

Forbidden Outpost

Tony Rubolotta

DSC Adventures

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously or based on the characters that appeared in the film "Forbidden Planet"

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DSC Adventures

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For the fans of Forbidden Planet
in hope that this sequel is at least half as
entertaining as the movie that inspired it.

Special thanks to my nephew, Geraldo Damazio who took
time during his visit from Brasil to do the cover design.

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Chapter 1 Prelude

In a few more seconds, United Planets cruiser C-57-D would be 100,000,000 miles from Altair 4, the safe distance necessary to avoid damage from the exploding planet. The countdown to the planet's doom began 24 hours earlier when the reactors of the planet's core were set to overload and trigger a massive chain reaction. It was too late to question the wisdom of the decision to destroy the planet. The process was irreversible and reaching a safe distance was now the highest priority.

Several crew members and the boatswain were gathered near the astro-navigation station at the center of the main deck. Their attention was focused on the replica of the ship at the center of the crystal astro-navigation sphere and the robot at the helm controls. It was strange to see Robby the robot seated at the console because he had always been seen standing until today. But there he was, performing the duties of an astro-navigator. The ship model at the center of the crystal sphere was level and straight, indicating level and straight flight directly away from the doomed planet.

Commander Adams took Altaira's hand as they turned away from the astro-navigation station and walked toward the main view plate adjacent to the engineer's station. Crewman Randall sat at the engineer's console with his attention focused on the ship's chronometer and with a com-link in hand. Adams pointed to the view plate, "See, Altair 4, the bright speck below the star." The main sequence star Altair was a slightly brighter dot near the middle of the view plate.

"15 seconds." announced Randall. Altair 4 had already exploded but it would take another 15 seconds for the light and radiation of the blast to reach the ship.

Adams moved behind Alta, putting his arms around her waist as they both faced the main view plate and he spoke softly and slowly. “There's Altair, your father, my ship mates, all the stored knowledge of the Krell. Five seconds... four... three... two... one...”

In the view plate, the light from the explosion of Altair 4 expanded to a bright white disk set against a black background studded with pinpoints of bright stars. The brightness of the disc overwhelmed the nearby pinpoints of light and cast a bright light on Adams and Alta. The disc created by the glowing debris field held its place for several seconds, then quickly receded and then suddenly disappeared. Adams turned his attention to Alta as she turned to look away from the view plate and toward him, returning his gentle embrace and resting her head on his shoulder for comfort.

“Alta,” he said, “about a million years from now, the human race will have crawled up to where the Krell stood in their great moment of triumph and tragedy. Your father's name will shine again, like a beacon in the galaxy.” Adams slid his hands down from her shoulders to her arms, pushing her back slightly to look into her eyes while she lifted her head from his shoulder and looked back into his eyes. “Yes, it's true, it will remind us, after all, we are not gods.”

Adams pulled Alta closer, cradling her head on his shoulder again as she tightened her arms around him. Altair 4 was the only home she had ever known. Her father was the only man she had known until the arrival of United Planets cruiser C-57-D and its crew, and Commander J. J. Adams in particular. Emotions she had never known, grief, romantic love, fear and anxiety, had taken her on a chaotic and stressful emotional ride in the past few days. She was emotionally spent and physically exhausted.

Adams had some idea of what she must be going through and walked her toward the officers quarters at the stern of the ship. He thought Doc Ostrow's quarters would be best for her. She was present when Doc revealed the secret he had learned

about the great Krell machine, and then died. Being in Doc's quarters might refresh that dreadful memory, but these were the most suitable quarters for a young woman on her first space voyage. The cabin was small but it was private and afforded some space to store her belongings. Doc was a cultured man and the small personal items he placed in his cabin reflected his refinement. Adams walked behind her and stopped at the doorway, pointing to the two aluminum trunks the crew had moved into the cabin.

“Alta, I have some things to take care of now. Why don't you start unpacking or rest. We only have a few minutes. I won't be long, and...” said Adams, hesitating to say more. Alta had enough on her mind now and he thought it best to give her some privacy and time to escape, even if it was for only a few minutes.

Adams closed the cabin door, took a deep breath, pulled himself to attention and walked briskly back to the astro-navigation station where most of the crew had now gathered around the robot. He asked the boatswain “Is all the gear and equipment stowed?”

“Closing up the compartments now sir.” the boatswain responded while pointing to a few crewmen to the right and upper deck who were busy securing compartment hatches, doors and loose equipment.

The crew was eager to get started for home and had made all of the ship's systems ready for the jump to faster-than-light (FTL) speed. Randall was running through the systems checklist, and for each item waiting for an aye aye before continuing. The crew had been on Altair 4 for only four days after a trip of over one year to reach the planet. But what a four days of terror it had been with little time to relax. They were eager and anxious to get underway.

“Robby, do you understand the sequence of operations for a light speed jump?” Adams asked the robot while glancing about to see what the crew was doing. Most were waiting for orders while a few others were moving toward the astro-

navigation station.

“Yes sir.” the robot answered. Robby had learned the ship's helm and navigation systems quickly but had not yet been through a light speed jump. The jump to FTL wasn't particularly difficult but had to be done in proper sequence and timing to avoid injuries or death. Robby was making a few adjustments and the very act of doing that raised Adams's confidence in the robot as he looked over Robby's side. Most of the crew had gathered around the astro-navigation station and were speaking in low voices.

Adams raised his com-link to address the entire ship's company. “We will make our jump to light speed in a few minutes. Make a final check on your gear and report to DC stations when instructed.” Adams turned toward the officers quarters looking for Alta to emerge. He was thinking she must have heard the announcement and understood it applied to her as well as the crew. That was confirmed a few seconds later when she came out of her quarters and started toward him.

Adams turned to greet Alta and holding her shoulders at arms length, he spoke with a consoling and soothing voice, “Alta, in about 377 days, we will be on Earth, our home.” Our home, she thought and beamed a reassuring smile, which Adams returned as he issued his orders. “Boatswain, sound DC stations. Robby, execute light speed jump on DC stations ready. Execute the course for Earth at maximum speed.”

Two aye ayes followed and the crew started toward their DC stations. Alta stayed close to Adams as they moved forward on the ship toward the compartment where the DC stations were located. Adams pointed to one of the floor plates, then the ceiling plate and shallow hood directly above it. He would take his place in an adjacent station. This was Alta's first jump but she knew to drop her arms by her side and to stand in the center of the floor plate.

The ship's warning lights, used to signal DC stations were still flashing when the DC beams were turned on, spanning the floor and ceiling plates of each DC station, enveloping each

occupant in a cylinder of pale blue-green light. The sound of a barely audible hum from the ship's core and propulsion driver surged in volume as the devices powered up and the ship accelerated.

The silver, saucer shaped ship accelerated toward a distant pinpoint of light in a black sky with many visible pinpoints. The light from Altair reflecting off the hull of the ship and onto the camera of the view plate turned redder as the speed increased, and then blue as the ship passed the light barrier and the camera view shifted forward. No one could see the view plate directly from the DC stations compartment, but the light reflected from the ship's interior was clearly visible. As the camera returned to facing the stern, the colors shifted again toward red.

The jump to light speed was completed in about 12 seconds and the pale blue-green DC fields vanished. A typical side affect of the DC field was a slight muscular stiffness in the neck and back, and Alta was no exception. Like most of the crew, she was gently massaging her neck and stretching her back as she left the DC station. As they were leaving the compartment, Adams said to her "I have a few things to do but the ship is yours."

While Adams made his way straight to the boatswain and began the post-jump check, Alta decided to see what the main view plate was showing. She was caught completely by surprise by what appeared on the screen a few seconds later. The ship had caught up with the light waves from the explosion of Altair 4. She relived the experience of seeing her former home world destroyed but in reverse and at a faster speed with a much redder light. Despite the distortion, the affect on Alta was much the same as it had been the first time, filling her with a sweeping sense of loss, despair and loneliness.

She did not want to see the destruction of the planet again, but it was done. A few seconds later, Altair and Altair 4 could be seen as they were before the explosion. Alta turned from

the view plate, wiped a tear from her eye and made her way toward her cabin. Perhaps if she busied herself unpacking, the memories would fade, even if just temporarily.

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Commander Adams made his round through the ship while composing a top secret personal log entry in his head. He would encrypt and protect this log using thought pattern technology. That would allow him to extract selected parts for inclusion in the official mission log. He was unsettled on how some details might be received and wanted additional time to consider and compose the official report.

“This log is personal and top secret. Time synchronization will follow. Our mission to Altair 4 in the Altair star system to discover the fate of the ship Bellerophon and the science prospecting expedition sent there 20 years ago has only been partially successful but tremendously costly. We located Dr. Edward Morbius, the sole survivor of the expedition. We also discovered Morbius had a daughter, Altaira, from his marriage to another member of the expedition, Julia Martin. We learned later that Mrs. Morbius died giving birth to their daughter, Altaira.

We also discovered Morbius had the company of an advanced robot he had constructed during the first few months on Altair 4. The robot was constructed using alien technology discovered on Altair 4, which I will discuss more thoroughly later in this report. Soon after the robot was built and within the first year of the landing on Altair 4, every member of the Bellerophon expedition, with the exception of Dr. and Mrs. Morbius had been violently killed by some unseen presence of unknown origin at the time of the incidents. We now know the cause of those deaths and it will be explained in this report in the sequence it unfolded.

Dr. Morbius reported the discovery of an extremely advanced civilization called the Krell. He reported them to be one million years ahead of human kind in every way, but they had been extinct for the past 200,000 years. Apparently,

according to his discovery, the entire civilization was wiped out in a single night by some unknown force while the Krell were on the verge of a fantastic achievement. The Krell, he said, had devoted their entire energy on a project that promised to free the Krell from all dependence on physical instrumentality. Unfortunately, Morbius had no other details concerning this fantastic project.

We did learn about some of the Krell technology from Morbius, including the presence of an enormous machine beneath the surface of the planet, a cube measuring 20 miles by 20 miles by 20 miles. Morbius did not know the purpose or function of the machine. He also showed us a Krell laboratory. Everything we saw had been maintained in new condition with no indications of wear or age.

It was Doc Ostrow who discovered the secret of the great underground machine by using a Krell device discovered by Morbius in the laboratory. Morbius called the device an educator and claimed that it boosted the user's intellectual capacity, if they could survive the severe shock of using the device. Unfortunately, the shock cost Doc Ostrow his life but before he died, he learned and told us the gigantic machine was the great Krell project and it had been finished.

The machine allowed the Krell to mentally manipulate matter and project it anywhere on the planet, in any shape and form they desired. The Krell were destroyed as a consequence by monsters from the id, that is monsters the machine created as commanded by the subconscious minds of the Krell when the great machine was activated. The Krell, despite their highly advanced state of intellectual and cultural development, still harbored a suppressed subconscious lust for murder and destruction. The entire race, enabled with the ability to create subconscious monsters, perished in a single night 200,000 years ago. All traces of the Krell civilization have since disappeared from the surface of the planet. Only the self-repairing machine and underground laboratories had survived.

It was Dr. Morbius who, after using the Krell educator

device and receiving the mind boost, was able to subconsciously operate the great Krell machine though he was not aware of this ability. It was the monsters created by his id that killed the Bellerophon party and four of my ship mates. Those killed include engineer Chief Quinn, executive officer Lt. Jerry Farman and crewmen Strong and Grey.

The last monster Morbius created was about to kill me and Alta, his daughter when he finally accepted his responsibility and removed the monster. Morbius died, apparently as a consequence of the mental and emotional strain of the realization he had subconsciously murdered so many people. His last request was that I throw a switch that would cause a runaway chain reaction and destroy the planet Altair 4 and the great Krell machine with it.

Before we left the planet and it was destroyed, we were able to recover Morbius's journals and a few Krell artifacts. There was much we could not remove from a Krell laboratory without destroying the equipment. Some equipment, made from an incredibly energy absorbent material called Krell metal, could not be cut for removal. Altair 4, the great Krell machine and the vast knowledge store of the Krell was all lost though the robot we call Robby may reveal some of the Krell technology.

This log is now closed and sealed by order of Commander J. J. Adams.”

Adams finished his tour of the ship, satisfied the crew had attended to their duties and was prepared for a long and uneventful flight home. He would record the words exactly as he spoke them in his mind. What he would enter into the official mission log, he was uncertain.

...

Alta sat on the edge of the small armchair in the cabin, looking at the trunks on the floor in front of her. Robby had fabricated the aluminum boxes using the Krell synthesis machine on Altair 4. Alta recalled packing them with the few possessions she had and those she found in her father's room.

She had postponed unpacking to avoid a fresh confrontation with her memories from Altair 4. She would need her clothes now and could not delay unpacking any longer.

The first trunk contained mostly clothing Robby had made for her. She removed each piece carefully, taking a few seconds to look it over before placing it in the small closet of the cabin. Smaller articles she placed on the closet dresser. She paused when she found the dress she asked Robby to make especially for her to wear for Adams. She remembered Robby asking her if the garment should be "Radiation proof" and her response that "Eye proof will do." That brought a small smile and giggle, a tiny release of tension and a welcome memory. The diamonds and emeralds on that dress were brilliant, even in the dimly lit cabin. When finished, she sank back into the armchair, staring at the second trunk. That was the one she dreaded.

For the moment however, she would enjoy the tranquility of the ship's hum. The sound was barely perceptible but a reassuring lullaby of the ship protecting its inhabitants from the dark and hostile cold of deep space. Alta felt snug and secure as she looked up at the ceiling, her eyes closed and her thoughts drifting into a semi-conscious dream state. The voices that comforted her when she slept on Altair 4 had followed her aboard the ship. The speakers were formless and hazy but their words were clear and in a language she recognized but did not understand. The voices were soothing, drawing her from semi-consciousness into a light sleep.

She could see the forms moving around her, each waiting in turn to speak to her. The soft words lured her into a trance, a twilight slumber.

The softness of the voices was suddenly shattered by the piercing loudness of a klaxon. The hazy forms fled instantly, leaving her semi-paralyzed as the loudness of the klaxon shocked her to awaken. The tranquil hum of the ship was gone and the sound of danger overwhelmed the once quiet cabin.

Chapter 2 Core Critical

The klaxon reverberated throughout the ship as the crew members scrambled to their emergency duty stations. Half the crew was off duty and half of those were sleeping when the rude alarm broke the quiet of the ship. Commander Adams emerged from his quarters and looked about to assure himself all crew members heard and responded to the alarm. Some of the crew were jumping from their hammocks and scrambling to put on their uniforms. Adams called to the boatswain and then signaled with his finger to his ear followed by a throat cutting gesture to kill the klaxon while he moved toward the chief engineer's duty station.

“Randall, what have you got?” the commander asked. The commander looked over Randall's shoulder at the panel, his attention caught by several blinking red and amber lights in various display cells.

Randall was focused on the instrument panel, then turned his head toward the commander and replied “A core temperature spike sir and still rising.” Randall's focus returned to his instruments as the commander crossed his arms and turned his gaze from the panel to Randall. “Sir, primary cooling level zero, pressure zero, flow zero, secondary cooling level 100 percent, pressure 11.3 bars and rising, flow at 60 percent of capacity. The core will reach critical pressure and temperature in 5 minutes.”

The core generated all power for the ship and if it were lost it meant death in deep space. The reserve power cells would keep them alive for a short time but would eventually be drained.

Commander Adams asked “What is the charge on the reserve power cells?” It had only been a short time since

departing Altair 4 and making the jump to light speed, certainly not long enough to achieve a full charge.

Randall brought up the cell monitor on his panel, gave his head a twist and a slight shake and said “Thirty per cent sir.” As the commander glanced around, he could see every crew member looking his way and waiting for his next words. This was J. J. Adams’s call and what commanders are supposed to do. The immediate danger was a core meltdown and power failure. Everyone knew what that meant and it was up to the commander to stop the impending disaster.

Adams was looking at the panel to his side but the orders rang out loud and clear in every direction. “Robby, cut all power to propulsion. Youngerford, reduce life support levels to safe minimum requirements and trim gravity to 60 percent. Randall, reduce core output by five percent and divert all surplus generation to the reserve power cells.” Each order in turn was punctuated with a loud and clear “Aye aye sir.” Adams's plan was to reduce the load on the core to slow down the rate of core heating and charge the power cells enough to run the ship while making emergency repairs.

“Randall, we have to go to DC and drop from FTL before the core temperature goes critical. Give me the time to reach 45 percent charge capacity and critical temperature.” Adams said as he started toward the astro-navigation station where Robby was attending to the propulsion system shutdown. Robby's data cord did most of the work but his hands were still required to operate some of the controls. The sound of relays dropping as Robby worked at the console assured Adams the robot was doing as requested.

“Aye aye sir.” came the reply from Randall as he busied himself checking and setting instruments.

Adams quickly glanced about and surveyed the ship. It looked as though the crew had been reassured by his demonstration of command and prompt, decisive action. Crewmen were busy at their assigned stations making the adjustments necessary to adapt to the new environmental

conditions. Though Randall had his full attention on the monitor, he spoke up with a clear voice for the commander to hear. “Sir, reserve power cells will be at 45 percent in two minutes and 20 seconds. Something is wrong with the secondary coolant flow but the core won't overheat for at least three minutes at present generation levels.”

Commander Adams did not acknowledge Randall directly but spoke to the boatswain saying “Order to secure from general quarters and make for DC stations in two minutes. We have plenty of time so don't rush.” That wasn't quite true but the commander needed a calm and cool headed crew to get through this crisis.

“Aye aye sir.” replied the boatswain. “Secure from general quarters. DC stations in two minutes.” The boatswain had one of those booming voices that did not need the com-link to be heard. The crew made final adjustments at their duty stations then stood at attention facing the boatswain to signal completion.

Adams was looking about intently with a puzzled expression. Cookie sensed the reason for the commander's actions and piped up “She's over here sir!” as he pointed to the officers quarters aisle way. Alta had come out of her cabin to see what the commotion was about that so rudely interrupted her dream world. Adams motioned for Alta to join him since they would go to DC stations very soon. Alta moved to Adams's side and asked about the problem. Adams could see she was obviously groggy as he took her by the arm to guide her. As they moved toward DC stations, he told her the core cooling system failed and they would have to make repairs. He assured her they would be safe.

Robby had laid in the speed change commands and signaled the boatswain accordingly. The boatswain gave the order for DC stations and the crew moved in a rapid and orderly manner. Robby remained at his post. Robots were not affected by the light speed barrier crossing. Warning lights flashed as the DC station fields engaged and the ship

decelerated to sub-light speed seconds later. About 12 seconds later, the DC fields disengaged, the crew stretched and strained to recover full mobility and then returned to their duty stations. The DC stations always gave the occupant a stiff neck and back. No one was sure why but the alternative of being ripped to shreds going through the light barrier was not acceptable.

From his station, Robby reported “Ship speed zero point two nine c sir.” At sub-light, the core could be shutdown and the ship run on the reserve power cells for a short period of time.

Adams looked at Alta and asked her to wait for him in the ward room. Moving alongside Randall, he glanced at the instrument panel then ordered “Shutdown the core and give me a time on reserve power duration.” The problem now was to stretch the reserve power enough to maintain vital ship systems while repairing the core cooling systems.

“Aye aye sir, checking reserve power. Just a second sir. We have twenty-five minutes sir.”

Adams needed a little more time and ordered “Reduce gravity to 50 percent and kill the heat.” That should buy them about 15 more minutes he was thinking.

Like clockwork, Randall rechecked all of the critical instruments and updated the status. “We now have forty-five minutes on reserve power cells sir.”

Adams shook his head as he looked down, saying nothing out of concern that the crew not be alarmed. “Randall and Lee to the engineering compartment,” the commander ordered, quickly followed by “Robby, Youngerford and Clary, unlatch and prepare the astro-navigation cabinet for core access.” A rapid sequence of aye ayes followed as each name was called. Adams was concerned that 45 minutes may not be enough time to effect all repairs.

The engineering compartment was one deck below the main deck. The space was tight and crammed with electrical and mechanical gear necessary for all of the ship's systems.

There were also pipes, conduit, raceways and ventilation shafts to distribute everything from power to air. Even in this modern electronic age, it took a lot of old fashioned mechanical equipment to keep the ship operational. Despite the nature of the equipment, the space was up to fleet standards and maintained in spotless condition.

The engineering compartment was accessible by a lifting platform dead ahead of the astro-navigation cabinet on the main deck. Dead center in the compartment was the core, which was mounted directly above the propulsion driver and directly below the astro-navigation cabinet. The core looked like a cylinder about a meter in diameter and length. It looked simple from the outside but was an extremely complicated piece of equipment sitting in a cooling shroud of close fitting tubes.

Adams looked about the compartment taking a deep breath as the platform dropped to the engineering deck level. The faint odor of the silicon based cooling fluid was in the air despite the ventilation system. The commander spoke quietly to Randall and Lee, "I don't think we can fix the primary cooling system in the time we have. From the smell of it, we have a major leak on our hands. Our best chance is to repair the secondary cooling system, but we don't know at this point what is wrong with it."

Neither Randall nor Lee appeared surprised and simply responded "Aye sir."

"Decouple the core and I'll see you both above." said the commander as he stepped on the lift platform.

Another "Aye sir." came from Randall as Adams ascended to the main deck standing on the lift platform.

Robby, Youngerford and Clary had the astro-navigation cabinet ready to move, which they would do once the core was decoupled. Adams waited for the signal from Randall before ordering the cabinet pulled aside. The cabinet slid smoothly astern exposing the core and engineering compartment below. With the core accessible, the commander simply ordered "Pull

it!” The equipment lift arm was swung into place directly over the core and the crew made the lifting attachments.

Randall and Lee continued work below deck checking the sump to determine how much coolant had spilled and if it could be recovered. The ship carried a spare supply of coolant but it would be imprudent to waste what could be recovered. Randall called up “Commander, I think you will want to see this.”

“Just a moment.” Adams shouted back. Youngerford had just reported the primary cooling system tubes had been eaten away in several places. As Adams descended into the engineering compartment on the lift platform, he instructed Youngerford to “Forget those. Find out what's wrong with the secondary system and get it working.” A few more aye ayes and Adams had dropped down and out of sight into the engineering compartment. Youngerford and Clary began to disassemble and expose the core cooling passages for the secondary cooling system. A few off duty crewmen had gathered nearby to watch.

Randall spoke first when Adams reached the deck. “Sir, there is something more than coolant in the sump. It looks like something living was minced during our jump to light speed. The remains ended up in the sump.” Lee nodded his head in agreement. Randall had pulled the cover grill off the sump and was shining a light into the opening. Through a few centimeters of clear liquid, a glob of a golden brown substance was visible, partially suspended and floating in the coolant. It looked like there might be at least a handful of the goo.

“Separate the coolant and let's see what we have...” They were replying with the usual “Aye aye.” when Adams interrupted with another order “... and keep it isolated, no contamination please and meet me in the ward room when you're finished.” The commander mounted the lift platform and returned to the main deck.

Adams saw that the core had been pulled and placed on a service stand with Youngerford and Clary hovering over it like

mother hens. “Status?” he asked.

Youngerford responded “We are analyzing the secondary flow circuit now. We may have a defective pump but more likely a frozen valve. Inner chambers are clear and we will have the valve out for inspection in two minutes.”

Adams showed a slight grimace before speaking. “Carry on.” He paused briefly, then continued “There hasn't been a recorded cooling system failure for more than thirty years. To think that with all of our sophisticated electronics, we are at the mercy of a simple mechanical device assembled by a robot in Poughkeepsie, tested by another robot in Rome, Georgia and put into that core by another robot in Seville, Spain. How long to get it fixed and place the core in service?”

Youngerford didn't hesitate to answer “About ten minutes sir if it is a frozen valve. Slightly longer if it is the pump.” Youngerford twisted into a better position to put his hands on the valve and then confirmed “Yes sir, definitely frozen and ten minutes needed. I'll check the pump too.” Youngerford was a good mechanic and considered the possibility both pieces of equipment could be malfunctioning.

“Good job Youngerford. Do you need Robby to assist?”

The answer came back “No sir, Clary and I can handle it.” That was good news because Adams needed Robby in the ward room.

Adams motioned and asked for Robby to follow as he headed for the ward room. “Youngerford, come to the ward room when you are finished here.”

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It was only a few minutes before Randall and Lee joined Adams, Alta and Robby in the ward room. Once they were all seated, Adams started. “We will have to recharge our reserve power cells before we can stop again and repair the primary cooling system. In some earlier discussions, Robby indicated he might be able to effect certain improvements to our ship systems, making it clear that it was conditional. This may be our opportunity to make those improvements but tell me about

the sump first Randall.”

Randall explained they were able to recover, separate and filter the coolant. Testing indicated the coolant met all service specifications and could be reused. The organic material that had been recovered was placed in sealed quarantine containers. The ships facilities for examination were limited but would be used, if possible to determine the nature of the material.

Youngerford joined the group in the ward room at this moment and reported the defective valve would be repaired in a matter of minutes and the pump was satisfactory. Adams acknowledged with a nod and asked Youngerford to personally supervise and expedite the core re-installation, make-ready and testing.

Adams then turned and faced Robby, asking him to explain for the benefit of all present what he learned he could or could not do to make system improvements.

The robot started “Aye aye skipper. The problem is that your equipment design is based on your primitive understanding and mathematical expression of physics. Basically, I must downgrade the scientific knowledge of the Krell that is stored in my memory banks to match your inferior understanding in order to work with your primitive equipment. Under those conditions, I can effect some improvements in the efficiency of most of your systems. Please understand that knowledge of Krell science is not equivalent to knowledge of Krell engineering, which also limits my ability to make improvements.”

Alta nodded her head indicating she had no problem understanding what Robby was saying, but Adams, Randall and Lee looked a bit puzzled. Adams responded first with “I think we are being insulted and if I get it right, he is saying I can't fix a space ship that was built with sticks and stones.” Randall and Lee chuckled but seemed to accept the point the commander made. “Robby, on our next shutdown, we can keep the core off line for about an hour and thirty minutes,

maybe a little longer. Can you do something with the core and propulsion driver in that time?”

“Yes commander. The improvements I can make in that time will increase maximum core power output by 16.5 percent.”

Adams looked about noting that Randall and Lee had approving faces with eyes opened wide in astonishment. He then asked if Robby could do anything with the propulsion system while it was off line but with the astro-navigation cabinet in place. Robby responded that it would depend on how long he had and that a number of independent improvements could be made, time and access permitting. The answer was indefinite but understandable as to why.

“Out of curiosity Robby, do you think you can safely analyze the organic material that was found in the engineering compartment sump? That is without risk of contamination of the ship?” The commander was thinking of that little chemical lab that was built into Robby. This was a backup plan if the ships facilities proved inadequate. Robby's built in lab had been used to analyze food and rocket bourbon, so why not the recovered organic material.

“Yes sir. My laboratory implements protocols specifically designed to prevent contamination provided the sample can be introduced in isolation. Quarantine containers should be adequate for the task.”

“Thank you Robby. I may ask you to do that. Let's get back to the bridge. Youngerford should be done by now.” As Alta began to rise from her chair, Adams grasped her wrist and quietly said “Would you please return to your quarters or remain here?” Her facial expression said she didn't like the request, but she nodded her agreement anyway, deciding to go to her quarters. Adams was concerned about the dangers present when making repairs and testing equipment, especially a core. He didn't want his concern for Alta distracting him from the present task.

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“Secondary cooling system at 100 percent efficiency sir. We can run sub-light indefinitely and we will have full reserve power cell charge in one hour.” Youngerford spoke loud enough to make sure the entire crew heard his report. He was rewarded with a subdued cheer and a few thumbs up.

Adams made a point to congratulate Youngerford and Clary before issuing his next set of orders. “Boatswain, sound general quarters and make-ready for environment change. Mr. Youngerford, bring gravity to one and life support to optimum in thirty seconds. Mr. Randall, monitor secondary cooling system temperature, flow and pressure. Robby, commence improvements on the propulsion system. Cookie, a shot of genuine ancient rocket bourbon all around.” There was a rapid succession of aye ayes and a short outburst of cheers.

The crew's morale had been a concern for Adams. The expedition to Altair 4 cost the lives of five crew members for little apparent reason or gain. The core overheating did not help the situation but in one respect, it was a fortuitous event in the way it was handled, restoring the crew's confidence in their commander, and most importantly, in themselves.

Adams watched as Cookie passed the bottle around and as each man hoisted it high in the air before downing a swallow. It wasn't customary to pass a bottle of booze around a UP cruiser, but so far, nothing about this expedition upon reaching Altair 4 was “customary”. Adams's turn came last, he hoisted the bottle saluting the crew and took his swig as the crew cheered.

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“Commander, the reserve power cells are fully charged. Your orders sir?” Randall stood facing the commander waiting for a reply.

“Shut down the core. Youngerford, Clary, start the core cooling system repairs. Boatswain, stand down from general quarters.” the commander ordered, and in typical fashion came a rapid sequence of aye ayes. “Mr. Randall, Robby, join me in the ward room.”

The commander wanted a private discussion concerning the cooling system damage. The crew knew something organic had been found in the engine compartment sump, but they made no connection with the cooling system failure. Randall knew a report was expected.

Youngerford and Clary were busy unlatching the astro-navigation cabinet while several other crewman watched. Lindstrom had wheeled out a cart of machine parts and the printout of the plans Robby had made for core improvements. The crew was in good spirits with their attention focused on the core repairs and improvements that were now underway. Youngerford, Clary and Lindstrom hovered over the plans that Robby had drawn showing the modifications to the core. They talked, pointed to various details on the prints and decided what they would need and who would do what work.

Adams gave them a last glance and smile before he turned toward the ward room and left the bridge. Randall and Robby were not far ahead and just disappearing in the doorway.

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Alta had not realized how tired she was until she sat back in the armchair and began to doze off. Her formless friends of the dream world with their soothing voices joined her. There was a melodic sound to what they were saying that lured her into a deep sleep. They spoke softly to her in a language she did not know but did understand, at least in her dreams. Then the voices changed, from calm to frantic. They were saying wake up, but not in English. Alta resisted, asking her friends not to leave but they persisted and were now shouting as they backed away from her.

Chapter 3 Goo

Adams and Robby were turned toward and looking at Randall as he stood to give his report. This was usually a job reserved to the chief engineer, but with Chief Quinn dead, it fell on Randall as the most senior engineering technician. He was confident that he knew all of the details of his report but nervous about keeping it concise yet comprehensive. Adams noticed his unease, stopped Randall with a hand wave as he was about to speak and motioned him to sit down.

“Thank you sir.” That was a big relief as Randall looked for and sat in the chair behind him. “The problem with the secondary cooling system was purely mechanical. The flow control valve was about 70 percent open when it froze. That valve is normally closed and never used in normal operation. The lack of exercise may have led to its failure to fully open. The valve was repaired and reused.” Randall paused, looking for an acknowledgment before he continued, but was briefly interrupted as the ward room door opened.

Alta, who had fallen asleep, had been awakened by the voices in her dreams and told to go to the ward room. No one appeared surprised when she entered and took a seat next to Adams. No one said anything to her. It was as if she was expected and took the place that had been reserved for her.

Adams gave Randall a nod to resume his report. “Several of the primary cooling system coils were found to be extremely thin in a few places, leading to their rupture when temperature and pressure reached a critical value. The eating away of the cooling tube walls appears to be from the outside in. There was no evidence of internal corrosion and none was expected. All of the tubes are a special beryllium and copper alloy in a fine silicon laminate structure. They should be

impervious to corrosion but something ate away at them.”

Adams looked up at the ceiling, staring into space while pondering what Randall had just reported. He brought his eyes back to the conference table, quickly glancing at Robby and Alta to see if they had any reaction. Of course Robby wouldn't react, but Alta had a blank look indicating no reaction. He turned his eyes and attention to Randall again asking “Any progress analyzing that organic material?”

Randall responded no, adding “Our facilities are probably up to the task, but without Doc Ostrow, we don't have the necessary knowledge.” The mention of Doc's name brought a sigh to Commander Adams. Doc had taken the “brain boost” on Altair 4 to save them all and sacrificed his own life in the process. He was sorely missed in many ways. It was at times like this when his knowledge and wisdom were especially missed.

The commander got past that moment and responded “Maybe there is someone, er, something that can help.” He turned his head toward Robby.

“The robot?” asked Randall. He turned his attention to Robby, staring in particular at the small, closed hatch in the robot's chest plate where material samples could be introduced for analysis. He looked back at the commander, waiting for a response.

Adams nodded, “Yes, I think so.” The tenor in Adams's voice changed and deepened as he continued, “Look, if that stuff is a threat in any way, I would rather we found out now than wait until we get to Earth.” That caught Alta's attention as both she and Randall nodded in agreement.

“Yes sir. Lee is preparing three sealed samples the robot should be able to analyze without breaking quarantine.” said Randall, looking at Robby as he spoke.

Adams turned his full attention to Randall, giving him a penetrating and thoughtful look before speaking. Randall was remarkably calm now, surprisingly so considering the significance of his report and the potential dangers of the

organic material, which he seemed to fully appreciate.

Randall was one of the younger crew members at 21, though he did look slightly older than his age. Like all crew members, he was in excellent physical condition. He was certainly one of the taller and leaner of the crew. He looked like he could be an officer, and it was important to Adams that crewmen should look their parts as reassurance to all who saw them.

Adams spoke slowly and with deliberation. “You have done an admirable job filling the engineer's post after the loss of Chief Quinn.” Randall started to raise his hands in protest but Adams continued, “No, I mean it. You don't have his experience yet but you do have his love for the job and an eagerness to improve your abilities. I'm giving you a field commission of ensign.” Again, Randall started to mumble a protest but was silenced by Adams with a wave of his hand. “Ensign Randall, congratulations. Let's get this ship back in order. We will reassemble here once the samples are ready.”

“Thank you and aye aye sir.” The energy in Randall's voice expressed his appreciation for the commission and desire to demonstrate his worthiness.

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The core cooling system repairs had been completed and the core powered up. The propulsion system was not activated. Robby used the lift platform to enter the engineering compartment where he went about making alterations on the propulsion drive. Occasionally, the clang of metal parts or the sound of a ratcheting device could be heard on the main deck as the robot worked away. Robby may have looked awkward but his mechanical precision allowed him to work at incredible speeds.

On the main and upper decks, the crew was busy moving about to various stations checking instruments and panels to verify that all of the ship's systems were in proper operating condition.

It was only a few minutes later that Robby ascended from

the engineering compartment. He reported to Adams that the alterations he could make while the core was powered were finished and the robot resumed his position at the astro-navigation console. Adams ordered a course correction for Earth before hyper-drive was engaged. Adams instructed the boatswain to announce DC stations in one minute once the course was laid in.

It was a small curiosity that DC may not have meant “deceleration” as many believed since it was also a requirement for acceleration to use a DC field to exceed the speed of light. The origin of the name has been lost to history but legend has it the original name was ADC and that the A was mistaken for the indefinite article “a” and not the letter “A”. The legend goes on that the “a” was dropped in the belief it was an article, leaving DC.

It didn't matter to the crew what it was called. DC stations were essential if you wanted to stay in one piece, decelerating or accelerating through the light barrier. In normal or hyper-drive, the ship's gravitational generator was sufficient to counter g-forces, but crossing the light barrier induced some force that disrupted biological functions and processes. The DC field produced by a DC station countered that force.

The call for DC stations produced the normal calm but hurried movement to the bow of the ship. Alta had also adapted to the drill and joined Adams on the adjoining platform. The pale blue-green light of the DC field enclosed each occupant as the ship surged to light speed, and then beyond.

The alterations Robby made produced a 20 percent increase in hyper drive propulsion speed and an astounding 40 percent decrease in normal drive energy consumption. Adams wanted him to work on other systems as well, but the pressing issue now was the organic material specimens taken from the engine compartment sump. Lee had finished preparing the samples for Robby to place in his small laboratory. It was time to find out exactly what this goo was.

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Adams, Alta, Randall and Lee watched as Robby placed one sealed sample after another into the opening leading to his internal chemical laboratory. Robby had requested the ward room view plate be activated for his use. He had learned to create and project images using the view plate input connections and his data cord. He had also learned that humans preferred this to his photonic signaling capability.

The images Robby displayed were definitely the cells of some organism. All appeared dead but not decayed enough to prohibit examination of the structure. Most cells showed a nucleus, but they appeared to be ruptured. The cell wall was the most striking feature. It was thick and finely divided into rigid, articulated plates. Some kind of fibrous strands of entwined protein connected the plates along the edges.

"I'm no expert' Lee said, "but that looks like brigandine armor."

