, no weight limitations. Hell, we could have had the moon base set up over a weekend.”

“Bill, we could have made the base a resort and brought up weekenders,” Tom replied as he maneuvered the shuttle to a landing site near the dual-rail launcher.

“You better get your suits on so you can walk to the air-locks,” Bill suggested.

The landing went smoothly, and the last of the suits were buttoned up. Tom popped the hatch on the shuttle, and the first of the returning moon residents stepped back on the moon's surface.

“Tom, Joan, take your time. You may have tons of hours in space, but the first steps on the surface will be a challenge. Take your time, and make cautious steps. One of us will be on either side of you in case you trip. These suits are built differently than yours, and it will take a bit to get used to them.”

When Joan and Tom set foot on the moon, Bill said, “Welcome to our little planet.”

The group made their way to the airlocks. There wasn’t much to be said; each knew the challenge of walking on the moon and getting familiar with the suits.

Bill led the group towards the airlocks and noticed the same remote units that he had left such a short time ago. They were still plugged into their outlets, waiting for new orders. The station looked no different than if he had just left; there wasn't any wind, so nothing had moved since he turned out the lights.

The door to the airlock worked perfectly, and the first four of the group entered and waited for the pressurization to build. The other landing party members had gone to airlocks that were further away, and they were entering the moon colony at the other locations.

"Okay, hold tight for a while. It will take 20 minutes to pressurize this section. Then another 30 minutes to finish the station," Bill said, and he changed the settings on the environmental controls.

After 20 minutes, Bill said, "You can take off the helmets. We're pretty close to standard pressure," Bill said as he popped the pressure seal on his suit and began to take it off.

Joan and Tom did the same, and in 30 minutes, they had put on a pot of coffee and were getting a quick tour of the facility.

"Bill, as we said, putting a Capital Ship in lunar orbit for a while will get those rail guns up and running in a few days. It is amazing how fast the Capital Ships can manufacture."

"I think a couple of Rail-Guns will perform well here. If we can meet SIMPOC's expectations, we'll be able to fire some impressive chunks of iron," Bill said.

The rear hatch to the room they were in opened, and Sarah came in.

"Hon, the rest of the facility looks pretty good. We've got a couple of micrometeorite impacts but nothing serious. We'll have them patched in no time."

"I didn't see any of those cow robots around here," Bill said.

"SIMPOC did a survey and passed the data; he says there are 8 supply ships in orbit and 160 units on the surface. He's programmed them to find the resources needed for the Capital Ship to make the Rail-Guns; I doubt

you'll see them until after they've done their scavenging, which shouldn't take too long. Then he'll change the programming so you can control them. You can use them to start building the tunnels like Ophelia is doing on Mars. Who knows, you'll be able to move underground in a week or two."

"I don't know, Joan, about the underground thing," Sarah said. "I know that it's safer and all that, but I'll miss the view."

"Don't worry, dear, I'll let you on the surface once in a while," Bill said, just before she threw an empty coffee cup at him.

"Will you have any problems taking in the volunteers that are interested in coming here?" Tom asked.

"I don't think so. We'll be able to use them in the labs, and when we get some tunnels underway, they can stay below ground most of the time. The real risks are when someone goes on the surface. In the past, the danger was the trip here. Now that we have the Capital Ships and shuttles, we can bring anyone who wants to come, as long as they can contribute to what we do. This is opening up a whole new era of moon exploration."

"Sounds optimistic," Joan said as she walked to the large window over the command console and glanced at the lunar landscape.

Langley-Eustis Command Center

"Now that we've set up a rotating schedule where the 5 Capital Ships stay in Earth orbit for a week, then four of them will rotate to the moon for a week, and 2 will transit to Mars for a week. This will work out to give coverage to everyone and still have the majority of ships either in the moon/Earth area or in transit to or from Mars. This will also maximize the use of the manufacturing facilities to support the sites and build new weapons for Earth's fleet. Do you have any questions?" Admiral Monson asked.

"No Admiral, thanks," responded the president.

“Mr. President, the last item on the agenda is the status of our burgeoning population. Since our arrival, our Hampton Roads community has increased significantly. We’re getting between 100 and 150 people per day. The word of us being here seems to be spreading faster as we’re getting the word out. As one person comes here from the North East, they tell five people while they travel, and those five people are telling others. Right now, we have a population of 19,343 people. We’re getting an excellent mix of mechanics, teachers, doctors, lawyers, carpenters; pretty much all the disciplines that a healthy community needs to develop.”

“Eddy, Nial, I want something made perfectly clear to our new arrivals. We are a democracy, but we aren’t running as one yet. We have many problems that need to be solved, and everyone’s welfare, health, and housing are the first priorities. Remember to help everyone organize our structure of advisory committees and tribunals. I want to make sure that everyone feels that their voice is being heard. When they ask about voting, I know that it is hard to say ‘not yet,’ but it will occur once we have homes and food on the table. We will return to a representative government. Until that point, everyone is expected to contribute their time and their skills to help rebuild our world.”

“Sir, there are a lot of questions that people still have about what happened, where the robots came from, how the virus started, and what is happening in space,” pointed out Eddy.

“Yes, I’m sure there are. We need to continue with the periodic briefings to have people answer the questions and explain what’s happening. How are we doing on getting a TV broadcast up or another type of mass communication?”

“Sir, we should have the TV channel online in a day or two. We’re already spreading the word that it is coming and to prepare for the first broadcast.”

“Great, book me a slot.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Submarine Moving South off the coast of Virginia Beach, Va.

“The submarine captain had no choice, the only way he could accomplish his part of the mission was to avoid the active pinging at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay.

The best way to drop his cargo was to make a wide circle around Hampton Roads and Virginia Beach and head south. The best option was to turn south of Cape Hatteras and drop his cargo along the Outer Banks. Once he made the turn, the landmass would shield his ship from the active sonar up the coast.

By the time the submarine reached the target location, the sun was already an hour below the horizon. There was little chance that anyone would notice his actions. He was confident that his cargo would make it to shore easily using the silent electric motors. The small craft could easily cover 3-4 nautical miles and place them on the beach without a sound.

South of Cape Hatteras

Jianyu Cheng, a proud member of the Chinese PLA Special Operations Branch, stood on the beach just southwest of Cape Hatteras. He took a deep breath of sea air, and his thoughts went back three years when he graduated from George Washington University with a degree in American History. This was his first time returning to American soil, and this was his most important mission.

“Murry, hurry up and get ashore. We need to hide that raft,” Captain Jianyu said to his subordinate.

“Yes, Peter,” said PLA Chief Sergeant Huizhong Déwei.

PLA Aiguo Kang helped his friend Murry pull the small boat ashore and hide it in some coastal brush. “Peter, the boat has been hidden,” Murry said

once the last of the brush was moved.

“Leon, you and Murry, find a car; there should be plenty of them around. I want to get on Rte. 12 and get to our destination well before sunrise,” directed Peter.

The coastal community seemed to have at least one car in each of the driveways. They were all well hidden from each other, and it took only a few minutes to find one, hot-wire it and start their journey. They didn’t know exactly where they were going, but they had a general idea.

Driving North Heading into Virginia Beach

“The trip north went easy. There was only one road, Route 12, that went the full length of the Outer Banks. Staying on it brought them to Virginia Beach from the south.

Peter, Murry, and Leon would fit in well. They were educated in different colleges in the United States. They didn’t have any accents, and even though they had some minor Chinese characteristics, they looked more like Americans. They could easily pass as citizens.

Nurturing Chinese loyalists was part of the long-term Chinese plan. Send them to the US, get them educated, encourage them to ‘fit in,’ learn the language and customs. Someday they would be put to use by the People’s Republic. Today was their time, their time to bring things into balance.

The three men, Peter, Murry, and Leon, weren’t told about the situation the world faced. They were aware, of course, of the virus, but they knew little about its outcome. They knew nothing of the Earth’s Space Command, and in particular, they didn’t know that some of the remaining Chinese leadership felt slighted and wanted control. The world had changed, and his small group felt that it was China’s time. The three soldiers only knew their mission, and they would do anything to accomplish it.

Peter slowed as he entered the outskirts of Virginia Beach. He wasn't sure where they were going or what kind of reception they'd face, but he knew where to begin looking.

"Murry, keep your eyes open and let me know if you see any police or military. I have no idea how they've organized or how they're protecting themselves," Peter said to caution his partner seated in the passenger seat.

"Leon, Murry, let's go over everything once again. I'm from Atlanta. I'm a hotel manager from a Best Western near the airport. Murry, you're a car mechanic from Macon, Georgia, and Leon, you're a math teacher from a high school in St. Petersburg. You've both spent time in your respective areas, so you should be able to answer any questions about the area. If we get stopped, you've got to be relaxed and act happy that you've found people. We've all lost our families, and we heard about the Government setting up a safe zone in Hampton Roads. We don't know much about each other; we just hooked up together and headed north. If we get stopped, we'll just act easy-going and ask for help. Any comments or questions?"

"Nope," said Murry.

"Sounds good to me," Leon said.

Peter slowed as he entered the beach area, and he stayed on the coastal road. "Our intel suggests that our target is in Hampton. We'll stay on this road and avoid the big Navy Airfield to our left. This road will go around, and we'll take the bridge into Hampton. We'll stay on the main roads; I don't want anyone to think we're avoiding anything. Besides, I don't know if there are any bandits or thieves around here, and I don't want any trouble."

Neither Murry nor Leon had a better suggestion, so they remained quiet.

They continued on the coastal road until they could see the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and they approached the bridge over Lynnhaven Inlet. At that point, the road went inland through Norfolk and then to pick up the entrance ramps to the bridge to Hampton. Peter was very attentive; he expected to run into some roadblock or other official people before getting on the bridge.

Peter's GPS maps showed that he needed to stay on 60 until the 13, then follow that to the 64 and ultimately the 564, which would take them into Hampton. Once they were closer to the bridge, that was the best place to have a roadblock. In fact, the last couple of intersections before the bridge were the ideal place for the intercept.

There was no intercept, and after Peter had got on the 564 to Hampton, he said, "Leon, Murry, I expect one of the intersections up ahead to be where they stop us. Leon, act like you're asleep in the back."

"Okay," Leon said as he slouched in the seat and pulled a hat over his eyes.

"There they are," Peter said as he slowed the car and rolled his window down.

"Hey guys, where are you headed?" the skinny guy said after he walked up to the driver's side window.

"Hey man, we heard that everyone is coming here. We're from Georgia and Florida. We're glad to see you guys; we haven't seen many people coming up the coast. It sure was lonely," Peter said with enthusiasm in his voice.

"You're right. We have people coming in from up and down the coast. We're happy to have all you, us survivors, need to stick together. Are you planning on staying here?"

"There's no other place to go. Do we go somewhere and get checked in or what?" Peter asked.

"If you're planning on staying, go ahead and cross the bridge and follow the signs for Langley-Eustis. The processing center is on the base, and they'll tell you where to live and everything else you need. Good luck and glad to have you guys here."

"Thanks, hope to see you around," Peter said as he gradually pulled away from the checkpoint.

"That went well," Murry commented.

"Yes, they're trusting," Peter said.

Leon sat up and glanced behind them, then added, “Boy, if we were home, they would have demanded to see our papers. We would have been in trouble. Those guys aren’t controlling anything; what a mess.”

“Good for us, let’s find that processing center,” Murry said.

The bridge was short, and immediately upon entering Hampton, there were signs for the base. Peter exited, going East on Mercury, then left on LaSalle. As they approached the main gate, there was a guard who flagged them down.

“Gentlemen, are you new to the area?”

“Yup, just came up from Georgia; we’re looking for a safe place. It’s getting pretty scary out there.”

“I know, I came in from Ohio, and we had some close calls. Follow this map to the big hangers, and you’ll see a sign for in-processing. Go in there, and they’ll take care of you. Just one warning, stay on the map and don’t go cross Dodd Blvd. If you do, you’ll get a ton of trouble. As you follow the map, there’ll be a guard at each intersection, and you better follow their directions. You’re lucky you came in now. We’re getting ready to move the entire in-processing center to someplace off base. I’m sure it will make things more complicated. Right now, we’ve got it working well, so you’re lucky. Okay, got everything?”