Though the nucleus had been ruptured, the cells contained intact DNA that could be extracted and analyzed. It was a simple enough structure to allow Robby to produce an approximate image of the complete organism. It looked like an armor plated flatworm with a mouth extending the entire length of the bottom side of the body. The organism was about 8 centimeters long, 2 centimeters wide and paper thin, making it extremely flexible and semitransparent.

Randall asked for a chemical break down and Robby obliged with another image. A graph showed the cell wall contained a copper and beryllium alloy substrate. The materials were in the same proportions as the cooling system tubes. The cell itself contained small structures determined to be manufacturing sites for a powerful organic acid. Robby's analysis suggested the acid had been designed to attack copper specifically, but was quite capable of leeching beryllium and silicon as well. The implications were startling. This organism could attach to the exterior of a cooling tube and eat away, and no one would be the wiser.

Adams made the inescapable observation and stated it first. “These damn things were designed to attack our cooling tubes while being nearly invisible. Robby, Alta, are these organisms indigenous to Altair 4?”

Robby could not respond affirmatively but offered “I have never witnessed this life form on Altair 4. I do not know its origin.” Alta said nothing but just shook her head. The core had been outside the ship on the surface of Altair 4 for only a short time. Could that have been long enough for an exposure and infestation?

It was at this time the hum of the ships propulsion drive and core gave way to a shudder that seemed to start at one end of the ward room and slowly move to the opposite end. The long table began to resonate with the vibration. The chairs began to vibrate as well. The ceiling lights vibrated and shook, giving the false appearance of flickering. It passed quickly and startled everyone. Robby noticed this and promptly assured everyone that it was an expected event. “That was an anticipated wave guide deformation. It will not happen again but was an expected adjustment arising from a controlled stress. My apologies for not informing you commander.” The event was disturbing but also fortuitous and snapped Alta out of her near trance.

Alta had been in deep thought but looked up and startled the group with her next statement. “My father may have created those organisms in a dream using the Krell machine. He was very upset that if you had managed to contact Earth, he might be required to leave Altair 4. He hated the thought of leaving and the idea he could be ordered around like that. When you pulled the core from the ship to build the transmitter, I watched but I sensed he saw what I saw even though he wasn't there. His depression seemed to vanish after that, as if he had discovered some magical relief from his torment. What better way to sabotage your communication than to use such a subtle and unseen saboteur. Destruction of the core would have prevented you from contacting Earth, or

even leaving the planet.”

It made sense to Adams except for one problem which he asked, “Then why kill Quinn if these worms would have cut us off and stranded us here?”

Alta again surprised the group with her answer that “Maybe the organisms were not working fast enough and the fear they would fail manifested another dream to act on that fear. I would like to think father found a way to sabotage your effort without harming anyone, but when that failed, something more drastic was required. I don't think father was consciously aware anything was happening, not even in his dreams. I had never seen father act like that, so I can't be sure.”

Of all people, Adams was most appreciative of how difficult it was for Alta to make that statement. Sure, it was only speculation at this point but from an authoritative source who knew the man, the mind and the mania behind the possible sabotage and murders on the planet. She loved her father, Dr. Edward Morbius, but she also knew that some evil force lurked in his subconscious mind and asserted itself if it thought his world was threatened. She was convinced her father would never harm anyone consciously, but subconsciously was another matter. He was outspoken about his dislike for other humans from Earth. His subconscious probably harbored emotions far more intense than mere dislike.

Lee spoke up stating that a complete life scan was made of the engineering compartment and showed it was “clean”. He asked Robby “Is there any threat of contagion and disease from this material?” His concern was for specimens that were in storage for later use, if needed.

With Robby's response of “No, not from this material.” there was a collective sigh of relief, almost. It was Lee who hesitated now, showing he was still absorbing the robot's words.

“I have a thought.” Lee told the group, then added “I need

a little time to run it through my brain and get it straight.” Adams and Randall nodded their approval. Lee drifted into thought as Adams and Randall examined their notes.

It was concluded in the discussion that followed that the organisms had been ripped apart during trans-warp acceleration above light speed, which would be expected for living organisms not protected by a DC field. The damage to the material was consistent with damage to biological organisms crossing the light barrier without the protection of a DC field.

It was also concluded the damage to the tubes had been done while the ship was on Altair 4 and during normal sub-light flight on leaving the planet. This was based on an estimate of the strength of the organic acid and amount of tubing material consumed. The damage was enough to thin and weaken several tube walls and ultimately cause failure as temperature and pressure of the coolant increased. With the destruction of the planet and great machine of the Krell, Adams was confident these organisms would never be seen again.

Lee was not as sure. “Think about what we just discovered,” he said, “an artificially created life form, specifically designed and placed to do harm to a vital piece of equipment. That life form was probably alive after its creator had died, if we are right about the light barrier jump killing it.”

Lee's statement hit Adams, Randall and Alta like a lightning bolt. Lee waited before he spoke, looking each in the eyes to see if they grasped the implication. Each in turn nodded slightly and Lee continued. “If the Krell machine could create living organisms that small, engineered for a specific task and then carefully placed to cause maximum damage with little chance for discovery, why not something similar, or smaller placed inside a person?”

That sent a chill up Adams's spine and he felt obligated to reassure Alta about her father. “If it did happen Alta, I'm sure your father did not do anything consciously but we do know

he could have done it subconsciously.” Alta was not reassured or comforted and buried her face in her hands. Lee was right she thought, and how dreadful it was that her father may have done that, subconsciously or not.

The commander asked “Lee, what can we do for detection?” Lee was the ship's instrument technician and most qualified to answer the commander's question.

Lee answered “The medical exam scanner can detect foreign organisms in the human body, so that may work. It can detect anything from a virus to a tapeworm. Specific identification by species can be a problem if we don't have an NMR signature.”

“I think detection will be sufficient at this point.” Adams said, then continued “If anyone is carrying a hitchhiker, it would have gotten a free ride through DC. We have to check.”

The group indicated their agreement with gestures and a few brief words before Adams continued. “I don't want to unnecessarily alarm the crew so we'll schedule this as a routine examination. Uh,” Adams hesitated, “I really need an exec to handle the routine details. I realize how much I miss Jerry Farman now.” That gave everyone pause to think and reflect. Farman could be a character and a space wolf but he was well liked and respected by the crew. His death on Altair 4 was violent and witnessed by most of the ship's company. “Any recommendations?” Adams asked.

“What about Wallace?” Randall said but was greeted with a puzzled look from Adams and Lee. “Boatswain Wallace?” he clarified with a question. No one ever called the chief boatswain mate by name. It was “UN-fleet like” and boatswains were not supposed to have names.

“Oh, yeah,” Adams responded. “I never thought of him but he's always there when I need him, does his job very well and looks out for his men like a mother hen. Let's pull his record.” Personnel records were confidential but Adams preferred getting additional input for such an important promotion. Adams punched a few keys before speaking into

the com-link microphone to call up the record, “Chief boatswains mate, Wallace, er, uh...” he stammered.

“Lawrence.” replied Randall to the rescue, which Adams repeated into the microphone.

The record with photos popped up on the small computer screen at the table. Adams read and stated “He's career fleet and about 38, older than I thought but with 20 years in. He has never expressed any interest in a commission though profile tests scored him high on command ability. This could be a hard sell. I wonder why he turned down promotions?”

Lee made it clear that as an enlisted crewman he liked the choice of Wallace as well and added “It wouldn't hurt to ask him sir. Maybe he'll give in to you.”

Adams nodded in agreement and said “The toughest part is going to be not calling him boatswain but by name.” That raised a small chuckle from the group, then Adams continued “I'll put the question to him, but I may need to sell him on taking the job. If he agrees, setting up the scanner examinations will be his first assignment. Anything else we need to discuss concerning the goo? Anything else we need to discuss concerning anything?”

The response was some head shaking with a few nos thrown in. “All right. We have covered a lot and I think we could all do with some rest. Dismissed.”

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The commander addressed the crew using the com-link. “I am pleased to announce that Boatswain Wallace is now Lieutenant Wallace and will be my exec.” That drew a cheer from the crew and a beaming smile from Wallace. “Mr. Wallace, take the bridge.”

“Aye aye skipper.” Wallace snapped back. “The first order of business is scanner examinations. See the duty roster for the schedule and report to Crewman Lee in the lab at your assigned time. That's all.”

It had taken some probing and time for Adams to convince his chief boatswain mate to take the commission and

promotion. Wallace confessed that he greatly enjoyed his relationship with the crew as something of a mother hen, father confessor and benevolent uncle. He knew that would end if he became an officer. In fact, he said it must end if he became an officer. Adams was convincing, telling the boatswain he could best help and care for his men by filling the vital role of exec. In that role, he couldn't be socially close to the crew, but he never was anyway by choice.

Having an exec would allow Adams to focus on some important issues and give him another sounding board. It would also allow him to rest easier knowing he had a competent second in command. Adams needed sleep just like everyone else and he would sleep better knowing Wallace had the bridge.

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The medical examination scanner was about the size of a flashlight and connected to a wall mounted cabinet in the lab with a long cable. The business end was both a transmitter and receiver with a visible light guide to aid positioning. Lee's only experience with the scanner had been testing and calibration using standardized test samples. To his satisfaction he learned that scanning a human wasn't that much different. By the time he got to Cookie, who was last on the roster, he handled the scanner like it was an extension of his hand.

The lab could be intimidating with all the wall cabinets filled with gauges and display panels, the workbenches, extension lamps and exam platform. It certainly had an adverse affect on Cookie.

“Stay still Cookie. The scanner does need to auto focus and your fidgeting is stopping it.” Cookie stood at attention again and looked straight ahead as Lee continued the scan. Though Lee never touched Cookie with the scanner, he would jerk slightly as if he had been touched with a cold stethoscope. “C'mon Cookie, we're almost done.”

Adams walked into the lab as Lee was finishing with Cookie. Cookie looked at the commander and acknowledged

him with a head bow and “Commander, sir!”

Lee had just finished with Cookie's feet in a literal head to toe scan. Lee stood up straight and told Cookie he could go. Cookie gave him a thank you and another head bow to the commander as he left the lab, backing his way through the door.

Adams asked if everyone had been examined, including Lee, who responded affirmatively. “Well, what did you find?” the commander asked.

Lee walked to the front of the cabinet panel to which the scanner was attached, pressed a few controls and pulled up the report summary on the viewer. He ran his finger down the screen as he reported the findings.

“Lindstrom has a cold, Clary has a dormant osteopathic virus, and my beneficial bacteria count is a bit low. Other than those, everyone is showing nothing but beneficial bacteria at healthy levels. No aliens sir.” Lee turned from the view plate toward the commander to see his reaction.

The commander said “OK.” but his face did not express relief. “I just have this uneasy feeling we could have missed something. If Morbius consciously knew how to make a stealth germ, his subconscious would have had access to that knowledge. We have no idea what such a germ may be designed to do, how it could be transmitted or mutate. If we missed it, well, I don't know.”

Lee turned to deactivate the viewer and asked “What do you want to do sir?”

“I'm not sure,” Adams responded “but I will bring it up at the next officers call.”

Chapter 4 Homeward Detour

“Sir, permission to speak freely sir?” Cookie seldom asked for permission to speak, he just spoke. Something important must be bothering him. Commander Adams nodded his approval and beckoned Cookie to enter his cabin. Once the door closed, Cookie fidgeted a little and it was obvious he felt awkward. He also looked around, clearly checking to see if they were alone.

“Speak up Cookie, we're alone and I'm listening.” Adams could sense Cookie needed prompting.

“Well sir, its about you and Miss Alta. Please don't get me wrong because I'm sure I speak for every man on the ship when I say we wish you happiness.” Where was Cookie going with this? That definitely caught Adams attention and raised his eyebrows.

The commander paused just a few seconds before responding “Yes, I appreciate that but what's on your mind Cookie?” Cookie glanced down at his feet, wrung his hands and then looked directly at Adams.

“Well sir, it's just that we have been in space for over a year now and we have almost another year before we get home. We all like Miss Alta but it can be difficult to keep our minds where they belong when she is walking about the ship. It's just not good for morale sir.”

Cookie was right of course and Adams had to admit he had not given the matter much thought. “Actually, its about 292 days to get home thanks to the alterations Robby made. You wouldn't want me to confine her to quarters, would you?”

“Oh no sir, that would be cruel but please understand sir that the men may have tendencies to be more cordial, or friendly than under normal circumstances.” Cookie may not

have a PhD in philosophy but he demonstrated a clear understanding of men and women, especially young men on long trips in a confined space with a young and attractive woman.

“Good points Cookie. I'll have to give that some thought and address the issue. Anything else?” Cookie mumbled a no as Adams replied “Dismissed.” Adams and Alta were not married yet and maintaining separate quarters seemed to be an instinctive call that worked for the better of the crew's morale. But what to do now?

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Alta carefully unpacked the items from the second trunk and laid them across the bed. She reflected on those last frantic moments as she and the crew of United Planets cruiser C-57-D went through the Morbius residence to recover what they could of both scientific and personal value. Besides her garments and her father's journals, there were a few mementos of the mother she had never known. A woman's lab coat, shoes that were too small for Alta, a strange piece of jewelry that was called a charm bracelet and a vial of liquid known as perfume. There were no photographs and as it turned out, Alta had no idea of what a hard-copy photograph was. She had never seen one.

Robby had fabricated a number of storage containers, including the aluminum trunks she packed, before an effort was made to remove the material synthesizer from the Krell lab. As Alta was going through her personal belongings, the crew made a thorough search of the house for anything related to the Krell that might reveal new technology. Dr. Morbius's office yielded a number of bound manuscripts filled with notes and sketches. His bedroom yielded nothing except a few personal items Alta wanted to keep.

Efforts to remove items from the Krell laboratory failed. Though most equipment was made from steel and plastic, it defied dis-assembly without actually destroying the item. Items fabricated from Krell metal were few but impossible to

cut or remove. What appeared to be spare parts, some made using Krell metal, were recovered though the nature or function of those parts was never determined.

Alta does remember that despite the haste to salvage what they could, the crew paid all due respects to her father and Doc Ostrow, as they were buried with full honors on a planet that would soon explode. The nightmare of the monsters from the id would not pass until the forbidden planet and the horrible machine it housed were destroyed. Even with the planet gone, Alta would still wake in a cold sweat with vivid images of a beast she had seen only in her dreams. Her dream world friends could not always keep that beast at bay.

When Adams entered, he could see Alta was distracted, almost in a trance like state looking at the items laid out before her on the bed. He turned to leave but snapped back when Alta asked him "Is everything all right?" She had noticed him enter the cabin though she kept her eyes looking straight ahead.

He flashed her a smile but the shake of his head was saying no, everything was not all right. "I'm concerned about the crew's morale. You may not fully understand the problem because of your, er, um, limited experience, but men do strange things when they are contesting for the attention of females, especially young and attractive females. It isn't always good." He paused then added "There are some other considerations as well."

Alta was still acquiring necessary social skills but she apparently understood the issue with her answer. "All right, what would you suggest I do, or not do?"

"Mostly, be careful about what you wear. Anything revealing could be perceived as an invitation that you did not want to send. Be careful about what you say, particularly regarding any affections or opinions about crew members. You have free reign of the ship, but avoid secluded areas or crews quarters, including mine."

That last comment caught her by surprise but before she

said anything, she showed that she understood the reason and went from a puzzled expression to a slight nod of approval. Adams assured her it would only be for a few months. He had a plan.

Adams left and walked straight to the exec's station. "Boatswain, er I mean Mr. Wallace, assemble the crew. I have an announcement to make." Crew members at their duty stations, including Robby, stood still and silently waited for the commander's words.

"We have been in deep space for 13 months now and still have just under ten months to go before we reach Earth. You have been through a lot, especially the loss of Chief Quinn, Lieutenant Farman, Doc Ostrow, crewmen Grey and Strong. Everyone is pulling extra duty and in one area at least, medical, we are outright incapacitated. I am concerned the health scans may not have been, uh," he paused, searching for the right word but all that came to mind was "complete."

Adams paused, glanced about and could see the crew murmur and nod in general agreement. There were only 14 of them now and though no one complained about the extra duty, the commander knew it would eventually take a toll on morale and unity. Though Adams would have preferred maintaining course for Earth, there were now three compelling reasons to detour.

"I'm ordering Robby to plot a course for Barnard's Star where we have a small colony on one of the moons. We can be there in about six months. Unfortunately, that is the closest port in our general direction but I think in six months, even the moons of Saturn would look like paradise." Everyone knew which moons of Saturn he meant. They were considered the hell holes of the solar system but at least they had people, lots of people, and things to do, lots of things to do.

After the laughing subsided, Adams continued "Lieutenant Wallace will set up a shore leave rotation schedule stretching over four weeks before we resume our flight to Earth. Everyone will do three weeks off and one week on. I know

you are all eager to get home but I think some R and R would do you a world of good by then.”

From the general head nodding and murmurs, it was obvious the crew approved. Adams gave them a moment to settle down before he continued.

“Barnard's Star is no paradise but it is an oasis of civilization. There are about 40,000 colonists there and I'm sure some of them will welcome you and your paychecks.” There was a small outburst of laughter before Commander Adams continued.

“You will be able to make sub-space contact with Earth from Barnard's so you can let your family and friends know where you are. That's all. Mr. Wallace, dismiss the crew.” That was it but it appeared the crew was satisfied with a four-week layover, even if it was a backwater colony and meant one extra month of delay. “Mr. Wallace, I'll be back in a moment to discuss things with you and Robby.”

Adams wasn't sure how Alta would react to what he would say to her now. Of course she had heard the announcement, but Adams had more in mind for her. He went back to Doc Ostrow's cabin to explain his plans for her. She had just finished repacking the trunk with her mother's and father's belongings when Adams entered the cabin.

“Alta, Barnard's Star has a major mining colony that generally runs transports to and from Earth about every two or three weeks. I want to put you on the first available transport and have you stay with my family on Earth until I get there.” He could see the disappointment in her face and spoke quickly to assure her his decision was for a good reason.

“It's not fair to the crew, or me, or you if you remain on board the ship for the rest of the voyage. This may be difficult to accept, but I want you to meet other men. Who do you really know other than your father and I? I need to be sure about us and I don't think it is fair to you to expect you to abide by a decision without any knowledge of other men. I hope you understand I want this for us so there is no question

about our love for each other. Please try to see what I am saying.”

As Adams spoke, he could see Alta's facial expression going from disappointment to confusion to acceptance. She knew he had her best interests at heart and nodded her agreement as she spoke “John, of course I trust you and will do as you ask. I don't doubt your love for one moment.” With that, they embraced and kissed to seal their understanding and agreement.

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Robby had picked up the principles of astro-navigation quite quickly and proved extremely competent. He had plotted the course for Barnard's Star and was waiting for orders to engage the course change. When Commander Adams came alongside, Robby reported “Course for Barnard's Star laid in and ready to execute Commander.”

Adams looked left, and then right before he responded “Execute course change Robby.”

“Aye aye sir,” the robot responded, “course change executed.”

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Former crewman Randall, now Ensign Randall, did well assuming the responsibilities of Chief Quinn, the first crew member killed by a monster from the Krell machine operated by Morbius's subconscious mind. Randall was almost apologetic when accepting the appointment, but he was the most qualified crewman for the job. The robot had not been able to learn all of the intricacies of the various ship systems and it was part of Randall's assignment to teach the robot. As Robby had previously noted, learning United Planets technology would be his “dumbing down” exercise.

As Randall began to regularly meet and interact with Robby, the problem became more apparent. Robby's understanding of the physical sciences was as advanced as the Krell operating system embedded in his body would allow. He was way ahead of Earth sciences and it was difficult for

him to take steps backwards, especially if they were wrong. Randall now had a much better understanding of this problem but did not know how it could be overcome.

When Randall and Adams questioned Robby about the ships propulsion system, he understood the physics, including the incorrect theories, but he could not understand the hardware without a through examination, possibly including dis-assembly. That could not be allowed at this time and further improvements had to wait.

Robby could make additional upgrades to the propulsion system, but he could not explain how it worked in English or mathematically using the current level of Earth mathematical expression. The other problem was Robby's inability to produce the necessary components. The Krell synthesis machine was required but had to be left on the planet. Could Robby build the Krell synthesis machine later? No one knew and Robby did not seem to understand the question. As Robby had so wisely noted earlier, Krell science and Krell engineering were related, but not identical. Understanding the science was one thing, but using it was something else.

The technical and mathematical language barrier between Robby and his new owners was going to require enormous effort to overcome, if that were even possible. Commander Adams decided to take a different tack, but that would have to wait until they reached Barnard's Star. A colony computer might hold the answer to exchanging information with Robby.

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The greatest challenge of space travel was boredom. It was no different for Alta though every crew member seemed eager to engage her in conversation, keeping the boredom somewhat minimized. After a while however, even the cute flirtations became part of the routine. The ships library of literature, music and cinema were a rich diversion for Alta, especially acquainting her with Earth traditions, customs and culture.

Curiously enough and despite their repetitive nature, Alta

received great comfort from her dreams. She enjoyed the company, comfort and tranquility offered by her formless friends. She could not understand why, nor did she discuss her dreams with anyone, not even John J. Adams. She did learn from the cinema that people would discuss their dreams, particularly those that were disturbing, which hers were not, or those that had some hidden meaning, as she was sure hers did.

On the change of watch, Alta went to Adams's quarters as she often did and despite his protests. "John," she asked, "do you know anything about dreams?" They were sitting on the bed with their backs against the wall and holding hands when she asked.

He answered her promptly with "If you mean do I know how to interpret dreams, no, but I am a good listener. Do you want to tell me?"

She did want to tell him. "It's never the whole dream but a part and I have been having it for, well, years I guess. Too long to remember actually." As Alta turned to look at Adams, he placed his arm around her and pulled her closer. He didn't say anything and she continued. "In the repeating part of my dream, I am visited by some things or some people who I can't see very well. They are blurry. Very blurry."

Adams nodded and mumbled "OK." to assure her he was listening. He didn't know what to make of what she was saying at this point. Alta paused for a moment, looking around the room and noting to herself how remarkably similar it was to the cabin she occupied, but a mirror image. It was just a momentary side track but she wondered why the commander of a cruiser didn't have a bigger cabin than the other officers. It struck her as it never had before that for a man with such responsibility and authority, Adams was remarkably unpretentious in his command. It gave Alta great comfort to know that about the man she had chosen to love.

"These blurry images speak to me but I don't know the words they are using. Strangely, I do know what they are trying to tell me. I'm sorry, I just can't explain it." Alta was

truly befuddled. She continued “They tell me they will protect me.”

Adams perked up at that and asked “Protect you from what?” He looked at her, but she was staring off into space.

“I don't know John and that is what troubles me so much. What does it mean darling?” she asked, turning and meeting his eyes with hers. Adams shook his head. “What do you dream about?” she asked, looking deep into his eyes.

“Normal things I guess. People I have known, places I have been. Once in a while, I might even dream I'm on the bridge of a ship and I am in my underwear, or wearing nothing at all!” giving a giggle as he snuggled his face close to hers.

Alta turned her head away giggling as well, faced outward and leaned back into Adams chest, sinking into his arms as she spoke “I have dreams like that too.” They both laughed but she turned serious and continued “but these other things, the blurry ones, always make an appearance, and then leave.”

Adams wasn't sure what to say, stammered and then offered “Maybe we can get some help for you on Barnard's, someone to help you discover what these dreams mean.” Adams seemed certain that Alta was not mentally disturbed but perhaps had been traumatized by some earlier and long forgotten experience. For now, he would just lean back and enjoy holding Alta in his arms.

Chapter 5 Alert

The routine approach to Barnard's quickly turned into an exercise in panic control. For some unknown reason, Robby went into a convulsive fit of sounds. The crew was stunned and bewildered by the combinations of grunts, utterances and musical tones emanating from the robot over a very wide frequency and energy range. Randall, sitting next to the robot, yelled "Robby! Robby, what is it? In English, please!"

"It is an alert signal sir." the robot replied in a normal tone.

Commander Adams was coming up behind the robot when he heard that. "Alert? What kind of alert was that?" the commander asked.

"It is a Krell distress signal sir." the robot replied again with a normal tone.

"What? How? Where? I thought the Krell were extinct. Where is this signal coming from?" Adams waited and could hear Robby's circuits clicking.

"On this moon sir. I have the source location coordinates identified."

"Robby, get us into standard orbit, then we will talk. Continue to monitor that distress signal. Mr. Wallace, bring the crew to general quarters." Adams looked at the radio operator, signaling a question with his hands. The radio operator shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Apparently, only the robot was aware of the signal.

From orbit, Adams would contact Barnard Port Authority to request permission to land and provide special quarantine protocols. The Flight Control Officer on Barnard introduced himself as Ensign Otomi. When Adams requested the officer in charge, Otomi simply answered "Speaking. How can I be of assistance?"

“Good. I am Commander J. J. Adams of the United Planets Cruiser C-57-D.” replied Adams before he continued. “I am requesting permission to land with quarantine protocols in effect. Our medical scans show clear but I have some doubt about the accuracy.”

This was not an unusual request for a ship coming to Barnard's after visiting an alien world. Even ships with medical officers and full scan medical bays often took this extra precaution. Otomi was rather routine in his response that permission was granted for landing pad 8 and that the ship should maintain isolation while the quarantine rampway was being placed. Otomi did request a crew, passenger and cargo manifest before landing however. It was part of the quarantine protocol.

Adams stammered before answering with a question “Passenger manifest?”

“Yes,” Otomi replied, “that's standard procedure sir.”

“Certainly.” said Adams, as he motioned for Wallace to come closer. “I'll get those to you Mr. Otomi as soon as they are prepared.”

Wallace overheard and understood the problem immediately. There was no passenger manifest and Alta wasn't listed on the crew roster. Wallace had not been advised why the medical scans had been performed on the crew. Alta had been omitted from the scan examination because she was not on the crew roster, a simple and innocent oversight. If Wallace had known of the discussion leading to the decision to make the scans, he may have included Alta on the roster. “Skipper, we have no passenger manifest and Miss Morbius was not scanned. Your orders sir?”

Adams bowed his head into his hands, giving a few seconds of thought to the exec's words before he straightened up and gave the orders. “Arrange for Lee to scan Alta right now. Then create a passenger manifest with Alta on it. Make sure Robby is on the cargo manifest as machinery.”

“Aye aye skipper.” responded Wallace as he left to find

Lee, and then Alta.

Failing to scan Alta was an innocent oversight but could have dire consequences if anything were found. If there was to be any blame, it would fall on Adams. He knew and accepted that, after all, he was the commander of the ship and ultimately responsible for everything that happened on the ship.

Even if Alta were complicit in the oversight it was understandable. The thought her father might subconsciously do anything to harm her never arose. Certainly, he would not put any harmful organisms in his daughter, hence there was no need for her to be scanned. “Certainly” wasn’t good enough however and the scan would be the final word.

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Wallace excused himself from the lab, thanking Alta for her cooperation on his way out. Lee asked her to step up on the examination platform as he turned on the scanner. A slow and steady movement was required to allow the portable scanner to focus but even then, it took less than two minutes to complete the procedure.

Alta stepped off the platform and joined Lee at the panel viewer to see the results. No alarms had sounded so nothing was expected, which is why they both gasped when they saw the report. Something had been detected, but it was not identified as foreign or human. In fact, the report called it an undefined anomaly. Lee was unaware that such a result was even possible. “Undefined anomaly?” he grunted, clearly displaying his surprise.

Alta was visibly upset and protested “I feel fine, just fine. Maybe its a machine malfunction or a computer error.” There was no hostility in her voice, but a hint of indignation was there.

Lee encouraged her to remain calm, that he would test the scanner and run diagnostics on the computer. That took less than a minute but verified that both the scanner and computer were operating properly. Lee spoke to assure her. “Look,

there must be some logical explanation because you look fine. All your body functions are well within normal ranges. And if it were alien, it would have definitely have said so on the results.”

Lee said all the right things but the best Alta could manage was “I hope you're right.” with a slight tremble in her voice.

Lee told her that since there was no apparent danger, that she not say anything and leave that to him to inform the commander, Wallace and Randall. He also assured her that Barnard had better facilities and everything would turn out just fine. She wanted to believe that and agreed it would be better for Lee to make the report of findings, however he saw fit.

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Ensign Randal stood by waiting for the Commander's orders. “Randall, we need to talk to the robot.”

Randall snapped back “Aye aye sir' and started walking to the astro-navigation station where Robby was posted and Wallace was standing.

“Not here, in the ward room.” Adams said. Adams wanted Alta present during the questioning since she was more acquainted with Robby than any other person. Adams called her on the com-link and asked she join him in the ward room.

When Alta entered, Adams stopped her at the door and asked quietly if everything turned out all right. She said that Lee would give the full report, neither answering Adams with a yes or a no. There was no mistaking her evasion of the question but Adams let it go. He was sure that if Lee had found a problem, he would have told the commander immediately. Adams let the evasion go unnoticed and beckoned her to take a seat at the side of the long table in the ward room. Wallace and Randall were already seated and waiting to begin.

Adams was the first to speak. “Ensign Randall, start the recording.” Randall pushed a console button and a light flashed on. Adams spoke again. “Auto record date, time and place. Parties present include J. J. Adams, Commander, L.

Wallace, Executive Officer, V. Randall, Ensign, Altaira Morbius, civilian adviser and Robby the Robot, status to be determined. We are here to investigate an apparent distress signal received by Robby approximately 40 minutes ago while we were on our approach to the Barnard's Star space port. Details of the incident are recorded in the ships log and flight recorder. Robby, can you explain how you were able to receive a signal we were unable to detect?"

"My basic programming includes a function to monitor broad spectrum, frequency multiplexed and phase shifted signals. The signal I received was on one of those collections. I recognized it as a Krell distress signal." Several implications were clear as the four humans focused their attention on the robot.

"Why didn't we detect that signal?" the commander asked.

"You did sir, but your signal analyzer classified it as white noise from random RF sources." the robot responded.

The commander continued. "Robby, do you understand the Krell language?" It was a perfectly reasonable question that if Robby could detect a Krell distress signal, should he not understand it?

"Commander, I understand what is called Krell B, the logical and symbolic language of my programming. I know its vocabulary, grammar, syntax and audible constructs. I do not know its origin or derivation."

Randall noticed the change in Robby and put the observation on the table. "Robby, your answers to our questions go beyond a simple answer and you often elaborate with an explanation. Can you explain that?"

"Yes. My programming is adjusting to the requirements for contextual communication and negotiation with humans. The human desire for the why is overwhelmingly apparent." said the robot in a very matter of fact manner. "My anticipatory routines are adjusting to respond." Robby's statement drew silent and blank stares. The robot's programming was far more sophisticated than anything Earth

science had yet produced. Compared to human ideas about AI, the Krell made Earthly programming look like scrawls on the wall of a torch lit cave. Nonetheless, it was just programming, very advanced, but nothing more.

Adams and Randall had been studying Morbius's journals for months without making any progress. Perhaps they should have asked the robot for assistance. "Ensign, get the journal we have marked as MJ 2. Let's see if the robot can read it." There was silence as the ensign scanned a bookshelf, located the journal and handed it to Adams.

Adams opened the journal near the beginning, placed it in front of Robby and then asked "Can you read this?"

"I can read most of this page since it appears to be a direct derivative of Krell B. Some of this text appears more advanced. It may or may not be decipherable." Adams and Randall looked at each other in disbelief that they had missed something as simple as asking the robot for a translation. Robby did claim to speak 187 languages and their various dialects and sub-tongues, obviously programmed by Morbius, but he never volunteered that Krell might be one of the languages he understood.

Alta had been quietly absorbing what she saw before she spoke. "My father never thought of asking Robby for help either. He told me he began by translating simple mathematical expressions. He had some difficulty when he reached the level of calculus and said he might not be able to go any further. He said the Krell were using notations totally unfamiliar to him. He reminded me that the Krell were about a million years ahead of us in math and physics and would probably back correct everything they invented, discovered and reported."

Adams carefully pondered what Alta said before sitting back to continue the interrogation. "Let's put the journal aside for now. Robby, can you translate the distress signal you received into English?"

"Yes commander, but only partially. There are some

words or phrases that are beyond Krell B and not in my vocabulary or symbolic language skills.” replied the robot.

“Give us what you can Robby, and if possible, include the Krell you cannot translate using Krell pronunciation.”

There was much to learn about Robby, including the meaning of the few clacks and clicks that always seemed to precede his speaking. This occasion was no different with a few extra clacks and clicks before the words came out. “An-ik-frid-*<musical tones>*-piod-di-*<musical tones>*-bir-bir-bir-*<metal clanging sounds>*. Do not land. Acknowledge and remain in orbit for further instructions. That is the complete message commander, which then repeats.”

“Just a moment Robby” the commander interrupted. “Give me the transmission chronology or milestones.”

“The transmission was first detected at an altitude of 100,000 meters. It repeated every 15 seconds and terminated as we orbited the moon out of a line of sight.”

“Robby, do you know what triggered the signal? Could it have been those unknown Krell parts we scavenged?” The commander did not expect an answer but had to ask the question.

The robot responded as expected, “Unknown sir.”

Adams glanced at Alta, and then Randall, and then Wallace but all shook their head. No one had any idea of what triggered the signal unless it was Robby. But how? Certainly the robot would know if it had sent a signal.

“Robby, do you know how to acknowledge the signal?”

“No sir.”

The commander began to speak again “I'm not sure...” but was interrupted by Alta, who seemed somewhat distraught and uneasy as she spoke.

“An-ik-frid-*<humming music>*...” and a pause, and then silence. “I don't know what those sounds mean but I think I know them. Not like a buried memory but like some hidden meaning. I can't explain it.”

“Stop,” shouted Adams, “stop the recorder. Erase the last

5 seconds.” Adams waited for Randall to switch off the recording before he continued. “Trust me please. I’ll explain in few minutes if I’m right.” Alta, Randall and Wallace nodded their consent.

Neither Adams nor Randall nor Wallace knew what to make of what Alta said and they looked at her with questioning stares, betraying a slight hint of disbelief. Adams asked “Are you sure that wasn’t something your father said, or played from a recording, or from the Krell music recording he had?” Adams, with his tone of voice, indicated he would like an affirmative answer, ending the mystery.

“No, he never tried to speak Krell. I don’t think he knew how but he did have the Krell music, but that didn’t have those syllable sounds or that clanking metal I hear now. Krell opera? I don’t think so.” Alta was straining a smile, as if concealing her search for some lost thought temporarily misplaced in the back of her mind.

Randall suggested an experiment that would have Robby say something simple in Krell B, if that were possible, and see if it meant anything to, or produced any response in Alta. Wallace suggested that it be recorded so they could play it back if it revealed anything.

“Wait!” Adams interrupted, “Let me explain why I wanted the recording terminated. I don’t know how this may go but it isn’t exactly a controlled experiment.” The commander looked toward Randall, and then Wallace but got blank expressions from each. They didn’t understand, at least not yet. “Alta, there will be people determined to exploit what we learned on Altair 4 and if there is any chance they believe you understand the Krell language, they will most likely want to confine you for study and experimentation. They will never let you go. They will always believe you are holding back, that there is more to get from you if they just hold onto you until ... you’re dead.”

Randall obviously got it as he threw his head back and let out a long “Aha.” Wallace was more subdued and nodded his

head to express agreement. Randall sat up straight, looking at the commander and began energetically nodding his approval, and then was joined by Wallace. Alta's ever so slight smile disappeared. She understood that Adams was trying to protect her.

Adams beamed a small smile and gave a small sigh, "Well, we are getting somewhere. Ensign Randall, will you clean up that recording, please."

"Aye aye sir." Randall and Wallace understood the trust being placed in them, but their sympathy for Alta also weighed in their decision. Adams made a request, not an order and both his officers appreciated his position and situation. Alta would be protected and they would cooperate, even if it meant keeping information from UP Fleet Command.

"Go ahead Robby, just remember to keep it very simple." the commander said as Randall, Wallace and Alta focused their attention on the robot.

There were a few clicks and clacks then speech from Robby. "Int bir ven <c sharp, e flat> tress to ven <d, f> mot <metallic click>." Robby's pronunciation included some distinct accents and intonations. It seemed that even a simple phrase in Krell B was not so simple after all.

Alta sat quietly, staring ahead, obviously in thought and then said "I know that it's a mathematical equation, but that's all I know. I don't recall ever hearing that before but I sense I know what it means, but I simply forgot."

All eyes were now on Robby. "She is correct. Do you require the English translation commander?"

"No" said Adams. He wanted to give Alta as much time as she needed if there was any possibility she might recall the meaning, even at some later date. "That's enough. There is no need to go any further at this time."