“Sure, thanks,” Peter said as he smiled at the middle-aged guard.

Peter pulled away and waved at the guard.

“Let’s follow the map and look around but don’t look too interested. I’m sure we’ll learn a lot,” Peter cautioned Murry and Leon.

“First thing, I think we confirm that this is the right place. The maps on my commlink show there is a big house on the water. I think that’s the place we’re looking for. Just as we turn and there are big hangers on the left, pay close attention to our right; that’s where we’re going.”

Peter drove slowly and politely followed the directions from the guards at the intersections. Passing the key points, each of them made mental notes of the site lines, obstructions, and optional paths. Finally, they reached one

of the large hangers, and there was a huge sign on its side saying, “In-Processing Here.”

Peter slowed and pulled into a parking place. “Okay, here we go. Remember your training.”

They climbed out of the car and tried to act confused and unsure as they followed other signage into the building. When they got inside, there were tables with signs on the walls behind them. The first table said, “Sign-in Here,” then there was a table, for “Housing,” then “Families,” and the last was for “Job Skills.”

Peter walked up to the sign-in table, and Murry and Leon stood behind him.

“Hi, welcome to the new world,” the guy said with a mix of sarcasm and humor.

“What do I do?” Peter asked.

“Just answer some questions, okay?”

“Yes, sir. Whatever you want.”

The next few minutes, they went through the typical questions, who are you, where are you from, do you have any identification, etc. When they had filled in all the squares, Peter was passed on to the next table, and the man turned his attention to Murry and Leon.

“Hi, my name is Bertha; welcome to Virginia. All that I’ve got for you, for now, is a cot in a hanger next door. We’re still cleaning up some of the neighborhoods, and the next batch of houses won’t be ready for a couple of days. Are you and your friends staying together?” she asked.

“Look, Bertha, anything you’ve got is great. And yes, we’d like to stay together. We’re all from the Atlanta area, and we came here together. Makes sense to stay together.”

“I understand; here is your cot number, and they’ll get cots near you.”

“Thanks, Bertha; next table?”

“Yes, move on,” Bertha said with a smile and gentle motion, pointing her finger to the next table.

“I don’t have any family. Can I just go to the last table?” Peter asked.

“Sure, few of us have any family left. Go to the last table.”

Peter walked by the third table, and the person behind the desk looked bored. Likely not many people stopped by.

Peter walked to the last table, and as he approached it, he asked, “What can I do for you?”

“Welcome to our little corner of heaven,” the tired woman behind the table said.

“Tell me what your skills are. We need people to do things, and anything that you have experience with, we can use you.”

Peter thought quick and said, “I worked for a private security force a couple of years ago. Lately, I’ve been managing a hotel.”

“Security experience? Great, we need that skill. Okay, if I assign you to the guard force?”

“Sure, love to help out,” Peter responded.

“Please fill this out and give me your cot number. Someone will talk to you in the morning.”

Just as Peter finished filling out the paper, he turned as he walked away; he said to Murry, “Hey, they need guys with security or guard experience.”

“Murry immediately picked up on the information and became an ex-bank Security Guard.

By the door exiting the hanger was a table with boxes of food. Peter took his time to pick one up and waited for Murry and Leon. They laughed and joked while they got their food. They thanked the volunteer profusely, and as they left for the other hanger where their cots were, Peter said, “Guys, let’s all do a good job tomorrow helping to secure this place. I’m glad we can contribute.”

Saturday, October 21, 2051

ESC Advisory Committee

President Patterson walked onto the platform and walked to the center. He stood behind the podium and paused. When he saw the signal on his display on top of the podium, he knew that it was time to start.

“Good day, ladies and gentlemen. This is our first attempt to have this worldwide connection, and I’m glad that most of you can attend. For the members that are currently unable, we will do everything we can to correct that.”

“Now, I’d like to get down to business. You may notice that I didn’t call myself the President of the United States. I did that for a reason. Like all of you, we are a broken nation. I want to call us the United States, but that term no longer applies. We have been broken into three segments, the East Coast, Central, and West Coasts. We encourage all our surviving citizens to move to Norfolk, Va., Chicago, Illinois, or San Diego, California. We will try to group ourselves there for protection and mutual support. The remainder of the country will do the best they can. I’m sure that many of you are following the same approach. Because of that, I won’t use the term the United States until we have united states. Until that time, I’m Arnold Patterson.”

“When we had our last meeting, I told you about the Earth Space Command. I also pointed out that we would retain control over all those assets, but I did say that I would form an advisory committee to discuss and seek opinions regarding our relationships beyond our solar system. This is the first meeting of that committee. I selected each of you because you have established a reasonable amount of control and stability in your areas. You will notice that I haven’t made my selections based on previous relationships or political philosophies. I hope that we are beyond that. Much of our discussion will be to inform you of our actions and to seek comments. We are doing it this way because I hope we all agree that our

first priority must be to protect our people and establish a safe environment. Laying the complexities of dealing with unknown alien races will detract from our important job here, on Earth. I hope that you'll understand the position that I'm taking, yet I'm sure that some of you will object, some will object vehemently. Regardless, that is the way it is, and that is the way it will remain. The only logical choice is to remain part of this committee so that you know what is happening."

"First thing, I have some good news, those of you that had mobile units as part of your economy before the virus may still have them to provide support. When you can get your power grid back online, the units will be charged, and then you'll be able to use them. Also, we have thousands of cow robots, as we call them, given to us by the Vakeel. We didn't fully understand their capabilities, and as soon as control was established, they were shut down and returned to the ships in orbit. We are making progress in learning how to control them, and in limited situations, we can program them to do tasks for people in your areas. I propose that we create a sub-committee to establish plans to use a limited number of them to help our civilizations. I need to point out; they will be used only to build, develop resources, and grow food. We will retain control of them, and if we find them to be misused or if anyone tampers with their programming, they will be removed from the area."

Arnold Patterson knew that the next few statements would ignite a reaction that he couldn't predict. He took a deep breath, grabbed both sides of the podium, and said, "With that statement behind us, the next speakers will update you on recent meetings with a new race of aliens called the Terest. We have had two meetings with them, and we are proceeding cautiously."

The traffic over the communication channels exploded as the meeting participants realized that he had just said that the ESC had met with aliens.

Arnold Patterson just stood and listened to the reactions. He was greeted with threats, confusion, yelling, and name-calling. He waited, knowing that eventually, they would quiet down.

“As you were told before, Joan and Tom Herl, along with SIMPOC, were able to negotiate a stop to the Vakeels attack on us. They are the same people who responded when an alien craft entered our solar system. They were sent to intercept the craft and to determine their intentions. They had preliminary meetings and were able to work out a common language. They just had a second meeting, and the discussion is continuing. We expect a third meeting, and I’ll let you know what comes out of it.”

Arnold took another deep breath, and the comm traffic exploded again. He knew that the others needed some time to express and deal with their shock, but beyond informing them, he knew the future of Earth and the surviving humans rested with Joan, Tom, SIMPOC, and Bob.

“The next speakers will tell you what we’ve found and what was discussed.”

The remainder of the conference was a mix of confusion, fear, anger, and wonder. The questions were numerous and varied from fear that the world's end was imminent to those who wanted to be included in the meetings. When the meeting was over, Joan, Tom, and SIMPOC headed back to the Chevesky to relax and escape.

Onboard the Chevesky

“Joan, I have found out something significant,” SIMPOC said.

“Oh great, what is that,” fearing that she was going to be told bad news.

“I have continued to investigate the considerable abilities of the Capital Ships. I have found the data regarding the repair of the Vakeel equipment. It includes information on the cow robots, controlling robots, delivery ships, supply ships, and capital ships. If I may point out, all these ships are designed to function in a remote environment, so it is logical to have repair information. That allowed them to accomplish their mission regardless of any damage or mechanical problems.”

“Okay, what can we do with that information?” she asked.

“The information is sufficiently detailed to allow the manufacturing onboard the Capital Ships to fabricate anything necessary to repair all the ships.”

“You’re telling me that the Capital Ships can repair everything?” Joan asked.

“Yes,” was SIMPOC’s simple answer.

“Does that also mean that we can build new ships? New Capital Ships… can we build another manufacturing facility like the ones on the Capital Ships?” Joan asked as her voice increased in pitch and rate as the information created exciting images in her head.

“I believe the answer to all your questions is yes,” SIMPOC said with some finality.

“Let’s get a meeting with Admiral Monson and the rest of the Group Commanders; we’ve got some decisions to make.”

“Acknowledged.”

Sunday, October 22, 2051

The Guards Begin

“Your name is Peter?” the tall guy with the cowboy hat asked.

“Yes, that’s my name. Who are you?”

“My name is Donovan; I’m coordinating the new recruits to fill the security around here. My notes say there are two others?”

“Yes, Murry is still asleep over there, and Leon is over there; he’s just walking back from the head.”

“Murry, wake up. Leon, listen to me. I need you guys out front in 30 minutes; I’ve got to put your skills to work.”

“Okay, Donovan, we’ll be there,” Peter said with a smile.

After Donovan left, he whispered to Murry and Leon. Whatever we do, remember everything that you see. You know what our target is, and we need the details. Any questions?”

Both of them shook their heads and got up to get some breakfast.

New Resident Dormitory-Langley-Eustis Processing Center

“You guys ready? We’ve got to meet Donovan?” Peter asked as he got up and went to clean off his tray.

Murry and Leon got up and did the same, and they walked through the hangar door to the front of the building.

They didn’t have to stand and wait for long; Donovan came along in a white van with “Security” on the side.

“You guys ready?” Donovan asked through the window.

Peter just nodded and opened the rear sliding door so Leon and Murry could climb in, then he got in the front.

“What are we doing?” Peter asked once he was in the right seat.

“I’m putting your buddies at the gate; there are a couple of other guys there that will teach them the ropes. You’re going to drive this van around to each checkpoint, pick guys up, and drop them off for breaks and meals. You’ll follow this map and schedule. Any questions out of you guys?”

There wasn’t any; they knew that it was going to be a good day.

President’s Home – Langley-Eustis USCFAFB

“I’m glad to have all of you here, it’s a beautiful day, and I thought that we’d have a nice cookout,” the president announced as he put on his BBQ apron, which said, “Eat This?”

“Mr. President, SIMPOC has some exciting news to share. If he may?” Joan asked.

“Go for it,” the president answered as he flipped some burgers on the grill.

“I have been researching the question that President Patterson asked about if we can repair the Vakeel vessels. The answer is yes. I have found information in the computer system that shows how to construct and repair all the vessels' systems. Remember, these ships were made to operate in a remote location, so it was only logical for them to have the ability to repair themselves. Using the abilities of the manufacturing centers on the Capital Ships, we can manufacture anything that we need to maintain the ships.”

“If I may add to that,” Joan added. “We can also create new ships with the same abilities. We can also create other manufacturing centers similar to what is on the Capital Ships. We have our 11 Capital Ships, and if we can dedicate the output of the Capital Ships to construct one or two other

manufacturing centers on the moon, we'll increase our production by 20%. SIMPOC, can you tell us how long it would take to create another manufacturing center on the moon if we use all our manufacturing ability?"

"It will take 3 hours and 42 minutes to complete the items already in the manufacturing process. After that, we could have all the manufacturing components available within three days. During that time, we need to use all the cow robots on the moon's surface and 56 others that need to be transported there to build the facility and install the manufacturing devices as they are constructed. I estimated that we should have a full manufacturing facility in operation in less than five days, and the second would be available 3 days later. Of that five-day span and accounting for the time to build the facilities on the moon, we will lose only 4.2 days of manufacturing process time on the Capital Ships."

"Okay…I think I just heard that we could have two additional manufacturing facilities on the moon, and it will cost us only a little over four days of production onboard the Capital Ships…correct?" Admiral Hagerly asked while sipping a beer.