The quiet that filled the ward room was profound. Attention was focused on Alta conveying looks of disbelief and amazement. It made Alta feel very uncomfortable as she squirmed in her chair and looked away from all eyes.

Adams broke the silence. “Let's keep this quiet and give some thought to the next steps. We have other concerns at the moment.”

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Wallace transmitted the requested manifests to Otomi and received permission to land on landing pad 8.

Robby reported the distress signal was still being transmitted.

Adams got on the com-link to give instructions for landing and quarantine. “All ship systems are to remain on closed internal circuits until we receive clearance to use external air and services. All crewmen will go through quarantine scan and those of you on shore leave may proceed to the space port afterward. Have fun gentlemen and remember to be nice to the natives. Robby, get us on the ground.”

Adams would wait on board the ship until the duty crew had been scanned and were in the standby gangway. Port personnel would scan the ship once Adams had departed for his quarantine scan. This was to go by the book to minimize the risk of contagion.

It was a simple calculation as far as Adams was concerned. There were 40,000 colonists on the Barnard's Star moon colony. There were 11.3 billion people on Earth. End of argument.

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A few moments later, UP cruiser C-57-D touched down on landing pad 8. Pads 7 and 8 were among the smaller landing facilities compared to those used for freighters and ore carriers. Adams ordered the exec to dismiss the crew.

Neither Lee nor Alta had said anything to Adams about the scan findings. It wouldn't matter now that they had landed and a full and proper scan would be made. Alta simply told Adams she would see him after they had both gone through quarantine. She concealed her anxiety well as she disembarked through the gangway. The rest of the crew followed with Adams, Wallace and Randall watching as each

man descended through the gangway hatch, with Cookie bringing up the rear. The officers would soon depart as well leaving only Adams behind until port personnel arrived.

Chapter 6 Shore Leave

The crew of C-57-D was going to get an introduction to Barnard's Star colonial history whether they wanted it or not. The visitors arrival center with its historic displays was also the quarantine area for new arrivals. The crew would be there about four hours for pre-scan processing and full medical scanning before they were released. What would they learn about this port of call?

The Barnard's colony was actually on a moon circling the second planet, one of the gas giants of the Barnard's Star system. The moon was in the “habitable” zone, had a 50% surface cover of water, an atmosphere primarily of nitrogen, oxygen and carbon dioxide, mineral rich rocks and a comfortable gravity at 0.94 of Earth's. It was not the best candidate for Eco-forming but what was discovered was enough to tip the decision to colonize. There was gold, and plenty of it. The colony center was established over the second richest known gold fields in the galaxy. The richest gold fields were about 30 kilometers north but in an area temporarily closed to development.

There was an abundance of other valuable minerals as well, but gold was still the prime ingredient of high energy, high efficiency, high reliability circuit and power components.

Sixty years earlier, the first Eco-forming team arrived to begin that miraculous process by which lifeless, barren planets were made to resemble Earth. First came the wave of viruses, bacteria and single celled organisms to begin the transformation. That was followed with plankton, lichens, mosses, molds, fungi and other low order plants before the grasses, kelp and other aquatic plants were introduced. Simple animal life followed as the variety of microbes, plants and

animals was systematically increased. The atmosphere is transformed to one more friendly to animals and humans alike as carbon dioxide is consumed and converted to plant material and oxygen. It took 40 years before the first settlers could claim Barnard's as their home without the requirement of artificially maintained atmospheres. Until that time, mining was simply not practical.

In historical context, Barnard's was the second colony to use Eco-forming in place of Terra-forming. The large, expensive and unreliable Terra-forming machines had never graced the landscape of this moon.

With Eco-forming completed, the moon featured tropical rain forests, temperate woodlands, rich farmland, tundra, alpine forests, deserts and a wide variety of plant and animal environments. The moon had become something of a vacation spot for Earth's inhabitants seeking distance and seclusion from the busy home planet.

Most of the inhabitants of Barnard's worked the mines and ore refineries. About one-third had families with wives and children. Most of the other people on Barnard's worked to entertain the miners, refiners and tourists. You would find some other trades and occupations, but they were a very distinct minority. The butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker were here, but you had to literally dig them out. Anyone who could hold a shovel was at least a part time miner.

Make no mistake that Barnard's is a rough place but the crew has been to rough places before and they would certainly survive Barnard's. About a third of the crew would go in for drinking, gambling and whoring while the remainder would be more discreet and selective in their choice of entertainment. Of course, they all went out drinking that first day, after finding a suitable hotel or making arrangements for clear passage back to the ship.

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Alta had to wait her turn in quarantine just like everyone

else. Pre-processing included the injection of dye and marker materials to improve the contrast and resolution of the scan. Alta expected some adverse result, but she had no idea of what it might be. The technician had set the scan controls which automatically repositioned and started the scanning head mechanism. A problem showed up almost immediately as the scanner arm reached about eye level.

The technician saw something unusual about her pituitary gland and surrounding brain tissue and spoke freely about it with Alta. The conversation was being recorded as part of a medical log. When asked about childhood diseases, she only knew about them from her biology lessons as a child and she simply replied she had none. The technician noted that was unusual to which Alta replied she had grown up alone on Altair 4. The technician seemed satisfied that she had never been exposed, but he was focused on the brain abnormality the scanner revealed.

When questioned, Alta replied she had never experienced any difficulty, seldom had headaches or similar problems. The technician allowed the scan to proceed and made a record that there was no apparent infection or foreign body. The unusual shape, or structure was a simple anatomical anomaly and posed no threat to other people. Alta was greatly relieved but still not satisfied. She wanted to know why she was different. What was it?

When the scan was completed, Alta went to the customs and immigration area where she cleared without any delays. Alta's plan was to book passage to Earth as Adams had requested, then take in some sightseeing and return to the ship that evening. The transport terminal office was quiet and notably empty, except for one employee behind a counter. Alta found a charter flight for Earth with three berths open and departing in three days. She booked it, inquired about sightseeing but decided to wait until tomorrow. She was set on returning to the ship and spending what little time was left with Adams.

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All of the bars in the Colony Center section of Barnard's featured the same cheap, tinny look of garishly painted corrugated metal. Equally cheap windows were decorated with flashing neon beer signs, printed menus and credit card icons. The interior walls were always grungy with a thick coat of some putrid pastel color. The lighting was always dark and subdued except the dancer's stage, cage or perch. The furniture always appeared to be good quality and was certainly comfortable. Between the cold beer, cool interior, comfortable seating and sensuous and scantily clad dancers, why would anyone want to leave? The dancer's pole was never left unattended for more than a minute as the heavy beat music droned on endlessly.

Crewmen Simms, Perez and Chang were craning their necks to see the dancer. She wasn't very energetic but she sure looked appealing to three men who had been in space without female companionship for over a year. Of course they enjoyed the company of Alta, but she was off limits. They would occasionally turn toward each other with a smile and wink to admit their fantasy and ground themselves back to reality. There were establishments that catered to female miners, but this was not one of them. Even the waitress who brought their beers had them gawking. She knew it too and gave a little extra wiggle as she walked away from their table.

Simms broke the silence. "The natives certainly seem friendly. My bet is the dancer is taken."

Perez and Chang nodded their agreement and added "Yeah, probably the waitress too." There were some females in the room but they all had a miner or two clinging to them. The three chugged their beers down while exchanging some small talk and agreed to leave.

It was Perez who suggested it was too early in the day to find any free females and that perhaps they might take in some of the colony sights. They agreed but what and where? There was a rover rental shop up the street which they decided to

check out. The small storefront had the typical wall racks of tourist fliers with photos, maps and directions. The one for Auric Canyon caught Chang's eye. It was a natural gouge in the moon's surface, just over two miles deep, about four miles wide and over 16 miles long. It was about 30 kilometers north of the colony in a nature preserve. The brochure indicated the area was rich in gold but temporarily closed to mining to permit a geological study of the gouge.

Chang suggested they see it since he wanted to compare it with the Grand Canyon on Earth. Perez and Simms consented, but with the understanding they bring a six-pack or two with them. Simms rented the rover while Perez and Chang discreetly left to purchase the beer.

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It was a straight shot north to Auric Canyon with rather pleasant scenery on the way. The Eco-forming had created some beautiful forests on rolling hills and wide open fields. Wildflowers were everywhere to be seen and dazzled the eyes with large swaths of pink, amber and turquoise. The air was filled with a pleasant perfume like scent. They had reached the entrance of the canyon preserve in about 40 minutes. A large map of the preserve clearly located a number of overlooks placed all around the perimeter of the canyon.

Upon reaching the first overlook, they dismounted the rover with a six-pack in hand. Chang strode up to one of the large signs posted for tourists and began to read aloud. "This vantage point presents the broadest view of Auric Canyon, which curves to the northwest for a total of 16.6 miles. You are standing two miles above the canyon floor. The water at the bottom of the canyon maintains a constant level regardless of rainfall. No explanation has been found for this natural phenomena. Hey, that's kind of interesting, ya know. Let's check these other signs."

Perez barked back "Quon, you keep reading to us. Georgy and I prefer it that way." Perez and Simms had developed a liking for the strongly flavored local beer and thought it was

marvelous that Quon would be their tour guide.

The terrain around the rim was very flat except for a few arroyos cut near the edge. From the slope of the ground, it looked like little rain entered the canyon from the rim. The vegetation was mostly scrub brush and grasses, hiding a few skinny jack rabbits attracted to the noise. The products of Eco-forming also included ants, an eagle, a few gophers and some wildflowers scattered among the scrub brush. The Barnard's moon was proof that practice made perfect when it came to Eco-forming.

Chang was happy to oblige his compatriots and walked to the next sign. "Currently, there is no natural explanation for the existence of Auric Canyon. The canyon is completely closed at both ends with no underground rivers detected. This rules out water erosion. Wind erosion has been considered but there is no evidence of where the deposits have been carried. Auric Canyon is a true geological mystery. Wow!"

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Flapjack, one of the original forty-niner miners, stayed down and concealed in the arroyo. He did not recognize the three intruders but they were definitely wearing some kind of uniform. The usual park police would have left for their perimeter tour a few hours earlier and it was too soon for them to return. Very quietly and slowly, Flapjack pulled the small ore carrier up from the canyon face and into the arroyo.

He peaked from the arroyo edge and saw that one of the three men was reading the tourist signs, while the others sat in the open rover drinking beer. They couldn't be all bad he thought, if they drink beer. He wasn't taking any chances because the penalty for violating the mining restriction was one year mandatory confinement and expulsion from the colony. His legal mine was still productive, but scraping gold ore from the canyon face was a far easier and faster way to make money.

What were these strangers doing? Were they from fleet on shore leave? How long would they stay and how long would

he have to remain hidden? Flapjack was focused on planning his exit when he saw the flash of light, followed quickly by a distinct crack and a dull thud. The man reading the sign fell to his knees, and then fell face forward onto the ground. Flapjack froze where he was and kept his eye on the small party of intruders.

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Chang was down by the time Simms and Perez had turned toward the sound. Perez saw the flash and heard the crack but it was too late as he went down in the rover seat. Simms was paralyzed with fear and could not move. He closed his eyes. George Simms heard the crack as he felt the impact and then fell from the rover to the ground.

...

Flapjack saw the three men go down in about 8 seconds. He held his position, feeling safe since he saw no other flashes. He was about 200 meters from the fallen men and well concealed with his camo hat just peaking behind the edge of the arroyo. He decided it was too risky to move and would wait to see what developed. He was totally unprepared for what he saw next.

Flapjack wasn't concerned about moving because he was frozen in place with fear. From just beyond the rover, he saw two cylindrical objects about 2 meters tall hovering just above the ground and moving toward the rover. As the distance closed, he could make out some features. The cylinder walls looked like a number of thin panels placed along the circumference and partially spanning the longitudinal axis. He noticed the top and bottom of the cylinder was tapered.

When the cylinders reached the fallen men, he could see some of the panels open and reveal arm like mechanisms that were very flexible. Almost instantly, a stretcher would appear and was maneuvered into place around one of the fallen men, repeating the procedure until all three were placed and set in a horizontal position suspended above the ground.

There was no mistaking these were some kind of robots

but nothing like Flapjack had seen before. United Planets robots had arms and legs, were quite clumsy and not capable of levitation. Nor did they have flexible appendages like these robots. Flapjack watched the robots depart with their captives in tow on the stretchers. When they disappeared from sight, he made his way along the arroyo, to the canyon edge and a series of adjacent arroyos until he reached the one that would lead to his rover.

That would be a two kilometer walk, but not today. It was a two kilometer run. For his age, Flapjack moved very quickly to the brush where the rover was concealed. He had forgotten his ore carrier, but decided escape was more important than risking a return trip for some lost gold ore. One curious thing was that Flapjack only mined the gold from his canyon claim. He thought the mining restriction was unjustified. Anyone who knew Flapjack could tell you his next stop would be the sheriff's office in Barnardsville.

...

Simms was the first to regain consciousness and except for his eyes, he was totally immobile. He could sense he was being carried somewhere while flat on his back. He could move his eyes and blink, but that was it. He could hear a whirring sound but he could not speak. He looked toward his feet and could see something that appeared metallic, roughly cylindrical and otherwise featureless from his vantage point. He blinked several times to clear his eyes and on closer inspection he could see the cylinder was slightly tapered and had three bands around its circumference. He could not see Perez or Chang but assumed they were in the same condition.

Simms could see a smooth ceiling with corner edges to each side indicating he was in a corridor. The ceiling appeared to be smooth rock, but he couldn't be sure. A short distance later, the ceiling opened up and a few seconds after that he was placed upright. He was in a large room with at least seven other people on flat, translucent panels standing upright as if they had been stacked in a row for storage. Only the backs of

the panels were visible. He still couldn't feel anything, nor make out any details of the other people in the room. All he could tell was they were all immobile and there was no sign of his captors. If more were stacked behind him, he didn't know.

...

Adams was back on board the ship with a skeleton crew of Randall, Lee, Lindstrom and Bertolli. Alta had returned but went directly to the commander's cabin. Robby was dutifully standing at the astro-navigation station.

“Commander, the Krell message has changed. It now says 'Return to orbit. Do not land. Clean up is in progress. Remain in orbit pending further notice'. Sir, the signal is being reflected.” Robby was even anticipating what he would be asked. Those routines would change constantly as he became familiarized with command protocols and etiquette.

“Clean up is in progress?” Adams echoed back as a question. “Robby, keep monitoring that signal and let me know of any change.”

Adams went to his cabin, satisfied the ship was secure and in good hands. As soon as the door to the cabin closed, Alta pressed close and threw her arms around Adams. She had finished her small tour of Barnardsville and was happy to be back on the ship with Adams. She whispered “I'm frightened but I know what must be done.” Adams could only hope that was true as he tightened his embrace. She eased away from him, looked him in the eyes and said “Something happened in quarantine today, actually, it was during the scan. The technician found an abnormality in my brain but said it did not appear harmful. I don't recall his exact words but he dismissed the matter. But I didn't and the question I have is, am I human? Was something done to me before or after I was born? Could the Krell machine alter me?”

Adams was stunned by Alta's frankness and fearless confrontation of her problem. He didn't know what to say though he tried. Alta put her finger to his lips, gave him an affectionate look with an ever so slight but noticeable smile

and continued. “I need a DNA test, perhaps additional scans and perhaps some tests of any telepathic or brainwave activity I might be displaying.” Adams gave a large sigh, relieved that she was forthright, was taking charge and responsibility for her situation and he did not have to convince her.

“Yes, we need to do that.” he said, but who could he trust? Or perhaps there was another way. The last thing he wanted was Alta to become a zoo specimen.

Chapter 7 Forty-niner

The miners on Barnard's liked to think of themselves in the tradition of the California Gold rush of 1849. They were an independent and impulsive lot eager to make and spend money. They generally got along well with each other making Barnard's fairly peaceful. There was tension with the refiners but the two groups had their own territories staked out. There were plenty of bars, casinos and women on Barnard's to go around.

The “authorities” on Barnard's were scant and concerned primarily with completing the Eco-forming and general public health. The United Planets operated the space port and maintained a park police force that operated moon wide. A small geological science office was also present but no one actually did any work as best as the colonists could tell.

The “local authorities” put in place by the colonists had to comply with UP regulations but were independent of the UP. A sheriff and small contingent of deputies kept the peace. Dr. Renfro was considered the public health officer and it was he Commander Adams would approach concerning Alta. Unfortunately, there was a rather raucous demonstration at the colony town hall. About 40 miners had assembled to air a number of grievances, primarily concerning Auric Canyon.

The canyon had been properly named as evidenced by large and highly visible veins of gold ore exposed on the canyon faces. The area had been declared by the authorities as off-limits because of the geological interest it generated. The canyon had been studied by geologists for nearly 20 years without reaching any conclusion on how it was formed. Miners frequently visited the canyon to look for new veins as the sides of the canyon weathered after a heavy rainfall. In the

past 24 hours, four miners had disappeared. Their ATV had been found. There were tracks as well but they just stopped as if the miners had been lifted from the surface of the moon. The miners wanted the canyon searched and their friends found.

Adams and Alta had to push their way through the crowd, but no one gave them any trouble and they were soon in Dr. Renfro's office. Renfro was responsible for the quarantine and scanning protocols and supervised the technicians that performed that work. After the introductions were made, Renfro volunteered some knowledge he had gained of Alta.

“Oh yes, you are the young lady with that unusual scan result. The technician was correct and I concur with him there is no threat of contagion. There are no alien bodies inside you. What can I do for you?”

Alta spoke right up. “I need my DNA tested to verify it is 100% human and uncontaminated by alien DNA. I need a more thorough scan of my brain to learn more about the anomaly in and around my pituitary gland.”

“Whoa! That's a tall order young lady, both costly and time consuming. What makes you think you may be contaminated?” Renfro was clearly defensive. Who was this young woman to practice medicine and order tests?

Adams jumped in at this point. “It's a very long story Dr. Renfro but I assure you the concern is genuine and could pose a threat to everyone in this colony. If we can get the testing started I will give you as much time as needed to explain the circumstances leading to this request.”

Renfro was uneasy but seemed satisfied. “OK, let's get the required samples, get the tests started and then relax with lunch and a few drinks so you can tell your story.” Adams and Alta nodded. “Follow me please. We will get the samples now but let's hold off on the scan, at least temporarily.”

Renfro's two technicians seemed to welcome the work and drew the blood samples. Renfro gave them instructions that encompassed a broad range of tests. When he finished, he

turned to Adams and Alta and said “Let's get some lunch and into your story.”

...

When the miners saw Flapjack at city hall, they extended him greetings and welcomed him to their protest. He had no idea what they were talking about. He made a few inquiries and learned of the four missing miners. There was no evidence the miners had been mining at the canyon. They had just disappeared and no one had been able to contact the park police. Flapjack was putting this together in his head. He had to speak to Sheriff Martin. No one tried to stop him as Flapjack moved through the crowd.

Flapjack knew his way to the sheriff's office. He had been a guest there several times for suspected canyon mining but was found innocent and released on each occasion. He and Sheriff Martin had actually become close friends because of some unusual common interests. They both enjoyed fishing and hunting, but it was opera, Verdi in particular, and drama, Shakespeare, that distinguished and cemented their friendship.

The sheriff's office was on the opposite end of the corridor from Public Health. Being sheriff on Barnard's was a peaceful job. There were occasional brawls to break up, but that was the extent of violent crime. Sheriff Martin was sitting at his desk in a small office to the right of the Sheriffs Office proper. Flapjack was as pale as a ghost. Martin could see him through the window and motioned him to come in.

“You don't look well Flapjack. Something troubling you?” Martin asked.

Flapjack stumbled about before settling in the chair opposite Martin. Martin was puzzled by his friend's behavior. “Something I can get you?” Martin offered.

Flapjack looked Martin square in the eye and started his story. “Julius, you are not going to believe this.”

Martin put his hands together and sat back, staring intently at his friend. “It's not about this miner thing, is it?” Martin asked. “The park police will investigate as soon as we get

some details and get a hold of them.”

Flapjack had to get right to the point. Time was of the essence with four missing miners, the three men he saw earlier and possibly the strangely absent park police. “Julius, I saw something at the canyon I would never tell anyone but you. Anyone else would say I was crazy but I know what I saw. I think it may involve the missing miners and be the reason no one can reach the park police.”

Martin didn't say anything but sat quietly as Flapjack told of the three men in uniform he saw taken at the canyon. He said nothing about the metal cylinders he saw until he had relayed all the other details. Martin had known Flapjack for a long time and knew his friend was not a teller of tall tales. He thought Flapjack could be mistaken but he knew for certain Flapjack had seen something.

“Flapjack, I will check it out. There is a United Planets cruiser here on shore leave. You may have seen some of the crew. Maybe I need to find the park police as well.” Martin said.

“No Julius, it may be too dangerous!” Flapjack was visibly upset and clearly worried about his friend. “Whatever took those men came from nowhere. There was a flash, a crack and a thump and they were all down in seconds.”

Martin assured him he would be careful and use the satellite for the initial search. That calmed Flapjack. “I'll see if I can locate the captain of that UP cruiser as well, check on his crew. We can head over to port now. I'm sure they won't mind if you come with me. You are after all, the witness. Ready?”

Flapjack nodded, stood and led the way out of the sheriff's inner office. Martin stopped just long enough to tell the dispatcher where he was going.

...

Alta, followed by Commander Adams and Dr. Renfro was just leaving the lab on the side of the corridor when Flapjack and Martin came through the door at the end leading to the

Sheriff's Office. It was Martin who called out to Renfro "Just a moment Doc." As Martin approached, he sized up the commander, taking particular note of his uniform.

Flapjack was at his side and said "Hey, that's the kind of uniform I saw them fellas wearing." Alta, Adams and Renfro all turned to Martin as he and Flapjack drew closer.

Martin and Renfro shook hands, as did Flapjack. Martin asked "Would you introduce us Doc?" The handshaking continued as Renfro proceeded with the introductions.

"Sheriff, Flapjack, this is Alta Morbius and Commander J. J. Adams. Alta, Commander, please say hello to our Sheriff and one of our more distinguished forty-niners, Flapjack. Miss Morbius, Commander Adams and I were just heading out to lunch. Would you care to join us?"

"Actually, I would like that. I need to speak to the commander and I think Flapjack can help explain why." replied Martin. "How about we meet you at the Pick and Shovel?"

"Sure," said Renfro, looking at Alta and Adams, "that's where I had in mind. If you are leaving now, we can walk with you."

Martin and Flapjack agreed and they all proceeded out the back door to avoid the crowd of miners still gathered in front of the city hall building. It was a short walk and beautiful day. Zircon Street was considered the high rent commercial district with its pricey shops, boutiques and of course, the Pick and Shovel restaurant.

...

Bars were plentiful in Barnardsville but good restaurants were a rarity. The Pick and Shovel stood at the intersection of Zircon Street and Argentine Avenue, considered the center of the Barnardsville commercial district. The restaurant was housed in a plain looking imitation brownstone building, a popular design for the pricier boutiques. Most of these buildings featured large plate glass windows, stained glass doors with heavy polished brass trim and some type of

colorful canvas awning. The imitation gas lights on the street completed the transformation from mining town to sophisticated and upscale urban center.

The restaurant was always busy and today was no exception. The maitre d'hotel in formal tuxedo made everyone feel under dressed but the restaurant had never adopted a formal dress code beyond no shirt, no shoes, no service. Nonetheless, most of the clientele, though informally dressed had a refined look.

Renfro requested a table for five, which was quickly assembled from two smaller tables. Once the party settled into their chairs, Renfro recommended they try the local specialty for a starting drink. There was an exchange of typical small talk and pleasantries while the waiter served five Golden Sliders. They drank to everyone's good health and all deferred to Renfro to order lunch.

Adams had spotted four crewman at a table not too far from theirs and gave them a salute when they looked his way and waved. Martin decided this would be a good time to make his inquiry with the commander. He would lead up to asking about any missing crew members after some small talk. Alta would be his ice breaker.

"Alta, that's a very pretty name. I've never heard that before." Martin wanted to start the conversation on a pleasant note and Alta was the natural key.

Most women would have blushed but Alta had never experienced the typical childhood and adolescence most women had been through. She very matter of factly responded to Martin "My name is actually Altaira. I think my father gave me that name because I was born there and he so loved that planet. He feminized the name and also came up with Alta."

For some reason, Martin was speechless, almost stunned and visibly shaken. He looked intensely at Alta, his mouth gaping before he finally composed himself to speak. "Alta. Altaira. Altair. Is that where you are from?"

Alta appeared surprised by the question but answered

“Yes, I was actually born on Altair 4.”

Martin took a deep breath, sat back and asked Alta how she had gotten to Barnard's. Adams was a bit puzzled by Martin's reaction and decided to intervene. He explained they had just arrived from a mission to Altair 4, where they had found Alta and her father, Dr. Edward Morbius. Martin was dead silent and staring intently at Adams, hanging on every word. Renfro and Flapjack were both looking at Martin, wondering why he had reacted the way he did.

During the earlier introductions, Julius Martin was introduced as “the sheriff.” It was clear to Adams that it was the mention of Altair 4 that caused the sheriff to react so strangely. Adams got right to the point and asked the bewildered sheriff why his interest in Altair 4.

Martin sat up straight, took a deep breath and explained. “My twin sister was part of an expedition to Altair 4. I was told the expedition was a long term research project that would be incommunicado for about 16 years, maybe longer. Well, 16 years came and went and we heard nothing except that a search and rescue mission would be launched. That must have been you commander.”

Adams took a drink of the Golden Slider before answering yes. He was searching for the words to tell the sheriff there were no survivors. Martin spared him the unpleasant duty and said “I assume then, there were no survivors.” Adams nodded his head slowly with a mild grimace on his face.

He realized he didn't know the sheriff's name and then asked, offering to match it up to the grave markers that had been found and recorded. Martin replied “Martin, Julius Martin and my sister was Julia Martin.” Adams put the connection together immediately, but so had Alta. She had been looking down at the table and drink in front of her, but this snapped her attention to the sheriff. The waiter was setting the food at the table but she waved hers away. The only hunger she had was for information about her mother.

She dropped the bombshell on Julius Martin that “I'm your

niece. You are my uncle. Julia Martin, your sister was my mother. She married my father on the flight to Altair 4. She died when I was born. I need to talk to you. I never knew my mother.” The tears were welling up in Alta's eyes as Adams reached to hold her hands across the table. Martin took a hand as well, still stunned but also elated by the remarkable stroke of fate that brought uncle and niece together.

Martin gave Alta a warm smile and said “You and the commander must have dinner with my wife and I tonight. We have a lot to talk about. Unfortunately, I have some other duties I must attend to first.” Alta smiled back, then motioned the waiter to bring her plate back. Her appetite was restored and she would enjoy lunch with the others. The small talk she enjoyed with her uncle was just an appetizer for the conversation she imagined would take place that evening.

...

Alta and Renfro returned to his office to see if any of the lab test results had been returned. In the sheriff's office, Flapjack, Adams and Martin sat around the sheriff's desk as Flapjack told the commander about the UP crewman he saw disappear earlier at Auric Canyon.

Adams was concerned but explained there was little he could do. Most of the crew were on shore leave and under no obligation to report there whereabouts to anyone. Flapjack admitted he was too far away to get a good look at the crew and probably would not be able to identify any of them. Adams suggested they examine the site, but Flapjack insisted they not do that as he had argued before with Martin. He believed it was too dangerous.

Martin asked Adams if he would join him and Flapjack at the space port where they could use the satellite surveillance system to examine the Auric Canyon area. It seemed a reasonable request and he agreed to join them considering he may have several crew members involved. Alta would be with Renfro and they would meet later at the ship.

...

Ensign Otomi guided Flapjack, the sheriff and commander to the communications room where surveillance satellites were monitored. A globe holograph of the moon allowed Otomi to select a region to view. The multiple satellite cameras allowed a very good three dimensional image. Martin was already familiar with the equipment but listened patiently as Otomi gave them a primer on how to operate the camera selector and locator controls. Satisfied the men had been properly instructed, Otomi left them to begin their search.

Flapjack picked up the ground immediately and spotted the abandoned rover. He took a photograph of the rear identification tag they could use to trace the vehicle. There were no signs of a struggle or any disturbance, but the ground was also hard and dry and it was doubtful any tracks would be left.

Flapjack started a methodical search of the canyon rim, running northwest along the western edge. The ATV of the missing miners had been found to the south, but no one had searched north. It wasn't long before Flapjack zoomed in on the abandoned park police rover. Again, there was no sign of a struggle or any evidence suggesting where the three park policemen might be.

The first rover was traced to a rental car agency where it was confirmed it had been rented by a Georgy Simms. The sheriff, using the remote facilities of his office, was able to obtain surveillance camera photographs of the transaction showing that Simms was accompanied by two other UP crewmen. Adams identified them as Perez and Chang.

Martin and Adams wanted to mount a search of the area but Flapjack begged them to reconsider. He was convinced that not only would the search fail, but the searchers would also be in extreme danger. Martin knew Flapjack was not prone to unreasoned panic or fear, which moved him to agree. Adams resisted at first but soon relented and agreed to an extensive satellite search first.

Adams would come to appreciate why Martin valued the

advice of Flapjack. The forty-niner was a legend, his gruff look and disposition disguising a deeper intellect and uncanny common sense. While Flapjack bore no resemblance to Doc Ostrow, he seemed to possess the doctor's knowledge and wisdom. Flapjack agreed to lead the search team with the aid of a sheriff's deputy and a crewman on loan from Adams. They would be at it for several days, scouring every inch of the canyon.

Adams preferred more aggressive action if indeed he had missing crewmen. It was Flapjack who convinced him that a round the clock search using the satellites was far less risky than adding more people to the ground where the disappearances first occurred. Adams would accept that, at least for the first 72 hours.

Chapter 8 Of Family and DNA

Alta was disappointed that nothing had been revealed by the blood and tissue tests. She conveyed this to Adams but also said the DNA testing was not finished. Dr. Renfro believed some of the samples were suspect and wanted to do some additional comparative testing. She took her mind off that as she dressed for dinner and focused on placing her necklaces.

Adams changed into a fresh dress uniform and met Alta at her cabin. He reminded her the taxi being sent to pick them up would arrive any minute. Alta was both excited and nervous at the prospect of meeting the mother she had never known, even if it was just through photographs and the recollections of her mother's twin brother, her recently discovered uncle.

It was about 6 PM when they descended the gangway toward the space port and the taxi stand beyond. There would be a few more hours of light followed by a strange twilight as the moon rotated and its orbit entered the reflection of the gas giant it circled. The sky was clear and every indication was for a beautiful evening on Barnard's. It was a short 15 minute drive to Martin's home on the outskirts of Barnardsville. Alta and Adams were quiet the entire time with her hand tightly and nervously squeezing his as the taxi sped down suburban roads.

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The Martin residence was quite old fashioned, a red brick ranch style house with several large bay windows. It was modest by all measures but nicely kept and landscaped. Adams saw the lighted button at the door and pressed it. He wasn't sure what it was but it looked like it demanded it be

pressed. He could hear a bell ringing from the inside. Martin greeted them and asked them to enter. The house had a very slight but pleasant aroma of cooking beef that Adams noticed and complimented right away.

Martin motioned them to follow as he walked through a nicely appointed dining room on the left and an opening to a very large kitchen beyond. Martin didn't hesitate to put them at ease. "Let's do this right. Please call me Julius, or Uncle Julius if you prefer. This is my wife Sheila, Aunt Sheila that is. We are so happy you were able to join us tonight. How about some wine?"

Adams reciprocated immediately and asked they simply call him John. Alta was only now discovering people beyond her father and the crew she had become acquainted with on the ship. Everyone was so friendly and kind she thought. Her father harbored a dislike for people from Earth and she was finding it more difficult to understand her father's attitude. This was family and they made her feel comfortable, welcomed and secure.

"Wine?" Alta asked, "What is that?" Julius smiled and poured four glasses. Sheila was putting the final touches on dinner so they could adjourn to the living room and relax before eating.

John and Alta each accepted the glass they were handed. Julius remarked the wine was a local vintage and quite good thanks to the cool and sunny climate and the sandy soil. He lifted the glass in the air and said "To my new found niece and the memory of her mother, my sister!" There was a light clinking of the glasses, something Alta had never seen but she quickly followed the example. Julius invited them to sit on the large sofa while he walked over to a book shelf, removing a large bound volume.

Alta found the room very comfortable and more inviting than the house she lived in on Altair 4. There was a brick wall with a box like opening on one side of the living room. She learned that was called a fireplace. The sofa she shared with

John faced two large stuffed chairs, one of which was occupied by her Aunt Sheila. There were small wood tables everywhere to place things on. The colors were subdued earth tones, grays, tans and beiges with some black and dark brown accents. The large bay window overlooked a beautiful expanse of green grass, shrubs and some wildflowers. This room exuded tranquility.

Uncle Julius handed Alta the book he had retrieved. He said it was a family photo album, something unknown to Alta. Other than her father's journals and technical books, she had never seen a book exclusively for personal photos. Everything she had seen until now was done by way of view plates. To have this in her hands made it special. She could touch it, feel the grain of the leather cover and the stiff pages of coarse paper. Even the smell of the leather, paper and inks reached to her. The world of electronic viewing may be more convenient, but it severely degraded the experience she was now enjoying.

Julius told her “You can borrow that and if you would like a copy, I'll have one made for you. Hard copy like that one, or electronic if you prefer.”

“Like this one.” Alta responded instantly.

“Just one thing,” Julius continued, “don't touch the photographs. The acids and oils in your skin will harm them.”

She opened the album to the first page and saw the picture of two infants lying side by side. A caption below showed “Julius and Julia – 3 days”. It was plain to see this was her uncle and mother. She thought for a moment while staring at the picture, then closed the book and looked at her uncle saying “I really want to talk to you. I can look at these later.” Julius understood, flashing her a smile.

Sheila excused her self and said she would have dinner ready in about 15 minutes. As much as she wanted to hear that conversation between uncle and niece, she could appreciate a desire for privacy. John was also perceptive, took the hint and volunteered to help Sheila, waving aside her protests that he stay and relax.

“I remember when your mother was selected for the Altair expedition. That was quite an accomplishment for a 24 year old biochemist. Mom and Dad were happy for her but so sorry she would be gone for such a long time. I was too.”

Alta didn't say anything and was content to watch her uncle as he sank back in the armchair, presented a smile of contentment and continued the story.

“I remember helping her with her luggage. She still lived at home and I was married to Sheila by then. I drove her to the Midland Space Port for the flight on the Bellerophon. She was so excited and afraid she had forgotten something. It was strange how happy I was for her but how sad I was to see her go. I thought that in about 20 years, we would reunite and have a grand family reunion.” Julius paused, pleased to see the smile on Alta's face.

“Did you know my father?” Alta asked.

“No.” Julius replied, “Your mother only had a few male acquaintances but none she was close to. Either your father was a well kept secret or she met him on the flight to Altair.”

Alta nodded when Julius mentioned the flight. “Tell me about the rest of our family.” she asked.

“Oh yes!” he said and continued. “We have a younger brother Richard, your uncle, but we were never that close. I hear from him occasionally. Last I heard, he was on Titan. Your grandmother and grandfather are alive and still live near Midland. It's the same house your mother and I grew up in. Sheila and I have no children. That's a long story for another time. But tell me about you Alta, your life on Altair, what you did, what your father was like.”

She agreed but warned him “It will be boring, I promise you.” Julius chuckled, but leaned forward and hung on every word she spoke.

...

Flapjack had been joined in the communication room by Ensign Randall and Deputy Sheriff Greer. The search by visible light had turned up the abandoned ATV but nothing

else. There was no sign that anyone had ever been along the canyon rim, with one exception. Flapjack did spot the ore carrier he left in the arroyo but quickly moved the focus of the camera to another area. With darkness coming soon, they would have better contrast with the IR and UV. Perhaps that would turn up something.

Ensign Randall had not been directing the search but was another pair of eyes on the view plates. The Krell distress signal was considered classified information so nothing was mentioned to anyone now conducting the search. Randall did pay extra close attention because the signal coordinates were located on the north end of Auric Canyon. Nothing turned up at those coordinates. Even ground penetrating radar showed nothing where a transmitter should have been according to Robby.

Perhaps the Krell had some way to create a false or phantom signal source. Perhaps the signal actually originated elsewhere but appeared to come from a diversionary location. Randall would keep this all quiet until he could talk to the commander.

“Maybe we need some bait” said Flapjack, to the surprise of both Randall and Greer. Of course, maybe he was right too.

...

Dr. Renfro had received the final analysis of Alta's DNA samples. There were some displaced genes that could not be explained. He could not say they were not human, but he couldn't explain why they were dislocated. Could this explain the anomalous shape of part of Alta's brain? Was this a genetic inheritance? He kept looking over the report and at each line he shook his head. He rose from the desk, walked over to and out the door and headed toward the Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff Martin was a blood relative and it might help to compare his DNA with Alta's. Renfro would have to explain this if he wanted Martin's help, but he didn't see that as a problem.

“Good morning Julius” Renfro said, “How did things work out last night?”

“Just great, thanks for asking Ed.” replied Martin. “I have a wonderful niece and she has a terrific beau.”

Renfro could see that he would have to approach the subject carefully considering Martin's joy at finding his unknown niece. He explained Alta's concern and a small question she had that might lie in her DNA. Renfro assured Martin it was nothing serious and driven purely by Alta's curiosity. He asked if he could get a DNA sample, basically draw some blood, so he would at least have one side of the family as a basis for comparison.

Martin agreed without any hesitation, much to Renfro's relief. He would do anything to help the daughter of his twin sister. The sheriff would stop by the lab and leave the samples as soon as he reviewed the logs from the search team looking over Auric Canyon, about 10 minutes he guessed.

...

Commander Adams was reviewing the search logs too but looking for something very specific. There was nothing there concerning the source of the Krell distress signal. Randall would be back in a few minutes and they could discuss a new strategy. Adams left his cabin just as Randall was coming up the gangway. Wallace was near the astro-navigation station with Robby when Adams asked them all to report to the ward room.

Adams let Randall give the briefing and he reported that nothing had been found except the abandoned vehicles. He specifically noted that nothing to identify a signal source was found.

Adams asked Robby if it was possible a mistake was made, that perhaps the signal was a ghost. Robby replied no, stating that either it was a ghost and if it was, it would be indistinguishable from a real signal source. Robby also stated the source could be very well concealed.

Adams brought Wallace, Randall and Robby up to date on

the story told by Flapjack about the crewmen being abducted by some type of robots. It was Wallace who saw a possible link between Flapjack's story and the Krell signal stating "cleanup was underway." Was this the cleanup the signal was referring to? Were these Krell robots removing human trespassers from Auric Canyon? Would they stop there or extend the "cleanup" to other areas of Barnard's?

When Randall mentioned Flapjack's suggestion to use bait to draw the robots out, no one balked. The experience they had on Altair 4 with the great Krell machine was too fresh in the memories of those present to dismiss what might otherwise be considered absurd. Nothing was absurd if this was a Krell distress signal. The other thought was expressed by Adams, "I sure hope we didn't bring anything else here." He was thinking about the organic goo and the fact a machine could have survived the light speed jump if it found a place to hide on or outside the ship. There was still great uncertainty about the five artifacts that had been recovered and stored in the ship's hold.

The orders were to continue the search and give thought to what might be acceptable bait.

...

Midland Fleet Command received the sub-space message from the Barnard's Star colony late the evening before. There had been some delay in transmission and decryption. Overall, the message was about three hours stale. Commander Adams indicated this was only a partial report and that the mission to Altair 4 was a failure. His information on the Krell race was sketchy, as were details of the Krell technology they had discovered.

Admiral Seitgart was concerned that technology vital to the interests of the United Planets might be compromised or lost. His staff agreed and recommended Commander Adams execute a complete security lock down and remain on the Barnard's Star colony until higher fleet authorities arrived to take charge.

The orders to Commander Adams were dispatched at the same time the orders were given to outfit and equip cruiser C-11-E. Commodore Savorkian would command UP's latest and fastest cruiser. The trip would take four months. It was fast, but still not as fast as the modified C-57-D.

...

Alta canceled her reservations on the flight to Earth now that she found a relative on Barnard's. It was just a short walk from the space port to city hall and Dr. Renfro's office. She stopped in the sheriff's office first to tell her Uncle Julius about the change of plans. He was very happy about that.

He walked with her over to Dr. Renfro's office. While Renfro was reluctant to discuss anything with a patient without complete privacy, he made an exception because of the unusual circumstances. It certainly didn't seem like a breach of confidentiality when it was a family matter.

"Nothing" he said, "There is nothing unusual about the Martin DNA. If you want to check the Morbius side of the family, we either need some of your father's DNA or that of a close relative." Close relative? Alta didn't know any but she did know where she might find her father's DNA. She had some of his personal belongings such as a hair brush, comb, razor and toothbrush. These were things Robby made to replace the originals that had worn out.

Fortunately, she had anticipated Dr. Renfro's suggestion and request. She left the small travel case with her father's items with Dr. Renfro hoping they might contain samples of her father's DNA. He looked the items over quickly and thought there would probably be enough material to work with. It would take another day however.

Alta also made arrangements with Uncle Julius to see him and Aunt Sheila that evening. She couldn't promise that Adams would accompany her but she would ask him. When she left, she noted the number of miners protesting outside of city hall had dropped from about 40 to less than 10. Perhaps Flapjack had convinced most of them something was being

done and they should go home.

Chapter 9 Lock-down

The order from Midland Fleet Command arrived about midday on Barnard's at the space port. It required Adams code for decryption and the ship's computer. It wasn't marked for your eyes only, so Adams convened an officers call after he read the order himself.

Wallace had been through a security lock-down before. Randall had not. Adams asked Wallace to explain it to the junior officer. "Anything found and removed from an alien planet, moon, base or other type of facility, including any artifacts, machines and life forms, must be placed and kept in secure areas of the ship. Their existence must be kept secret from any persons not part of the ships company or not cleared by UP Fleet Command."

Randall shrugged, "So what's the problem?"

Wallace answered, "That would include Robby and Miss Morbius." Randall's jaw dropped a little as a dumbfounded look spread over his face. He understood the problem now. No one outside of the crew knew about Robby, but Alta was quite a different story.

"She's human. Does it really apply to her?" he asked, looking at Wallace, and then Adams for an answer.

"Yes it does" said Adams with no hesitation and no doubt. There was no way to hide it either since Alta wasn't listed in the ships company, but was listed on a passenger manifest delivered to the space port authority. Adams picked up again, "We have to keep Robby on board and not reveal his existence. We have to get that message to the crew. Technically, I'm supposed to suspend shore leave but can you imagine being stuck here on ship for four months? I am allowed some discretion so shore leave will continue."

Wallace and Randall both agreed, but what about Alta? Only two people knew she came from Altair 4. If they could keep it that way, Adams might be able to claim necessary discretion on a need to know basis. He also had to extract pledges from Renfro and the Martins not to discuss Alta with anyone. Adams made it clear he would assume all responsibility while Wallace and Randall made it clear they would support his decision.

Randall now offered his report on the search of Auric Canyon. He, Flapjack and Deputy Greer decided any further searching was pointless. The abandoned vehicles had not been moved and no new evidence had been uncovered. The option of using bait to see if anything could be drawn into the open had been discussed, but without any resolution. With fleet not scheduled to arrive for four months, they would have time to think about the bait option, provided there were no further incidents. Auric Canyon would have to be placed out of bounds and off limits.

...

Alta had returned to the ship to learn that Adams had a meeting in the ward room without her, or Robby. That seemed strange but the door was locked and she thought it best to wait. It was a very short wait as Randall, then Wallace and then Adams emerged from the ward room. They all gave her a polite hello and Adams asked her to come into the ward room.

He told her it was imperative she not tell anyone other than Renfro and the Martins where she was before arriving on Barnard's. He also told her Renfro and the Martins had to agree to remain silent. They would use the cover that she was a passenger on the mission. Alta seemed a bit puzzled but accepted what she was told. Adams did not want to go into detail about the lock-down, that they were to remain on Barnard's for four months and a UP commodore would arrive and take charge.

Alta was looking forward to visiting again with her Aunt and Uncle. "John, you are coming with me, right?" Adams

smiled and nodded, of course he was. They had a little time to change and get ready, leaving the ward room and heading for their cabins. They would be met at the space port by a taxi as before.

...

Flapjack had run out of ideas on what bait to use and expressed his exasperation to Sheriff Martin. Martin reported that the park police had been very secretive and claimed jurisdiction. Martin asked if Deputy Greer had been helpful, and Flapjack said that he had though the search yielded nothing.

“We'll think of something” Martin assured him. “Say Flapjack, would you like to join us for dinner tonight? My niece and her boyfriend will be there. We would love to have you, and any guest you decide to bring of course.” Martin was thinking of Mary Lou.

So was Flapjack who said “Sure, you don't mind if I bring Mary Lou?”

“Absolutely bring her” came the reply from Martin. “Make it about 6 PM, that will be good.”

Flapjack left as Martin sat back and then grabbed his keys off the desk. It had been a frustrating day and he was eager to get home.

...

Adams pressed the button which rang a device called a door bell. How quaint and direct were some of these names used to describe the things found in older homes. He giggled a little when he heard the bell ring. Julius was there almost instantly greeting Alta and Adams. As they had the last time, they walked through the dining room and into the kitchen, but no one was there. Julius looked back at them as he kept walking and said “We are going to dine out on the patio this evening.”

Julius led them through another door to a large room windowed on three sides, and then outside to a large concrete slab on the ground. It was called a patio. They saw Sheila

standing by a black, box like device with faint wisps of smoke escaping into the air. It was called a grill and she was cooking. Most of what Adams saw was unfamiliar, definitely antiquated and perhaps even forbidden for use on Earth. A little further down the patio, he saw Flapjack and a rather attractive woman, both sitting in lightweight chairs made with some kind of plastic fabric. On the ground next to Flapjack was a plastic box container with a white top and blue sides.

Alta and Adams said their hellos and were particularly attracted to whatever it was that occupied Sheila. She lifted the cover of the box like device releasing a cloud of smoke but revealing an upper and lower grate with disc and tubular shaped pieces of meat sizzling over glowing coals. Sheila responded to their surprised look with “Hamburgers and hot dogs.” So this is how they were once cooked Adams was thinking.

Flapjack asked Adams and Alta if they would like a beer. Alta had no idea what that was but Adams answered yes for both of them. Flapjack pulled two icy bottles from the blue and white plastic container and pried them open with a small device. Adams had seen bottled beer of course, but never stored like he saw it here. It was always in a refrigerator unit and always less than ice cold. He remarked how good it was served ice cold. He wondered how Julius got some of these things. They had to be contraband. Alta had never had a beer but made it clear she liked the taste.

Flapjack introduced Mary Lou as his friend, motioning for Julius and John to sit and join them. Alta was standing next to Sheila, fascinated by what she was doing. She had never thought of doing cooking herself, after all, that was Robby's job. On the ship, Cookie cooked in some hidden room called a galley.

The space behind the house was quite pleasant with greenery of every type. In the distance stood a wood slat fence with a planted border of flowers ranging from short in the front to tall in the back. There were also some tall trees

that shaded large portions of the back space, including the patio. You could hear the chirping of birds and the distinctive hum of an insect, but it was otherwise dead quiet. Alta thought this was just as beautiful as anything they had on Altair 4.

It was clear that John wanted to say something, but he kept squirming, glancing at Mary Lou, and then looking away. Flapjack sensed his discomfort and assured him Mary Lou was one of them and the only one outside the little group who knew about Alta. Flapjack also knew about lock-down procedures though he wasn't sure the commander had received such orders. A request for extended docking time was a dead giveaway and Flapjack knew fleet was on the way. It wasn't difficult to figure out why.

“John, Alta is safe. No one is going to say anything, including Doc Renfro. Besides, Julius and Sheila are my best friends. You think I would let anything happen to his niece?” That was the reassurance John needed that Flapjack volunteered.

With food cooked and served alongside potato salad, pickles and sauerkraut, the men adjourned to one side of the patio and the women to the other. Alta had never known any women, not even her mother. While Alta certainly had a head for science, she understood very little of what the women talked about. It had a lot to do with their men, somethings to do about keeping a home, and other things they would accept as their responsibility. They also had a grasp of politics and of science as well, though not at Alta's level. They had their own talents they were very good at and enjoyed. Alta felt strangely detached but enjoyed what she heard. People simply enjoying what they did because it pleased someone else. It seemed so oddly in conflict with her father's opinion of people from Earth.

Adams took this opportunity to ask Julius for help. “I need to get word to my crew we are on lock-down but shore leaves are not canceled. I need them to check in with the exec.

Can you help?" Flapjack's suspicion was now confirmed as he flashed a small smile of satisfaction, the cause for that smile known only to him.

Julius had six deputies and would put them to work on finding and notifying the crew if Adams could give him a roster. He had already ordered the road north to Auric Canyon blockaded. Hopefully, no more of the crew had ventured up that way or ignored the road closed signs.

With that settled, Adams could sit back, relax, enjoy the food and beer as well as engage in some pleasant conversation. The women had moved closer and they talked all evening about anything that popped into anyone's head. Adams could see Alta was having a wonderful time and that made him happy.

...

Commodore Savorkian stood impatiently as his officers seated themselves at the conference table in the ward room. His finger tapping on the table was getting faster with each passing second. When he saw everyone was at their place he began "Gentlemen, it is time to brief you on our mission. Commander Martin, you may proceed." The commodore settled into his chair as the commander rose at the opposite end of the table to brief the four junior officers in attendance.

The commander cleared his throat and began. "UP cruiser C-57-D is at the Barnard's Star colony on lock-down. The ship docked there on its return flight from Altair 4, where it was reported to have recovered several alien artifacts, possibly some alien machinery and at least one human that was an inhabitant of that planet. The civilization that once existed on Altair 4 was far more advanced than we previously believed."

The officers sat quietly as Commander Martin reached for a paper in front of him on the table. "What the commander of the C-57-D failed to report was the discovery and acquisition of an advanced robot. The robot was discovered during the course of a medical scan of the ship and reported by the scan team officer. Nor did the commander of C-57-D report the

female passenger from Altair 4. Again, a medical scan team made and reported that discovery.”

The commodore was nodding his head in approval as the other officers began talking quietly among themselves while Commander Martin paused. These were two major breaches of UP regulations that could jeopardize the security of the UP. Martin placed the paper back on the table, put his knuckles on the table top and waited. A few seconds later the chatter died and all eyes were turned again to Commander Martin.

He continued looking straight ahead into empty space. “We have a second issue concerning a number of missing park police. By last report, the Barnard's UP Park Police Authority states that seven men are missing. The first incident occurred shortly after the arrival of C-57-D. The Barnard's Park Police have requested military assistance to determine the whereabouts of the missing police officers. Be aware there has been tension between the Park Police and inhabitants of the colony.”

Commander Martin made another strategic pause to give the junior officers time to mumble about a possible rebellion. And chatter away they did as the commodore watched with great satisfaction, betrayed by an ever so slight but unmistakable smile. No one would swear to it, but the nearest officers thought they heard the commodore say under his breath “J. J. Adams, you're ass is mine!”

Martin again waited for silence before he continued. “We will arrive at the Barnard's Star colony in about four months. I will review your assignments with each of you before then. You're dismissed.”

The officers rose from the table, somewhat cheerful this was going to be a potentially difficult assignment, perhaps even a career making assignment. As they filed out of the ward room, Commander Martin moved closer to the commodore who was openly smiling.

“Well Richard,” the commodore said, “this sure beats Titan. By the way, don't you have a relative on Barnard's?”

“Yes” replied Martin, “my brother, but we don't talk. Excuse me commodore, I have to check my marines.” The commodore nodded and Martin left the ward room.

...
“Aunt Sheila, I saw a photograph of you, my mother, Uncle Julius and Uncle Richard. Did you know my mother well?” Alta asked. While Julius let out a small laugh, everyone else looked at Sheila, waiting for her answer.

“Your mother and I were college roommates for three years. That's how I met your Uncle Julius, and Richard too. She was in biochemistry and I was in English” Sheila said as Alta leaned forward to catch every word. Adams was fascinated as well and this caught Sheila's attention. She did not like being the center of attraction but felt compelled to finish her answer. “Your mother went into space and I got married and started writing. My pen name was, still is Anna Chronistic.” That even got a laugh out of Flapjack.

It was Mary Lou who pointed out “Your Aunt Sheila is a well known mystery writer. I think she has 21 books to her name.” Sheila nodded but was clearly embarrassed by the notoriety given her by Mary Lou.

Alta studied her aunt, a slim woman, gracefully curved but with plain facial features. Her long and straight auburn hair fell below her shoulders by about a foot. It was her green eyes that attracted Alta's attention. Alta did not pretend to understand male attraction but Aunt Sheila certainly had whatever it took. Mary Lou, on the other hand was strikingly beautiful. It seemed like a mismatch that Mary Lou and Uncle Julius should be paired and Aunt Sheila was more a match for Flapjack. Of course, she was perfectly matched to John, she thought to herself.

“It was strange seeing your mother off,” Aunt Sheila continued, “a mixture of regret and happiness. It's hard to explain except your Uncle Richard took it very badly and blamed Julius. There was an undercurrent however.”

That caught Alta by surprise but Julius sat back. He knew

the follow up.

“Alta, I met your Uncle Richard and Julius through your mother and I think Richard really liked me a lot. That's what your mother told me, but I was more attracted to Julius, and I later discovered the feeling was mutual. I hope you don't think I'm flattering myself but it became clear that Richard took my affection for Julius very badly and sought any way he could to separate from his brother. He blamed your mother's decision to go into space on Julius, and me to a lesser extent.” Aunt Sheila's voice always conveyed a sense of kindness and consideration, and now was no exception. It was clear from the way she said his name she harbored no grudge against Richard. Alta wondered if the reverse were true after all the years that had passed.

It was Adams who asked Julius “Where is your brother Richard? What became of him?”

Julius sat up straight and moved to the edge of his chair. This wasn't a pleasant topic for him to discuss but it really was among family he convinced himself. “Richard is in the service, UP fleet just like you. Last I heard he was assigned to the penal colony on Titan doing supply runs and prisoner transfers. It didn't sound like a good assignment.”

“No it's not” Adams responded, “He had to tick someone off really good to draw that duty. I hope he's not reporting to Commodore Savorkian. He was commandant and what jerk he is.”

Flapjack could see the commanders remarks were not well taken by Julius and he quickly changed the subject. “Gentlemen, how fortunate we are to have the company of all these lovely ladies tonight. Here's to the women in our lives!” and with that, Flapjack raised his beer bottle in salute, joined by Adams and Martin with “here here”. Alta, Sheila and Mary Lou smiled broadly and bowed their heads to acknowledge the compliment.

The laughter, chatter and drinking continued for some time. The patio and backyard were bathed in the reflection of

sunlight from the gas giant. It was a strange reddish twilight, too bright for night and too dim for day. It looked like the Martin's would have overnight guests.

...
“Alta can stay but I must return to the ship.” the commander said to his well intentioned host and hostess. “In fact, I would greatly appreciate if you, Flapjack and Dr. Renfro would meet with me at the ship, say tomorrow morning at 10?” Both Julius and Flapjack appeared puzzled by the request. Adams sensed this and added “I have three missing crewmen, you have four missing miners and the park police cannot account for seven of their people. We need each others help.” Flapjack and Martin nodded in agreement.

“I’m fairly certain Doc can make it” Martin replied as he and Flapjack signified their agreement with hand gestures. “Ten is good for me” Martin continued, with Flapjack nodding.

Adams thanked everyone for an enjoyable evening and assured Alta that staying with her Aunt and Uncle was most satisfactory. She gave him a fast peck on the lips and thanked him for his understanding. Adams made his way to the waiting taxi, then turning to wave at the five people standing in the strange twilight and waving back to him. “Barnard's Space Port” he said to the driver as he ducked into the taxi.

Chapter 10 Dreams Come True

Renfro, Martin and Flapjack sat speechless and disbelieving at the conference table in the ward room. They looked at Commander Adams with clear expressions of disbelief. “Gentlemen, I assure you what I told you is somewhat condensed but is true in every detail” said Adams, as he looked at each face for approval. Wallace and Randall were present and nodded their affirmation, but the three visitors remained in awe of what they heard.

“I guess I wouldn't believe me either” Adams sighed as he picked up the com-link. “Robby, you can come in now.” As the door opened and Robby stepped into the room, several distinct gasps could be heard, Flapjack being the most notable. The three visitors all bolted upright in unison as they stared at the robot moving closer to the conference table. “Robby, this is Doctor Renfro, Sheriff Martin and Flapjack.”

“Greetings gentlemen. I am pleased to meet you. How can I be of service commander?” asked Robby in his typical matter of fact voice. Robby stood at attention after a click and a clack, waiting for his next instruction.

Renfro regained his composure first, gulping and acknowledging the robot with a nod, gaping mouth and pointing finger. “That's the robot. I don't believe it but there it is.” The three men spoke quietly now, admitting their initial disbelief and movement toward acceptance of all Commander Adams had told them. “Do you think this super race, the Krell, are here on Barnard's? Do they have a machine like the one on Altair 4?” At least Renfro's questions confirmed he had listened and understood the important parts of the commander's briefing.

The commander clasped his hands together and placed

them on the table, looking intently at the three guests before speaking. 'We don't know what is here. We do know the Krell explored space and we believe they returned home. This may be an outpost, an abandoned colony, a listening post, whatever. All we know is a distress signal using the Krell language originated, or appears to have originated from this moon.' Looking toward the robot, Adams asked "Robby, what is the status of the distress signal?"

"Unchanged and still advising we return to orbit since cleanup is incomplete and still in progress."

The commander thanked Robby and then turned his attention toward Flapjack, very deliberately and calmly stating "I think what you saw at Auric Canyon were Krell robots performing a cleanup of alien life forms encroaching on their outpost. For whatever reason, that outpost believes that we are a Krell ship, or carrying a Krell passenger." Neither Wallace nor Randall were prepared for that statement, looked at each other and then back to the commander while asking for clarification. What Krell passenger? That was on everyone's mind. Or was the commander completely mistaken and some other action, perhaps by the park police, had triggered the distress signal.

Robby was asked and again stated he was not the source of any signal, nor could any such signal be detected aboard C-57-D. The five artifacts were not radiating any form of energy. Adams let the table top chatter continue and die down before he made an obviously difficult statement. "It is possible, in fact it is likely Alta is the trigger for the Krell distress signal, which is more of a warning to her than a plea for help." The other men at the table began murmuring and shaking their heads, that is all but Renfro. The doctor gazed at the commander and ever so slightly nodded his head in agreement.

When the murmuring ceased, the doctor volunteered his opinion. "Alta's brain structure in one particular region is quite different than what we expect to find in humans. I can't

say it's alien, but it isn't normal. It is also possible it produces very low frequency brain waves that we can't ordinarily detect because we don't ordinarily look at those frequencies.” That got everyone's attention and silence. Renfro could feel the eyes bearing down on him, waiting for more. “No, Alta is not Krell but something changed her. Something outside of her hereditary DNA.”

It was Alta's determination to learn why she was different that had strengthened Adams resolve to get to the bottom of the Krell signal mystery. If she could face her problem, so could he. “Robby, is it possible Alta is the trigger for the Krell signal?” There it was, on the table now.

“Sir, many things are possible but more precisely, it is probable.” The robot was technically correct. Everyone got the point. Adams got the answer he expected and suggested the group adjourn for 10 minutes, and then continue. There was a haunting quietness to the ward room as the men arose and stretched.

Adams had a prepared message he needed dispatched to Midland Fleet Command. He was taking on more responsibility than normally allowed a cruiser commander. He needed authority and some guidance and could not wait the four months it would take Commodore Savorkian to reach Barnard's. Besides that, he wanted any issues concerning Alta resolved before Savorkian arrived and took charge.

...

The aide stood at attention, nervously waiting for the inevitable as Admiral Seitgart fingered the folded message. “And just how old and late is this one?”

Ensign Loretta Choo shivered ever so slightly as she pulled herself to a very straight attention and replied to the admiral “It arrived five minutes ago sir and just came out of decryption.”

“Very good” the admiral flashed back with a broad smile, satisfied his new aide had learned her lesson. “At ease Choo.” The message was straight forward and he read it aloud for

Choo to hear. “Commander Adams is requesting permission to disclose necessary information to civilian personnel due to unforeseen events unfolding on the Barnard's Colony.”

Choo simply responded “Yes sir” and waited.

The admiral glanced up and continued “There are crewmen, park police and civilians missing. Adams is concerned that waiting four months for Savorkian to arrive may be too late if they are to find these missing people. He is also reporting that they have received an alien signal that may be related to the disappearances. There is much more here but that is the essence of his request. What do you think Choo? Come on, speak up.”

Choo was more nervous now than before but she knew Admiral Seitgart was sincere in asking her opinion as part of her training for future command. “Commander Adams is knowledgeable, intelligent and experienced and I would trust his judgment that action cannot wait. I would approve his request sir.”

“Good call Choo” the admiral said gruffly, “Send out the order under my name. He needs it now. That is all.”

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The meeting resumed in the ward room with Robby present at the start this time. Adams informed the group “I needed permission from fleet command to continue this course of action and fortunately, my request was granted. I am officially declaring a rescue mission. It is under military command but in view of our situation, I welcome civilian participation and input.” Adams waited briefly to make sure his remarks registered with everyone present. “That being said, you must understand I have final authority and responsibility.” That was understood and everyone acknowledged with a nod of the head or a thumbs up.

The commander was eager to start but there were a few ends that needed to be tied up first. “Doc, Ensign Randall is going to give you some biological specimens that were removed from the engineering compartment sump.” Adams

had mentioned the “goo” during the briefing so this came as no surprise to Renfro.

“I’ll get right on those commander. We just need to exchange information with the robot. Do we have a common language protocol?” Renfro knew about Robby’s laboratory but not how to access its information. In fact, there remained some doubt with the commander that it could be done. The colony computer might be up to the task. The ship’s computer is far less powerful and could not interface with Robby.

The commander replied “No we don’t which is why we are hoping the colony computer is up to the task. Robby, work with Dr. Renfro to link to the colony computer using the ship’s com-link and upload your findings on the organic material you analyzed.”

“Aye aye sir.” came the response.

“Before we go any further, I need to talk to Alta.” the commander explained. “Let’s meet again at 4 PM.” Various mumblings of agreement preceded the commander’s “Dismissed.” order. “Julius, I’d like to speak to Alta with you and Sheila present as early as possible. Can we go to your home now and do that?” Martin was prepared for that request and offered to drive, asking Flapjack if he needed a ride as well. Flapjack politely declined, stating he had other business. The group soon dissolved with parting goodbyes and handshakes.

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Georgy Simms should have been able to sleep but couldn’t. He was experiencing total sensory deprivation with the exception of his vision, but his mind struggled non-stop to understand and analyze his situation. Nothing had changed in the room where he was being held except for several tubes he now noticed were connected to his arm. When they were put there, he had no idea. He felt no hunger, no pain, and neither warmth nor coolness. He still had no power of speech. He knew he was being kept alive but for how long and to what purpose? He could see nothing except the backside of the

stretchers he had seen before.

A small whirring sound coming from the vicinity of his wrist where all the tubes were fixed caught his attention. Any sound was welcome. He could see one tube filling with a clear purple liquid. The drowsiness crept over him slowly and he thought how merciful it was that his final moments would be so peaceful. Whatever power of suggestion told him he was going to die was soon overturned by the realization he was dreaming. Simms and the others were going to sleep according to the schedule set by their captors.

...

Sheila hung up the telephone and while taking her seat at the kitchen counter told Alta "That was your uncle. He and John will be here any minute." There was a brief pause as Sheila looked over Alta and asked "Is something wrong?" Alta found Sheila's voice soothing, earnest and reassuring. She turned to look at her aunt and smiled, wondering if she was lucky or if all aunts were as kind and genuine as Sheila.

Alta did not answer prompting Sheila to ask "Is everything all right between you and John?"

Alta's smile grew broader and she replied "Everything is fine but something is going to change very soon and very rapidly." Sheila was clearly puzzled now, turning in the counter stool to face Alta and giving her a half-gaping look as if mouthing a question. Alta was sensitive to this and added "I didn't sleep well last night. When John gets here I'll explain." That satisfied Sheila and she returned Alta's smile.

Sheila and Alta could hear the front door open from the kitchen and Sheila, just slightly raising her voice said "In the kitchen." Alta, still acquiring a few basic social graces looked at Sheila with an admiring, possibly even jealous glance. "That was super sultry." It was just one of those things Alta noticed. Her only basis for comparison was Mary Lou and the actresses she had seen in the many movies she watched on the flight from Altair 4 to the Barnard's colony. Aunt Sheila was an unmistakably sexy woman despite her plain features. Alta

knew she could learn something from her.

Julius announced “Surprise!” as he and Adams walked through the dining room entry to the kitchen. With a brief exchange of hugs, kisses and affectations, Adams got down to business, almost. “Alta,” he started, “we...”

“Need to talk.” she finished. Adams started to say something but Alta cut him off with a hand wave, saying “My aunt and uncle need to know what we are going to talk about.” Adams and Martin moved to the side of the kitchen counter opposite Sheila and Alta, both with very puzzled looks about what Alta would say next. Alta put on her very matter of fact expression and started mentally speaking what she had practiced only an hour before in the guest room.

When Alta was satisfied she had everyone's attention, she began. “The blurry friends that visit me in my dreams are Krell. There are four specific individuals and they have told me I must go to Auric Canyon. They say I'm in danger and they will protect me.”

Adams and Martin stared at Alta, speechless and open mouthed but not Sheila who asked “The Krell? Who are they? What's this all about?” Julius simply said “Krell in your dreams?”

Alta turned a sympathetic glance to her aunt and assured her “The Krell are aliens from the planet where I was born. I'll tell you all about them later but I must clear something up with John and Uncle Julius first.” Sheila nodded her agreement and quietly announced she was going to put on a fresh pot of coffee.

An eerie silence overcame the kitchen as Sheila prepared the coffee and Adams and Martin looked at Alta, waiting for her next words.

When she was sure she had their attention again, she began. “I think I triggered the Krell distress signal. I think something was done to me to make me ... er ... um ... Krell friendly.” She forced a smile and a slight giggle with that but no one laughed. “They believe I am one of them, that I'm in

danger and they are trying to protect me.”

Adams started to cut her off with “Now honey, I...”

Alta stopped him dead with “No, you were going to tell me that but didn't know how. You are so kind and considerate and I love you for that but this is not the time. You may not believe this, but I want the answers more than you do.” Adams shook his head but he thought better of interrupting and shifted to an ever so slight but visible nod and gesture of surrender. He would hear Alta out since she was doing so well saying what he wanted to say but didn't know how.

“Let me tell you what I think happened and how it has led us to where we are now.” She waited while Sheila poured coffee. When Alta saw that Adams and Martin were focused back on her, she continued.

“My dreams with the Krell do not go back to as far as I can remember but started shortly after my first recollections. I am guessing I was about 3 years old when the blurry Krell first started talking to me. I think my father did that, subconsciously of course, but he arranged for some physiological change in me that would compel the Krell to accept and protect me.” Alta was becoming quite perceptive about Adams's reaction. She looked at him as he started to speak and with great deliberation said “You know I am right. The scan was flawed and I have something from the Krell in my brain. We need to try something else.”

“Stop Alta and please listen” Adams said, forcing himself into her monologue. “You need to repeat this to Doctor Renfro as well as Wallace, Randall, Lee and Flapjack. Your uncle and I are too close to you to evaluate this rationally, or at least without being suspect.” Adams paused, giving Alta an opportunity to break in but she didn't. “We are scheduled to meet in about two hours at the ship. Would you please join us?”

“Yes” Alta answered and quickly added “and I want Aunt Sheila there as well. I'll tell her and Uncle Julius about the Krell I know in the meantime.” Adams pondered that request

briefly but he was confident Alta had a good reason for her aunt being involved.

“OK.” he said, looking at Sheila as he spoke, then nodding to Julius. “Tell your aunt and uncle what they need to know. We have time.” Alta leaped from the stool, stepped quickly behind Adams place at the counter and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him behind the ear. “Now I know why I love you more each day Alta. You are a very brave and exceptional young woman.” Julius and Sheila made no effort to conceal their delight with Adams's words, both smiling broadly and nodding incessantly.

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“You may feel a slight tickle Alta. If you feel any pain, well, tell me.” Dr. Renfro stood at the head of the surgical table where Alta had been strapped, primarily as a precaution to prevent her from moving during the procedure. Alta had requested she remain awake and Renfro saw no harm in honoring her request. Renfro's assistant, fully gowned in his greens, stood facing a monitor, closely watching and periodically reporting Alta's vital signs.

“I'm at the first site Alta. Another min ... uh, there we go, got the first sample.” Renfro was very adept at using the probe tube and was able to maneuver it much like an experienced race car driver threading through lanes occupied by slower competitors. “I'm moving to the second site now.”

Alta was careful to speak quietly and not make any unnecessary movements. Though her head was well restrained, she still had use of those muscles. “No problem here.” she assured Renfro as he watched the view plate monitor and the zoomed out picture in particular.

A moment later he announced “I'm at the second site and...” he stammered, “that should do it. Two perfect samples Alta.”

With that as his cue, the assistant at the monitor reported “Respiration rate slightly elevated but all vital signs are well within acceptable ranges.”

Renfro thanked his technician and directed him to remove the monitor instruments and undo Alta's restraints. The probe tube was quickly removed and the samples placed in sterile containment ampules. Renfro would have to examine the specimens himself to honor Adams's request for confidentiality. "Just a few more hours Alta" Renfro assured her as he helped her to a sitting position on the table.

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Dr. Renfro took his position at the head of the conference table in the ward room. Without saying a word, he turned on the main view plate and moved a pointer to a region near the center of the screen. The magnification was too low to reveal any great detail but Renfro began to slowly zoom the image.

"This is specimen one taken from the ridge structure of the anomaly in Alta's brain. An optical microscope does not reveal anything unusual in what appears to be normal brain cells." Renfro was the only medical expert in the room. Though Crewman Lee had some training on medical related equipment, he had no idea what he was looking at and shrugged as a few eyes turned to him looking for some affirmation.

The next image Renfro brought to the screen was thought by some to be a mistake. It was Wallace and Randall who asked what the machinery had to do with Alta and this presentation. Renfro indulged their chatter for a moment, then abruptly resumed.

"Gentlemen, those are not machines. I don't know what they are but they are some combination of an extremely small microorganism with some sort of mechanical attachments. For now, let's just call it a mechanically augmented micro biological entity, or MAMBE if that is satisfactory." The level of chatter had raised considerably now as several people attempted to speak at once in various cross conversations. Commander Adams had to call them to attention several times before order was restored and the commander took charge.

"Doctor, we obviously have a lot of questions but in

fairness to you, please continue with your findings. Please hold your questions gentlemen and let the doctor finish.” Adams glanced at Alta who was remarkably well composed and signaled her approval with a nod and a wink.

Renfro looked about the table, now assured he could continue without interruption. “We will look at specimen two in a moment but you will see MAMBEs that look very much like these. How they got there I can't answer but Alta seems to have a viable theory about that. What they do I can answer in part.” Renfro paused to allow for the expected murmuring and quickly resumed. “These MAMBEs can deconstruct molecules, transport them and then reassemble them in the same or a different form.”

“Nano-machines?” Randall asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

“Not exactly” Renfro responded, “these are living things that are more like a human operator wearing a robotic work suit for heavy lifting, only, these are much more elegantly constructed and far more versatile. The UP has done a lot of work on nano-machines but with extremely limited results and no practical applications. These MAMBEs introduce a level of control well beyond our capabilities and, perhaps even beyond our ability to understand how they work. These MAMBEs work at the atomic level. I suspect the Krell had MAMBEs that may have worked at the nuclear level.”

While Adams's understood the importance of this discovery, he had to keep the group focused on the current problem, so he asked “Doc, can you make any connection between these MAMBEs and the Krell signal?”

The doctor grasped his chin with his hand, bent his head in thought and then replied “Apparently the ridge tissue is an antennae of some sort that is maintained and operated by a specific collection of MAMBEs. Some of the MAMBEs appear to function as electronic components though I can't be sure and that is beyond my area of expertise. I believe that a transmission of an extraordinary and constant nature,

generated and emanating from Alta's brain, triggered the Krell signal. I know that may sound like a stretch from what we know, but I can't find any alternative explanation that fits the evidence.”

Renfro was right because no other evidence pointing to any other explanation existed. Martin was hesitant to ask but directed his question to Adams. “Could that great Krell machine on Altair 4 have done this to Alta? More importantly, is it harmful to her?”

Renfro didn't wait for Adams to answer but jumped in immediately, determined to assure his friend that Alta was safe. “It has done her no harm. We don't see any harmful effects unless you consider her dreams a problem. It looks like it was done for her protection. Sorry commander, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

Adams took Renfro's apology graciously and added “Yes, from our experience, the Krell machine can make biologicals. Considering the Krell were around for about a million years, I don't find MAMBEs to be that farfetched in light of their other achievements and technology.”