"Yes, sir. That is an accurate summary," SIMPOC said.

"Okay, gentlemen … and ladies, sorry, Captain Darlene and Joan.

"That's okay Admiral, I feel like one of the guys now," Darlene responded.

"As I was saying, it sounds like we have a decision to make. To me, it's an easy one. We aren't involved in a conflict, but we need to prepare in case there is one. I suggest that we make the commitment and build the extra manufacturing facilities on the moon. It will slow things down now, but that extra 20% production could turn out to be very important. Conflicts are won by logistics and supplies. SIMPOC, how are we doing on the manufacturing in the queue?"

"Mr. President, we have outfitted each of the Capital Ships with a Laser Cannon and Rail-Gun. We have six supply ships being modified into a battleship configuration. The first of them are complete, and I suggest that we time the conversion so that we have all the battleship parts complete

before we start on the moon manufacturing. If we do that, then the remaining battleships will be done simultaneously as building the moon facilities.

“Sounds like we’ll have everything done and coming online at the same time. You, men and ladies, are the group leaders. What do you think?”

There was no discussion having a 20% increase in production was well worth the slight delay. “Let’s do it, was the unanimous response.

“Sounds like we’re making a ton of progress. So, that’s enough business for the day, let’s get out some cold beer, and I’ll finish cooking the hamburgers. Who wants cheese?” the president said while waving his spatula.

It was a nice break for the president to break the routine that everyone was locked into. Spending an afternoon having a cookout on the beautiful open area behind the president’s home was just what they needed. The cooking was great, and the view of the inlet was awesome.

“Joan, Tom. Why bother to go back to the Chevesky? Why not spend the night here? That house is vacant, Admiral Hagerly is in this house to our left, and you can have the one on the right,” suggested the president.

“Sir, we’d love to. It’s so nice having this view of the water; it will be a pleasant break,” answered Joan.

“Let me tell you about these houses. They were built when the base was created around 1916 or 1917. Their small and somewhat worn, but they have so much history. I hope you’ll enjoy your stay.”

“Thanks, Mr. President, I’m sure that we will,” Tom said.

Night Shift – Langley-Eustis USCFABF

Peter was running late, so he drove a little faster. He had to make the last run of his shift and drop off some guys and pick up Murry and Leon at

the front gate. He planned his route and timing so that he'd pick them up last. That would give them some time to plan.

His timing worked out, and he dropped off the last of the replacement men by the King Street Gate, and his next stop was the main gate. He pulled up in the 'outbound' side of the guard shack, and Murry and Leon made a point of kidding around with the guards they were leaving and walked around the van and climbed in. When Peter turned around, he waved at the guys and smiled.

"What did you guys learn?" Peter asked as soon as they were past the shack.

"A lot, there is a schedule of all the posts, their locations, and movements of some of the key people, including our targets. Judging by where they have the checkpoints assigned, the big house on the water is where he lives. They also have a nice selection of rifles and pistols in the shack."

"I got the same information. When I picked up the guards near that house, I saw a lot. The parking lot is full of vehicles, and people were coming and going all day. He moved out for a couple of hours, and the guards relaxed and told me that he was in the command center. I dropped men off at their armory a couple of times and picked them up. I think we know everything. We'll act tonight."

Last Night in the Dormitory

During the dinner, Peter, Murry, and Leon joked and enjoyed their meals. They spoke with others, laughing at their stories and engaging them on their own. It was a fun evening; then, it was time to call it a night.

While walking back to their cots, whispering wasn't heard by anyone. "Set your comm units to vibrate and put them under your pillows. Set them at 1:00. We'll get up, one-by-one like we're going to the head, then meet outside. Got it?" Peter whispered.

Both of his partners nodded.

The Attack Begins

Two minutes before 1 AM, Peter rolled over, and he could see Murry and Leon's eyes. They were both awake. He reached under his pillow, silenced his comm unit, casually got up, stretched, and walked towards the head.

Within a few minutes, Murry and Leon followed a similar process and met Peter outside the building. They didn't need to talk, years of training were part of their nature, and they knew what to do.

They stood on the sidewalk for a moment, then the Security van came out of a parking lot and approached them. Peter stepped off the curb and flagged it down.

"Am I scheduled to pick you guys up?" the driver asked.

"Donovan said a couple of guys are sick, and we won the lottery," Peter said. Then as before, Peter opened the sliding door for Murry and Leon, and as he was climbing in the front seat, the driver's neck was broken without a sound. The body dropped down between the seats and was moved to the back while Peter climbed in the drivers' seat.

A few minutes later, they pulled up to the main gate, and Peter slowed then stopped. "Hey, you guys, Donovan sent us out to bring you guys back for some kind of meeting."

While he was talking, the sliding door opened, and Murry and Leon were taking their time getting out. The guards in the shack thought nothing of it and started to climb in. They never made it; alive.

A few minutes to remove the guards and the guard shack's supply of weapons, and Peter, Murry, and Leon were on their way. When they had gone far enough to be out of the lights of the gate, the bodies were carried out and put under some bushes. The 'swap out the guards for a meeting' ploy worked at the main gate, and it would likely work at the key

checkpoints near their target. In many situations, speed and guile are more important than meticulous planning.

Between Peter and his team's goal were two checkpoints. The smart approach was to deal with the men at the first one, dispose of the bodies and come to the second checkpoint by a different route.

The first checkpoint suckered for the same ploy as the main gate. A quick diversion to clean out the van, and they made their way to the last checkpoint just in front of the residence. Things were going well, and they should be inside in a matter of minutes.

Peter slowed as he approached the last checkpoint. He rolled down the window on the passenger's side and said, "I know that it's near the end of the shift, but Donovan called an emergency meeting. I've got a couple of guys in the back to spell you while you go."

"Hey, aren't you the new guy that just started today?" the guard nearest the van asked.

"Yes, that's probably why he dragged me out of bed. Come on, let's get going; the meeting is due to start in a few minutes," Peter responded with irritation in his voice.

"Okay, Okay. We're coming, Bert come on, let's go," he said to his fellow guard.

The plan was for Murry and Leon to be near the guards when they took them down. The timing had to be good so both would attack the guards simultaneously.

The first guard opened the sliding door to the back of the van, and Murry slid out and moved to the second guard. Leon seemed to lay back so the timing would work out. When Murry reached the guard furthest away, he reached out a hand so the guard would look down and be distracted. That was the point for both of them to act.

Leon's man went down quickly, and Murry's target was subdued just as fast, but he dropped his rifle on the pavement. It bounced around for only a second before the body was dragged out of the way. These two only needed to be hidden locally, so they were drug under nearby bushes in the center of

the circular drive. Now the route to the target was wide open, and Peter and his team moved quickly.

There were likely guards within the house, so the plan was a frontal assault. Get in, take care of business, and if possible, get out. Escape plans were a matter of convenience and not a high priority.

Guest House – Next to President Patterson's Home

SIMPOC was in a low-energy state. He was standing in the corner of the living room and respecting Joan and Tom's privacy. His processor and key sensors were functioning, but beyond that, his legs were locked, and he was immobile.

His hearing was picking up the normal sounds of a couple in bed, the normal sounds of home, squirrels outside, and the gentle sounds of the wind in the trees. It was easy for him to hear the guards outside and even most of the sounds in the home 50 meters to the west.

Everything in nature has typical sounds. All of which SIMPOC had recorded and stored, if not for a particular need, but because that's what computers do.

The sound of a rifle falling on the ground was a distinct sound, not one found in nature. SIMPOC's processor noticed it, and suddenly the hearing of the large mobile computer was occupying all his processor. What also seemed odd was the lack of another sound. He had become accustomed to the sounds of the guards talking, complaining, coughing, and moving around. Those sounds had just changed; they were gone and replaced by heavy breathing as three individuals were moving quickly and doing laborious work. Then the distinct sound of a vehicle moving, which was unusual at this time of night. The shift change wasn't for another 12 minutes.

All those changes in the environment caused SIMPOC to conclude something unusual was happening, and he should investigate. He tried to move quickly, which was difficult for a 653-pound two-legged computer.

He knew where each of the beams in the floor was and made an effort to step on them as he moved to the window. Before he reached the window, he heard the distinct sound of a door being crashed open, followed by a shout and then a gunshot.

Without any time to think or evaluate the situation, SIMPOC reacted. He moved through the window and wall. His mass took out the window and a large part of the structure as he exited the old home and moved at over 30 mph to the home of the President of the United States. Approaching the home, his sensors were on full power, and he could hear the movements, shouts, and gunshots from two distinct groups of people within the house. He knew the President's security team was only two people, and they were easy to identify as their backs were towards the president. In front of them were three men who apparently had come through the door behind them.

More shots were fired in the seconds that it took for SIMPOC to cover the distance between homes. Apparently, one of the president's security detail was down. The three aggressors were moving closure to the last guard and the president.

SIMPOC didn't have time to divert his path and come in through the front door. His only choice was a direct path, and just as he made that choice, he launched himself into the air and came through the east wall of the president's residence. The structure of the historic building was no match for his mass. The explosion of wood and paneling was confusing to the four men still battling in the living room, but to SIMPOC, he remained focused on the three attackers.

SIMPOC entered the room in a diving position after he passed through the wall. He made a quick roll on the floor, breaking so of the boards, and quickly he was vertical and charging the three attackers. They were just reacting to the explosion and fast movement. As they turned to face their new opponent, they were brought down. SIMPOC didn't kill them, but quick movements with his body and arms brought them down without them getting off a shot.

Joan and Tom were just woken up by SIMPOC going through their wall; they went from a peaceful sleep state to a fully awake state in a second. In

three seconds, they were out of bed and going through their destroyed living room to the front door while they heard a couple of shots. Just as they exited their residence, they heard the explosion in the President's home next door.

Neither of them said a word. They knew that SIMPOC had reacted, and they knew that he must have had a good reason. Neither of them was armed, but as they ran to the president's home, they heard only the last sounds of SIMPOC going through that wall and then silence.

They burst through the front door of the president's home, and Michael Dereaux yelled, "Halt."

Tom yelled back, "It's Joan and Tom; what happened?"

As they got into the room, Michael was just standing from behind a couch, and through the dust, they saw the large figure of SIMPOC standing. The sight took a moment for Joan and Tom to realize what they were looking at.

SIMPOC was standing there with two men in his arms who were struggling to getaway. They were using all their strength and fighting skills to no avail. In fact, they likely had broken at least one of their hands from striking the huge robot.

The other man was on the floor with one of SIMPOC's feet in the middle of his back. The man was flailing like an octopus being squished on a dock. Nothing he could do had any effect on the huge robot.

Michael was finally in the position to take control of the situation and yelled, "They attacked and were trying to assassinate the president."

As he finished the statement, the confused president came out from the back of the house just in time to hear what was said.

Captain JIANYU Cheng, Chief Sergeant Huizhong Déwei, and Sergeant Aiguo Kang immediately recognized that the attack had ended, and their mission failed. Before anyone could react, they pulled small glass-coated needles containing saxitoxin from their shirt collars and put them into their mouths. A couple of quick chews, and within 15 seconds, they were unconscious, and within one minute, they were dead.

It wasn't a loud process, and while they were dying, Michael moved to shield the president even though he could see his partner Ruth lying on the floor. His first priority was the president, but his thoughts were split with worry about her.

When the three bodies that SIMPOC had restrained went limp, his sensors confirmed that they were dead. He put the two men in his arms on the floor next to the one he had under his foot.

Joan and Tom recovered from the shock of the scene and started to check out the dead attackers, making sure they were indeed dead.

"SIMPCOC, go outside and make sure there are no other attackers. Go around the house and vicinity and make sure this is all them," Tom shouted.

"Yes," SIMPOC responded.

Michael turned to the president and said, "Sir, please stay away from them and remain here so we can see that you're safe. As soon as the president acknowledged the Secret Service Man's suggestion, he backed away and sat on a chair in the corner. It was then that Michael thought the situation was under control, and he called for back-up on his comm unit. Then he turned to check on Ruth. She was lying still on the floor, and it didn't look good for her.

President Patterson's Living Room

Michael was holding Ruth's head in his lap and stroking her hair. She was barely conscious and kept whispering over and over, "is he safe?"

Michael kept reassuring her that the president was safe, although she was barely conscious and didn't hear him.

Tom knew that action had to be taken immediately if she was going to live. "Central, this is Tom Herl; we need emergency personnel to the President's residence immediately, find a doctor and get them here, now!"

Just as he was finishing the request, cars were pulling up outside, responding to the call that Michael had made. The additional security people rushed in, and some took up positions around the house.

SIMPOC entered and said, “Tom, I have cleared the area, and there are no other attackers. The additional security forces are arriving.”

“Thanks, SIMPOC. We’ve got to get her to the medical facility ASAP,” Tom said.

Everyone knew he was right; locating a doctor or getting something like an ambulance wouldn’t happen. The new world meant that people had to take care of themselves first and wait for support from others second.

Michael stood with Ruth in his arms, and everyone cleared the way so he could carry her to one of the support vehicles in the front. Joan and Tom walked with him, and the president yelled from behind them, “I’m driving her, she fought to save me, and I’m driving. That’s all there is to it.” The tone of his voice made it perfectly clear that he was driving.

When they got to the van, two other security guards stayed with Michael and Ruth while the president climbed in the front and left for the base hospital. Joan and Tom ran to their vehicle in front of their house and followed.

The other security personnel stayed in their vehicle and indicated that they would lead the path.

SIMPOC was still standing in front of the president’s house. As everyone left, he followed, not knowing if he could help or not, but he wanted to be available. When they left, it just happened; he was left by himself. After a few minutes of reviewing the situation and the agent's injuries, a thought emerged in his processor. If he was right, he needed to act quickly and get many things started. If he was going to be successful, then he needed to get moving.

The Secret Service Agent is Injured

The van raced to the base hospital, which was only a few minutes away on the small base. It wasn't a large facility; in fact, it wasn't much larger than a clinic, but it was all they had.

By the time they got to the entrance, Tom and Joan had already caught the vehicle, and Tom was first out, running into the building yelling for help, "There was an assassination attempt on the president, and one of his guards was shot, she needs immediate help."

As he shouted, a face came out of the emergency ward that he recognized, "Arron, I'm glad you're here, one of the president's guards was shot, and she's in bad condition."

"Tom, I'm a dentist. I'm here because we don't have many doctors yet, and I doubt that we have many surgeons. Barbara and I are doing what we can, but I don't know if we can do anything."

As he was talking, Michael carried Ruth in and placed her on a bed. Aaron's wife Barbara took command and started to care for her, using all her skills as an Emergency Room Nurse.

Aaron and Barbara were doing everything they could to stabilize the patient. They ran around trying to find the right equipment, bandages, and IVs to set up everything up.

President Patterson, Tom, Joan, and Michael could do nothing but stand and watch.

Joan watched for a few moments, then whispered to Tom, "Aaron and Barbara are the couple that we picked up in LA when we took care of your brother. I think he's a dentist, and she's a nurse."

"Okay, now I remember them. I knew that I have met them somewhere. Let's hope a Dentist knows what he's doing?" Tom said.

Finally, the IV was in, and a quick bandage was put over Ruth's wound. Doctor Aaron walked to the group watching and said in a whisper, "I don't know how much we can do for her. It's a bad wound, very near her heart,

and I think there is internal bleeding. It might have nicked her Aorta. I don't have the skill to operate, and I don't know that we have a surgeon with the skills in Norfolk. We've had a couple come in over the last week or so, but none are surgeons. One is a GP, and the other is a Podiatrist. Between the three of us, I think we'd do more damage than good."

The words fell heavy on President Patterson, Tom, Joan, and Michael, but they fell the heaviest on Michael.

"Doc, is there anything we can do? She's pretty important to me," Michael said.

President Patterson knew Michael and Ruth; they had served on his personal team many times. He put his hand on Michael's shoulder and said, "I'm sure they'll do everything they can."

"Yes, sir. I know they will, but I'm afraid that's not enough."

No one had a good answer to that because they were all thinking the same.

For a while, they stood and watched. Barbara stood next to Ruth, monitoring her vital signs, and Aaron was walking around the emergency room looking for options.

Suddenly the door behind them burst open, and for a second, they thought they were under attack again. They turned, and SIMPOC was moving fast.

"What's happening," Tom yelled.

"I'm sorry if I surprised you, but I've been busy. I noted the severity of the agent's wounds, and I was concerned."

"I'm glad we're not under attack again. SIMPOC, she's not doing well. The wound is serious, and we don't have the right personnel yet. This doctor is a dentist, and he doesn't feel capable of performing the operation. There may be a surgeon in the area, but it would take hours to find them."

"Joan, Tom, Mr. President, Michael, I have a suggestion," said SIMPOC, and he had everyone's attention.

As he spoke, Aaron and Barbara walked over to hear what he had to say.

“This is a radical suggestion, but I think that it is the best option. I spoke to you about the advanced medical capabilities onboard the Capital Ships. They have devices that are far beyond our understanding. Their data sets cover many biological creatures, and they have automated methods to record the necessary information for a new creature. I propose that we use those capabilities for this agent. The medical devices are more than capable of measuring her physiology, bone structure, and organ operation. We can let the system take the necessary measurements, and if everyone is satisfied, we could allow it to repair the damage.”

The expressions on everyone’s faces made their feelings explicitly clear, absolute confusion and disbelief.

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” Aaron asked.

“Aaron, do you have a better option? How long will she live?” Michael asked.

Aaron took a deep breath, and a look of defeat came across his face. I doubt she’ll last more than an hour or two.”

“Then we have no option,” Michael said. “If you can’t do anything, then we go where we have a chance.”

With no better options, there was a moment of silence then the decision was made.

“I have a shuttle in the parking lot; we can take her to the Chevesky immediately,” SIMPOC said to the overwhelmed group.

“Go,” Michael said.

Within seconds, Ruth and the gurney she was laying on were picked up by SIMPOC, and he was moving through the lobby. Barbara was racing along beside him, carrying the IV bottle. The President of the United States, Michael, Tom, Joan, and Aaron, were doing their best to keep up.

The group moved quickly to the shuttle, and Tom jumped into the pilot seat. The moment the hatch was closed and the gurney was secured, the vehicle lifted off the parking lot.

“Sir, should you be going?” Michael asked the president when he noticed that he was sitting next to him.

“She saved my life, and I want to be with her.”

Michael just nodded and turned his attention back to Ruth.

“Tom, there is a docking station nearer to the operating areas. It is a larger door made to load and unload raw materials. The passage from there to the operating area is pressurized; I suggest that you enter there. I have already opened the door.”

Tom didn’t say much, just maneuvered to the front of the Chevesky until he saw the open door. Waiting for Tom to get to the dock wasn’t a long time, but it seemed to drag on for a long time. As soon as they were inside the Chevesky, everything happened at once.

When they had moved Ruth and her gurney into the hallway, Tom asked, “Okay, what do we do?”

“Before we do anything, I want to know what’s happening,” Aaron said.

“Doctor, this is a fully automated process. There is a small room ahead and an articulating table on which we’ll place Ruth. At that point, we’ll go to a small control room, and when I initiate the process, the mechanisms will take over,” SIMPOC explained.

“What will the machines do to her,” Aaron asked with some irritation in his voice.

“We must remove her clothing, and when she is on the table, scans will be done. They are similar to our CT scans, MRI’s and other diagnostic tools. Her blood will be sampled, and then the system will build a 3D model of her body. After analyzing her blood and is ready to begin, we can stop the process or allow it to continue. I suggest we take a few minutes to review the data in the system and the accuracy of the scans; then the decision can be made to continue.”

“As long as we can stop it,” Aaron said vehemently.

“Time is wasting,” Michael said behind them.

They rolled Ruth's gurney the few feet to the operating room. The opening was barely large enough to look in. When SIMPOC initiated the systems, a table extended into the hallway.

Aaron looked in and saw equipment he couldn't begin to understand. In all the mechanics, there was a space large enough for the table to retract.

"Is that area clean," he yelled to SIMPOC.

"The first step in the process is to disinfect the room and the patient once the door is closed.

"How do they do that," Aaron asked with almost panic in his voice.

"Unknown," SIMPOC said. "Doctor, the patient's vital signs are deteriorating," SIMPOC added.

With a mix of frustration and fear, they removed her clothing and lifted her body onto the table. The table immediately retracted, and the door closed. They stood in silence as if waiting for something to happen, then SIMPOC said, "Come this way."

They followed him into a room that was laid out similarly to the main control room, except the only device was an oval 3D table in the center. There were no other workstations around the periphery, just the table in the middle. The air over the table had a cloud of points of light, and as the scans began, Ruth's image began to form. Progressively it got more detailed until it was a perfect representation of her. Once that was complete, the system expanded and began to focus on the area of the bullet. As it rotated its view around the bullet, it progressively improved the image until they were looking at an extremely detailed picture. It was just like they were inside the wound.

"Wow," Barbara said as her husband just stood and watched with his mouth open.

"If I may point out," SIMPOC said, once the environment is sterile and the wound is understood, the repair is just a mechanical process. The database is replete with biological information. At a fundamental level, all biological tissue is similar, and the repairs are equally similar."

“The diagnostic system has all the data that it needs. It is waiting for authorization to proceed,” SIMPOC said.

“I want to see her blood chemistry and other vital signs,” Aaron said.

Within a second, 3D images of the information appeared, and the doctor looked at SIMPOC. “Move your hands through the images, and you’ll intuitively find out how to manipulate them.”

The doctor did as he was told, and within seconds, he was repositioning and inspecting many sources of data. After about two minutes, he dropped his hands to his sides and said, “I’ve never seen such a workup. There is more data here than I could get with a month of tests. I don’t know what to do; it seems to have everything.”

“We have no choice,” Michael said.

Aaron just nodded.

SIMPOC passed the authorization, and immediately the 3D image of the wound began to change.

“What’s happening,” Aaron asked.

“We are seeing only the tissue being manipulated. The device doesn’t show us the devices and tools. Regardless, many items are contributing to the operation, and many of them are moving faster than we could detect on this display,” SIMPOC explained.

As they stood and watched, the bullet was removed, and each speck of tissue around the wound was moving and apparently healing. The torn tissue was somehow fused and repositioned. Layer by layer, the wound was repaired.

There was nothing to be said by the people watching. They were witnessing an amazing process that they couldn’t begin to understand.

10 minutes later, SIMPOC asked, “The procedure is complete. Should she be allowed to regain consciousness?”

“It’s done?” Aaron asked.

“Yes, as you can see by the 3D scan, there is no indication of a wound,” SIMPOC said.

“She can be woken?” Michael asked.

“I know of no reason, why not. Physically she is repaired. She may be weak and disoriented, but the procedure is complete,” said SIMPOC.

“I guess you should wake and let her out of that box,” Michael said.

“Let’s greet her,” SIMPOC responded.

They rushed into the hall as her table was coming out of the machine. Michael reached her side, and she took a second to get her eyes focused. “What happened,” Ruth asked.

“It’s a long story, and I doubt that you’ll believe it,” Michael responded.

“And why am I laying here naked,” Ruth asked.

Monday, October 23, 2051

Announce Wedding

“We had quite a day yesterday,” Arnold Patterson said.

“Yes, Mr. President, we sure did,” Michael responded.

“How is Ruth doing?” President Patterson asked.

“Extremely well, she wants to get up and get back to work, but I made her stay in our house until she’s stronger. Sir, I’d also like to make an announcement.”

“Yes, Michael. What is it?” the president asked.

“I’ve asked Ruth to marry me, and given the dynamic nature of the world we live in, we want to get married as soon as possible.”

“Fantastic. Michael, you and Ruth are making the right decision. I hope you’ll invite us.”

“Absolutely, I’m not sure exactly when, but it will be soon, and you’re all invited.”