Renfro briefly explained the effort made to analyze the goo sample collected from the ship's engineering deck sump. Robby had managed to connect to the colony computer and arrived at a common language, the doctor explained. Unfortunately, the effort shed no light on the present mystery. Renfro offered the goo with its unusual cell structure and acid manufacturing sites as further evidence of Krell advanced technology. As he discovered using the colonies facilities, the acid producing sites in the cells were collections of MAMBEs. He would continue to work with Robby in pursuit of better utilizing the colony computer for research.

While the conversation buzzed around her, Alta had focused her attention on Flapjack, who had been very quiet during the course of an earlier meeting and this one as well. It wasn't long before Flapjack became aware of her stare and gave her a puzzled shrug. Had he done or said something

wrong? He hadn't spoken at all so Alta's stare made him even more uncomfortable as he squirmed a little trying to fit his rear into the contoured chair.

"Please everyone." Alta announced in a loud voice. The silence came quickly and she directed her next remark to Renfro. "I think you have what you need to investigate my, um, condition but we still have people missing and we need to find them and bring them home."

She could see that sank in as the quiet persisted and people settled back in their chairs.

"Flapjack," she said, "I heard you have an idea about using bait to draw out some robots. I would like to hear what you have in mind."

Chapter 11 S&R Phase 1

It was obvious to Wallace that Commander Adams was concerned about losing control of a delicate situation. Alta and Adams had stopped short of reaching her cabin but Wallace could see from his vantage point they were arguing. It wasn't loud and it certainly wasn't violent, but the stares and gestures were confrontational. He would motion with his hands, prop them on his waist and she would motion back, crossing her arms and waiting for a response. At least it was talking and not shouting.

It made sense to Wallace that Adams would object to Alta becoming bait in some scheme to attract some unknown threat. He looked earnestly at Randall as he approached from the galley with coffees in hand, and then again at Adams and Alta when he knew he had Randall's attention. Randall took the cue and quickly glanced at the couple and then returned his look toward Wallace with his nodding.

“Yeah.” he said as he drew closer to Wallace, stretching out one hand with a coffee. “I can't blame the commander but she may be right. I'm sure glad she isn't my girl friend.” Randall paused, thinking about what he had just said, glancing down at his coffee and mumbling “That's not the way I meant it. I mean it's a tough spot she has placed the commander in.”

Wallace agreed, then seeing Adams and Alta coming toward him and Randall motioned they return to the ward room. Wallace lagged behind slightly in order to place himself between the commander and ward room door. He stepped aside to let Alta pass but very subtly stopped the commander and asked “Sir, can we review the operating orders from Midland Fleet Command?”

Adams looked puzzled at first, then realized that Wallace

was handing him the instrument he needed to reassert control. “Yes, we must, should do that” he replied. Wallace may not have intended it as such, but what he did assured Adams he had made the right choice for his exec. He showed that with a smile and nod of approval toward Wallace.

As everyone settled back into their chairs, Adams stood at the head of the table and slowly and calmly stated “So we all understand, my orders are to effect a search and rescue mission under military authority regardless of jurisdiction. I am to investigate an apparent alien signal to the extent it may be incidental to the search and rescue.” The commander stopped, looking around the table at each face and quite comfortable in the knowledge he was back in command. Alta was about to say something but was stilled by a cold stare from Adams that made her drop her eyes to look down to the table.

Alta knew that Adams had to take charge. She couldn't lead the search team and wouldn't know where or how to begin. She had no choice but to rely on Adams and hope to convince him that she could make a valuable, if not essential contribution. She looked back at Adams, the cold stare softened somewhat and she melted it with one of her approving smiles and a slight eye flutter.

The tension was reduced but wasn't completely gone from the ward room and Adams was aware of that as well. “Doctor, can you come up with something better than MAMBE? It sounds like some weird cartoon character with a silly name that would impress no one. This is an awesome discovery doctor and it demands an awesome name.”

Everyone took the hint quickly as the mood shifted from somber silence to slight gaiety with some chuckles and laughter. Dr. Renfro laughed the hardest, admitting he had struggled looking for an awesome acronym but MAMBE was the best he could do. He promised he would give it another try and was open to suggestions.

With tensions eased Adams started anew with his

customary confidence and a frightful insight. “These MAMBEs, or whatever, are going to be of significant interest to the UP. If UP scientists learn these came from Alta, they will not hesitate to make her a zoo specimen. I have a conflict, but it is partially moral and not entirely personal.”

Though the commander had not finished speaking and was about to continue, Dr. Renfro spoke exactly what Adams had on his mind. “The commander is right. The UP Science Division is just another elitist bureaucracy that asserts it can do just about anything for whatever they decree to be for the common good. I have no doubt MAMBEs would meet that criteria and Alta would become property of the state. I object to that as I am sure the commander does.”

There were some glances around the table but most eyes were focused on Alta, who sat silently but looking intensely at Dr. Renfro. She could not fully comprehend something so all powerful that it could deny her freedom. Her father had preached a dislike for people from Earth but her experience thus far contradicted everything her father said. “Everyone I have met has been so kind and considerate. Are there people who are not? Are there people who would keep me captive?”

Martin was sympathetic to his niece's naivete and would help her make the right discoveries. “Alta, I'll introduce you to the park police colonel and UP's chief geologist in the near future and you will learn first hand that there are people who are neither kind nor considerate, drunk with power and quite capable of harming others if they thought they could benefit.” Martin would know as would Renfro about the park police colonel and the geological team. Flapjack leaned back in his seat smiling in the knowledge that he had converted two more disciples now repeating what he had been saying for years.

Randall shook his head as he spoke, “The MAMBE discovery is too important to hold back so how do we release it without endangering Alta? Doctor, is there any way you can make the MAMBEs look like they came from the goo specimen I gave you?” Randall's question had everyone's

attention and Renfro appeared to be agreeable to the suggestion.

“Yes ensign, I think we may be able to do that with some very small changes.” said Renfro, folding and clasping his hands on the table and looking into space as if he were reading an answer that had been scribbled in the air. “That is brilliant and I really do think it will work. UP will get the few MAMBEs we have for research and Alta stays free.” The general murmuring of the group at the table was favorable, looking at Renfro and Randall with approving smiles and nods.

Adams waited for the noise to die down and then spoke. “Alta and I discussed the idea of bringing her to Auric Canyon to act essentially as bait.” Adams paused, casting a look at Alta that made the sound of fingernails scratching a chalkboard seem pleasant, but then relented as he continued “Though I am completely against that, I cannot refute her logic and moral position. It is personal for me but she is showing me that her way is best even in that respect.” Alta had early on convinced the group of the merit of Flapjack's idea and that she was the only possible bait that could be used. Adams was expecting a surprise reaction but it never came and he shrugged off his mild disappointment.

“Julius, are we set to meet with the park police and geologists?” the commander asked.

“Yes,” Martin replied, “they are expecting us in about, uh, 30 minutes.” and continued while glancing at the computer viewer clock. “They have the best transportation to and around Auric and I felt we owed them that courtesy.”

“Of course” Adams added, “we want their cooperation as well and they do have seven officers missing.”

“Cooperation?” said Martin with a slight hint of a laugh. “I think part of Alta's entry into the real world requires that she meet people like Colonel Dugan and Dr. Spangle. They are your quintessential UP bureaucrats.”

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If there was ever the antithesis of the image of a Park Police ranger, Colonel Rodney Dugan had to be it. At five feet four inches, plump, balding and in his early fifties, Dugan was known locally as the Park Police Cue Ball, and it was not meant affectionately. Dugan's office was a spacious corner of Park Police Headquarters and rivaled the size, decor and refinement of any corporate office on the Barnard's star colony.

Dugan leaned back in his chair as Dr. Spangle prattled on about his concerns. Dugan shifted his steel rimmed glasses from his forehead to his nose as he sat straight up, easily a head higher than Spangle sitting across the desk from him. Dugan's chair betrayed his megalomaniacal personality and was a full foot higher than every other chair in his office. "Spangle, shut the..." mumbled from his mouth as he slammed his hands on the desk, startling the young geologist into silence.

"Get a hold of yourself" Dugan shouted with his squeaky voice. "Martin and that fleet commander will be here any minute. Just keep your mouth shut and we can get through this. There is nothing for them to find unless you open your trap."

It was a strange contrast. Dugan had neither the look nor voice you would expect from a chief of Park Police, but his words had the disposition. Spangle looked like a Park Police chief, except for his youthful appearance. He was tall, trim, muscular and with a full head of hair. He looked the outdoorsman type while Dugan looked like he should be in a white coat in the geology lab. It was Spangle's nervousness that betrayed his appearance and revealed the true roles and relationship of the two men.

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Park Police Headquarters was located in one of several plain looking, concrete panel buildings set at the perimeter of the space port, this one being close to pad 4. The pad was presently occupied by CO-12-G Comstock, one of the new

classes of ore carriers that made the four month trip to the refineries on Earth. The Comstock dwarfed the two-story administration building, filling the view of the window of the taxi that bore Martin and Adams toward Park Police Headquarters. “Amazing that thing can fly.” remarked Adams, as they drove alongside. “Can't they refine that stuff here?” Adams asked as the taxi came to a halt.

Martin answered while paying the driver, “We could but we would lose some very valuable elements mixed with the gold. Someday we'll have the refineries like they do on Earth.” Martin took the lead as they exited the taxi and made their way to the front entrance and the reception desk inside. Martin presented his identification to the uniformed security guard at the desk and told Adams “Park Police, Port Authority and Geo-sciences have their quarters in this building. Most of the building is vacant and reserved to expand administrative empires.” Martin betrayed a slight laugh and ring of sarcasm as Adams signaled his understanding with a nod.

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“They're here” Dugan told Spangle as he hung up the telephone. Spangle closed his eyes tightly and heaved a sigh as if bracing for a major encounter. Dugan could not help but notice and said “You get a grip on yourself or I will.” Spangle's eyes opened and his face went expressionless. He knew what Dugan meant and was determined to comply with Dugan's order.

“Come in sheriff, and Commander Adams I presume?” Dugan was very cordial and disarming but Martin knew better. It was Dugan who refused to cooperate when the four miners went missing, asserting Park Police jurisdiction and warning the sheriff to stay away from Auric Canyon. “Well, I received our orders from Kiev Park Police Command and I am at your disposal commander.” Yes Martin thought, Dugan is just a wee bit too helpful and out of character.

Adams remained guarded but had to establish some kind of rapport with Colonel Dugan and made a point to graciously

accept the assistance. The personnel and transportation requirements were established first. Adams would have Ensign Randall, Crewman Lee and Alta Morbius in his party. Sheriff Martin would be accompanied by Deputy Sheriff Greer. Dugan identified Dr. Spangle and one of his officers or a corporal, both pilots, as his party.

While Dugan thought it was settled, it was Adams looking at Martin, who then turned and said “We will have two others in our group. One is a robot we call Robby.” That did not draw any reaction from Dugan or Spangle. They were thinking about the typical robots used for various industrial and household tasks so it was no surprise that one might be employed on this mission. “Also, we will be joined by one Mr. Flapjack.”

Dugan's attention snapped to Martin as his face turned from its normal pasty white complexion to a bright red hue. In contrast, Spangle looked down at the floor as all color drained from his face. Dugan stared at the sheriff but his remarks were clearly addressed to Adams. “Commander, that person Flapjack is a known agitator and troublemaker. I also believe he may be a claim jumper and mining illegally. He has nothing but contempt for authority and his language borders on sedition. I would rather he not have anything to do with this mission.”

Martin had prepared Adams for this and he very calmly responded to Dugan with “Flapjack may have his shortcomings but he has provided us with invaluable information and assistance. He will be in my party.” The intonation left no doubt that was not a request.

Dugan turned his attention from Martin to Adams, struggling to regain his composure and with a strained calmness said “That is your decision commander but I will not be responsible for any of that man's misdeeds and I will protect my people as necessary.”

“Fine,” replied Adams, “then tomorrow morning, here at 7 AM, with two birds and standard blaster sidearms. Colonel

Dugan, Dr. Spangle, thank you for your cooperation. Let's get those missing people back.” With that and a slightly uncomfortable exchange of handshakes, Martin and Adams left.

Dugan looked like a Christmas decoration with his red face and dark green uniform. He looked at Spangle with a frown. “You keep your cool and I'll handle that Flapjack person.”

Spangle was not reassured and asked “What if he sees those drag line cuts? What if he recognizes the canyon face cuts for what they are?” The tension in his voice left Dugan unsettled but collected enough to pause, take a few deep breaths and regain his composure.

“I said leave it to me. He won't see anything.” Dugan cracked a smile. Spangle noticed and it seemed to calm his nerves.

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The Park Police used military model helicopters. The two assigned to Barnard's were surplus model Dragonsprites from the Cron War. Both had received some damage during that conflict but were repaired and certified air worthy before being turned over to Kiev Park Police Command, and then assigned to the Barnard's barracks.

Colonel Dugan had an established pattern of doing the pre-flight inspections so no one was surprised when he arrived at the service hangar that evening. He was still working when the flight chief asked if he needed any assistance before he left for the evening. Dugan said no and that he was simply doing some clean up for the benefit of the guests they would be carrying in the morning.

Dugan finished his inspection late in the evening, ending with a profusion of self-congratulatory phrases. “Job well done” he concluded as he left the service bay.

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“Make sure those seat belts are nice and snug. Auric Canyon is infamous for the wind shear on the south cleft.”

Dugan's passengers were Adams, Robby and Flapjack on the fore seat with Greer, Alta and Spangle on the rear seat. Dugan made the seating arrangements for both birds to balance the weight, as he claimed. Alta also had a preference for the center seat since the open compartment made her uncomfortable. This was the first time she had been airborne other than on a spaceship which was totally enclosed.

The ride was a little bumpy and quite noisy. The up side was it would only take 10 minutes to get from the space port to Auric Canyon by helicopter. The view from the rear compartment was very restrictive but Alta could see and marveled at the beauty of the landscape. The rolling hills with green fields and carpets of trees in neatly arranged hilltop clumps were so unlike the desert area where she lived on Altair 4. The Barnard's moon was vibrant with plant and animal life. What she could not see was the approach to Auric Canyon, a dry and scrubby gouge of light tan in a sea of green. A scar in the moon if ever there was one. The other helicopter, flown by Dugan's corporal was behind them.

As the south cleft of the canyon came into sight, Dugan banked in that direction. He could see the thermal distortion and dust from the wind shear that those in the rear compartment could not. The first bump was met head on at full forward speed and rattled everyone on board. Dugan made sure it was rougher than it had to be. A few more bumps and then a sharp pitch, bank and dive left that quickly reversed with a sharp jolt.

In an instant, Flapjack was hurled from his seat toward the open door, his detached seat belt in his hand as he was flung headlong out the side. Flapjack was sure he would not survive a fall of 2,000 feet to the canyon floor. His eyes slammed shut.

He was clear of the compartment when he felt the sudden and violent tug on his belt that dug deeply into his waist while his pants painfully tightened about his groin. His forward motion had stopped as he was violently snapped back into the

helicopter. He was back on the seat, facing outward and extremely happy to be alive despite the pain in his waist and crotch. "Are you all right Mr. Flapjack?" Robby asked, careful to raise his voice just enough to be heard over the whine of the engines and wind noise.

Everyone was looking at Flapjack now and grabbing at their own seat belts to make sure they were secure. The incident left them all shaken but thankful the robot had acted as quickly as it did. It was Alta who saw it most clearly, being seated opposite Robby. She raised her voice saying "Robby, his hands, they are on retractable cables, he launched one to grab Flapjack."

"That is correct Miss Alta." Robby said, again raising his voice just enough to be heard.

Just then, the helicopter began its steady descent to the canyon rim. Dugan did all he could to contain his smile, certain that Flapjack had been thrown clear of the helicopter and was now lying plastered on the rim of Auric Canyon. His feigned ignorance continued as he spoke over the intercom "Sorry about that, wind shear you know." as if nothing else happened. Spangle wasn't so sure but was careful not to betray his suspicions. His surprise served him well to conceal his worries.

Flapjack was still holding the seat belt in his hand when the bird touched down. There was no apparent damage to the belt web or the anchor plates. The floor bolts were in place and intact Adams observed as he made a closer inspection. The best he could offer Flapjack was a head shake and puzzled look.

Dugan was out of the cockpit and barely able to contain his surprise at seeing Flapjack. But Dugan was shrewd and turned that surprise toward the seat belt in Flapjack's hands and Adams preoccupation with the floor bolts. "What happened?" As the other chopper touched down, the conversation between Dugan and Adams died down with Dugan assuring Adams a full investigation would be made, but

causally blaming the military surplus nature of the equipment and possible war damage as the lead suspects. “Thank goodness Flapjack is OK!” said Dugan, but Flapjack wasn't buying the well rehearsed and false sincerity.

By the time the chopper blades stopped turning, everyone had gathered near Adams for instruction. Dugan, Martin and Adams all carried com-links with open channels back to their respective headquarters and the ship.

“Most important,” Adams started, “don't do anything that could be interpreted as a hostile move against Alta or against anything we encounter. Perception may be everything. Your good intentions included, may be seen as a threat to Alta that requires a response.”

Of course Adams knew this was all predicated on the theory that Alta had triggered the distress signal and was the object of protection. This would be a real touch and go operation where judgment would be required at every turn. There could be no battle plan because of the great uncertainty.

“What if we see something?” Dugan asked. “What should we do?”

It was a simple but difficult question to answer. Adams thought for a moment because he had considered this before but the uncertainty continued to gnaw at his earlier decision. Nonetheless he would stick by it. “Nothing, keep those sidearms holstered. From all that we know, Krell robots are programmed not to harm sentient life. If we don't threaten them, or Alta, I think they will leave us alone. Robby, this applies to you too.”

“Aye aye sir.” Robby replied. Adams had considered Robby's role in the operation. How primitive was Robby compared to the robots Flapjack had described? Could Robby speak, or translate for them? Would his presence have a positive effect, in that he is a product of Krell technology with a common creator?

“We are going to proceed north on foot with Alta in the center and flanked on both sides and toward the rear. V

formation gentlemen. Keep it close but not intimate. Walk slowly and keep those sidearms holstered. We have them only as defense against wild animals. Make sure you don't forget that.”

As Adams looked left, then right, he could see everyone falling into formation, about two arm lengths apart and in a V with him, Alta and Robby at the vertex. “Robby, are you still monitoring the Krell signal?”

“Yes commander, it remains unchanged.” the robot answered.

“Are you ready Alta? Anything you need or want to tell me?” The commander's voice was rock steady but it was an act to bolster Alta.

“I love you John no matter what. Let's get started.”

Adams was tempted to move closer to Alta but maintained his distance. He gave her a warm and reassuring smile as he grasped the com-link and began to speak. “Wallace, we are ready to start and I'll keep the video and sound monitors turned on. If anything should happen to us, you must make that information available to Commodore Savorkian when he arrives. You are to do nothing until then. Am I understood?”

Wallace did understand but he didn't like what he heard. “Commander, what if you get in trouble? You really expect us to stay here and do nothing?”

“I expect exactly that. Getting this data to Savorkian is your first priority so they can deal with the situation here.” Adams words were sharp, abrupt and unmistakable. The missing men were important. His party was important. But the dangers, or promise of a Krell outpost was more important. “You have your orders Wallace.”

The unenthusiastic “Aye” was not that different than the responses Martin and Dugan were getting from their listening posts.

Adams took another quick look, behind, left and right before shouting “Forward!”

Chapter 12 S&R Phase 2

“Just ahead,” Flapjack shouted as he pointed to the arroyo, “that’s where I was hiding when I saw your crew being attacked commander.” The ground leading to the arroyo was pancake flat and rock hard with a fine layer of dust. The arroyo penetrated about 30 meters from the canyon edge on the right before it tapered to a point and rose to meet the uneroded ground of the canyon rim. At about 2 meters deep at the canyon edge, the arroyo was adequate for cover but not much else. Nonetheless, Adams decided the party would swerve left to avoid the drop.

“Keep your spacing, we’re going to drift left.” Adams yelled as the party slowly advanced with Alta at the point. “Wallace, anything on the satellite?” the commander asked speaking into the com-link. Wallace had a direct feed to the port communications center and was monitoring the north and west rim of the canyon on the main view plate.

“Nothing sir.” Wallace replied as he repeatedly scanned the target area. “The abandoned rover is still there commander.”

“We can see it now.” Adams said as they came up on the point of the arroyo. The rover was just where Flapjack said it would be, about 200 meters north. “Halt!” Adams yelled. He raised the magnascope to his eyes and focused on the rover ahead at 4 power but could see nothing unusual. The canyon was warmer than the surrounding terrain and Adams could feel the sweat dripping from his forehead onto the magnascope by way of his eyebrows. The sweat clouded one eye as he paused to wipe his brow and crank up the magnification to 12 power. Still nothing unusual to see. “Forward and watch your spacing. We’re bunching up a little.”

About 100 meters from the rover, every com-link started squawking with the same message, that something had been sighted at the north end of the canyon and was rapidly moving southeast along the canyon rim. Adams, Martin and Dugan were getting essentially the same message from their respective headquarters. The duty officers were zooming their attention and satellite cameras to the north and trying to focus on a group of moving objects.

Adams could hear just enough of each conversation to understand they were all getting the same report. In a very loud voice he yelled "Listen up!" as he gave an arm signal to circle. The left and right wings of the V formation drew in until all were within easy listening range. "Colonel, sheriff, we got the same message. Something heading our way. Tell your people to stand by and Lt. Wallace will coordinate the reporting. They should be tuned on his com and feeding to him. Wallace, did you get that?"

"Aye aye sir." Wallace replied over the open com-link channel. "We have six distinct objects in view moving as a group. Estimated speed is, damn, uh, 120 miles per hour. Range about 16 miles. They will be on you in about 8 minutes sir."

"Keep us up to date Wallace" the commander said, looking at Martin and Dugan, both close enough to have heard Wallace's report. "Let's close the circle a little and Alta, please move to the center." Adams looked around, satisfied everyone was properly located and dispersed, then spoke again "Keep those sidearms holstered." Everyone was facing outward and looking, and waiting, and sweating.

"Commander, the Krell signal has changed. I cannot interpret any of the new signal." It was a peculiarity of Robby's voice that it always sounded as if it was issuing a command regardless of the actual intention. It was no different now.

Adams was not surprised and in fact expected there might be a change. "Alta," he asked, "are you getting any kind of

signal, feeling, communication, anything?"

Before she could answer, Wallace was back on the com-link. "Commander, the objects are cylindrical, about 2/3rds of a meter in diameter, standing about two meters high and now moving at 160 miles per hour, and accelerating. We can't get any other type of reading from them on any energy band. They will be on you in about 4 minutes, probably less if they increase the rate of acceleration."

"Keep us updated" Adams said, then turning back to Alta and softly saying her name with the inflection of a question, "Alta?"

"Yes John, not exactly a feeling but that is probably the best description. It's telling me not to worry, that I will be fine and with friends in a very short time. I really don't like this kind of intrusion into my thoughts, or feelings, or wherever they are coming from." Alta's voice was breaking from calmness to anger.

"What the hell is she talking about?" Dugan asked.

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"We are going into a situation with very little information. Exactly the kind of job marines were trained for, right?" barked Commander Martin.

Eight voices of the men gathered in the ward room barked back in perfect unison "Aye aye sir." Discipline, training, unity, all on display in a single response. Martin was justifiably confident in his men.

"The kicker on Barnard's may be the presence of alien life." the commander continued. "Our experience doesn't go that far. Most of you have been involved in operations against rebels and pirates. We have yet to find any evidence of alien life anywhere the UP has explored, so we may have to write the book on this one because there is no book." Martin clasped his hands in front of him on the table, a signal he was willing to take questions. It didn't take long for the first one.

"Commander sir, what will our weapon load-out be?" It was a good question, Martin thought to himself.

“Special issue M-PAC rifles. Most of you have seen them, some of you have used them. They have an over-under layout with a high energy blaster on top and hyper-kinetic tube on the bottom. We won't be doing any on board firing. Those HK rounds will go through any armor we have, including standard backstops and the hull of this ship. You'll get your firing exercise on Barnard's.” A few hands shot up and Martin pointed to the nearest.

“Commander sir, will any civilians be involved?”

“Only as spectators to our awe inspiring operations men!” the commander shouted back to the cheers of the men. “This is strictly a military operation and we have the lead but will receive support from the cruiser currently at Barnard's. It is our show men, to succeed or fail however we choose.”

All the hands were now down. Civilian interference always concerned the men since it was often civilian concerns that put marines at risk and not the civilians expressing those concerns.

“If there are no more questions, just remember we are still about three months and three weeks out and this is our home until we reach Barnard's. Play nice with the crew and stay out of trouble.” Martin was concerned about morale. Keeping marines cooped up without some diversion was always a bad idea. He needed something to keep them sharp, but what? “Dismissed.”

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“Commander, they are all around you, every direction!” came the warning from Wallace.

Adams was more concerned about an improper action from the party than from the danger of the nearby objects. Perhaps answering Dugan's question, dishonestly if necessary, might calm them all. “Colonel, we believe Alta may have some telepathic ability that can communicate with certain robots. It's nothing unusual and could work for us.” Martin and Flapjack knew better of course, but their lives may depend on Alta and whether the colonel was fooled or not seemed

unimportant at the moment.

“There! There, due south, behind us!” shouted Sheriff Deputy Greer as he drew his blaster. Before the barrel cleared the holster, there was small flash, a crack and thud as Greer hit the ground.

Wallace was on the com-link instantly asking if Adams required assistance but was told in no uncertain terms to stay put no matter what happened and make sure everything was recorded. Adams made sure he said it loud enough for Martin and Dugan to hear as well.

“Don't touch your weapons” yelled Adams. The idea came quickly and the words slipped out without much thought. “Alta, see if you can help Greer please.” Adams was hoping that Alta's demonstration would convince the objects that she was not in danger and in fact, friendly with the beings near her. It was all a big hunch but he had nothing else to use. Everything possible had to be used to convince the robots the party was not a threat.

Alta moved slowly toward Greer, filled with anger that the party had been attacked but also contrite that Greer may have provoked the incident. She looked beyond where Greer was lying and just caught a glimpse of an object, just as Wallace had described. “I see it.” she said as she got within a foot of Greer. She knelt down, shifting her attention from the object to Greer's face. She could see he was breathing as she took his hand to check for a pulse. He didn't appear injured but looked like he was pleasantly sleeping. “He's alive, breathing, good pulse, warm hands.” she shouted for all to hear, perhaps even the object in the distance.

“Is that your plan?” Dugan screeched with his most sarcastic voice.

“The plan is to improvise and make peace with these things Colonel. Our plan is to find out what they are and what they want so we can get our people back.” Adams temper was rising but he had no choice but to tolerate Colonel Dugan. Adams looked around and if he saw anyone with a hand on

their sidearm, he yelled out their name. “Lee! Corporal! Get your hands off those weapons.”

Not fast enough. Dugan's corporal was hit with a crack and a thud. No one saw where the flash came from. Lee dropped his hands immediately fearing he may be next.

“Alta,” Adams said as he looked toward Dugan, “check the corporal please.” It was time to play another card. “Robby, can you communicate with those objects?” A pause and a repeat, “Robby? Are you with us?”

“John, the corporal is fine, the same as Greer. I need to speak with you.” Alta said softly, as if trying to keep that from the others. She walked to Adams side, took his hand and said “Walk with me.” She led the way until she thought they were a safe distance from Dugan overhearing what she had to say. “They have Robby.”

Adams reached for her shoulder, turning her slightly and looking to her eyes asking “How do you know? Are they talking to you?”

“In a way,” she replied, “they don't speak but I know what they want.”

Adams kept his stare on her, asking “What? What do they want?”

“Me. Robby. Aunt Sheila.” Alta turned her head to avoid Adams stare, gazing ahead to where one of the objects might be posted ahead. Her response had been so flat and emotionless Adams thought the objects may have control over her. “I know what you are thinking but I'm all right. It is me, not them talking. They want you and the others to leave.”

That was enough for Adams to explode “No damn way I'm going back without you.”

Alta slowly turned toward the commander, looked into his eyes and with tears flowing and a cracking voice said “Not leave here John, but leave the moon. Everyone. They will release the captives they have if you agree.”

“I can't agree to that. Move the entire population? That's crazy. Can you talk to them, convince them to drop that

demand?" Adams pleaded, but his case was with the objects and Alta was only an emissary at this point. Robby was totally unresponsive.

"I have to learn to talk to them John. They do not reason, they execute a program. It may seem like they reason but they don't and I need to penetrate that barrier. I don't know why they want Aunt Sheila here, but they will get her if she doesn't come. You can't stop them."

"We sure as hell can try." Adams shot back, obviously angered by the threat but unsure where to direct his anger and pulling it back from Alta as he spoke.

"Give me the blaster John." Alta demanded. "You can reach for it, they won't do anything to you now. Just do it nice, slow and smooth." Alta had never used a blaster but looked at home with it in her left hand. She pointed it in the air and an object about 100 meters north and secreted in some high shrubs appeared and started moving toward them. Alta lowered the blaster and leveled it at the hovering robot.

"No, it will shoot you!" shouted Adams.

"No it won't." she said with extraordinary calmness as she pressed the trigger and a stream of bolts were launched at the robot. Every shot hit but the robot kept coming with no apparent damage. Alta stopped firing. "A blaster would put a hole in Robby, but not these robots and they would let me shoot them all day. If you try it, they will do something to stop you. Exactly what I don't know but you would be incapacitated, just like Greer and the corporal." The robot stood about two meters from Adams, who then used the com-link to capture the image in detail.

"I must talk to the others Alta." said Adams, almost begging.

"I know but they must understand there is nothing they can do and I can only promise to try. Please trust me. I'm not going to give up." Alta's tears had slowed but she was probably concealing something the robots had conveyed to her. "Tell Uncle Julius I really need Aunt Sheila's help and I

won't let anything happen to her. I have to stay here or you are all in danger.”

Adams was ripping apart inside and threw his arms around Alta. He didn't even pause to think it might be considered a threat but apparently the guardian robots were past that stage and accepted the human friends of Alta as non-threatening. “I'm not giving up on you” he said as he kissed her and pulled her tightly to himself. “They won't keep me away. You tell them that.”

As Adams walked back toward the party, Robby moved toward Alta and the waiting robot. The other robots, five more in all had made themselves visible and drew closer to the circled party. Adams wasn't sure how to tell Martin about the robot demand for Sheila. He asked Flapjack to come closer and then blurted it out. Martin was at first disbelieving and then raging. Adams tried to assure him that Alta had guaranteed Sheila's safety, but it seemed Martin either chose not to hear or believe what Adams was saying.

It was Flapjack who gave the request a different point of view, one that Martin could accept. “Julius, your niece needs Sheila's help. That's all there is to it my friend. What do you think Sheila would say? No? I don't think so.” Flapjack's words did sink in and changed the point of view from that of sacrifice to that of assistance. Martin calmed down and apologized. He agreed the request had to be Sheila's decision.

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Edward Renfro tried to make small talk but wasn't very good at initiating conversations. Sheila and Mary Lou both giggled as he tried in earnest to find some female thing to talk about, but the best he could do was hair curlers. Renfro was hoping they would pick it up and change the conversation to something more suitable.

The rover was parked on the roadside under a beautiful shade tree. Auric Canyon was only two miles further north but this was the spot where he said they would wait. Wait for what he wasn't sure but Adams asked he do that on the chance

they might require non-military assistance. Renfro was greatly relieved when he heard the speaker pop and Adams request he join them at the canyon.

“Saved by the bell, huh doc” chortled Mary Lou as Sheila betrayed a concealed laugh. Renfro smiled, started the rover and pulled onto the highway north.

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The robots had moved closer and Martin, Dugan and Adams used their com-link video to record as much visual detail as possible. The satellites were at work as well but these up-close visuals and scans were far more detailed and hopefully, more useful as a consequence.

The party could hear the engine of the rover bearing Renfro, Sheila and Mary Lou in the distance but it screeched to a stop when Renfro saw the robots. Adams had to motion him to come forward, as did Martin and Flapjack.

Dugan wasn't happy and made it known. “I know Doc Renfro but who the hell are those two broads and why are they here?”

Martin turned to Dugan and said very calmly but forcefully while pointing “That broad is my wife and it will be up to her to save your sorry ass and everyone else that is here as well. You should treat your rescuer with more respect.”

Dugan's face turned bright red as he searched for the words to apologize. “Uh, I'm, er very sorry mam, I didn't intend any disrespect. It has been a very trying day and I beg your indulgence.” Dugan could sure be smooth when he wanted to.

Martin, Adams and Flapjack huddled with Sheila when she dismounted the rover. Renfro and Mary Lou held their places and were close enough to hear the conversation. Sheila's eyes opened very wide when she heard what was being requested, but she continued to listen.

“I'll do it. She is our niece and has become very special to me. If I can help us all by helping her, that's a no brainer.” Sheila spoke but Martin thought she might be just a bit too

cavalier about the dangers.

“Honey, I really do understand the dangers. I see these black bots and I know they mean business. I'm not going to abandon our niece, or my home, or my friends because of some tin can tin-horn dictator.” Sheila was resolute and that drew applause from Mary Lou.

It was settled. Alta, Sheila and Robby would accompany the robots. The rest of the party would leave by helicopter and rover. Flapjack made it clear he preferred the ground transportation after his flirtation with death on the ride inbound. Besides, he was pleased to drive back with Doc, and always pleased to be with Mary Lou.

Greer and the corporal would have to be carried to the choppers, but who would fly the second bird? Martin looked from face to face before he spoke. “I guess that would be me.” he volunteered.

“You have flight experience?” Dugan asked.

“Yep, I flew one of these in the Cron War. Long time ago but you don't forget how. Like riding a bicycle.” Martin quipped.

“Bicycle?” Adams asked. “What's a bicycle?”

“Later.” Martin replied.

Martin and Adams had their farewells to make. The two women appeared to take the parting well, sure that it was only temporary. Adams attitude was that he could rescue them if he had to. Martin was less certain but accepted that his niece's life depended on his wife's cooperation. He did not share Adams confidence they could be rescued or the women's belief they would be released in a short time. He was hopelessly indeterminate and would live day to day not knowing what to believe.

What about evacuating the moon? They would stall. Alta had a com-link now and she would do what she could to keep them informed and buy them some time.

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As the helicopters lifted off and turned sideways, the

passengers could see the robots had fabricated some kind of carrier capsule for the two women and that Robby was in tow on some kind of platform. Flapjack, Mary Lou and Renfro witnessed the robot departure from the rover. While Flapjack had been silent in those last minutes, he held a comforting inner belief that between Alta, Sheila and Robby, the Krell robots would meet their match.

Chapter 13 Retreat and Regroup

“Alta, can you hear me?” Between the drone of the engine, swooshing of the blades and wind noise, Adams wasn't sure anyone could hear him on the com-link while he was in flight.

“Yes John, loud and clear.” came Alta's voice to the commanders relief. “We are still moving and I can see mountains ahead getting closer. Aunt Sheila is fine and Robby is, well, I don't know.”

“OK,” the commander said, “we are going to track you as long as we can but if we lose the signal, you'll see that on your com-link, the small green signal light will go amber and then red. Green is good, amber means maybe and red is no signal.”

He waited for Alta to acknowledge and then continued. “Wallace will keep you on visual using the satellites as long as possible. No matter where they take you, I'll find you, I'll get you.”

“I know you will. Don't do anything stupid though and let me help. I'll learn as much about them as I can and get that information to you.” Alta's voice was raised to deal with wind noise issues she had, but she was calm and clearly rational.

Dugan had piped into the com on a different channel and asked “Commander, are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?”

Adams was heeding Flapjack's warning to keep Dugan distant but he did need the helicopters under Dugan's command, so some cooperation, or at least the appearance of cooperation was necessary. “Colonel, we believe we have an alien presence on Barnard's. I know only slightly more than you do and must keep that classified until I am relieved by Commodore Savorkian. That does not change my orders

however and I still plan to carry them out. I require your cooperation and will tell you as much as I am permitted by my orders.” Well, that was tongue in cheek but it sounded entirely reasonable and Adams was sure Dugan would accept the explanation.

“All right” Dugan came back, “I just hope you know what you are doing.” Adams did not answer but thought to himself, I hope I do too.

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The capsule that enclosed Alta was fabricated by the robots using some kind of thin sheet material, apparently some form of plastic. The sides of the capsule were open, and the front, top and rear were transparent. Alta was seated comfortably in a deep contoured seat formed from the material. The wind noise however, was unnerving as the robot whisked the capsule within inches of the rim floor and scarcely a half meter from the edge. She could see Sheila in an identical capsule just a few meters behind her. Though not very clearly, she could make out Robby right behind Sheila. Behind Robby was a swirling cloud of dust and small debris raised by the wake of the speeding robots.

Alta had no idea how fast they were traveling but if she looked at the ground passing below for more than just a few seconds, she began to feel a wave of nausea. She could see that Sheila's long auburn hair was blowing wildly and hiding her face. While she could not hear the words, she could see that Sheila was screaming and suddenly the capsules slowed to about half speed. Sheila's hair was still blowing, but not as wildly and not in her face. The wind noise was much more tolerable.

The mountains ahead were not high but were very rugged looking. Alta had to keep in mind it was all relative and she had no idea how fast they were going, how high the mountains were or how much time had passed since this journey had started.

As they drew closer to the mountains, Alta could not help

but notice how well the robots controlled the fashioned capsules, gliding over irregularities in the landscape such as the arroyos and gullies along the canyon rim. Small rocks that would trip a walking man had no effect on the hovering robots and the loads they towed. While Alta had been watching the canyon to the right, the mountains seemed to pop into close proximity. The robot turned the capsule slightly to the left, maintaining a constant distance from the rocks now rising to the right. A scant few seconds later, the capsules turned sharply right and into a solid wall of rock rising straight up from the narrowing canyon floor.

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The com-link chirped again, this time with Wallace. "They went into a mountainside sir and we lost visual. We can't see any kind of opening or door, just rock. Alta is still answering however and we are tracking her signal."

"Well done Larry. Track them as long as you can." said the commander, trying to speak above the engine that was now decreasing rpms as it approached the space port. "Have the ward room and plenty of coffee ready for a meeting in about an hour. I have to stop by Doc Renfro but will be at the ship shortly."

"Aye aye sir. Consider that coffee fresh, brewed and ready" Wallace responded with an eager and cheerful voice. The commander could appreciate his effort to compensate for what otherwise was a miserable failure at Auric Canyon. Adams smiled, confident that his exec would restore a sense of optimism to the mission.

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Dr. Renfro has just completed his examination and met with Adams, Martin and Dugan in the waiting area of his office to deliver his findings. "They're both fine, sleeping like babies. I never saw anything like it. I don't think they experienced any pain at all."

Adams felt relieved because he had three other crewmen that had been attacked and were probably in the same

condition. But he wanted to know “Doc, what caused that? When will they recover? Any idea?”

“I can't be certain but some kind of massive but gentle neural shock, electrically induced I think. I sure can't duplicate that effect,” the doctor continued, “so I can't tell how long they will be out. They should be all right in about three or four hours but that is a pure guess. My nurse will be here.” he said, glancing at the woman in white sitting behind a desk in the waiting area. She nodded back and that seemed to satisfy everyone.

“Colonel Dugan, I'll be in touch but not anytime soon. We have a lot of data to analyze, a real lot” Adams said in his best bureaucratic voice. “Sheriff, Doctor, please check your messages.” The commander didn't want to mention the upcoming meeting, seeking to avoid any questions or confrontation with Dugan about the lack of an invitation.

“Let me make one last check on my patients” the doctor said, seeking a convenient way to end the gathering. The other three men nodded their heads and started toward the office exit door. Flapjack had been patiently waiting in the corridor. He expected the sneer he got from Colonel Dugan. Not surprisingly, he also expected the sneer he got from Commander Adams. It was Sheriff Martin that surprised him the most with a sympathetic smile, nod and pat on the shoulder.

“It worked and no one got hurt” Martin said, somewhat to the astonishment of all present. He could see an explanation was required but would wait until they reached the ship's ward room.

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As she glided slowly through the corridor, Alta fixed her attention on each passing archway, characteristic of the Krell arches she was familiar with on Altair 4. These looked identically shaped but were larger, spaced about five meters apart and with the appearance of a smooth aggregate finish. She had not examined them as closely before as she did now.

“Krell concrete?” she said softly to herself. Why not she thought, the perfect complement to Krell metal.

She turned slowly in the chair to look behind and saw Aunt Sheila followed by Robby with a Krell robot attending to each. They were moving no faster than a brisk walk now, giving her time to focus her attention on doors that lined both sides of the corridor. They were all shut but each had a placard with strange symbols attached to the apex of the framing archway. It looked like Krell writing and she thought she knew what a few meant. Refrigeration, water reclamation, store room, holding area. That was less than half of what she saw but was she right?

The corridor seemed endless, arch after arch, door after door. She couldn't be sure, but she thought it also had a downward slope. How long was it? She needed challenges like this to keep her mind keen and focused and off of her feelings. Alta was not going to feel sorry for herself. She was going to figure out how long this corridor was. Six hundred and forty-eight meters, plus or minus 50 centimeters. “Clever girl” she congratulated herself.

Before they reached the end of the corridor, about another 140 meters, they abruptly stopped, a door on the left opened and the robots glided into a large room that had a strangely familiar look. It was almost identical to the Krell lab she had known on Altair 4. There were some differences, but more similarities.

“You will remain here until permanent accommodations are prepared” the lead robot spoke, with a husky female voice.

Alta was clearly startled and asked “You speak English. But how?” Sheila was out of the capsule chair now and standing beside Alta, quite puzzled but patiently waiting so they could speak privately.

“Your robot, Robby, we downloaded his linguistic tetragrams. He was an excellent teacher” the robot answered. “I am programmed to respond to Maud. I will wear this identification badge to facilitate recognition.” The voice did

not convey a tone consistent with the helpful nature of the words spoken. With that, Maud and the two other robots moved quickly though the door which promptly closed behind them.

Sheila didn't say anything but the look she gave Alta said plenty and Alta responded. "This is a Krell laboratory. This entire facility was built by the Krell. Those were Krell robots. Robby is a Krell robot but obviously a very different model. I believe these robots think I am Krell and their basic programming requires them to protect me, whatever that may mean." Sheila was nodding as Alta spoke, absorbing all that was said and digesting it for thought.

"There is no signal in here." Alta remarked, looking at the com-link indicator lamp glowing red. "We lost it just as we came in. This room must be shielded."

"Miss Alta. Are you all right?" Robby had come to life with a voice. Alta spun around, ran up to him and threw her arms around the place where his neck would be, if he had one. She was extremely happy that her long time friend, robot or not, was back in operation and apparently unaffected by the experience.

"Oh Robby, I'm fine but have they done anything to you?" asked Alta with a deep expression of concern.

"Nothing harmful Miss Alta but they have upgraded my linguistic capabilities to the latest Krell dialects. I have been instructed to work with Maud to attempt an English translation to the extent feasible." Robby had noticeably fewer clicks and clacks as he spoke. Something had changed. It gave Alta an idea as she looked around the lab, quickly spotting her target.

"There," she said, "the Krell educator machine, mind booster, whatever you call it. I need to use that." The clear glass tetrahedron cover was unmistakably the same as the one she had seen on Altair 4. Her father had used it to create three dimensional images with a beneficial side effect of increasing his intellectual power. She would attempt the same.

"Miss Alta, that could kill you!" Robby said, with an

unusual rise in his voice.

Sheila had remained silent but her concern for her niece moved her to ask “What does he mean? I won't let you harm yourself if that is what you have in mind.”

Alta tried to calm Sheila, explaining that her father had survived using the machine and while Doc Ostrow had not, it unlocked the puzzle of the great Krell machine, the mystery of the monsters from the id and the disappearance of the entire Krell race. Alta calmly explained that she believed the alterations to her brain might also help her survive. She was quite insistent that without the brain boost, they had little chance of escape, no less saving the other inhabitants of the Barnard's colony.

“If I do it, I don't think these robots will let me die. I just have that feeling.” she added as further justification for taking the brain boost. Robby said nothing and couldn't. Value judgments were well beyond his programming. Sheila agreed that the risk was justifiable as Alta had explained it.

Alta sat at the console and turned the educator on. She talked her way through it as she put the head set in place. The intelligence meter to the right of the machine began to move up and the power dials on the back wall began to register a very small but detectable increase in power consumption.

Alta looked up at her aunt on one side, then Robby on the other, placed her right hand on the imaging switch that would give her the brain boost, nodded her head, said “Here goes!” and yanked the switch back to the power on position.

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The faces gathered in the ward room were grim. Adams looked around the table, stopping with each person to acknowledge their presence. “Wallace, Randall, Martin, Renfro and,” he paused slightly, changing his inflection to one of anger, “Mr. Flapjack; what do we do now?” No one spoke, smiled or gave any hint they wanted to interrupt the commander.

“You were right Flapjack, Alta was perfect bait but the fish

that swallowed her refused to be reeled in. Now they have her and they want this moon emptied.” Flapjack turned his eyes away from Adams and looked down at the table, shaking his head.

Martin could see what was happening and intervened. “John, it's not Flapjack's fault and maybe the plan did work. The fish are still on the line as long as we have contact with Alta. I want her back as much as you do, and Sheila as well, but I'm not going to get angry with Flapjack over something all of us had time to think about and could have argued against.” Adams looked Martin in the eyes and finally gave in with a few nods of his head.

“Is there any way we can beat those robots with force?” Flapjack asked.

“No.” Adams replied, “Alta's little demonstration with the blaster fired at the robot told me they are made of Krell metal. We can't cut it, burn it, drill it, machine it, shape it or blast it. None of our tools survive and none of our weapons are effective. We could try to scale up but if that fails, well, I don't want to be around to see how the robots react. Forget force, at least against those robots. It won't work.”

Flapjack pounded the table with a fist before saying “I'm sorry I was right commander but Alta is a bright girl and I'll bet she, Sheila and Robby are regrouping and looking at their options just like we are. We need to outsmart these Krell-bots and I'm sure glad we have the three of them on our side.”

There were a few head nods around the table and some of the glumness disappeared but this was not a charged up group formulating a battle plan, but neither was it a burial detail. Flapjack couldn't resist with “By golly, I feel sorry for those lousy Krell, I really do cuz we're gonna kill them by the bushel, cut their living guts out and use them to grease the treads of our tanks.” At least Martin, Renfro and Wallace got it and showed smiles but Adams and Randall were clueless.

Wallace leaned over and whispered in Adams's ear while Martin did the same with Randall. Both cracked a smile and

looked at Flapjack with a thankful closing of their eyes.

Adams knew he had to finish on a positive note. “Alta is the key but that's no reason why we can't think too. What little we know about the Krell we have to exploit, make the most of it and be inventive as well. They were not gods, nor were their robots. We can beat them, just not at arm wrestling.”

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The jolt threw Alta away from the machine as she slumped in the chair, almost falling to the floor. Sheila dropped immediately to her side, checking her breathing, then taking her arm and wrist. Her eyes had rolled back but appeared to respond to the ceiling lights. Something was happening with Robby as the elements in his head shell were operating and raising a racket.

In practically no time at all, the laboratory door opened and Maud made her way to Alta. A panel in the robot's body opened to reveal an arm-like appendage that extended and began to systematically move over Alta's body, starting at the head and moving down. A few seconds later, a second panel opened and a second arm-like appendage extended, this one holding some kind of device that emitted a low pitched whirring sound. The robot focused that on Alta's head at about eye level.

Alta bolted upright in the chair, startling Sheila. The robot was faster and moved the appendages quickly enough to avoid having them hit Alta.

“What happened?” Alta asked as her eyes fully opened and she saw Maud, and then Sheila, and then Robby.

Sheila responded but it sounded like a question. “The brain boost? Don't you remember?”

“Yes!” Alta was ecstatic. She did remember and she felt something had happened though she found it difficult to explain. “I'm sure it worked. It was like doors opening, lights switching on, whatever. Mi vin to grundle <c-sharp> Maud.”

“Sin vir tant.” said Maud, as she folded in the appendages,

closed the panels and floated toward the door.

“I speak Krell, simple stuff but it is Krell!” That was enough to reassure Sheila her niece was unharmed and greatly helped by the educator. Could she do the same? She had to ask but she didn't particularly like the answer she got from Alta.

“It might kill you Aunt Sheila. I think it is just a freak consequence of what was done to my brain that allowed me to recover as fast as I did. That machine killed two people I know of and my father said it almost killed him. I promised Uncle Julius I would not let anything happen to you, so I have to say no, the risk is too high.” Another person may have thought Alta might be protecting the key to an increased intellect for her advantage, but Sheila could sense the true concern of her niece for her well being and would respect her decision.

Alta had to try an experiment and began chattering with Robby in Krell. He listened, then responded and it became evident to Sheila he was helping Alta with her grammar and pronunciation. They exchanged a few phrases and Alta returned to English. “How did I do Robby?” she asked.

“Very well Miss Alta. You will make a fine pupil.” the robot said, ending with a small arm waving gesture.

“Did it strike you as unusual that Maud said nothing about the incident?” Alta asked Sheila, but it was Robby that answered.

“I signaled Maud that you required medical attention. Inquiry as to why is not in her programming. She examines as requested, and makes repairs if she is capable. In fact, so we understand, robots are not capable of inquiry beyond a requirement to diagnose for repairs. If you break a leg, a robot does not care how it happened but only where the break is located and the appropriate treatment.”

“I didn't know that Robby!” Alta exclaimed. “She didn't care that I used the educator?” For Alta, and to some extent for Sheila, it was like a light had flashed on and some new

phenomena had been discovered.

“Robots don't, quote, care, unquote Miss Alta. They have no concept of care. As long as they have no programmed instruction to forbid you from using the educator, it means nothing to them if you do.” Robby's words were almost beyond knowledge and into wisdom, but Alta now knew better and understood. Clever programming, even massive programming, does not impart human qualities to robots like caring, wisdom, honor, values. Only what is programmed exists and it is the programmers version of human qualities that are exposed, if they are present at all.

Alta was now certain they could handle the Krell robots, win their freedom and protect the population from mass expulsion. She knew the weakness but how could she use it? What more could the educator do to help her? What else was at her disposal? Learning to speak Krell would be a help, but exactly how? She also needed more than just a rudimentary vocabulary.

Alta looked around the lab again until she saw what she wanted. She stood and walked straight for the library viewer. “Robby, can you help me with this?”

“What is that?” asked Sheila as she moved along side Alta, looking over her right shoulder. Robby, standing on the opposite side from Sheila and Alta, was operating a set of controls that changed the appearance of the library view screen.

“This is an access point to a Krell library. We had one on Altair 4 but father gave me the impression it was incomplete. I didn't know how to use it but perhaps Robby can help me now.” Alta looked down at the viewer where Robby had brought up a specific page. She could make out most of the words and in frustration told Robby “You must teach me Krell, help me expand my vocabulary. I can't read all of this.”

“Yes Miss...” Robby started and was interrupted as the lab door opened and Maud entered.

“Your accommodations have been prepared and your

afternoon nourishment is ready to consume.” Maud had a way of making 'lunch is served' sound about as unappetizing as possible. Both Sheila and Alta turned to look at the robot and shook their heads. “Is something wrong?” Maud asked.

“No.” Alta replied, “I am hungry as a matter of fact and could use some lunch.” Sheila was nodding in agreement as she put her arm around Alta's shoulder and they walked toward the door.

Robby was standing still but Maud had something to say to him as well. “Robby, we have scheduled you for an oil job. Follow the beacon.” Robby didn't say anything but started toward the door. He was overdue for an oil job and he was not needed by Alta at this moment.

Alta retrieved and glanced down at the com-link as she entered the corridor. The signal light was now amber. About three more meters down the corridor to the right and she picked up a green signal but that quickly turned back to amber as they turned left into another large room. Apparently, there were spots where she could get a signal but she would have to find them.

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Dugan was frustrated and let Spangle know it. Flapjack was still alive and Dugan had to come up with an explanation for the seat belt failure in the helicopter.

“Something big is going on here and I think they are deliberately keeping me in the dark.” he whined to Spangle. Dugan stood and went to the wall map in his office. He selected through the on-screen list and pulled up the view of Auric Canyon. “What's at the north end we didn't discover?”

Spangle wasn't in his best form today and gave the most obvious answer that “We can't know what we haven't discovered.” That drew the infamous “you must be kidding” look from Dugan. “I'm sorry, I was just thinking out loud.”

“You call that thinking?” Dugan jumped back. “If there are aliens up there, why didn't we ever see them or find them or they find us?”

Spangle lacked the devious mind that motivated Dugan and had to ask more questions to discover the point Dugan was making. “Do you think they know about the scandium deposits we found?” Spangle didn't find the ores but his predecessor did and Spangle was just keeping the secret.

“Maybe,” Dugan answered, “if they drive us off, maybe they take over production. Maybe what we saw was an elaborate hoax. Maybe Flapjack is more of a con man than we suspect, and maybe he partnered up with Martin. Maybe Adams is just being used, or maybe he is the mastermind.”

“That's a lot of maybes colonel.” Spangle said, very softly, almost apologetically knowing Dugan's temper. Dugan stared at the map, ignoring Spangle and concentrating his attention on the north rim of the canyon.

Chapter 14 Robby Goes a Courting

It was quite unlike her but Sheila placed her elbows on the small cafeteria style table, dropped her chin on her hands and stared at Alta. Alta could sense she was being measured in some way by her aunt. Alta's discomfort did not go unnoticed. Sheila was not apathetic though her words were not sympathetic. "You have told us much but we know so little about you." The remark puzzled Alta and it showed in her eyes, a look that was not wasted on Sheila.

"I don't mean to upset you Alta," Sheila continued, "but most people I know, I can associate with on an unspoken level. I know they had parents, they went to school, they had boyfriends, they watched movies and they had a past I could associate with, not that I knew everything, or understood everything. I knew enough to, well, get by. I knew what built them up, what let them down, what made them smile and what made them cry. You are different." Sheila was near tears thinking about the life her niece had lived, completely alone with her father and isolated from all other human contact. The tears had fallen and there was no taking them back. "You didn't even know your mother, my best friend and a wonderful woman. What you missed and what kind of emptiness that must leave inside you!"

For the most part, Alta was dumbfounded. No one had ever talked to her like this before, trying to crawl into her feelings, her experiences and her reasoning. While she would not allow herself to fall into self-pity, she did grasp that was not her aunt's intent. All of the psycho-babble words invented to describe human relations simply didn't work in how she felt about her aunt and how Sheila felt about her. Sheila was in pain for a niece she had just met and accepted as a blood

relative of her husband. Alta was now the child she wanted but couldn't have.

Alta reached for Sheila's hands, clutched them tightly, drew them down to the table and with a barely audible and greatly choked voice said "Thank you." Their predicament was never far from Alta's thoughts but this moment was an entrenchment on common ground for two people trying to solve a problem. Know thyself, including those close to yourself first, then solve your problem. The relationship between Alta and Sheila had leaped forward. It was solid, unbreakable, unshakable and determined.

"I know why they want you here." Alta said, almost apologetically but pushing out the words. "I can speak Krell at the level of three year old, maybe a little higher now. That comes from dreaming since the age of three and having the Krell in my dreams speaking a language I had no facility to learn. It was like telling a baby no, the baby only understanding the tone, hearing the sound, but not understanding the word no beyond stop what you are doing. That is how the Krell spoke to me in my dreams. That jolt from the educator in the Krell lab forced a breakthrough." Sheila looked intently at Alta, nodding her head gently to indicate she understood. It made a great deal of sense now that Alta was regarded as a child, but was there more to it?

Alta tightened her grip on Sheila's hands, put her head forward and spoke softly but deliberately saying "The Krell robots accept you as my mother." It all made sense to Sheila as she let it sink in, leaning back in the chair with her eyes fixed on Alta. Alta, the three year old Krell, needed her mother to provide what the Krell robots could not. If her father were alive, they would have demanded his presence as well but they knew from Alta's thoughts he was dead.

Alta had more to say but needed some sign from Sheila to continue. "Go on" Sheila said.

"The Krell robots are treating me like a three year old. They are not questioning your ability but they are following

their programming. Three year olds, even the magnificent Krell, do not run around unsupervised or risk exposure to aliens. That is not a judgment, just hard coding and for some reason, they exempt you from being treated as an alien threat.” Alta was positive about her analysis because her Krell friends in her dreams had been telling her this for nearly 17 years.

It made sense to Sheila now as she spoke out loud what she was thinking. “Yes, they regard you as a child that needs protective custody. They probably consider me deficient since I am not Krell but nonetheless accept me as your mother. Is that in their programming?”

“We must talk to Robby” Alta continued, “he knows so much and I must find the proper way to ask him. Quite frankly, there is much I know but I am at a loss for words to tell, or explain what it is that I do know. I need some time to think. I suppose if I grow up, the robots will allow me more freedom, perhaps even follow my commands.”

Sheila was agreeable, calming Alta and suggesting they examine their quarters before returning to the Krell lab, if the robots would permit them. The caretaker robot a meter from the table moved forward as Alta and Sheila rose from their chairs. It was Sheila that very politely and gracefully turned toward the robot and said with a soft but commanding voice “Show us our quarters, please.”

“Follow me” came the same husky voice used by Maud as the robot floated toward a long corridor off what was apparently a cafeteria, a very plain and windowless room with a few tables, chairs and serving line station.

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While robots could not make value judgments, they could learn to respond to the anticipated behaviors of their owners. Robby had demonstrated that on the ship during the trip from Altair 4 to the Barnard's Star colony. Robby had given himself oil jobs on Altair 4, so he knew what to expect and what to do, but that little learning module was asking questions to provide humans with answers.

The customary procedure was to stand inside an enclosure that was about shoulder height for Robby's designated model. The door would close and a system of nozzles with flexible piping would begin applying the liquid going from top to bottom. Robby was not in the habit of speaking aloud but he did as a matter of satisfying human curiosity. It wasn't obtrusive or loud, but it was spoken and it seemed more necessary now than ever before to ask questions. He knew Alta would ask for answers.

“Is this the standard c36 composition repair fluid?” Robby asked. That was the designation of the material Robby manufactured on Altair 4 using the Krell synthesis machine.

“No, c36 was replaced in 846,702 by the e series and we now use derivative e137. You cannot use that derivative and we produced e98 for this application.” The caretaker robots, while many millennium ahead of Robby in design, still shared some of the programming characteristics the Krell valued and continued into later models. Responsive communication and adaptation was one of them.

“Please describe e98.” Robby asked.

“See the library reference for repair fluid e98.” the caretaker robot responded. That seemed to satisfy Robby for the moment. He was questioning the nature and purpose of an “oil job” using a “repair fluid” because he knew Alta would question him. He would have to consult the Krell library for the answer.

The process started as the liquid was sprayed on Robby at about shoulder level when the Krell music started, just as it had in the oil job station on Altair 4. The familiar crystal recording media and the compact sound player looked similar to the one he used on Altair 4 but the sounds were different. The tonalities were not the same pattern that had played during his oil jobs on Altair 4. It would be inaccurate to say Robby was puzzled but his data banks were constantly on the alert to update information.

“Question,” Robby announced, “is the activation code for

e98 different from c36?”

The caretaker robot was terse, “Yes. See the library reference.”

“Thank you, I will.” came the reply from Robby as the machinery droned on and the Krell music played.

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Adams had decided it was essential to put as many minds as possible to work on the problem, with the exception of Dugan. The cargo containers had been pulled and opened from the small bays on C-57-D, the five artifacts removed and placed on work stands. The six men moved about examining each, looking for anything that might suggest a function, mechanism or trigger. Randall was making a video record to send to Midland Fleet Command. Perhaps the scientist there could help.

Adams was doing a lot of catch up work at this time preparing his final reports for submission. The findings on Altair 4 seemed to be a very small part now of an expanding puzzle. The commander was hoping a full disclosure, save a few details concerning Alta, might bring the help they wanted, but exactly what help was that? To locate and recover missing people? To contain an alien threat? To initiate a research project?

“We have looked at these pieces dozens of times while we were en-route and no one could come up with anything, and I’m talking about the entire crew. Cookie even suggested one might be a steak tenderizer and he could be right.” Adams tried not to laugh but his frustration placed him in a cavalier mood. He went on “All of these were taken from a shelving unit that looked like it was for storage of spare parts. We have tried everything at our disposal to examine these artifacts but without success. Microscopes, x-rays, NMR, sonar, radar, med scanners, everything. Nothing penetrates these three made from Krell metal and these other two appear to be hollow.”

Dr. Renfro had heard the term but wasn't sure so he asked

“Krell metal, what exactly is it? And what about the other items not made from Krell metal? What are they made from?”

Adams wasn't sure how to answer but went strictly by what Morbius had told him. “According to Dr. Morbius, Krell metal is a steel much denser than ordinary earthly steel, and those are his words. He said and we also agree, it absorbs tremendous amounts of energy without any adverse affects. Is it really steel? Hell if I know and we have no way to even determine the chemical composition. A high resolution scanning electron microscope isn't exactly standard equipment on a cruiser.”

“Not on this colony either unless the UP geology boys have one.” said Renfro, crossing his arms and looking at Flapjack. Flapjack took over with “What about the other do-hickers, what are they made of?”

“Those, er, do-hickers, on the outside,” Adams started, “it's an ordinary alloy of high nickle stainless steel with chromium but it doesn't behave like steel when x-rayed. Randall, you know more about it than I do. Finish up please.”

Randal had been most involved in trying to determine the nature of the artifacts, but even with the assistance of Robby, the ship's computer and ship board analytical equipment he could not determine anything beyond the surface composition of the metal. “Yes sir.” Randall replied, “Doc, it's some kind of laminate, at least that is what the sonar says. Steel and, well, whatever. We could open the steel items but it would require an enormous amount of energy and could damage whatever is inside though it appears they are both hollow. And the Krell metal, forget it! That stuff is heavy, very heavy!”

“Thank you Randall.” the commander said as everyone's eyes turned from Randall and back to the artifacts. “There is one more thing I need to show you. I almost forgot about it since I think we know the purpose and how to use it. Wallace, would you get the Krell recording crystals and the playback device? Thanks.”

Adams did not consider the sound recording crystal and playback device a mystery since they had determined how they worked. He made a clumsy attempt to cover his oversight but none was necessary as Martin, Renfro and Flapjack were more like children thrilled to get a new toy to play with than curious as to why it was kept back from them. “Dr. Morbius showed us this and said this particular crystal was recorded by Krell musicians 500,000 years ago.”

With the playback device now on a work stand, Adams plugged the crystal into the top socket and gave it a slight twist. With another motion to the side of the device, the volume increased and the tonalities of the Krell music were now clearly heard. “They call that crap music?” blurted out Flapjack, never one to conceal his opinion.

Adams laughed but added “I suppose you have to be Krell to appreciate its artistic qualities.” Adams found Flapjack's brazen honesty occasionally humorous, more often irritating but always useful. “Yeah, I guess even the mighty Krell had their top 10 and the bottom 1,000. The crystals Morbius found could have been a collection on the way to the trash heap.”

There were a few laughs and chuckles but the somber mood returned quickly. “Gentlemen, do with these what you can.” Adams said as he pointed a finger at Wallace “Larry, I need your assistance and advice. Ward room.” Adams paused briefly, then added “I have to prepare and file my reports with fleet. I won't send the Q and A part until we can talk.”

Adams and Wallace made their way to the ward room as the four remaining men focused their attention on the Krell playback device. It was marvelously compact and completely self-contained. How did it work? Where was the sound coming from? If they could understand this device, would it help them understand the artifacts?

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When Alta and Sheila returned to the Krell lab, they found Robby there looking at the library view screen. “How was that oil job Robby.” asked Alta, with a hint of laughter in her

voice.

“The word you might use Miss Alta is refreshing, but a more appropriate term would be rejuvenating.” With a click and a clack, Robby continued. “The liquid does have a quality to reduce friction, as you would expect from a lubricant. However, the caretaker robot that assisted me referred to the material as a repair fluid, just as I do and, in my case designated as e98.”

Alta was obviously perturbed and said, somewhat facetiously “That's fascinating Robby but what does it have to do with anything?”

Alta did not expect an answer and was about to speak when Robby interrupted “Miss Alta, it may have to do with everything since repair fluid e98 contains the MAMBEs discovered by Dr. Renfro.” Alta was left open-mouthed and Sheila looked down at the view screen Robby was reading, unable to comprehend anything she saw. “The sounds we have all referred to as Krell music is not music in the sense we define it. It was not written or performed for entertainment.”

Alta's mouth closed and she was now starting to comprehend what Robby was saying. “Read Robby, learn more, we need this information.”

Sheila was not entirely familiar with the topic of the conversation, but her question provoked a profitable response from Robby. “Krell music? What is that?”

“Miss Sheila, it is not music but a coding sequence written by Krell engineers to activate and control mechanically augmented micro-biological entities, or MAMBEs if you prefer.” the robot answered. “In my case with e98, the MAMBEs were instructed to make surface repairs, tune electrical circuits embedded in my metal skin, test and service micro-motors and precisely place molecules of lubricating fluid at contact points.”

“Are you saying MAMBEs are controlled by sound?” Alta asked.

“Yes,” Robby answered “but it must be properly

sequenced, contain the correct harmonics, include volume modulation and relative timing marks. The information is freely available in the Krell library.”

Alta was being overwhelmed learning that what she thought she knew was all wrong. She remarked to Sheila that every time she saw Robby using the Krell synthesizer on Altair 4, she thought he was playing Krell music for her entertainment. Much to her regret now, Alta had not made an effort to explore or understand the synthesizer. It was now obvious the synthesizer used MAMBEs and these were programmed using Krell music. To make apples required one album, a dress another, and the fluid for Robby's oil job yet another album. All of this data had to be formulated, coded and stored. The crystals were copies and had to be portable since MAMBEs had applications almost anywhere they could survive.

Alta went silent as a horrible thought entered her mind. “Aunt Sheila, the MAMBEs in my head, what are they listening to? What instructions are they receiving?” Alta paused, then pointing to the educator asked “What tunes did that device drill into my head?”

Sheila could see her niece was shaken and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. “We have to get this information to John Alta. He may know or discover how we can use it.” With Alta's nod, Sheila continued “Perhaps Robby needs to learn more from the caretaker robots. Searching the entire Krell library could take, well, forever if we don't know what we are looking for.” Alta turned her head to look Sheila in the eyes, hopeful eyes that were now smiling that some progress had been made. “Maybe we need to arrange a date for Robby. I know Maud isn't his type, but maybe robot opposites attract.”

“Yes,” sighed Alta, “we must give it a try and find a way to get this information to John, but there is so much to send.”

“I think your Robby can handle that.” quipped Sheila, as she removed her arm from Alta and turned to face the robot.

“What do you think of Maud, Robby? Don't be shy now, tell us.”

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The energy cost for faster-than-light communication was very high, so much so that interactive voice communication was not practical. Messages had to be sent in very short and highly compressed form to keep the energy requirements practical. It would take the most powerful communication hardware up to several minutes to recharge to send a micro second data burst. A two way conversation between Adams and Midland Fleet Command was a thing of the future. For now, data packed bursts every few minutes would have to do.

For ships, the situation was more difficult. The power requirements for faster-than-light travel and communications rivaled each other in magnitude so that only one or the other could be equipped by a ship. Making the ship larger to accommodate a communication generator would then require a larger propulsion generator, eating up the space that was needed for the communication generator. It was a losing cycle at this stage of UP technology. This was why the ship's crew was well drilled on cannibalizing ship parts to make communication possible once the ship was on safe ground and the propulsion system and life support were no longer required.

Adams was explaining this to Renfro, Martin and Flapjack as he and Wallace took the lead toward the space port communication center. They would have to send their data and questions in a burst and wait for the answer. If they had follow up questions and needed to provide additional data, that would have to be packaged and sent as a burst, assuming the generator had recharged by that time. This slow and tedious back and forth could not be avoided.

Adams handed a small, square data log to the communication officer, who happened to be Ensign Otomi today. He was assured it would be sent promptly, certainly within the next five minutes. “Anything interesting happening

ensign?” Adams asked politely to make some small conversation.

To his surprise, Otomi answered with a “Yes. The Comstock is being held in quarantine and no other ships are permitted to leave, direct orders from Midland Fleet Command.” That raised Adams eyebrows but it did not come as a complete surprise. Fleet tended to be borderline paranoid with concerns for alien contamination. It wouldn't be long before some loose lips revealed that possibility to the population of Barnardsville.

“That's interesting.” Adams said, trying to feign some degree of surprise. “We are off to lunch and I'll check back in about an hour and twenty. Thanks ensign.”

Adams turned from the counter to face his companions and asked “The Pick and Shovel?” The consensus was clearly yes as the men left the communications office to find a gentle rain falling outside. “Shall we walk it? This isn't bad.” Again, a consensus and motion toward Barnardsville center.

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Robby could communicate with any one of the caretaker robots by radio if he knew their assigned pre-fix. Unfortunately, as he told Alta and Sheila, he did not know the pre-fix for Maud, or any robot for that matter. It was Sheila who suggested “Try the Krell equivalent of M, A, U and D.” Could it be that simple?

“Yes,” announced Robby, “Maud is on her way here.” It was funny to hear Robby mention Maud in the context of a female, but both Sheila and Alta looked at each other and giggled.

“Got a hot date Robby?” Alta said jokingly.

“I do not understand Miss Alta. Can you clarify?” the robot asked.

“Never mind, just learn what you can as we discussed. Get her away from here so I can work without any concern for interference.” With that, Alta turned her attention to Sheila as she spoke. “Aunt Sheila, that device there, I called it an

educator but it is a lot more than that. Robby helped me with some translations and I now understand it is actually another portal to the Krell library. Unlike the viewer screen here, it can project three dimensional data using the Krell brain as a transceiver. I'll make use of that while Robby keeps Maud occupied and learns what he needs to learn.”

The lab door snapped open and Maud made her way toward Robby, standing near the educator. “You require assistance?” she asked, her husky female voice speaking more softly than usual.

“Yes,” Robby replied, “I need information concerning the facilities and a brief history of this outpost. I would like to observe what is here and project the results to Miss Alta.”

Alta turned to Sheila and explained “Robby can transmit through the library channel and we can receive the images and data through the educator. I have to grow up fast and this is one way. Think of me as a child learning and mentally maturing because that is how the robots think of me. When I reach a certain level of mental maturity, I expect my relationship with the robots to change.” It seemed reasonable and Sheila nodded her approval.

The silence that followed was strange and uneasy. Neither Robby nor Maud said anything but stood facing each other, though it was not at all certain where Maud's face was located. Alta decided to try something different and direct with “You may go now.” directed to Robby and Maud. With that, Maud spun a quarter turn left and glided toward the lab door with Robby close behind. “Just a moment.” shouted Alta, “Robby, can you record everything you see and learn so I can watch it later?”

“Yes Miss Alta.” came the reply.

“Thank you, you can go now.” With that, the robots continued toward and exited the lab door, which snapped shut behind them. “I hope he has a fun date. Our lives may depend on it.”

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In the corridor, Maud stopped, drew a sheet of plastic film from one of several of her paneled compartments and fashioned it into a travel sled using another appendage and some kind of forming tool. This would facilitate Robby's tour of the facility if he were towed and not required to walk. With Robby in place, Maud slowly floated in the direction where Robby and the women had first entered the facility. Any conversation between the robots would be instantly recorded and translated from Krell to English and then linked to library files as needed.

“Tell me about the history of this outpost.” Robby began. Alta had prepared Robby with a number of questions and it seemed that Maud was happy to answer. Alta and Sheila had a front row seat at the educator where the history of the Krell at Barnard's Star began to unfold.

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Despite having discovered faster-than-light travel and communication, the Krell remained in the Altair system, establishing several research stations and outposts on planets and moons. The three dimensional image in the educator identified the home planet Altair 4 and six research stations. The Krell had decided to focus their scientific energy and resources on improvement of the Krell race. Alta held her breath in anticipation as the view zoomed on Altair 4 and some kind of meeting room, quite elegant and posh. She would see the Krell for the first time, not the blurry creatures of her dreams but the real thing as recorded for the Krell library.

Alta was not shocked by what she saw, but stunned would be a more appropriate description of the feeling that swept over her as she watched the Krell file into the conference room. They looked as she thought they would, living models for a robot she knew as Robby. Her dreams had also deceived her into believing the Krell were short and squat.

The Krell were tall, standing about two meters tall and barrel chested. Their head appeared to be affixed directly to

their shoulders without a neck but did have a limited turning radius. The arms protruded straight out from joints located about mid-thorax. The legs were segmented, identical to Robby but they appeared to be much more flexible. Ears, eyes, nose and mouth were where they should be though they were somewhat peculiar in shape. The dome topped head was hairless complimenting the lack of eyebrows.

The most amazing feature was not revealed until several of the Krell turned to face away from the camera. They had eyes on the back of their head and another set of arms set opposite to those in front. The hands looked very human however, not at all like Robby's. What Alta could not determine was any differentiation between the sexes, if there was any. She could not tell if she was seeing all males, or all females, or both.