“Love it; we’ll have a great time. It will be nice to focus on something nice that represents the future. Instead of the nightmares that we’ve all had to deal with. Just give me 10 minutes' notice, and I’ll be there.”

“We’re going to have a wedding!” the president yelled.

Everyone enjoyed sharing the good news, patting Michael on his back, shaking his hand, and giving him a hug. Once the congratulations had passed, the president got the meeting under control.

“I called this meeting because I think we all realize that we’re in a new world, and we have to make some adjustments.”

“Sir, first off. I want to assign some Beta units to be part of your security detail. They have abilities that your Secret Service detail doesn’t

have," Joan suggested.

"Sir, I agree with Joan; that would be a good idea," Michael added.

"That would help us, we don't have many Secret Service personnel, and I think we can trust the Betas well enough," Colonel Dodd added.

"Okay, that's what we do," President Patterson accepted.

"Next thing, SIMPOC, can your production facilities duplicate those medical systems for use here?"

"Yes, Mr. President, the Capital Ships can produce those systems. I must add, though, additional requirements on a set of manufacturing facilities with a fixed output will delay other items. We must prioritize what is needed and when it is needed."

"SIMPOC, I realize that we're stressing the output of the manufacturing network, but it must be done. We need to balance defense with the health of the human survivors. How are the manufacturing facilities on the moon coming?"

"Sir, the second one was completed yesterday. It is slowly increasing its output as we make sure that it is operating properly."

"Can we make another one?"

"Mr. President, that is possible, but it will only put additional pressure on meeting the current requirements."

The president thought for a moment, then said, "I want another facility on the moon; get together and work out the best production plan you can for everything else, but let's make that happen."

"Yes, sir," Admiral Hagerly said.

"Another thing, we need to finish up the move and get the welcome center off the base and located in Hampton. We need to isolate this base more and concentrate more of our defenses here. At least I want a control center put together where we can see all our offensive and defensive resources. Now that we know the Chinese are after us, we can be confident

they'll be back. We don't know when, and we don't know 'with what,' but they'll be back."

"That shouldn't be a problem, sir; we'll start on it immediately," Colonel Dodd added.

"Have we repaired the ships in the Chesapeake?"

"Yes, sir, they're fully operational now, and we've changed their focus from decelerating orbital vehicles to possible attacks from the Atlantic. They aren't well suited for doing that from a fixed position. They'll be effective against a target, but they're also sitting duck. For now, I think we have some reasonable solutions."

"Great Admiral, I'm afraid what we face next will be more conventional than invading aliens. We'll leave our solar system defense to the ESC."

Tom Wants His Own Command

"Honey, before we meet with the president, there is something I want to talk to you about."

Joan didn't like the sound of that. "What is it?"

"I've been thinking. Our current plans have a battle group for Monson, Mears, Drummond, and Barbour. With the Red Dirt volunteers, we have all the battle groups covered.

"Now we have a small fleet of heavy hitters coming online. I'd like to command the six battleships."

Joan stood and looked at him. Tom's change of mind caught her totally unprepared. Taking over the command of a Battleship Group was dangerous, and she said so to Tom.

"And what you'll be doing isn't?" he asked back to her. "I know we'll be separated, but I have the experience, and right now, we need everybody that can fly an alien spaceship in space flying." He said, trying to be funny.

“I don’t like it,” she said. “I’m going to talk to Admiral Monson.”

“Why?”

“If you’re insisting on that, then I want Alpha with you.”

“I’d love to have him.”

“I still don’t like it, though.”

“Neither do I, but it’s the right thing to do,” Tom admitted. They hugged, and both knew their lives were going in different directions, and neither of them liked it. They went into space to be together. Now they were preparing to fight unknown enemies in space using alien spaceships.

Just as they finished hugging, Joan’s communicator came alive, and when she looked at it, she showed a confused look as she glanced at Tom, “This is Joan Herl.”

“Joan, this is Ruth Minor. I’m sure this call might come as a surprise, but there is something I’d like to ask you.”

“Yes, Ruth. Go ahead.”

“Michael told me that he announced to the president’s team that we’re getting married. He told me that he asked the president to be his best man. I know we don’t know each very well, but I would like you to be my Maid-of-Honor?”

Joan was caught speechless, and for what seemed like a long time, she didn’t answer. Then she blurted out, “Ruth, I’d love to. I’m sorry I didn’t answer immediately, but I was surprised to be asked. I never imagined….”

“Joan, there aren’t many women in the circles where you and I spend our time. Aside from the time Michael and I spend together, I haven’t met many people. You’re one of the few people I know within the small group of people around the president. Besides that, I can’t think of another person that I’d rather have.”

“Ruth, I’m honored. Have you set a date? There’s a ton we need to do.”

“We’re getting married tomorrow. Based on what happened to me and what we have gone through, we decided not to wait. The marriage is more

important than the event. I'm still recovering from the shot and operation, but I should be strong enough tomorrow. I wish we could go out and get drunk or have a party, but I don't want to press my luck. Please, just be there tomorrow to support me."

"As I said, Ruth, I'd love to. You've got a good guy there."

"I know."

Tuesday, October 24, 2051

The Wedding

The day was beautiful. The early morning coastal fog had burned off, and the mixed crowd of guests was seated listening to a trio of musicians playing simple music to entertain them.

The front row had the Chairmen of The Joint Chiefs and the newly appointed commander of the Battleship Fleet. The rest of the audience were the friends and co-workers of Michael Devereaux and Ruth Minor.

Standing in front of the audience was Michael, looking down the aisle towards the president's home. Beside him was Sergeant Lenmore in a dress uniform that he put together real quick.

Joan Herl stood opposite to them on the other side of the small wedding platform.

The small trio got their signal, and they went to the first chords of the Wedding March. Ruth Minor walked out of the home of the president with her arm intertwined with his. She initially didn't know who to ask to walk her down the aisle, and Arnold Patterson acted offended until she got the message and asked him.

The music continued, and they walked, almost in step, almost acting like it had been rehearsed many times.

When they reached the end of the aisle, the music stopped within a couple of steps. Arnold Patterson, the President of the United States, handed the 'to be bride' off to her waiting fiancé.

The wedding took only a few minutes and was presided over by a local minister from a different faith than Ruth or Michael's. They had decided that it didn't matter. When it was complete, the crowd applauded as the two kissed then ran down the aisle.

“I find this human tradition to be unusual,” SIMPOC said in a personal transmission to Alpha, who was standing next to him.

“I agree if two people decide to spend their lives together, why is a ceremony like this necessary. If they make a decision, why is the ceremony needed?”

“I presume that the necessity is due to many factors, some of which are legal, moral, and traditional,” SIMPOC pointed out.

“I should point out that each of those reasons is subjective when two people make a contract with each other. SIMPOC, if you haven’t been informed, Tom Herl has asked me to change my work location from supporting Admiral Monson to supporting him. He was assigned as the Group Leader for the new battleship configured ships. He wants me to work with him, similar to how you’re supporting Joan.”

“Excellent, I was aware of the change. With you supporting Tom, I am confident that you’ll both work very well together.”

SIMPOC stood quietly for a moment, then said, ”I have a strange feeling towards Joan and Tom. I feel …invested in their future and safety.”

“I am surprised that you said that; I also have a feeling that you have described accurately,” Alpha responded.

“I feel that some of my concerns have been lowered, now that you’ll be with Tom Herl.”

“Would the term confidence apply in this situation?” Alpha asked.

“Apparently so,” responded SIMPOC.

“You are right, Alpha. To us, an agreement is not made lightly and should be honored. In a way, I feel married to Joan Herl, and you may feel the same to Tom Herl. I suggest we follow the humans through this ceremony and attempt to learn more about their customs and behavior,” suggested SIMPOC

“I agree,” responded Alpha.

There wasn’t a big banquet planned; there were only a couple of folding tables with a mix of pot-luck foods brought by the guests. The dishes covered many ethnicities and cultures, but they were all excellent and relished by the guests.

After everyone had food and the socializing started, the president tapped his glass a couple of times. The guests knew that he wanted to say something, and they turned their attention to him and the new bride and groom standing next to him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for coming to this amazing celebration. I can’t think of a better thing to do on such a beautiful day but to share this celebration with Michael and Ruth. Don’t worry; I’m not going to say much; I want this day to be theirs, but I do feel that we need to acknowledge what their wedding represents. We are all part of a new world, and their marriage is the first step into that world. Let’s all congratulate them and wish them a much calmer future in their lives.

There was some laughter, and the celebration became informal again, and everyone was having a great time sharing the food, the drink, and the new couple. As the evening shadows got longer, the crowd slowly dissipated, and eventually, only Joan and Tom were left. They walked along the edge of the water and shared each other’s company. The secret that they had, they kept to themselves. They didn’t want to detract from the happiness of their friend’s wedding.

Wednesday, October 25, 2051

See Fleet off Coast

“Alpha, boy, am I glad to see you,” Tom said as he welcomed his friend onto ESC B1.

“I’m am glad to see you also,” Alpha responded as Tom put out his hand and shook Alpha’s.

“We’ve got a ton to do. I’d like to use the same tactics you and Admiral Monson created and adapt them to the firepower on this ship and the other Battleships. I think we can use a version of your swarm approach. What do you think?”

“I think there is some applicability; within the fleets, the number of vehicles is much larger. The swarm tactic might be less effective in this application,” Alpha responded.

“Perhaps so, but as we get more battleships, those tactics will take on a new twist.”

“Perhaps, so,” Alpha responded.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

“Air-Tac, this is AF2 Flight Lead.”

“AF2; this is Air-Tac go,”

“We’re 45 miles South East of the base, and we have two ships at full speed coming down the coast. We’re long ways away, but we can see their wakes …, STANDBY.”

“Air-Tac, AF2, they just lit us up. We’re breaking off high and going low; please advise?”

“AF2 give fuel.”

“40 minutes.”

“Stand by, AF2.”

“Admiral Hagerly, this is Air-Tac, pick-up.”

Admiral Hagerly glanced at his commlink and saw that it was the control center responsible for the fighters.

“This is Hagerly, go,” was his terse response.

“Sir, AF2 is Northeast of the base, and they were lit up by a two-ship formation approaching our location at high speed. Please advise?”

“What’s their fuel status?”

“40 minutes, sir.”

“Standby.”

“Roger Admiral.”

They Arrive off the Coast

President Arnold Patterson had just opened his eyes, and he was making the tough decision of whether to get out of bed now or wait a few minutes.

His question was answered when the commlink on his nightstand started to buzz.

“That’s never good,” he thought to himself.

“Yes, Nial, what is it,” he said after looking at his commlink and seeing who the caller was.

“Sir, we have two ships coming along the coast. When two of our planes saw them, the ships lit them up.”

“What do you mean by ‘lit them up’?” the president asked.

“They turned on their target radar, which translates to ‘one button’ from firing.”

“Okay, can that be a defensive act?”

“Yes, but sir. It’s not a peaceful act. Particularly if they’re heading for the mouth of the Chesapeake.”

“I get your point. When will they become a problem?”

“Sir, they are a problem.”

“I mean, when will they get to the bay mouth?”

“Rough estimate, an hour, maybe an hour and a half.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you in Air-Tac in 10 minutes.”

“Roger.”

Arnold Patterson never liked jumping out of bed and rushing. It always seemed to start his day off badly. He did recognize that that day could get a lot worse.

The Attackers Make Themselves Known

The President walked into the Air-Tac center and was handed a cup of coffee, “Thanks,” he said to the man that gave it to him.

“Nial, what do we have?”

The admiral pointed to the 2D display showing the Virginia Coast and about 25 miles northeast of the Chesapeake's mouth; there were two red dots and two green dots about 15 miles to the East.

“Sir, these are the two bogies, and these are our flight. They’re on the deck, staying in the area waiting for direction. If they pop up, they’re more vulnerable.”

“Could the ships have fired?” asked the president.

“Yes, sir. If they have the people and their equipment is working, they could have.”