At this point, Sheila interjected something that Alta would remember from now forward. "They are not frightening, are they? They look like they could be very friendly." It seemed like a superficial remark but it was a plain and outspoken truth. Despite their awesome brains and accomplishments, they were just creatures, very much like people.

The point of showing the council meeting was its historic significance in turning the direction of Krell science yet again. After 400,000 years, the Krell believed they had conquered disease, mental illness, crime and similar physical, mental and emotional disorders. This most "happy and cheerful" race could now march to their destiny in the stars. The Barnard's Star outpost was one of the first established outside the Altair system.

The moon was a hostile environment for the Krell and a vast underground complex was built to support mining operations. Atmosphere generators would be introduced about 50,000 years later when the surface deposits of valuable minerals were discovered. Before that, the Krell had always expected to go deep like they had on Altair 4 to get valuable ores.

Auric Canyon may be the modern name but it would better

have been called Auric Mountain when the Krell started extracting gold. The mountain was eventually leveled and the gouge called Auric Canyon was dug in pursuit of gold, silver, tantalum and scandium. The scandium was a rare find in such close proximity to gold. The Krell had discovered and developed the richest gold fields anywhere in the known reaches of the galaxy.

Yes, the Krell had a very high demand for gold and the Barnard's Star mine remained in operation for 200,000 years but was being phased out due to a new discovery.

The Krell experiments with early MAMBEs often progressed very little and very slowly, frequently marred by some major setbacks, particularly for medical applications. Eventually, industrial applications for atomic level MAMBEs became practical and started the quest for nuclear level MAMBEs.

The death knell for the Barnard's Star mines came with the development of the first nuclear level MAMBE. High purity gold in large quantities could be made from any material. The hazards and cost of mining gold was no longer justifiable. The vast Barnard's Star complex would be shut down and relegated to a listening outpost of the Krell empire, which now spanned 437 planets and moons in 340 star systems.

Two events led the Krell to turn inward and abandon space altogether. The development of nuclear level MAMBEs now made exploration and mining in deep space unnecessary as a part of maintaining the Krell lifestyle and wealth. Space, as a scientific frontier, held less appeal as the Krell considered other avenues of scientific research to improve the lot of the Krell race. Experiments with Krell and machine telepathy were well under way and looked promising. Krell to Krell telepathy was an unrealized dream for some, and an unrealized nightmare for others, but the machine was different.

The second event occurred soon after the Barnard's Star complex was closed. Space was neither empty nor uninhabited, as the Krell Empire would soon discover.

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Adams and his lunch party were seated at their favorite table when Ensign Otomi made his presence known to the maitre d'hotel. Adams knew it had to be for him and motioned Otomi over when their eyes met.

“Commander Adams, I'm very sorry to interrupt your lunch but I received the first of a several part message for you. It was marked Extremely Urgent and For Your Eyes Only.” That meant the message would have to be decrypted and Adams could do that only from the ship.

As he stood, clearly disappointed they could not enjoy at least one peaceful late lunch after the harrowing experience of the day, Adams apologized to his companions and demanded they stay and have an enjoyable time.

The commander knew that Extremely Urgent was to be taken quite literally. What was so urgent that Admiral Seitgart needed his immediate attention?

Chapter 15 A Harrowing Day's End

Sheila placed her hand on Alta's shoulder to give her a gentle nudge to wake her but startled her instead, as she snapped to a full upright position in the chair at the educator. It was early evening by Sheila's watch but the day had started for both of them at sunrise and had been harrowing to say the least. Alta was dozing off occasionally and Sheila could feel the urge to sleep sweeping over her. "Alta, we need to stop. This is too much for a tired mind to take in. We have several mysteries to solve and a good night's sleep would help."

"I'm awake, I'm awake" Alta snapped back from her adrenalin surge. She took a look around, spotting Sheila first, then Robby, then looking at the educator but still disorientated. Her aunt's words reached her consciousness a little late but her head started to nod as she spoke "Perhaps you're right. I am exhausted, physically and mentally but I have one more thing I must do. Robby." she called.

"Yes Miss Alta." came the familiar voice of the robot, "How can I be of service?"

"Send the first part of the recording to John, uh, Commander Adams and tell him I need to speak to him before we send more." Alta's speech was slow and her enunciation very careful as she continued "Tell him I will find a place to use the com-link sometime tomorrow."

"Yes Miss Alta." replied Robby. The robot could roam freely so finding a suitable location to transmit to the ship was not a concern. The Krell robots could interfere but that was to be seen and there was no indication they would.

"Let's go Alta, it's time to sleep" Sheila's voice urged as Robby left the Krell lab first. "The quarters the Krell prepared for us look adequate but I hope they have showers and fresh

clothes for us as well. But right now, I just want to hug a pillow.”

Alta turned off the educator and slowly rose from the chair, steadied by her aunt’s hand on her shoulder and the other cradling her elbow. “Yes, I need sleep.” she said softly, standing, turning and slowly walking toward the lab door. Sheila took a place at Alta's side with her arm around her as they left the lab.

“I don't quite know what to make of what we saw in that second part.” Alta said. “I don't want to alarm anyone and I think I should do more research before we send that out. Do you?”

Sheila was struggling to stay awake as they ambled down the corridor but she wanted to assure Alta that she understood the question and reason for asking. “Yes Alta, what we learned is much too ambiguous and I'm sure we can find many of the missing details. I think a fresh and rested mind will help us do that.” Sheila did not fully trust what they had seen because of their mental state. They were both very tired and could be easily confused and misled.

Alta turned her head to look at her aunt, gave her a smile and said “I'm so glad you are here.” Alta's eyes were glazed and any attempt at intelligent conversation would be wasted. Sheila smiled back.

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“Cookie, is that you?” the commander queried as he looked toward the galley from the astro-navigation station. The noises from that area suggested Cookie was having an engagement with some kitchen utensils.

“Just a moment sir, I'll be right there.” came the reply from Cookie. Adams and Randall moved toward the table near the engineering station as Cookie made his appearance. “I'm here sir.”

“How much of that rocket bourbon do we still have?” the commander asked. Adams and Randall both took a seat facing each other and leaned back, their faces and body language

showing their exhaustion.

“About 15 gallons sir” came the answer from Cookie.

“Fifteen gallons? Where the hell did the other 45 go? We couldn't have drank that much” Adams said with a note of surprise in his voice.

“Oh no sir, we only drank a quarter, 15 gallons, on the trip here from Altair 4. The crew wanted some for shore leave and for trading.” Cookie paused for a reaction then continued “That bourbon is better than anything you can find in Barnardsville.”

Adams looked at Randall who gave a single nod, then turned his attention to Cookie. “Bring out a pint please, and two, no, make that three, five, six glasses.” Adams looked back at Randall and before Cookie could turn he said “Oh hell, make it two pints and a bucket of ice. There are more than a few of us that will need help sleeping tonight.”

“Commander, are you clairvoyant or something?” said Randall, just as Wallace started through the deck hatch, followed by Dr. Renfro, with the voices of Sheriff Martin and Flapjack right behind. “How was dinner gents?” Randall asked.

The small talk that followed suggested dinner was fine but it was clear that everyone was frustrated by the days events, and exhausted as well. Just as everyone was taking a seat at the table, Cookie arrived with two pints of ancient rocket bourbon, six glasses and a bucket of ice. Allow me sir.” Cookie offered as he opened the bottles and asked around, “straight up, neat or on the rocks?” Adams gave Cookie a quick glance and any reservations he had about speaking in his presence were gone. Cookie had been a valued and trustworthy member of the crew and there was no reason to exclude him from what was going to be said. “Anything else sir?”

“That's all Cookie.” the commander replied, then thought to add “If you would like to join us, get yourself a glass and a chair. What I have to say I will be telling the entire crew so

while you are here, you may as well get it early.” That was greeted with puzzled faces all around and as Dr. Renfro began to raise his glass, he paused thinking that honor should be left to the commander. “Drink up gents. Nothing to celebrate yet.” Adams said while Cookie pulled a glass from his apron, grabbed a chair at the engineers station and sat down at the end of the table.

Silence. Stares. A few sips and eager looks toward the commander. What did he have to tell them? Something about the orders he received that interrupted his lunch? Adams had his hands clasped behind his head, dropping them suddenly as he sprang forward and sat straight up.

“I received orders from Midland Fleet Command. I thought they were in response to the messages we dispatched earlier, but apparently not. Why they were sent at this time and in response to what, well, I don't know.” Adams could see he had everyone's attention as Randall also moved to a straight up position and others rested their arms on the table, leaning forward to better see and hear the commander. “What I am about to tell you will mean my court-martial.” That drew a few murmurs.

Adams continued with “I have been ordered to suspend any and all communication with Sheriff Martin, and to quote fleet command, that Flapjack character too. I may continue to work with Dr. Renfro but I am not to disclose any information that might normally be considered classified or sensitive.” Adams paused but just long enough to take a large slug of bourbon. “I have only been told that the sheriff is considered a security risk with highly questionable loyalties and Flapjack is, again to quote fleet command, a highly unstable individual with criminal proclivities.”

Martin and Flapjack were both noticeably upset but it was Renfro who then asked “Well, what about me?”

“You are in the pending further investigation category doctor.” Adams replied. “I shouldn't be telling any of you what I just told you. It directly violates my orders. I am not

satisfied with the reason for the orders, especially in view of the invaluable assistance you have all provided. I need your help regardless of anything fleet command has to say.”

Martin had just finished a swallow of bourbon and started pouring another glass when he very calmly volunteered “I think I know what happened.” Adams gave an open hand gesture, seeking the explanation. “Dugan is behind this and my bet is that he sent a dispatch to Kiev Park Police Command who contacted Midland Fleet Command with the colonel's concerns.”

Randall broke the silence with “What concerns?”

Martin sat his drink down as he turned to face Randall at his side. “You heard me earlier today when I volunteered to fly the chopper out of Auric Canyon. Do you recall?”

“Sure” responded Randall, “You said you had experience flying in the Cron War. So what's the big deal?”

Martin sucked in his stomach, then answered “I flew for the other side.” Randall's jaw dropped but it was Wallace that was turning red, whispering under his breath and tightening his grip on his glass. Adams had a more subdued reaction, heaving a deep sigh and throwing his head back.

“Why didn't you tell us this earlier?” was Adams reaction that seemed to meet with the approval of Wallace, Randall and yes, even Cookie.

Martin remained calm and responded “Tell what? That I was on the other side, that we lost, that I accepted amnesty and a voluntary exile to Barnard's? That is in the past, it's on the record and has nothing to do with our current situation. Do you really think I plan to start a revolution against the UP with my wife and niece both missing?”

It took Wallace time to calm down, but listen he did and a sip of bourbon later started nodding his head, clearly absorbing what Martin said. “Skipper, if I may.” he asked Adams, waiting for some signal to continue.

Wallace had regained his temperament and spoke very calmly. “I'm sorry I almost lost my temper. I fought in the

Cron War too but on the UP side. That was before your time in fleet commander, and ensign. You know about it from the history books, perhaps even some recollections when you were younger but I was in it. Most of all sheriff, I owe you an apology. I have no reason to be angry with you. You colonials fought honorably and for what you thought was a just cause.”

Martin was about to say something but Wallace silenced him with a head shake and a hand wave, and then continued. “You are absolutely right sheriff, it has nothing to do with now and I have no reason to hold a grudge. I'm sure my side killed as many of your friends as your side killed of mine.” With that, Wallace dropped his head and closed his eyes. He had come to like Martin and that too was now and not the past.

“But why would Dugan do this?” Adams asked.

Martin had a suspicion but nothing more. “Dugan doesn't want me or Flapjack anywhere near Auric Canyon. That goes far beyond the UP directive suspending mining in the canyon area. He fought me tooth and nail about searching for those missing miners. But,” Martin was about to continue, then changed saying “wait just a moment, something is wrong. Why didn't I see this before?”

Adams sat up now, started nodding, pointing at Martin and said “Yes, something is very wrong but it didn't hit me until just now.” Martin said nothing, making it clear he wanted Adams to figure this out himself. “The protest outside of city hall about the missing miners started the day we arrived. Right?” Adams asked and was answered in the affirmative by Martin, Flapjack and Renfro. “OK,” the commander continued “it's unlikely they disappeared that morning and the protests started that afternoon. It takes time to figure out if someone is actually missing. I'm sure there had to be a delay between the time they went missing and a protest was organized. In fact, wasn't it the delay in trying to find them that caused the protest? Hadn't they been missing sometime before our arrival?”

Martin had to confirm Adams's question at this point. "That's right, about four days before your arrival is the best we have been able to determine. Does that sound right to you Flapjack?" The gruff forty-niner gave that a thumbs up, head nod and a whispered yes-sir-ree.

Adams saw the direction of the conversation but prepared everyone for a drift. "We can't be sure the robots were not active before our arrival in Barnard's colony space but all the evidence says they did nothing until our ship arrived. I have to go with what is most likely, so I'm left to believe that it wasn't the robots but it was something, or someone else that caused the miners to disappear. Is that what you had in mind sheriff, and possibly some linkage to Colonel Dugan?"

"Exactly" replied Martin, "his refusal to cooperate with a search wasn't about some petty jurisdictional claim. Something is wrong in Auric Canyon and he wants to keep it hidden."

While some side conversations were starting, everyone went silent when they heard the com-link at the engineers station chirping. Randall excused himself from the table to answer the transmission. It was only a few seconds before Randall turned to Adams and said "Sir, it's Robby with a transmission and a message. The transmission is a visual and the message is an audible from Miss Alta."

"I'm exhausted gentlemen," the commander said, then added "but this could be time critical and I think we should watch the transmission." There was a small discussion expressing mostly surprise that Alta had managed to send them anything so soon after her capture, but everyone agreed it should not be delayed. Adams looked to Randall and requested "Pipe the audible to my com-link, I'll use the ear piece. Give me a moment and we can watch the visual on the main view plate."

There was some chattering around the table as the commander listened to Alta's message. The part where she mentioned a second half to the visual intrigued him but he

would say nothing about it to the others at this point. He relayed to Martin that Sheila was fine and they were both going to rest. Everyone had shifted to a comfortable viewing position and Adams told Randall to start the transmission.

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Alta was pleasantly surprised to see her friends. She was concerned they might abandon her now that she was in the custody of the Krell robots. The one thing that was different about her dream was that her friends were no longer blurry and formless, but were unmistakably Krell. She could also understand most of what they were saying.

Alta also knew she was dreaming, but how much of her dream was a creation of her mind and how much was a creation of some external influence? She decided on the most direct approach. She would ask her friends who they were, where they came from and why they were here. She asked in Krell and the dialogue began.

Her friends were the electro-magnetic signatures of Krell minds that had been captured in an organic recording media now functioning in her brain. There were four of them and they had lived on Altair 4 at one time. They were among many chosen by the Krell for electro-magnetic preservation. These four in particular were teachers of science, philosophy, language and history. They would be Alta's tutors and special advisers as well.

They made it clear their purpose was to bring her to mental, emotional and social maturity based on Krell standards and expectations. They knew she was not pure Krell, but some kind of hybrid that included significant genetic material from another species. Nonetheless, they expressed high hopes that Alta would embrace her Krell inner being.

She understood now that her friends were indeed well intentioned and were not the product of her own mental activity. They would help her with the Krell language in particular, but also give her a foundation in Krell philosophy.

The history and science were part of the normal learning experience for any Krell youngster and the least of her visitors' concerns for her development. The educator had strengthened the neural connections of her friends and would facilitate the learning process.

What she also understood and what was most important to her was the Krell concept of an awakening. This would be a breakthrough to a level of maturity that would free her of the guardian robots' custodial powers. The awakening would make her a free agent. She could then command the robots.

Alta was completely aware she was dreaming but vowed to take every opportunity to mature and reach her awakening. That was the only way she could win freedom for herself and Sheila. It was the only way the Krell robots would release her. It may also be the only way she could save the colonists on Barnard's colony. The barrier was very high and that was her major concern. Could her human brain do what the Krell expected?

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When the transmission ended, the seven men watching were speechless and mind-numbed. There was no doubt that the Barnard's colony moon was a Krell outpost, not only in the distant past, but today as well. It was manned by robots and they would do whatever their programming instructed them to do.

There was a special satisfaction for Dr. Renfro to discover that not only was he right about the MAMBES but that he was right about more sophisticated mechanically augmented organisms capable of working at the nuclear level. That would be a tremendous leap in the ability to manipulate matter and energy, essentially performing fission and fusion with great specificity on demand. There was nothing even remotely approaching that capability in UP science that could be applied on the industrial scale mastered by the Krell.

The ease with which Alta was able to gather this information left everyone in the room baffled and would be

the topic of conversation for some time to come. The robots would not release Alta but apparently, they would keep no Krell secrets from her either.

“We have a great deal to think about gentlemen and Alta tells me there is more to come.” Adams said to the group. “There is one thing I have to get out of the way before we continue.” Adams's voice was grim as he looked squarely at Wallace and said “Lieutenant, as the ships executive officer, it is your duty to relieve me of command for direct violation of my orders. If you do not, you will face a court-martial. You will have no defense other than the case I make for violating those orders. I will not have an argument that the orders were illegal, only that they were issued under circumstances that involved deception, which I will have to prove.”

Wallace apparently knew the predicament he faced and had an answer ready. “Skipper, Dugan is up to his neck in no good and I'm going to help you prove it but even more important, I think my obligation to the safety and security of the UP is best served by you commanding. The fleet order is ill advised and just plain stupid, and I'll stand by that, sir.”

That brought everyone to their feet, going to Wallace, patting his back, shaking his hand and thanking him for taking a principled stand. Even Cookie joined the throng. Adams graciously thanked his exec for the support and pledged to do his best to complete the two missions: rescue the missing persons and investigate the alien presence. Those goals had never changed in his mind as he reminded everyone to stay focused.

“I think we can wait until tomorrow to discuss the transmission we just saw but if anyone believes there is anything urgent to address now, speak up.” Adams told the group.

Flapjack had one observation but wasn't sure how important it might be. “There is no scandium here, at least none has ever been reported. Yet that visual says the Krell were mining scandium. That was no mistake. They gave the

atomic number and my guess is Robby did the translation.”

Adams was puzzled and had to ask “What is scandium and why do you think it may be important?”

Flapjack seemed to be the resident expert and started to answer “It is a common element but rarely found in a concentrated ore suitable for mining and refining. It's usually alloyed with aluminum and now some other materials to improve mechanical properties. Very little is produced and it is very expensive. More expensive than gold in fact. No one has found any on Barnard's. If they did, they would be very rich compared to the gold miners.”

“Give it some thought Flapjack. Maybe it is important.” said Adams, hoping he was not grasping at straws. No one else said anything so Adams continued. “We'll resume at 8 AM. I know it's early now but I'm totally spent. Today was, well, a wringer.” There were a few amens to that and with the exception of Cookie, everyone was dead tired.

As the group started to break up, Martin approached Wallace, and speaking quietly thanked him for his words concerning the Cron War. “No sheriff, thank you! I can't say we are close friends but I have a lot of respect for you that was earned by your present deeds and not some unknown past. You made me realize how much I could have lost by holding a grudge that had no merit.” Martin grasped his hand when it was offered by Wallace, and gave it a firm shake.

Before he left, he approached Adams and just said in a whisper “That is one hell of a good exec you have. An excellent choice.”

Chapter 16 The Menace

Sheila was in good cheer when she awoke. A good night's sleep could do that and refresh one's outlook. She was happy, smiling, even humming but not self-deceived into believing the solution to her troubles, and Alta's, were just around the corner.

The L-shaped room was windowless but had one pocket that featured an outdoor scene complete on two sides with a blue sky, sunlight, flora and fauna. It was a very high quality holograph as best as Sheila could determine and gave the convincing appearance of a patio with a low rail fence. The room had a number of holographic windows as well, giving it the appearance of a small cottage.

This was not the room the Krell had initially assigned her, at least not from the inside appearance. Had she been moved or had the Krell robots performed an interior decorating miracle? The furnishings were the same and placed where she recalled they had been at first sight. A closet was in the same place and she decided to look inside. It was filled with clothes, some of which caught her attention and seemed oddly familiar. She examined one dress closely then realized it was identical to one worn by Alta when they first met. There were also shoes on the closet floor. They all looked the right size too.

Sheila took the dress off the hanger and a pair of shoes from the floor and placed them on and near a dressing stand. There were some loose items on the dresser, mostly jewelry but also a hairbrush and comb, ribbons and even some basic makeup. The drawers contained familiar undergarments and some accessories. She took what she needed and decided to find the bath and shower.

At the end of the room farthest from the door, where the double bed was located, she noticed a peculiar depression in the side wall that joined the patio. She stepped closer and a section of the wall parted and slid open, revealing a fairly spacious bath with lavatory, toilet, whirlpool tub and shower stall. Several bath robes hung on a wall bracket along side a vertical shelf unit filled with towels. That's what I want she thought, and as she stepped into the room, the door behind her slid closed.

Alta had entered the room at that very moment as Sheila disappeared behind the closing door. She made a quick inspection of the room and could hear the shower water starting to run and her aunt singing a happy tune, something quite old she thought. "Aunt Sheila?" Alta raised her voice.

Sheila was slightly startled into silence, but she recognized the voice and quickly calmed herself. "Yes, Alta, is that you?" she responded.

"Yes." Alta replied, "I see the robots took care of you too. They made copies of everything Robby had made for me. You're a little taller than me and slightly more curvy so I hope they got the measurements adjusted."

"I'll find out in a moment" Sheila said as she turned off the water and resumed her singing, but in a more subdued voice. "This bath robe fits perfectly." she said. "Did they move us?" she asked.

"No." Alta answered, "These rooms are in the same place, at the end of the corridor closest to the cafeteria. They must have done something while we were sleeping. They have breakfast ready for us and the coffee is," and she paused, thinking why not, and finished with "well, out of this world." It was true. "I'll be in the cafeteria. Take your time." She could here her aunt improvise a "yes I will" into the song she was singing. Alta smiled broadly and left her aunt's quarters, turned right and about three meters further and she was at an entrance to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria also seemed more cheerful with false patios,

table grouping surrounds, a decorative slat ceiling and potted plants. It was quite a contrast from the plain surroundings she and her aunt had encountered on their arrival. To her surprise, Robby was standing near the table she had selected earlier for her morning coffee. “Good morning Robby.” she said, as she pulled the chair from the table and sat.

“Good morning Miss Alta.” The robots had not changed everything on Robby. When he spoke, it always sounded like he was giving a command. “Will Miss Sheila be joining us this morning?”

“Yes,” Alta answered, “and we will follow the schedule I gave you yesterday. Sheila and I will return to the Krell lab and you will continue your tour with Maud. By the way, how are you two getting along?” Alta was laughing and awkwardly trying to conceal it. Robby's head was rotating left and right.

“Robots are not required to get along to perform their duties Miss Alta.” Robby said with the proper emphasis to express a slight hint of incredulity.

Alta laughed again, checking it the best she could as she said “But don't you find her attractive?”

That drew a few clicks and clacks from Robby, more head rotations and “I find her...” a pause, and then “metallic.”

Alta couldn't contain the laughter now and that caught Sheila's attention as she entered the room. Her niece laughing brought a smile to her face as she moved toward the table where Robby was standing. “Good morning Mr. Robby.” she beamed as she joined Alta at the table.

“Good morning Miss Sheila.” Robby responded. “Miss Alta is acting strangely and needs you to discipline her. Ha ha ha.” Sheila and Alta both stopped what they were doing, looked intensely at Robby and started laughing as if on cue. Where did he get that from?

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With the crew dismissed from shipboard duties, Adams decided to move the meeting from the ward room to the

engineering area where they would be close to the main view plate, the com-link station and have more room to stretch in a less claustrophobic environment. Cookie had prepared breakfast pastries and coffee and it appeared as if everyone was well rested and fed.

Adams started. "Does anyone have anything to add to what we saw and discussed yesterday?" No response. "Nothing?" he asked again. There was some head turning at the table but no one said anything. "We are in hostile territory and I want to make that distinction and not call it enemy territory. They don't like us but that doesn't mean they want to kill us."

Adams paused but could see his audience wanted him to continue. "We can't beat the robots militarily, at least not with the weapons available to us, and I don't think we should try to beat them militarily. They have captives and could take many more if they wanted to." Adams looked around the table and if he could describe in a single word what he saw, it was despair.

Sheriff Martin could see that too and said it aloud, "I think what most of us are feeling is helplessness. There is nothing we can do but, well, wait and hope Alta and Sheila come through with something, but what?"

Flapjack as his usual cantankerous self offered "I have no personal interest in this other than my best friend Julius and his wife Sheila, but I'm not going to let some cast off robots from a race that self-annihilated 200,000 years ago drive me from my home. It ain't gonna happen and I'd rather die charging those tin cans than let machines tell people what they have to do."

Wallace also spoke up and added "I wouldn't quite put it the way Flapjack did, but I'm right along side him. People have lived here peaceably and made their homes here. The Krell are extinct, they had their chance and it's our turn now."

Adams was moved and his personal stake was quite high. It was clearly more than Alta to the others and he could sense

that greater interest. There were 40,000 colonists to consider. “Alta told me a second transmission was coming but she wanted to speak to me first. I can't think of anything we can do except wait. In fact, I still haven't received a response from fleet to the messages we sent yesterday and when we do, I'm not convinced they will be all that helpful. They may be the brains but they know far less than we do.”

Randall picked up on that and asked “Are we going to send fleet the first transmission from Alta?”

That put Adams in a spot because fleet would want to know how the transmission was obtained. That would jeopardize Alta's low profile and relative anonymity. Randall didn't come out and say it but he was right to imply that fleet should see what they saw. “Yes Mr. Randall, but only after we have the second part.” That satisfied Randall and everyone else as well. They wanted to protect Alta but the stakes were far higher now and many more lives were at risk.

Adams left things with “I'll let you all know when I get something. You are all available today?”

The affirmations were unanimous as Renfro, Martin and Flapjack bid their farewells and moved down the hatch. Cookie had not spoken but took in everything he heard. He was shaking his head as he rose from his seat and started collecting the breakfast plates. He was mumbling something that caught Adams's attention, but the commander let it pass.

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For some reason, the educator seemed to be extremely cooperative this morning, or more accommodating or whatever the right word was that described it as more natural to use. Alta noted that for Robby and Sheila to hear before dismissing Robby to find Maud and continue his tour. Robby would remain in communication with Alta should he be needed for sending information to the ship.

Before she started, Alta backed away from the headset to look at Sheila. “I don't know what to expect,” she said, “the Krell were very intelligent and powerful yet they described a

menace as one reason for withdrawing from space. I don't know if learning about this menace will help us but I think I need to follow that trail to its end.”

Sheila agreed and encouraged her to take advantage of the Krell library while they had access. Sheila was fearful the robots might eventually restrict Alta's access to the vast wealth of technical knowledge in the library, especially if they knew her intention was to use that knowledge to make good an escape.

With the headset back in place, Alta began the journey deep into the history banks of the Krell library. There was no jolt when she threw the imaging switch this time, just a smooth transition to a three dimensional catalog.

For 200,000 years, the Krell freely roamed their galactic neighborhood, pushing the frontier outward with each improvement in propulsion. Journeys that once took decades were shrunk to years, then to months and then weeks. When the necessity for space travel for raw materials was ended by the invention of nuclear level MAMBEs, there was a small and lingering desire to remain in space for purely scientific purposes. The Krell would continue exploration but only for the sake of discovery.

Despite the large number of planets investigated that met the requirements to support life, very little life was found. In the early days of exploration, many of the better suited planets and moons became mining installations, a few became colonies and all were considered outposts, part of an early warning defense system though no threats had ever been encountered. That was until about 600,000 years ago. That was when the Krell met the Garon.

Alta stopped here and backed away from the headset. The image was still persisting when she began talking to Sheila. “I can control this a lot better now, persisting images and returning to where I left off. Very much like reading one of those hard copy books you have and putting a book marker in it.”

Sheila was paying close attention to the images and remarked “It seems strange the Krell found so little life compared to what we humans have discovered. Do you think they may have been seeding some worlds with what they found on other worlds? Perhaps most of what we found was seeded by the Krell?”

Alta thought it was certainly a possibility, recalling that animals on Altair 4 were probably specimens obtained from Earth, at least that is what her father believed. Could it have been the other way around? “Shall I continue?” Alta asked Sheila, who responded with a nod.

The first encounter with the Garon took place on a planet very distant from Altair 4. It looked Earth-like but it couldn't have been Earth because it was much too far away. While there were images of the Garon home world, thus far, there were no images of the Garon, just descriptions about their nature. They were intelligent and while they could not communicate in Krell, the Krell found their languages easy to learn. In fact, the Krell had identified 33 distinct Garon languages.

The Garon civilization, as the Krell described it had achieved a high level of skill in stone working and the early stages of metal working. They were by Krell standards extremely primitive but very intelligent and capable of learning. The Krell believed that by establishing friendly relations with the various Garon cultures, they could help advance the welfare of the entire race. The Krell plan was to provide teachers, engineers, scientists and doctors to help the Garon, instruct them and have them advance at their own rate.

The Krell were not entirely satisfied with the Garon progress and worried about the aggressive tendencies of the species. The Krell could recall from their early history that conflicts abounded over various things such as water, land, minerals, food, commerce and at its worse, power for the sake of power. While the Krell had abolished these tendencies in themselves, the Garon proved stubborn and resistant to

modification.

The nature of Garon warfare was brutal, often annihilating entire regional populations. The Krell believed that their influence would temper the Garon to more civilized behavior. As Garon technology advanced, so did the magnitude of barbarity the Garon inflicted upon each other in their conflicts. This was not to say the Garon were incapable of virtues like honor, mercy and justice. In fact, some of the Garon were quite capable of exercising these virtues but found themselves in constant conflict with those who didn't.

After 6,000 years of effort, Garon technology had advanced to primitive space travel in crude chemical powered rockets, exactly as the Krell had advanced hundreds of thousands of years before.

But what did the Garon look like? Alta and Sheila had the same thought and question. The answer was lurking on a back page of a massive catalog and would soon make its presence known in the educator.

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Dr. Spangle was always nervous, but the hand-wringing today was out of control. "Well," he asked Dugan, "is our problem solved?" Spangle wanted to hear it was solved, but not how.

"I think so," the colonel replied, "but you can never be sure and I have to get some insurance for us. Commander Adams has been ordered to disassociate with Martin and Flapjack. Renfro is less of a problem but I need to take care of him too."

Spangle wasn't satisfied and thought to himself that Dugan's methods would backfire and finish him as well. Despite his nervous nature, Spangle was getting angry with Dugan's tendency to solve problems with violence. For a moment, that anger overcame his fear of Dugan. "Those miners could have been bought off. There was no need, no reason to kill them."

Dugan was furious and laid into Spangle. "You like the

money Vinny as long as the blood stains are on someone else's hands. No Dr. Spangle, you're not going to unburden your conscience by pushing your guilt all on me. You knew the plan. You could have blown the whistle," Dugan yelled, "but you didn't you whining toadie."

Spangle was visibly shaken and little did he know that saved his life. Dugan had the side drawer of his desk open and his hands on a police model blaster. He needed Spangle to run the illicit mining operation but he didn't need a traitor in the organization. As long as he believed Spangle feared him more than the authorities, Spangle would be allowed to live.

"All right, all right," Spangle pleaded, "but do you think they will find the graves?"

"Hell no!" Dugan shouted back, indignant with the question and going on to say "Look what happened to the officers who did the dirty work. They're gone, and so are the officers that went to check on them. I still think Martin and Flapjack are behind this, discovered our little secret and are trying to horn in on our enterprise. If I'm wrong, and there really are robots, so we stop mining and that's the end of it until UP cleans up the robots."

"So you still don't think there are robots?" Spangle asked with the most timid voice he could muster.

Dugan took his hand off the blaster, closed the desk drawer, sat back, propped his feet up on the desk and said "No damn way! It's just a trick."

...

Sheila couldn't contain her disbelief. "That's the Garon? That can't be. There must be some mistake. Are you sure you have the right image, the right page?"

Alta couldn't believe it either as she leaned back, breaking contact with the head set. The image persisted. Alta looked at her aunt to her side and said "I don't believe it either but yes, that is the image, those are Garon, one male, one female."

"But they are human." Sheila pleaded and followed with a question. "The Krell consider humans a menace? They are so

much more advanced. I can't imagine them fearing humans. That's us Alta. We are the menace that caused the Krell to withdraw from space? I can't believe it.”

Alta was quite sympathetic to what her aunt was saying. “I can't believe it either. The Krell were so powerful, so intelligent, so noble. Maybe the Garon just look human but there is something else about them I have to learn, to discover that will explain it.”

“Are you going to send that to John?” Sheila asked.

“No! Not without some explanation from the Krell library.” Alta turned to look at her aunt who was staring at the image. “I think we need something to eat first. The educator seems to work better when I'm not stressed by lack of sleep, hunger or any other discomfort.”

Chapter 17 Ambassador Adams

The lunch looked delicious but Alta had lost her appetite. Sheila could sense that and thought she knew why. She turned to the robot posted near their table and asked “What is your name?”

“I am programmed to respond to Wilma” the robot replied with the same voice used by Maud.

“Get lost Wilma. Can't you see she can't eat with you standing there? You want her to die from malnutrition because of you?” asked Sheila with a loud and bold voice.

Sheila did not expect her command to be obeyed but she was surprised nonetheless when Wilma asked “What is get lost?”

All right, Sheila thought to herself, I'll indulge the robot. “It means go away, remove yourself from our presence, leave us. Get lost. Get it now?” Sheila was giggling and thinking that should cover most of the variations. Wilma made a quarter turn and floated for the exit to the main corridor and a surprised Sheila said “I never thought it would be that easy.”

Alta's eyes followed the robot out and then turned to Sheila with a look of disbelief and amazement. Was it that easy to order the robots around or was it because Sheila was recognized as Alta's mother? “Thank you Aunt Sheila. My appetite is back. I really am hungry but, those robots make me feel like some laboratory specimen.” As Alta pulled the lunch back toward her, she added “Robby was never like that, even when I was a child. He was attentive but not overbearing.”

“We have to keep pushing the limits Alta, see how far we can go.” Sheila said as she pushed her empty lunch plate aside. “As far as we know, these robots haven't caused any serious injuries but we should try to find out if that is true.” Alta

nodded as she took a bite out of an amazingly well prepared and beautifully served BLT sandwich. Sheila saw she was busy chewing and took the opportunity to offer a suggestion in the form of a question. “Do you think Robby can relay messages between you and the ship?”

Alta looked up from the lunch plate, looked at her aunt and waited to swallow before speaking. “He probably can. Maybe I'm just making this too complicated and maybe we can learn more by just pushing on some little things, like we do when we use the lab. There is no time like the present to try.” she said as she took the com-link in her hand, hit Robby's channel alert and waited.

“Yes Miss Alta.” came from the com-link and was without any doubt the voice of Robby. “How can I be of service?”

“Robby,” Alta said, “I want you to connect me to the ship and act as a relay between me and the ship. I want to speak directly to Commander Adams. Can you do that?” Alta and Sheila were looking at each other and waiting for an answer.

“Yes Miss Alta, I have a clear signal now.” the robot answered.

Alta and Sheila looked up at each other, smiling and obviously pleased by what they heard. “Is Maud there and can she hear me?” Alta asked.

“Yes Miss Alta, she is showing me the water reclamation facilities and she can hear you on my channel or I can switch to synthetic voice.” came another clear answer from Robby.

“Get lost Maud. Go get an oil job or something, get off this channel and away from Robby. I need some time with Robby alone.” said Alta, but there was no response. “Did she leave?” Alta asked Robby.

“No Miss Alta.” came the answer from Robby.

Alta looked at Sheila shaking her head. Sheila didn't say anything but took the com-link from Alta's hand and said “Get lost Maud. Go get an oil job or something, get off this channel and away from Robby. I need some time with Robby alone.”

“What is get lost, Miss Sheila?” came the response, clearly

using Maud's voice. Alta and Sheila just looked at each other, shaking their heads and then laughing.

“Ask Wilma!” Sheila snapped back. Sheila waited a few more seconds and then asked Robby “Is she leaving Robby?”

“Yes Miss Sheila.” came the reply, “She has left the area and I am alone now.”

Now Alta was too excited to eat and pushed the plate away. She looked at her aunt, shaking her head in disbelief and flashing a broad smile.