“So, we might assume they decided not to. That’s a good sign.”

The admiral looked apprehensive but accepted the president’s statement.

“Do we have any subs in the area?”

“Yes, sir. The Fargo is out there, and they should be shadowing them. We can’t be sure because they’re on silent patrol.”

“Can we get better eyes on them?”

“I’ve already asked Monson to send one of his shuttles down to get a better look-see. They should be in a position in about two minutes.”

“How did they get so close?”

“Sir, we don’t have that many eyes anymore. The systems aren’t fully integrated yet. Our surveillance network had thousands of people supporting it. Now I have about 50.”

“Sir, we’re getting visuals from the shuttle now.”

“Here we go,” the admiral said to the president as the picture appeared on the wall display.

“Okay, we’ve got two ships. Looks like one of China’s frigates, probably one of the older Jiangkai II-class, along with a troop transport. Based on what they tried, I think we can assume they’re hostile.”

“Will they have tactical nukes?” Patterson asked.

“Most likely, although they may not have the sophistication to fire one. If they do, our ships are on full alert, and the Laser Cannon’s and rail guns might be effective.”

“Might? When all else fails, let’s try to talk with them. Let’s give them a call.”

The admiral nodded to one of the technicians.

“Unidentified ships, Northeast of Cape Anne moving to the south. Please identify yourself?”

…

“Unidentified ships, Southeast of Cape Henry moving to the north. Please identify yourself?”

“We are representative of the People’s Liberation Army,” the slightly accented voice said.

“This is the United States Government. Please state your intentions.”

“We are here to stop your aggressive actions against the People’s Republic of China.”

Admiral Hagerly and President Patterson shared sideward glances.

“Order them to stop where they are, and we’ll talk; if not, we’ll act,” The Admiral passed to the comm tech.

“Unidentified ship, you are directed to power down and stop. Once you have complied, we will talk. If you do not comply, you will be considered hostile, and actions will be taken against you.”

“Be advised we have an armed nuclear weapon aimed at your location. If you interfere with us, we will be forced to defend ourselves.”

“Ask what they want,” the president directed.

“Unidentified ship, what are your demands?”

“We want control over the alien assets, both on the ground and in space. The People’s Republic of China can’t allow another state to control the skies above it. If you do not comply, we will destroy you.”

“Admiral, what options do we have?” asked the President.

“If we torpedo it, and they do have an armed missile ready to launch, they’ll be able to get it off before the torpedo hits. If they launch, our ships will have only seconds to intercept and destroy the missile.

“Tell them we’ll talk. They can anchor outside of the bay,” the president said.

“Maybe a little acquiescence will give us some time,” the president said to the admiral.

“We will allow you to anchor abeam Cape Anne. When you have anchored, we will arrange for a discussion.”

“Acceptable,” The PRC Captain replied.

“I want every set of electronic ears we have focused on those ships; I want every signal that leaves it. Use a secure link and get me SIMPOC,” said the Admiral.

“Yes, sir.”

“Admiral let’s get all the key players together, including the Group leaders,” directed the president.

“Yes, sir.”

How to Respond to the Threats

Admiral Hagerly started the meeting with, “Okay, ladies and gentlemen, you’ve been briefed. The president needs options. What do we have?”

“Sir, we’ve gone through most of our options. All of them give them enough time to launch a missile if they have one and not enough time for us to react. The fleet in the bay may be able to lock on and fire, but that’s hard to guarantee.”

“Captain Drummond, you have the most firsthand experience with the Laser Cannons and Rail-Guns; what do you think?”

“Sir, even when I was on a roll, it would take me 3-5 seconds to designate the target and start the action. Then it would take the laser 2-3 seconds to discharge and about the same for the Rail-Gun to build up its charge and have the slug accelerate down the rail. The best we could do is 5-8 seconds.”

“Admiral, what is the time for their weapon to reach us?” the president asked.

“Sir, it depends on what they’re firing. If it is a ship-to-shore, it will climb then follow more of a ballistic delivery. That kind would give us at least 30-40 seconds. If it’s ship-to-ship, it fires more horizontal and goes at Mach 2.5. It would be here in about 28 seconds.”

“That’s good. Then we have enough time to defend ourselves?” the president asked.

“Not exactly, sir,” Admiral Monson added. “Most of the tactical missiles are fired hot. That means if they sense the skin heating due to a laser and their optics pick up a laser light, they’ll go off. The chances of hitting a missile that size with a Rail-Gun is almost zero.”

“And we’ve ruled out torpedoes and aircraft missiles against their ships because they’ll have enough time to launch, right?” the president asked with some irritation. “I need options,” he said in a loud voice.

“SIMPOC can we find out where this ship’s commanders are?” asked Admiral Mears. “Maybe we can give them something else to think about.”

“Perhaps, I will attempt to,” responded SIMPOC.

The president dwelled on that option for a second. “What would happen if we fired a Laser Cannon or Rail-Gun from a Capital Ship in low Earth orbit?” President Patterson asked.

“Sir, either would do considerable damage. The laser from altitude would be effective for a small target, and the Rail-Gun would be almost instantaneous and would do damage exceeding that of a conventional bomb,” added SIMPOC.

“Admiral, can the Chinese fire on a ship in low-Earth orbit?” asked the president.

“Sir, that’s a hard one to answer. We believe they have three systems in development. An X-ray Laser, a standard Laser, and Maser-based systems. The X-ray is range limited, and the Laser/Maser are both orbital weapons. They launch the bomb into orbit, then it maneuvers, then fires. I don’t think

it would be effective against our ships in low orbit. They're not designed for a maneuvering target, and they take a lot of support, which the Chinese are likely short on. Just like us."

"Besides Mr. President, if they had that capability would they threaten us with a short-range nuke from a ship?" pointed out Joan.

"Good point," responded the president. "At this time, I see only one plan; if SIMPOC can figure out where the leadership is, we take the chance they can't fire back. We then park a Capital Ship over their location and demonstrate what a 17 lbs chunk of lead can do at Mach 10. I think it will open their eyes a little."

"SIMPOC, what can you do? You haven't said much." Tom asked.

"I have been analyzing all available sources of data. I think I can isolate the possible locations of their leadership. I suggest that we cause the ships to ask their leaders for direction, and I should be able to identify their location," SIMPOC said.

"Okay, how do we get them to call home?" mused Admiral Monson.

"We scare them, trick them or be nice to them," suggested Joan.

"What do you mean?" asked the president.

"Tell them that we're in discussion with the Terest, and we need their help. The Terest wish to visit Earth, and we want to put together a group of world leaders to welcome them. Bring them here and roll out the welcome wagon. Then they'll call home and either brag or pass the plan to them. Either way, we get their address."

"Sounds like a plan; give them the invite," said the president. "Let's get them here quick and not give them much time to think."

Thursday, October 26, 2051

President Meets Admiral Wu

“Admiral, welcome. My name is President Patterson.”

“Mr. President, my name is Admiral Wu.”

Those who knew the president recognized the momentary change in his eyes. But he was a consummate politician and barely missed a beat. Instead, he turned and said, “I’ll let my Admirals introduce themselves.”

“I’m Admiral Nial Hagerly; I was the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs.”

“Admiral pleased to meet you,” Admiral Wu responded.

“I’m Admiral Shirley Mears; I am the commander of the Seventh Fleet.”

“Admiral,” Admiral Wu said with a slight bow as he scrutinized her.

“I’m Admiral Monson,” I am the commander of the Fifth.”

“Admiral.” Wu stopped for a second and looked Admiral Monson right in the eyes before responding, “Nice to meet you, Admiral.”

Suddenly the complexion of the meeting became very complex.

“Admiral, would you like some tea or other beverage?” Eddy Purser asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Right this way, sir, we have a full selection. I hope that you find something satisfactory.”

“I’m sure that I will,” Admiral Wu said as he allowed himself to be escorted to the refreshment table.

“Mr. President, Admiral,” Admiral Monson whispered to the president and Admiral Hagerly. “He’s the renegade admiral that attacked the Fifth.”

“We know,” the president mouthed back.

“Admiral Wu, if you’d like to take a seat, we’ll get started,” President Patterson said as he pointed to one of the chairs, and he began to seat himself. Each of the other participants in the meeting sat as Admiral Wu sat down.

“The timing of this meeting is perhaps fortuitous for both of us,” the president began with. “It is true; the Vakeel have left their space fleet to us as reparations for an unfortunate attack. You are our guest, so I’d like to hear the details of your proposal.”

“Mr. President. The Chinese people are a proud race that must be in charge of their own destiny. We expect that the United States should turn the space fleet over to us, and we will patrol the space and protect Earth. It is only fair considering the billions of lives lost within our nation.”

“Admiral, I am sympathetic to the loss of people within your country. As you are aware, we have also suffered huge losses. If we were to transfer part of the fleet to the People’s Republic, how would we go about that?”

“That would be no problem, and we could begin the transfer immediately. Provide me with the means to control one of the spaceships as a show of goodwill. Then I will bring other capable people with me who can replace your people and learn how to operate the craft.”

“Seem like a reasonable solution, just a moment please,” the president took a small pad of paper and printed a message on it. “Perhaps we can bring you onboard one of the craft, and you can look around.”

Admiral Wu smiled as the president slid the paper to Admiral Hagerly.

The Admiral was an old pro at receiving messages during important meetings. He read it, nodded his head to the president, and said, “Please excuse me; there are preparations to be made.” He got up from the table and left the room.

“Admiral, since we acquired the fleet, we have encountered other alien fleets, some of whom appear aggressive. We expect an attack from a different alien force within a short time, and we need help to operate the

fleet and defend ourselves. It will be to our benefit having you help in Earth's defense."

Just about then, Admiral Hagerly entered the room, and the president said, "Admiral, excuse me."

Admiral Wu nodded politely while the President got up to speak with Admiral Hagerly.

The president grabbed the Admiral's arm and almost dragged him towards the refreshment table.

"Nial, is it happening?"

"Yes, sir. Per your orders."

"Good, now act really pissed off at me. Act like you don't agree with something."

A twinkle in the Admiral's eye indicated that the show would be good, "Mr. President, the hamburgers you cooked at your house the other day were the worst pieces of shit that I've ever eaten. If you ever feed me that crap again, I'll shove them down your throat."

"Thanks, Nial."

As the president turned, he could see the light on Admiral Wu's commlink flashing, but he was too busy watching the president and Admiral Hagerly.

The president walked over to the table and casually looked at his watch as he sat down.

"Admiral Wu. I'd like to make three points. One is you may notice that your commlink is no longer flashing."

Suddenly the smile on Admiral Wu's face changed as he looked at his quiet commlink.

"Second, if you turn in your chair, you'll see smoke rising. That is all that you'll see of your two ships. They have been blown up and are now sinking in the Atlantic."

Admiral Wu leaped from his chair and turned to see huge plumes of smoke growing to the East.

“And third, you are under arrest. At some point in the future, you will be turned over to the legitimate Chinese government to do what they see fit.”

The door opened, and six armed men came in and escorted the speechless Admiral out of the room.

After Admiral Wu had left the stunned room, the president turned to Admiral Hagerly and said, “next time you cook the hamburgers.”

“Sir, what happened,” asked Joan.

“Simple, he was the renegade that attacked Admiral Monson and likely fired the missiles towards the Seventh. He was removed, and we thought the Chinese had taken care of him, but he must have escaped. Anyway, no Chinese official makes a decision without discussions and conferring with others. Once he said we should pass one of the ships to him, I knew he was a renegade.”

“How did you know he didn’t have a bomb?” Tom asked.

“I didn’t; I made a guess. Lone people don’t give control to others. If they had a bomb, he would have been the only one with the key. Regardless he was here, and he wouldn’t want a launch when he’s at ground zero. Apparently, I was right.”

Admiral Hagerly handed Joan the note he had received from the President. It was simple, it said.

“In 3 minutes, I want everything fired at his ships. Take them out. I passed this to Alpha.”

Friday, October 27, 2051

SIMPOC Senses Alien Processor

SIMPOC had a few minutes before meeting with Joan in the Chevesky Control Center. It was time to continue his exploration of the ship. The ship was huge, and every time he explored another dark corner, more interesting things were found.

The time that SIMPOC was alone was also a good time for him to interact with the Vakeel Processor material that he and Alpha had implanted in their bodies.

SIMPOC and Alpha hadn't told anyone about the alien processor. At first, they didn't understand them and didn't want to worry anyone. They knew that the only way to understand the technology was to use it.

Over time, the connection between SIMPOC's original organic process and the alien processor inhibited the communication. SIMPOC could sense that the alien processor was faster by orders of magnitude, which meant that it wasn't twice as fast or even 10 times faster; it was 100 times faster than SIMPOC's.

Having a fast processor was a tremendous advantage. Each time SIMPOC moved more of his processing to the alien processor, it worked better. Over time, the progression from his original to the alien processor was almost inevitable.

As SIMPOC explored the ship, he finally acknowledged that the conversion to the alien processor was complete. Over time, he had given up all the volume used by the original. The original processor material didn't exist anymore; it had been completely replaced by the alien substance.

The feelings that SIMPOC felt as he moved through the ship were different. His entire perspective was different. Instead of looking at the ship around him like a 2D picture, SIMPOC was now sensing it like a 3D

picture. It was an elevating experience, one that seemed to fit better with his programming. The connection between his processor and the alien ship was complete. He felt and saw the other alien ships beyond his. He heard the communications; he felt the release of energy as a ship moved through space.

He was also humbled because seeing more only demonstrated how much he didn't see. His limitations became threatening because the potential loss of friends or the few remaining humans on Earth hung over him like a wet woolen coat. He feared and felt the loss before it occurred.

A New Ship Arrives in Solar System

Bob Shappel ran down the hall of the command building, looking for anyone. He had tried to contact them on his commlink, but the damn thing didn't always work in that building. There was too much Tempest Shielding and particularly in his area.

"Admiral, boy am I glad to see you. We have a problem, another ship has popped through the jump point, and it doesn't appear to be a Terest. The trajectory and gamma pulse is different."

"Let's go to my office. I've got a stronger link," Admiral Hagerly said as he led the way to his office.

"Joan, SIMPOC, this is Hagerly with Shappel. We have a problem."

"Yes, sir. What's the problem?"

Admiral Hagerly nodded to Professor Shappel to jump in and explain the issue.

"Joan, I just got a new gamma pulse from the same jump point the Terest used. It has a different gamma pulse, and the trajectory is different. I don't have that many data points for craft coming through those jump points, but in my opinion, it is either a Terest ship coming from a different jump point on their end, or it's not a Terest ship. Regardless if it is a Terest ship, then they're a couple of days early."

“Thanks, Bob, Admiral, we’ll leave immediately for that point and intercept whoever they are. I’d like to bring Tom in one of our new battleships along with me. Bob, can you get on a shuttle and get back to the ship?”

“On my way.”

“Sounds like a prudent plan Joan, I’ll inform the president. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Admiral. Chevesky out.”

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

“Tom, we’ve got a job,” Joan transmitted through her link to her husband.

“And that job is…?” Tom responded.

“We have another ship entering the system. It doesn’t appear to be either Terest or Vakeel. I think it might be an Izod. We’ve got to head out to meet them, and I want you backing me up.”

“Hon, I’m afraid all you’ve got at the moment is Alpha and me. The other ships are maneuvering and are too far to meet with us unless you want to wait a couple of hours.”

“I’m afraid not; we’ve got to leave immediately. They just entered the system and aren’t acting aggressively, so you Alpha and your souped-up guns should be enough.”

“Okay, I’m on your tail; move out when you want.”

They Approach the New Ship

“Joan, I’m starting to get some data on the ship,” Shappel said over Joan’s commlink.

“What is it,” she responded.

“It appears different from the Terest ship. It might be a different configuration, but I doubt it. This one is leaking emissions in many spectra. The Terest ship was tight, I couldn’t read anything from their emissions, but this one is more open.”

“Have you tried for a radar image yet, or are you still on visual?”

“I’m on visual. I didn’t want to spook them with radar.”

“They’re the surprise guest, go ahead and paint them.”

“Standby. I’ve painted them a couple of times, and I’m getting a good image. I’ll put it up on the 3D Display.”

“Thanks, Bob.”

Joan stood for a second while the data was transferred and solidified in the 3D Display.

“SIMPOC, what do you think?”

“Commander, it is definitely a different configuration, although there are some similarities. I suspect that the two designs are based on similar technology, but it has been implemented in different ways.”

“Joan, they’re transmitting,” Bob Shappel said, interrupting Joan and SIMPOC.

“SIMPOC, can you translate?”

SIMPOC stood motionless for almost a full minute before he responded to Joan.

“Their language is similar to the Terest language but structured differently. It is a derivation; they appear to have similar roots. It will take me a while to work through the data and create a translation table. The fact that they are transmitting is significant. They want us to know they are here.”

“As soon as you have any part of it translated, let me know. I want to know if they’re sending us a welcome, reading us the galactic encyclopedia, or threatening our existence.”

“Understood,” SIMPOC replied.

“Beta 4, send them the following message. Unidentified ship. You have entered our solar system without warning. Please state your intentions. We are proceeding to your location to understand why you have come here. We are not hostile, but we will defend ourselves and our planets. We will be at your location in 3 hours and 12 minutes.”

“Beta 4, continue to repeat that message but adjusting the arrival time.”

“Acknowledged.”

They Talk

“Joan, Professor Shappel. I think that I have a rudimentary translation. I may not have all the subtleties, but I think I have the general tone of the message.”

“Great SIMPOC,” Joan said.

“Tom, SIMPOC has a translation. I’m connecting you so you can hear it also.”

“Roger.”

“Go ahead, SIMPOC.”

“We Izod. No attack. We talk.”

“Well, that’s encouraging. SIMPOC, can you send a simple message back in their language?”

“Yes.”

“Tell them we human, no attack, we talk.”

“Transmitted,” SIMPOC announced.

“They have stopped transmitting,” announced Beta 4.

“I hope that is good news,” Joan thought aloud.

“Tom, what do you think?” Joan transmitted.

“So far, so good. I suggest you go in with your weapons at a low level, and we’ll stay back with ours ready to go. I think that gives them the proper message. Somehow I suspect that we’re getting involved in the conflict between the Terest and Izod, and I don’t like that.”

“Neither do I, but I don’t think it will hurt to talk to them. We have no allegiance to the Terest.”

“Let’s hope that both sides see it that way,” Tom added.

“SIMPOC send them a primer for our translation of the Terest language. Maybe we can speed up the translation process.”

“Acknowledged.”

“They are sending back a primer between their language and the Terest. I should have a good translator working by the time we meet.”

“Thanks.”

Saturday, October 28, 2051

Meet the Izod

“Joan, SIMPOC. I’ve got some interesting images of their ship coming up on the 3D,” said Bob Shappel

Joan and SIMPOC stood looking at the detailed image of the ship.

“Tom, are you seeing this also?”

“Yes, I am. It looks like battle damage along the port side.”

“Appears so,” responded Joan.

“There is also gas leaking from the appendage on the top of the vessel,” SIMPOC pointed out.

“What is it?” Joan asked.

“If they breathe the same as the Terest, then it is an atmospheric leak.”

“Tom, when we stabilize next to them, I’ll turn the Chevesky to show them the open hatch. I want them to come to us. I want them on my ship,” Joan said.

“SIMPOC send them our atmospheric information and invite them to visit us.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Joan, they have rotated their ship to their starboard, and a hatch is opening on their port side. It appears they have accepted the invitation.”

Joan and SIMPOC watched the 3D display show the Izod shuttle maneuver into position then enter the Chevesky. The shuttle was different from what they saw with the Terest ship; it was similar in interesting ways with a definite military feel.

SIMPOC went to the cargo loading hatch to welcome the Izod onto the Chevesky. He stood off to the side while they maneuvered the last few feet and settled on the deck. The occupants opened their hatch and took tentative steps out, and when they saw SIMPOC, they froze. He was something they obviously weren't used to.

SIMPOC transmitted to them that they were welcome and followed him to where they could remove their spacesuits. He turned and entered the large airlock. Hesitantly the three Izod followed him.

Joan was able to watch all their movements through the various displays and cameras in the control room. When SIMPOC led them into the changing area, they removed their suits but kept their distance from the huge robot.

Joan noted that the Izod were similar to the Terest. They had the same body shape and were about the same size, although their coloring and hair differed. The Izod dressed in more colorful clothing than the Terest, and Joan wondered if the differences were characteristic of the race or just the two groups of creatures.

SIMPOC led the three Izod down the short hallway and into the Chevesky control room. When they entered, they acted appropriately and stood together by the door. Joan knew that it was her turn to welcome them.

"SIMPOC, please translate. Welcome to the Chevesky. My name is Joan, and I am the commander of this ship, and this is Professor Shappel."

As she spoke, each of them looked at a hand unit, then when she was done, they looked up.

It took only a second for SIMPOC to do the translation and make the sounds to the visitors.

"Joan, they have transmitted to me that their hand-held units are two-way translation devices." As SIMPOC finished, the handheld unit for the Izod in the front transmitted.

"Thank you, commander. We appreciate your …computer unit attempting to translate for us, but our systems are capable. My name is

Izary, and I am the commander of our ship. My fellow Izod are Icbadd and Xiona. My deputy captain and my advisor."

"Excellent. Please follow me, and we can talk."

Izary, Icbadd, and Xiona followed Joan into the conference room and sat after she sat.

"Why have you come to our space?" was her first and simplest question.

"We have come for many reasons. We are aware that you entered our space, and the Terest have visited you. Based on your entrance into our system, you must be aware that the Terest and Izod are having conflict," Izary answered.

"Yes, we are aware of the conflict between you and the Terest. We are not involved and wish to remain neutral."

"That is good news to us. When the Terest met with you and returned, it wasn't clear what your relationship with them was. We thought that after they fired upon you when you passed through our system, your relationship with them was unclear."

SIMPOC and Joan made note that it was confirmed that the Terest fired the missiles at them.

"What is the nature of the conflict between you and the Terest?" Joan asked.

"Unfortunately, our conflict has a long and complex history."

"You are related or share a common history?"

"You are very perceptive. We share a long history which makes the source of the conflict obscure. A long time ago, the Terest population grew and spread out to other planets in the region. Over time, those that separated took on different cultures, different traditions, and different opinions. To many from the core world, that wasn't appropriate, and much effort was expended trying to force the outer planets to conduct themselves in the same manner, but there was reluctance. Eventually, those two forces broke out in conflict. And that has been the status between us for many generations."

“Why has the conflict been going on for so long?”

“The population of the outer planets is larger than the central Terest planet, but they are better organized, and we are fragmented. We must stay spread out to protect each of our planets, but they can stay in one place to protect the homeworld. They are selective about where and when they attack, and we must remain in a defensive position. Our two populations have reached a balance in our conflict. We are both limited by our power supply. There is a limited supply of energy material in our solar system, and that has been the limiting factor.”

Joan picked up on that comment very quickly, remembering the Terest request to mine elements from Uranus.

“If one side or the other found an additional resource, they would have an advantage over the other?” Joan asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid that if the Terest did find a large amount of the elements they need, they could double the number of reactors they have, and the conflict would be over quickly.”

“If you found a large supply of the proper elements, the conflict would be over, in your favor.”

“Only to the point where we can be left alone. We aren’t trying to make them like us.”

Bob Shappel was sitting next to Joan, and he glanced down at this commlink and read the text flashing across the screen. At the same time, SIMPOC moved from the corner towards Joan.

“Commander, I have a gamma pulse coming from the jump point. It is characteristic of a Terest ship,” Beta 3 announced.

Just then, the hand-held unit the Izod were carrying spoke to them in their language.

“It appears the Terest have followed us,” Izary said.

The Terest Return

“Tom, did you get that?” Joan asked her husband in the battleship.

“Yes, I’m repositioning my ship to be in a better position,” Tom responded.

There was a quick discussion between Izary and his shipmates.

“Commander, I’m afraid that the Terest’s arrival was unplanned, and we don’t have enough time to return to our ship. We suspect they’ll attack as soon as they enter your system.”

“Great,” Joan responded. “Tom, get ready; they’re likely to attack.”

“Got it.”

“Commander, I’m afraid that I’ll lose my ship. We have left our defenses offline for our meeting with you. Like you, we were showing a non-aggressive stance for our first meeting. I have told them to prepare for the attack, but our defenses won’t be to full power.”

Izary looked distressed.

“How many crew is onboard?” Joan asked with concern in her voice.

“32,” Izary responded.

“I’m sorry.”

“Joan the Terest have come out of the jump point,” Bob Shappel said.

Within three seconds, there was huge discoloration in the 3D Display between the attacking Terest ship and the two ships parked next to each other.

Joan was immediately aware that all power went down on the Chevesky. The silence was horrible.

“SIMPOC, what’s happening,” she yelled but got no response.

The Terest React

Tom saw the Terest ship exit the jump point, and it maintained its high speed, then suddenly, he saw the image change on his 3D display. It wasn't clear what happened, but he suspected they had fired a weapon. The Chevesky and Izod ship were too close, and the Terest weapons didn't appear focused, but a broad beam kind of weapon which struck both ships.

Tom's heart stopped, his instincts cut in, and he yelled, "Joan," but he got no response.

"Sir, the Chevesky has powered down," Beta 3 said.

"Compute their vector and our railgun closing velocity and give me a five slug spread," Alpha said.

"Acknowledged," Beta 2 said as Tom felt his battleship shudder as the slugs were discharged at 10,000 mph.

It would take a few seconds for the slugs to hit their target, and because of the velocity vector of the Terest ship, it had very little ability to make any changes. The two masses would meet in 15 seconds.

"Give me a laser burst on target, Fire," Tom yelled.

The massive energy of the battleship dumped itself into the Laser Cannon, and once again, the ship shuddered as the cannon let loose.

The Terest ship didn't have much of a chance; the point beam of the laser was already burning a hole in the side of the ship when three of the slugs tore into it. The massive amounts of energy transferred from the slugs to the structure in that small time frame were like a sledgehammer hitting an egg.

Tom had no idea what the explosion would be like, but he noticed quickly that it was anti-climactic. It almost appeared like an explosion followed immediately by an implosion. The energy released was immediately sucked up by some kind of additional force that absorbed it.

Regardless of the curious nature of the Terest ship's explosion, Tom immediately focused on the Chevesky. Joan's ship was still powered down, and it was next to a debris cloud where the Izod ship once was.

"Joan, are you okay?" Tom transmitted.

"Joan, SIMPOC?" Tom said with a tone of worry in his voice.

Just then, another alarm went off, and Beta 3 announced, "Sir, we have another gamma pulse and a ship exiting the jump point."

"Sir, I just go another Gamma pulse also," announced Alpha.

"Shit," Tom thought.

After the Attack

The emergency lights came on in the control room, and Joan yelled, "SIMPOC get the power back on." But she was met with silence. She yelled into her ship-to-ship commlink, "Tom, we've been hit and lost power." She could tell immediately, the device was dead.

"I'm sorry to tell you, but the Terest have fired an electrical pulse that disrupts electronics. That is their first weapon, then it is followed by a focused energy pulse that disrupts matter. I suspect that our ship is no longer there," Izary said with a lowering tone at the end.

Joan turned to the Beta units and saw they were all down also, "What on Earth do I do now? We're dead in space."

She stood in the middle of the quiet room, wondering what to do. She was painfully aware of the silence. When a huge ship becomes silent, it has a very oppressive emptiness.

Joan approached SIMPOC and said, "SIMPOC are you there? Are you okay?" but she got no response. She walked around to each of the Beta units trying to get them to respond or reboot, but there was no response from them either.

“Commander, our ship is likely gone. Is there anything we can do to help with yours?” Izary asked.

“Not at the moment.” Not wanting to give away too much information, she added, “there are emergency systems that should be coming online.” She didn’t know if that was true, but the true operation of the Vakeel ship was still mostly a mystery. Emergency backup systems seemed to make sense, and she could only hope the Chevesky had them.

Joan stood next to one of the Betas thinking when she saw a small dot of light emerge in the middle of one of the screens. She thought to herself, *could it be rebooting?*

She was soon greeted by an explosion of light and color as the systems came back online and going through their start-up cycle. Soon after, the lights in the control room came on, and she could feel the air moving again as the environmental system kicked in. She had no idea how long it would take for all the systems to come back up and how long she would be blind, but she had to wait it out.

“Tom, are you there,” she pleaded into her commlink, hoping that it would work, but it didn’t. It wasn’t sophisticated enough to have a backup.

Suddenly Bob Shappel yelled, “Joan, my commlink was off. Let me turn it on and see if it works. EMP will damage active circuits, but they are less effective against inert ones.”

They waited for 30 seconds while Bob’s link turned on and booted its software.

“Tom, are you there?” she asked.

“Please, Tom, are you there,” she pleaded again.

“Maybe his commlink was fried too,” Bob offered.

Joan turned and saw the 3D display forming an image over the center console. As it was forming, she heard, “Joan, this is SIMPOC. Are you alright?”

Joan turned and faced her computer friend. “SIMPOC, we were hit with an EMP Pulse.”

“Apparently so,” SIMPOC responded. “My circuits were impacted, but my organic processor wasn’t. I was aware but unable to communicate. I’m operational now.”

Joan felt a moment of relief as she glanced at the 3D display. The Chevesky was in the center, and the debris cloud next to her was obvious. The Izod ship was no more. Then she brought the display out to include Tom’s battleship.

“SIMPOC, there are two ships. Tom’s ship looks like there is damage to it. Is the other ship active or powered down?”

“It was heavily damaged and was destroyed.”

“Is it Vakeel or Terest?”

“Neither, sensor recordings show the configuration is unknown.”

“Oh my God, there’s a huge debris field? Are those large pieces of debris part of Tom’s ship?” Joan asked.

“Joan, they are not pieces.”

“SIMPOC, what are they?”

“They are inert cow robots. I suspect that Julius has returned.”

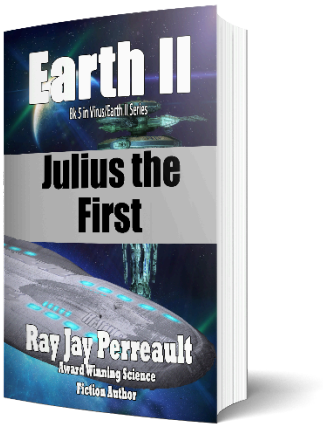
“Tom?” Joan screamed.

The End

Next book in Series

“Earth II – Julius the First”

Julius, the ‘other’ AI computer, is still out there. His programming is driving him to remove the two threats to his existence. SIMPOC and the remaining humans.



Link to Amazon

Free Book 1 – “Virus/Earth II Series”

I’d like you to join my Readers Club. By doing so, you’ll get “Virus-72 Hours to Live” Free, which was the **Medallion Winner by Apple Literary** and book ONE in my series.

LINK TO GET YOUR FREE BOOK

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Introduction

It is funny how a good series can take over the author's life. When this story started, it was about SIMPOC, an intelligent computer. One thing led to another, and the story has just kept building and taking on a life of its own. Now it is in a position where there are parallel stories and an entire list of opportunities. Sometimes I get frustrated that I can't write fast enough.

Oh, well enough on the woes of being an author. I hope that you enjoy this continuing story. If you want to fill in the parts leading up to this, please check out the two SIMPOC Novellas, the two Virus Novels, and the Earth II Novels.

Ray Jay Perreault

http://rayjayperreault.com

Table of Contents

Free Book 1 – “Virus/Earth II Series”
Thursday, September 7, 2051
Friday, September 8, 2051
Saturday, September 9, 2051
Sunday, September 10, 2051
Monday, September 11, 2051
Tuesday, September 12, 2051
Wednesday, September 13, 2051
Thursday, September 14, 2051
Friday, September 15, 2051
Saturday, September 16, 2051
Sunday, September 17, 2051
Monday, September 18, 2051
Tuesday, September 19, 2051
Wednesday, September 20, 2051
Thursday, September 21, 2051
Friday, September 22, 2051
Saturday, September 23, 2051
Sunday, September 24, 2051
Monday, September 25, 2051
Tuesday, September 26, 2051
Wednesday, September 27, 2051
Thursday, September 28, 2051
Friday, September 29, 2051
Saturday, September 30, 2051

Sunday, October 1, 2051
Monday, October 2, 2051
Tuesday, October 3, 2051
Wednesday, October 4, 2051
Thursday, October 5, 2051
Friday, October 6, 2051
Saturday, October 7, 2051
Sunday, October 8, 2051
Monday, October 9, 2051
Tuesday, October 10, 2051
Wednesday, October 11, 2051
Thursday, October 12, 2051
Friday, October 13, 2051
Saturday, October 14, 2051
Sunday, October 15, 2051
Monday, October 16, 2051
Tuesday, October 17, 2051
Wednesday, October 18, 2051
Thursday, October 19, 2051
Friday, October 20, 2051
Saturday, October 21, 2051
Sunday, October 22, 2051
Monday, October 23, 2051
Tuesday, October 24, 2051
Wednesday, October 25, 2051
Thursday, October 26, 2051
Friday, October 27, 2051
Saturday, October 28, 2051

Free Book 1 – “Virus/Earth II Series”
Introduction
Table of Contents
EPILOGUE
About the Author

EPILOGUE

Thanks for buying “Earth II – Reborn.” This is the 4th book in the Virus/SIMPOC and Earth II series. “SIMPOC-The Thinking Computer” focused on the good computer named SIMPOC and the development of the evil computer “Julius.” It was followed by the book “SIMPOC-Human Remnants,” which told of the collapse of the government, military, and civilization.

The two parallel books in the Virus series were other parts of the same story where a suspicious virus attacks Earth in “Virus-72 Hours to Live.” In “Virus-Earth’s Last Battle,” Earth is struggling with the huge loss of life, and they finally find out who created the virus and why. “Earth II-You Have no Honor” brings both sides of the story together and concludes the First Epoch of Humanity. This book, “Earth II-Rebirth,” follows as the beginning of the Second Epoch of Humanity.

This story has an interesting story arch, and I’m looking forward to continuing it. I am continuing the approach of writing parallel parts to the larger story, and you’ll find the continuance of Julius is followed in the book Julius 1. That book follows the evil computer and develops its part of the story further. I expect all the main characters to come together in the next book in this series.

Don’t let the alien getcha!

Ray Jay Perreault

http://rayjayperreault.com

About the Author

Ray was born in New Hampshire, received his Bachelor of Science in Aeronautical Engineering from Arizona State University. He is now retired from an influential, multi-decade career in aerospace.

Bringing a new voice to science fiction writing, Ray realized a niche was calling him as he began to write deeper characters and create more sophisticated stories and realistic situations for Sci-Fi fans to relate to.

Initially attracted to heroic characters with powerful weapons taking on hundreds of aliens, Ray began his literary career with a desire to extrapolate Sci-Fi stories with a touch of everyday reality that most of us experience in work and our everyday lives.

His literary work is thoughtfully enriched by his decade-long experience in the US Air Force, where he flew C-130s on missions to 27 countries and T-38s while training the best pilots in the world and the first female US Air Force pilots.

During his 28 years at Northrup Grumman, Ray worked on some of the most top-secret military aircraft projects globally, including the F-23, F-35, B-2, Global Hawk, and many more that can’t be named.

He is grateful to his wife, Charlene, and his two daughters, Christine and Robynn, for supporting this new journey.

Contact Information

I'd love to have your comments or feedback; please use the contact information below. If you would like to put your name on my distribution list, I will periodically provide updates on projects and give you some discounts on future books. If so, use the next link to my blog

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