“They are not our enemies nor are they our masters Alta. They have been telling you that all along. It wasn't a clue we had to discover or unravel. It was right there in your dreams. I don't think these robots speak or act in riddles.” Sheila said as she took Alta's hands. “They may not do all that you ask, but it seems that as your mother, they will do what I ask. I'm sure there may be limits, but we don't know what they are.” Sheila sat back, very contented and greatly relieved that their situation was probably not as grim as they thought. Sheila handed the com-link back to Alta saying “Go ahead and contact John. I'm sure he and Julius would like to know we are well.”

“Robby,” Alta said, “get me a relay and connect me to the ship. I want to speak to Commander Adams.”

...

Randall heard the com-link chirping and could see it was the channel assigned to Robby. “Robby, is that you old buddy?” Randall asked, making no effort to conceal the excitement in his voice.

“No Mr. Randall, this is Altaira” the voice said and continued “Is” she started to talk but was cut off by Randall shouting.

“Skipper! Skipper! It's Alta, on Robby's channel.” Randall didn't need the com-link for that announcement which was probably heard in every area of the ship and the space port as well. “Sorry Alta, the skipper, er, John will be right here.”

A few seconds later, Adams took the com-link from Randall and spoke into the mic saying “Alta, Alta darling, how are you?” The stress and concern in Adams voice was evident and pronounced.

“I'm fine darling but I have to get right to the point. I'm not sure if the robots will block this communication. I'm doing a relay through Robby.” Alta's voice was calm, cheerful and reassuring. “First, tell Uncle Julius that Aunt Sheila is very well and I am so grateful she is here. She is beside me right now.”

“Julius isn't here now but I will see him later this afternoon. I know he will be happy to hear that.” Adams replied and continued with “What is that second transmission you want to send?”

“I can't send it yet. It may cause more harm than good until I uncover some other details. Be assured though, I'm more confident now that everything is going to work out. Aunt Sheila and I have learned a lot in just 24 hours and things are not as bleak as they may appear.” Alta's voice sounded confident but Adams wasn't completely sold on what she was saying.

“I wish I shared your optimism Alta.” Adams said. “Maybe in time I will. Is there anything I need to do, or can do on this end?” he asked.

Alta was about to speak when Sheila tapped on her wrist, waved her finger no and motioned for the com-link. “John, this is Sheila.”

“Oh wow, Julius is going to kick himself for not being here. How are you Sheila?” Adams asked.

“I'm fine, just like Alta said but you need to listen to me now. Tell Julius to go home and rest. Alta and I need all of you at your best. That includes Dr. Renfro, Mr. Wallace, Mr. Randall, and of course Flapjack.” Adams started to say something and was immediately cut off. “I said listen John, so listen. We will call you about nine this evening. Please make sure everyone is there. I need to check something out with

Alta and will let you know what it is when we call. All right?"

"All right." Adams answered, "I'll get hold of them all right now. You do promise to call?"

"Yes, absolutely." Sheila responded and Adams seemed satisfied. "Talk to you later. Alta and I have work to do."

"OK." replied Adams, then turning to Randall, saying "Let's locate Sheriff Martin first and get this set up exactly as Sheila requested."

"Aye aye skipper." barked Randall, then asking "Should I alert Mr. Wallace too?"

"Yes!" replied Adams, with a renewed enthusiasm in his voice. He also had acknowledged, at least inwardly for now, that Flapjack was probably right, with his plan and his assessment of Alta, Sheila and the Krell robots.

...

"You know I write mystery books but that doesn't mean I'm a crime solver." said Sheila, as she and Alta entered the Krell lab with Robby right behind. "I plant the clues when I write so obviously, I can find them, interpret them and use them. I don't claim that power outside of my books but we are sitting on more clues than you can imagine."

That puzzled Alta and she made it known with "I'm not sure I understand. What clues? I told you everything I know."

"No you haven't," Sheila said, "and the biggest unexplored clue is standing right next to us."

"Robby? He told us everything he knows." Alta said that but paused, put her hand on her chin and gave the statement a little more thought. Sheila said nothing. Her niece had to come to the realization herself. "He only tells me what I ask and what he knows at that time. I think I see the problem." Sheila was nodding her head.

Alta took her seat at the educator with Sheila next to her. Robby stood behind as Alta leaned forward to engage the headset, and then stopped and backed away. "Yes, things have changed, but only things that can help unravel the mystery." Alta paused and looked at her aunt who was gently nodding

her head. “Robby,” Alta commanded, “are you still receiving the Krell distress signal?”

“Yes Miss Alta.” Robby replied.

“Robby, translate the signal to English please.” Alta asked in a very polite voice, not as a command but more like a request. Alta had never seen Sheila flash anyone a thumbs up, but that is what she did and with a broad smile as well.

“Garon ship, identify yourself, your diplomatic status and mission. Return to orbit. Do not land. Cleanup is in progress. Remain in orbit pending further notice. The message then repeats Miss Alta.” Robby's upgraded language skills were now able to translate the entire message and most likely, able to respond.

“Yes, I remember now. The leading words, Robby didn't know them. Of course he wouldn't, they were probably invented long after Robby's model was designed and outfitted.” Alta looked at Robby and said “An-ik-frid-
<musical tones>-piod-di-<musical tones>-bir-bir-bir-<metal
clanging sounds>. Right Robby?”

“That is correct Miss Alta. Your pronunciation is also greatly improved.” Robby the schoolmarm had spoken and Alta smiled that he acknowledged her progress. Sheila was also pleased and showed that with her smile directed toward Robby.

“Alta, we need to fill in some gaps concerning the Garon, diplomacy, treaties and agreements with the Krell.” Sheila was cooking up an idea but Alta had to do the research since only she could access the Krell library. “You have to learn to rely more on Robby, after all you are at most about five Krell years old and a lot of the Krell language is unknown to you.”

Alta suspected Sheila was right but had no comparable experience. The Krell library was vast and it was easy for a five year old to get lost but how could she use Robby as a guide? “I'm not sure how to do that Aunt Sheila.” she confessed, apologetically.

“Talk to Robby in a language you both understand,

English. Krell baby talk isn't going to work.” Sheila said as she placed her hand on Alta's shoulder. “You have to tell him what you want to know and then let him take you there, and then translate. You are trying to do too much and we don't have time. Learn Krell later, not now.”

Sheila was right and Alta knew it. In her stubbornness, she was trying to learn and absorb as much Krell as possible and it was delaying the exploration of the library and fact finding. “You're right Aunt Sheila. I'm doing it mostly out of respect for my father's work and some sense of academic purity. We need practical answers, not a robust Krell vocabulary for my gratification.”

Sheila stood now, moved behind Alta and placed both hands on her shoulders, gently massaging her muscles. “Relax Alta. Let Robby drive and you follow him. Tell him what you need to see.” Sheila said with a soothing and sultry voice.

“Robby, I want to find out why this outpost identified C-57-D as a Garon ship when nothing like it existed when the Krell vanished 200,000 years ago. One more thing Robby, record all of this so we can show it to Commander Adams.”

“Yes Miss Alta.” Robby replied as he stepped a little closer to her and the educator.

Alta looked back and up at Sheila with a puzzled expression. “Don't worry Alta,” Sheila said, “we have about eight hours and that should be enough to produce the transmission we need to send.”

With that, Alta turned back to the educator, engaged the headset and said “Here we go Robby. Let's fly.”

...

The group of seven men, which now included Cookie, was sitting at the table near engineering when the com-link chirped and Adams answered. It was 21:00 hours exactly noted Adams as he spoke “Sheila, Alta, is that you?”

“Yes” It was Sheilas voice. “Robby has sent a transmission and you need to see that before we can go any farther.”

Martin couldn't resist and shouted "Sheila, baby, how are you?"

"I'm just fine dear, probably better than you. I am well rested and well fed." Sheila laughed but it was true. Julius had not slept well and had practically no appetite. "You have to sleep and eat dear, keep up your strength. We will need that very soon."

"OK," Martin promised "but I can't help it that I have been worried about you. You seem very optimistic though, and that's good to hear."

"I am optimistic and I think we will be home shortly." Shelia assured him. "I really think Alta and I could leave now if we wanted to but we need to get the other captives released and have the Krell rescind that order to leave this colony." Sheila waited briefly, but there was no response and she knew what that meant; Julius was having his doubts. "Dear, you have to trust me. Watch the transmission and we will talk later."

"Sheila, is Alta with you? Adams asked, but there was no answer. "Sheila?" he called again, but no response.

"That channel has gone quiet sir." Randall said as he checked the channel reset control. "We do have a transmission record sir."

"Let's take a few minutes and then watch that transmission. Is that all right with everyone?" Adams asked as he looked around the table. There were all nods and a few started to rise from their chairs, Flapjack being one of them. Adams noticed a small, white tube shaped object in his left hand. "What's that Flapjack?" he felt compelled to ask and satisfy his curiosity.

"Come outside commander and I'll show you." the forty-niner responded with his normal gruff tone. "It's something ancient, and forbidden, and bad for you." he blurted out.

...

Outside the ship and the space port receiving area, Adams and Flapjack stood in a grassy square with a single bench.

The Barnard's twilight was in full effect, giving everything a slight reddish hue. Flapjack held the white tube between his thumb and two fingers, tapping one end on a silvery metallic object in his right hand. "I like to light up and have a smoke before a good show and I suspect this one will be a doozy."

"I haven't done this for years commander, but I haven't been through much anxiety for years either." the forty-niner said as he placed one end of the white tube between his lips. Adams was puzzled and just stood there watching. "It has a very potent calming effect." Flapjack said as he shifted the silvery rectangular object to his left hand, raised it to the white tube, flipped a cover and operated a small thumb wheel.

"What the!" Adams balked and threw back his head slightly as a spark flew and flame jumped from the silvery object and ignited the end of the white tube. The tip was now glowing red with a fine stream of smoke rising and curling. He could see Flapjack was drawing something into his lungs. A moment later, he withdrew the tube from his lips, paused briefly and exhaled a thin cloud of smoke. "What are you doing?" Adams asked, clearly puzzled and somewhat disturbed by what he saw.

"I'm smoking youngster, something that has been banned for several centuries now." Flapjack put the tube back to his lips, inhaled again and repeated the process of exhaling the smoke, this time directing the stream straight up. He took a moment to look at the commander, who was apparently stupefied by what he saw. Flapjack shook his head, mumbling "What a shame."

"A shame? What do you mean Flapjack?" Adams voice was sincere. He had no idea what Flapjack was doing or talking about.

"This is a cigarette commander, a white linen paper tube filled with finely chopped tobacco, a naturally grown plant that contains a substance called nicotine. This is a Zippo." Flapjack chuckled before he went on. "It's a collector's item and more generally known as a cigarette lighter. I think you

may have deduced that?”

Adams nodded, his attention focused on the lighter.

“You're probably thinking, that isn't too good for my health and I'm thinking about a trade off.” Flapjack paused, took another puff from the cigarette and continued with Adams fixated on what he saw. “You see, I enjoy this because it does calm me and gives me a feeling I like. I'll probably pay something for that, but that's true with so many things.” Flapjack paused again. He could see Adams was still fixated on the glowing end of the cigarette.

“You ever ride a motorcycle commander?” Flapjack asked while lifting the cigarette for another puff.

“Uh what, a motorcycle, uh, yes, I have.” Adams took his attention off the cigarette and looked at Flapjack's face. “Yes,” he continued, “I like riding them.”

“Sure you do but what you rode is not a motorcycle. It's an encapsulated armored tricycle because that's all the authorities will permit. If you're here long enough and we get through this, I'll show you a motorcycle and you can judge for yourself which you would rather have.”

With the cigarette burned down to about 2 centimeters, Flapjack dropped it to the ground and stomped on it with his foot, giving a final twist before walking forward. “We better get back commander. We can talk about freedom some other time. Julius knows a lot about it too.”

The experience left Adams with a strange feeling that there was much to learn that was being held back. Adams thought to himself, I'm free, what is that old man talking about? That thought was fleeting because he knew he could not simply dismiss Flapjack as an old man. He looked at him carefully as they walked back to the ship and up the gangway to the hatch. Flapjack knew things that some people didn't want him to know. Flapjack did things that some people didn't want him to do.

...

The video of the recorded transmission was now on the

main view plate with an unfamiliar synthetic voice providing the narrative. It started by explaining the distress signal Robby had interpreted, first with the Krell introduction. The narrator explained that Robby had received a language update from the Krell robots and was able to translate the latest Krell dialects to English, provided there was an English equivalent. Robby's voice played again, but this time it was entirely in English.

“Garon ship, identify yourself, your diplomatic status and mission. Return to orbit. Do not land. Cleanup is in progress. Remain in orbit pending further notice.”

The question came from everyone's lips, subdued and mumbled but the same words. “Garon? Who or what are the Garon?” They wouldn't have to wait long. Alta had carefully pieced together the video to raise and answer questions.

The narrator explained the Garon were a species encountered by the Krell about 600,000 years ago. The Garon were intelligent but extremely primitive by Krell standards. The narrator went on to explain the Krell later broke all contact except diplomatic relations with the Garon, primarily out of fear of cultural contamination and corruption of the Krell by the Garon! The Krell were forward looking and made a number of agreements that would take effect at some future date when the Garon had achieved faster than light travel and could visit Krell outposts. The Krell believed the Garon would have become civilized to Krell standards as well by that time, but made some provisions in the event the Garon were still aggressive.

The Krell had annihilated themselves before the Garon achieved the capabilities of faster than light travel but the old agreements were still in place throughout the Krell empire. Krell outposts manned by robots would abide by the ancient agreements despite the fact the Krell were extinct.

The UP cruiser C-57-D was assumed to be a Garon ship. In fact, though the Krell historic record is incomplete, from physical descriptions, it is highly likely humans are direct

descendents of the Garon. It was logical to assume C-57-D was Garon since the Krell, despite extensive exploration had never found another intelligent life form.

The diplomatic protocols agreed to by the Krell and Garon provided for safe passage and ports in the territory of either species. When the Garon were capable, there would also be an exchange of ambassadors, representatives, emissaries and other personnel to facilitate trade and cooperation. The Garon were given the information necessary to build Krell translators for communication and beacons for navigation.

The diplomatic agreements were cautious on the Krell side and allowed for expulsion of Garon who violated Krell law or behavioral standards. These individuals were not to be harmed but were to be incapacitated and held until they could be transferred to an appropriate vessel for transport. The agreements did not make any provision for Garon colonies on Krell outposts. Those were to be negotiated, world by world.

The video faded out and then faded in, showing a man and a woman dressed in contemporary clothing. The narrator startled all present by announcing these were Garon, male and female. Just as the picture froze in place, a chirp on the com-link snapped everyone to attention.

“Alta? Sheila?” Adams asked, unsure who would be speaking.

“Hello everyone, it's Sheila. Alta will be on soon. Robby is doing a relay again to get the signal out. I can't spend too much time going over the details. I am very concerned the Krell robots may interfere so please hold any questions and any non-essential remarks. Are we OK with that?” Sheila waited not knowing exactly what the reaction might be.

“Hi honey,” shouted Julius, “you go ahead. We are all listening.” There were a few other voices saying the same thing then the chatter died.

Sheila waited for silence and then continued. “Alta will be on in a moment to explain our plan. I know you probably have questions about the video you saw but that would take a

lot of time to explain, time we don't have at the moment.” There were a few murmurs Sheila could hear but quiet returned quickly. “Here's Alta now.”

“Congratulations on your appointment John,” Alta said with a light and almost comic intonation, “or should I say Ambassador Adams, Garon emissary to the Barnard's outpost?”

Chapter 18 You Can't Get There From Here

“Core power at 100 percent.” said Randall. “Life support optimal, gravity at one point zero, auto gravity is engaged.”

“Propulsion driver is coupled, powered and ready sir,” barked Clary from the astro-navigation station, “orbital course is plotted and laid in.”

“Mr. Wallace, sound lift-off alarm.” Adams ordered and was answered by a distinctive klaxon signal of double pulses and double rests. “Crewman Clary, take us into orbit and prepare for evasive maneuvers.”

The hum of the propulsion driver increased in volume and frequency as the unit powered up and the ship began to lift from launch pad 8. The challenge from Barnard's Space Port was expected any second now. “Cruiser C-57-D, you are not cleared for take-off. Power down immediately and return to launch pad 8.”

“Elevation and ascent rate?” asked Adams.

“Five meters at zero point 5 meters per second skipper.” came back the response from Wallace.

“Cruiser C-57-D, return to launch pad immediately or we will be forced to fire on you!” came the familiar voice of Ensign Otomi.

“Crewman Clary, full reverse, bank to starboard and commence evasive maneuvers.” Adams ordered.

The cruiser came within a few meters of striking CO-12-G Comstock as the glide path turned sharply to the right and the cruiser banked. Clary straightened the path once the Comstock was between the ship and the space port blaster batteries. The maneuver had been practiced in the computer simulator until Clary could pull it off in his sleep. The ship's

rate of ascent decreased as the reverse speed increased. The Comstock, which filled the main view plate, was shrinking rapidly as the ship accelerated away.

“Range to Comstock Mr. Randall?” the commander asked.

Randall replied in precisely timed intervals “Five miles on my mark sir at minus five, four, three, two, one, mark.”

“Get us into orbit Crewman Clary.” came the order from Adams. The rearward motion of the ship reduced drastically as the ascent rate jumped and the ship moved sharply in the vertical direction. From the main view plate, a stream of blaster bolts could be seen in the distance bearing down on the ship, but they would miss by hundreds of meters as the ship streaked toward orbit and outside of blaster range.

The cruiser was soon in geo-synchronous orbit and in communication with Robby on the ground at the Krell outpost. Adams asked for a direct link with Robby and then verified the Krell distress signal had remain unchanged. On cue, Robby gave the Krell language response to the distress signal, and then repeated the response in English. The signal from Robby would be directed to the cruiser and re-transmitted to give the appearance the signal originated from the cruiser.

“Mr. Randall, put the English translation on ships speaker.” said Adams as the com-link indicator signaled the incoming transmission.

“This is Garon space cruiser C-57-D, Commander Julius Martin commanding. Our diplomatic status is emissary ex-officio to the Krell outpost on this moon's surface. Ambassador J. J. Adams heads the delegation to suppress and retrieve Garon violators of the accords for colonial settlements.”

That should do it thought Adams. Alta was confident those would be the correct words to use to get landing clearance from the Krell.

Robby was on the speaker next, relaying the translation of the Krell message responding to the ships signal. “Commander, the Krell are requesting your challenge code.”

It had taken Alta a few hours at the educator to learn there was a challenge code, what it was and how it should be transmitted. “Go ahead Robby, we will relay the code from here. Mr. Randall, you know what to do.”

Randall relayed the signal and when finished, received another message from Robby. The message had been translated from Krell but it was just a stream of numbers. Adams raised the com-link to ask, “Robby, what are those?”

The robot came right back with “That is your approach vector and landing coordinates.”

“There's just one problem Robby,” the commander said “we don't have Krell charts and we don't know how to interpret Krell vector notation. How much time?”

“Fifteen seconds.” Robby replied and was cut off almost immediately by Alta.

“That won't be enough time John!” Alta said in a very hurried voice. “I need to coordinate your charts with the Krell charts, then work on the notation with Robby. Sorry about that.”

Krell military model robots had assumed a position overlooking the designated landing site and when the ship did not appear or move into the required flight path, they opened fire.

The two beams from the planet had a bluish-white color but were subdued in brightness and very thin as well. The first hit was on the cruiser's propulsion drive unit, disabling the ship. Adams ordered the engineering deck sealed just as the second beam tore through the hull and struck the core. The ship exploded sending large sections of the hull plunging toward the moon's atmosphere.

...
“John? John, are you there?” Alta asked while Sheila could be heard mumbling something in the background. Alta's voice and Sheila's mumbling sounded both frustrated and angry. Thoughts of the ship's debris field and bodies flung into the cold of space unsettled the two women at the Krell

lab.

“Yes.” came the reply from a very disappointed commander. “At least we got everything recorded. We will need those charts and the vector notation before we attempt the next simulation.”

“Aunt Sheila is working with Robby on the charts now.” replied Alta. “I’ll get back to you soon on the vector notation.”

Simulation 4 was a failure but had at least resolved the issue of the challenge code. It was Flapjack who put things in proper perspective, something that was becoming habitual with his observations. “Commander, this was not a setback but a step forward.” came the gruff words from the weathered miner. Adams said nothing but turned to look at Flapjack, now sitting at the engineering table with a cup of coffee. Adams was expressionless and Flapjack took that as his cue to finish his thoughts. “Things have worked out well. Alta’s plan was brilliantly simple and I think it will work but had you not pushed back, it would have been a disaster.”

Wallace was walking toward the table with his coffee in hand and joined in the discussion. “I have to agree sir. Her plan is working but we needed the details and it was you pushing back that had her and Sheila searching for what we needed.”

Randall, just a few paces behind Wallace with his coffee also jumped in. “Without the Krell training simulation they found on the Krell computers, we would be dead.”

Adams was feeling surrounded now and looked around for Martin to join the chorus, and he did. “John, for the first time since they took Alta and Sheila, I’m optimistic about getting them back, and the other missing folks as well. These little steps are frustrating but they are getting us closer.”

Adams raised his hands saying “OK, I surrender, you’re all right and we just have to stay with the program and polish Alta’s plan.”

...

As Sheila and Alta had learned, the Krell outpost was not

operated by robots but by several very powerful computers. These were separate and apart from the Krell library but could be accessed though the educator, at least in a limited way. It was Sheila's idea to search the computers for training simulation programs to handle Garon intrusions into Krell space. Robby had to do the search and turned up no less than three simulators covering several variations of initial conditions and targeted to specific disciplines, including security and diplomacy.

Sheila had located the Krell charts of the moon with Robby's help and asked him to translate the Krell symbols, markings and legends to English. Alta had busied herself on the vector notation but had a problem. The Krell were mapping extra-dimensional space and Alta did not know why and more importantly, how to transform that to a notation the ship's computer could process.

“Maud, come over here please, I need your instruction.” Alta requested but the tone was more like that of an order. Robby was occupied with the charts and Alta had discovered that Maud would follow her commands if they were in the form of a request for teaching. Alta was always pushing the boundaries of where Maud would let her go, so she started as usual with such a test.

“Maud, I want to learn everything I can about the military robots, their capabilities, armor, armament, you know, everything.” Alta said as Maud drew closer.

“Miss Alta,” Maud started, as she always did, “that is restricted information for designated personnel only. You should know better than to ask me for that information.” Alta looked at Maud and nodded her head, mostly to acknowledge how Maud's adaptive response programming was advancing.

“Oh yes!” Alta replied with an apologetic tone, not that she was sorry but to remove any suspicions Maud might develop concerning her true intentions. “I need help understanding and translating this vector notation to English to match our understanding of the application for navigation.”

Alta gave Maud a quizzical stare, not certain the way she framed the request would work. Alta leaned forward to engage the headset of the educator as Maud began finding and translating texts on the subject. Robby recorded the session as he usually did and would transmit that to the ship later. Alta still had the burden of learning what was presented to assure an adequately comprehensible presentation would be available to the ship's crew and computer.

Alta had her head in the educator headset and could not see Sheila but assumed she was within hearing range as she spoke, "Last night, I thought it would be so simple. It's a good thing John objected or they would all be dead now."

Sheila could sense the frustration in Alta's voice and looked up from what she was doing at the library viewer to respond. "It's a great plan Alta, it just needed polishing around the edges. Who knew the ship would have to evade the blasters at port authority? That and other details we didn't know. John didn't reject your plan, all he did was insist on a walk through." Sheila turned her attention back to the viewer screen where the chart was being rendered with more and more text in English. Robby had marked the location given by the Krell landing coordinates and Sheila could see from the map it was at the very north tip of Auric Canyon. "Robby is just about finished Alta."

"Good!" came the reply from Alta, "I'm just about finished here too. I really don't understand this notation but Maud produced a formula and algorithm we can use for translation. The Krell use some kind of trinary digital system with positive, negative and zero. They apparently have a light based system too that adds and subtracts colors to mean something. I'm glad we don't need that. It looks very complicated."

"Robby is finished here Alta." Sheila announced with a joyous intonation. "The charts have been transmitted!"

"I'm done too." replied Alta, also with a happy inflection in her voice and continued "Robby, you can send now. I have

that little side project John asked me to look into.”

“Maud, you can go now.” Sheila commanded and Maud responded, turning 180 degrees and gliding toward and then out of the lab door. “I never thought Maud would help us. It's weird. She's even helping me with a little bit of Krell, just like Robby.”

...
“Skipper, the Krell charts are here.” said Randall, adding “There's also some programming code for the ship's computer to translate the Krell vectors. Ordinarily, Chang would check this out before we linked it but...”

“Chang is not here.” the commander broke in and finished. “Give it to Lee. We'll have to take the chance Robby did it right and Lee can spot any glaring errors.” Adams looked around and could see the crew was getting weary and not their sharpest. “Let's get it done. We can run three more simulations if we have to.”

“Sir,” Randall spoke again, “it's Alta for you.”

“Alta,” the commander said, “we got the transmission and it will take about 20 minutes to link in the program. Anything more on that little project I asked for?”

“Not much,” Alta answered, “the Krell were very mistrusting of the Garon and as long as the Garon kept their distance and followed directions, they were tolerated. I think that is why the freighters, transports and ore carriers that come and go from Barnard's are not bothered.”

“What about the historical record Alta, anything on that?” Adams asked.

“There is a massive amount of raw data dating back 200,000 years but none of it is searchable or readable. It seems the Krell had an army of librarians and curators to write their history from raw data. That also seems odd as well.”

“What do you mean odd Alta?” the commander requested.

Alta paused for a moment, searching her thoughts for a meaningful example before she spoke. “For example, if you want to research the Cron War, there are over 50 books that

cover it from numerous perspectives. I saw that in the ship's library on the trip from Altair 4 to Barnard's Colony. There is no equivalent to that in the Krell library. It's one narrative only and one perspective only. There are no differing opinions or perspectives, at least none that I could find. There may be some nuances of the Krell language to handle that, but none that I have found."

"That is curious," Adams admitted, "but the important point is the Krell don't trust us and we have to consider every action in that light." Adams paused, looked about and could see that Martin, Flapjack, Wallace and Randall had heard that remark and were now focused on him. "We're going to run the drill Alta, so I'll talk to you in just a few minutes."

Adams turned slowly to face the table in engineering and crossed his arms as he did. "Mr. Wallace, let's do it again!" If they could land this time around on the simulation, that would be a major step and was Adams's goal.

...

Dugan was furious and let Spangle know. Adams had made no effort to conceal who was visiting the ship. A casual inquiry at the space port revealed that both Martin and Flapjack had arrived early that morning and were still on board. "This commander doesn't follow orders!" yelled Dugan as Spangle quaked, not knowing what Dugan might do next.

"You could send another message to Kiev," Spangle said, then quickly added "but, I guess that won't work." Spangle had figured that if Adams was not going to follow orders, repeating them would make no difference. Dugan actually looked at him calmly from behind his steel rimmed glasses, his eyes twinkling and gave a slight nod of the head.

Dugan lowered his voice as he fixed his attention on Spangle and spoke. "It's early evening already, when are they coming out? We can't wait here all night for them." Dugan said as he looked around the space port reception area. "I have to be flexible." Dugan said but drew a puzzled look from

Spangle. Dugan looked at Spangle and let loose a “Hmm” followed by a whisper, “In math, you reduce one side of the equation or the other. I don't want them talking to each other and I don't really care who it is that isn't doing the talking.”

Normally, Spangle would have been in jitters but he was getting use to how Dugan thought in situations like this where he felt threatened and wanted to prevent discovery of his wrong doing. Spangle nodded his head finding that once he had crossed the line, additional crossings were getting easier. Any way, he reasoned, a disobedient commander not following orders would get what he deserved. “Do you want to wait for them?”

“No.” Dugan answered, “This isn't the place and I don't have the right tools anyway. Stay here and watch, wait where they can't see you and call me when they do leave, Martin in particular.”

...

Adams looked down at his watch at the conclusion of the seventh run, satisfied they had done a full days work and could do the real thing without a problem. “Twenty two hundred hours, that's enough for today and that final run says were are a go for tomorrow. Great job everyone.” There was general agreement from the chattering taking place from others gathered near the engineering station.

The voice over the com-link was Sheila asking “What time John?”

Adams looked about and saw the crew was eager, but very tired. “How does nine sound ladies?”

“That's good for us.” Sheila came back and followed quickly with “Goodnight honey, John, Flapjack, everyone, we're off to bed.”

A number of bids goodnight rose in response from people within earshot of the com-link speaker.

“Mr. Wallace, post the duty schedule for tomorrow and you can dismiss the crew with a well done.” Adams said to his exec as he turned to more directly face Martin and Flapjack.

“Is everything all right?”

Both Martin and Flapjack agreed with only the slightest hesitation. Martin did ask “Aren't you pushing it John?”

“I don't think so.” Adams responded. “The last run was perfect and I don't want anyone to forget what they have to do. As we saw, some of the timing is extremely critical. You know your job, right?”

“My job is easy commander,” Martin offered in response, “but I guess you're right. All of our jobs are easy when you get down to it and the details. I'm good.”

Adams then looked directly at Flapjack and asked “You going to have a smoke Flapjack?”

“You betcha commander,” came a snarly reply from Flapjack “and you gonna watch and grill me John?” shot back a question.

“You betcha.” came the answer from Adams as he started toward the hatch and gangway.

...

Dugan answered the phone, listened, said nothing and then closed the transmission. He returned his attention to the workbench in the garage.

Dugan slid the energy mag in place on the long barrel blaster, a model designated Eagle Eye and used for target shooting, hunting and more infamously during the Cron War, sniping. Dugan adjusted the energy setting to military standard, not to vaporize but to severely wound and cripple. The military standards setting would also limit tracers to one every five rounds. He only needed two shots he thought to himself. He put his eye to the magnascope, powered it up and checked for focus.

The scope was usually zeroed at 100 meters but Dugan felt that was to close and adjusted for 400 meters. This man, who didn't look like he belonged in a uniform did know his weaponry and how to use it. He also knew how to set the magazine to overload and make it look like a manufacturing defect.

Dugan wasn't pleased he had to work in the Barnard's twilight. His reactive camouflage was the best money could buy but there was always the chance someone might see the silhouette. There was no alternative. Every delay would bring Martin, Flapjack and Adams closer to discovery. With the blaster concealed in his golf bag, Dugan opened the garage door and put the all-electric rover in reverse, confident that no one would hear or see him leave his home.

It was about a three mile drive down mostly rural roads to the Renfro residence. A dirt road branched off the pavement to the left and led to the hillside behind Renfro's ultra contemporary home. The large expanses of glass and the narrow concrete frame offered high visibility of the occupants. Dugan had to park and get past the tree line however, before he spotted his target.

This area was uninhabited with dense vegetation and undergrowth. Dugan carefully picked his way between the dense tangle of shrubs, saplings and tall grasses until he reached the edge of the treeline. He was fairly certain that despite the twilight, the reactive camouflage and dense foliage behind him would conceal his presence. He could see people in the Renfro house with the scope but his target had to be hit precisely by two rapidly fired rounds. The first would vaporize a hole in the glass and the second would impact the real target at a very specific point.

Dugan took a prone position, raised the blaster and brought the scope closer to his eye. He searched the field of view for his target, settled his elbows firmly in place as his finger slid over the trigger.

Chapter 19 Mary Lou

Glass vaporizes with a distinctive pop as small fragments are propelled at subsonic speeds by the rapidly expanding vapor. The effect on Edward Renfro was exactly as expected. He froze in place, caught completely by surprise by the sound at the plate glass window in front of him.

A little less than a second later, Renfro felt something equivalent to a meat cleaver chop away at his right arm. Half in shock, he looked at the limb and saw his upper arm had been shredded for half its length. His arm from the elbow down was hanging by a thin sliver of bone just visible in the tangle of bloody ribbons that was once his upper arm. Renfro dropped to his knees, smashing his knee caps on the marble floor, adding to the pain that shot from his arm. He would have collapsed forward smashing his face on the floor if not for the fast action of Mary Lou, grabbing and steadying him from behind and helping him to gently lie on his left side.

She looked out the window facing the back yard and hill far in the distance but could see nothing that didn't belong there and no movement. Renfro looked up at her, barely conscious but managed to say "hospital" before he passed out.

Mary Lou punched in star 81 and waited, and waited. Finally, "Barnardsville Trauma Center, state you emergency please." What a question to ask Mary Lou was thinking. She had no idea what the emergency was other than a torn up arm, lots of blood and an unconscious person.

"1430 Remington Lane, tremendous blood loss, it's horrible. Dr. Renfro is very badly injured and unconscious." She knew that was choppy but hoped it was enough.

"An ambulance has been dispatched and will arrive in 8 minutes. Please hold the line and remain calm." came the

response, coolly, calmly and almost mechanical.

Mary Lou pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at it indignantly, muttering “Hold the line? Are you kidding.” She hit pound, then star 91 almost without thinking. “Barnardsville Sheriffs Office, how can I help you?”

“1430 Remington Lane, Dr. Renfro's residence. I think he's been shot.” she said to the unknown voice on the other end. When she was asked for her name she screamed back “Get someone here now.”

“A police car has been dispatched and should arrive in approximately 6 minutes.” the voice came back, and it too was also very mechanical, much like the hospital.

Mary Lou dropped the phone, unconcerned whether it was on or off, and took a place behind Dr. Renfro and cradled his head in her arms.

...
“Greer, you have to do this!” Martin shouted, trying to shake his deputy out of his fixation on Renfro's arm. Martin was hoping the paramedics would have the doctor on the way shortly so he could regain his deputy's attention. “Greer!” he shouted again and this time the deputy looked back.

“Yes sheriff, I'm sorry, I'm here.” Greer was shaken. He had seen barroom fights, cuts, bruises and lumps but never an arm almost taken off by a blaster bolt. The blood had spread thin and covered a large area of the marble floor. The sprinkling of muscle tissue, skin and very distinctive bone slivers made the gore factor very high.

Martin recalled having the same reaction the first time he saw casualties in the Cron War, 16 years earlier. He could understand what Greer was experiencing but just like he had done, Greer had to get his emotions under control and put his brain in charge.

“I hate to do this to you son, but you have to take charge of the investigation. I have something else I must do.” Martin didn't want to get into a detailed explanation but had to give Greer enough to know he was the choice, the only choice to do

what had to be done. He had both hands on Greer's arms now, straightened him up and turned him to squarely face him. "You ready Deputy Greer?"

"Yes sir." came the reply, not as rock steady as Martin had hoped, but steady enough to get started.

"Out on the balcony, now." Martin ordered Greer while looking at Mary Lou sitting on the end of the sofa farthest from the bloody pool on the floor. The photographer was a contractor and was taking pictures of everything, fearful of missing any detail. In one respect it was good he was plodding around and drawing Mary Lou's attention from the blood.

Martin and Greer both got up from the floor where Greer was sitting and Martin was hunched over, made their way to the balcony sliding door and out onto the dimly lit balcony. Martin turned briefly to look back and said "Perfect silhouette lighting." He and Greer stood at the rail at the balcony edge, saying nothing. In the distance, Martin could see three portable floodlights aimed at the ground and moving around the hillside. His deputies were looking for evidence. Martin turned back to Greer, putting a stern grip on his arms until he turned and looked him in the face.

"You with me deputy?" Martin asked and Greer responded with several strong nods. "You have to run the investigation. Talk to people, collect evidence, put your brain in gear. There's a terrible irony to this." Martin said, softening his voice and showing some sympathy for his young deputy. "We haven't had a murder in Barnardsville for more then, uh, ten years now. That's good, unless you need people experienced in investigating murders, or attempted murders." Martin paused and saw that Greer was paying attention, his eyes clearly focused and riveted to the sheriff.

"I'm no powerhouse murder investigator son so I don't have any advantage or any mystical and magical advice or wisdom to offer. Just look, ask and think." Martin hoped that would sink in but Greer quickly let him know it didn't.

“Sheriff, I think I know who did it but I'm not sure you're going to like it.” Greer said with an apologetic and somewhat teasing tone.

“Deputy, I'm open to any idea you have because I don't know.” Martin replied.

“I know this may hurt sheriff, but I think we need to bring your friend Flapjack in for questioning.” Greer said, almost begging forgiveness for making the suggestion.

Martin now needed to defuse his temper and asked calmly and soberly, “Why do you say that?”

Greer looked, up, down and around but finally turned his eyes to Mary Lou and said in a near whisper “Isn't that Flapjack's girl friend? Here alone with Doc Renfro?”

Martin looked squarely at Greer, then turned to look at Mary Lou. Sitting alone, her legs pulled in and up close, her hands clasped. She had tried so hard to maintain the charade, never thinking what happened this evening could be a consequence. Martin looked back at his deputy and motioned for him to sit in one of the balcony chairs.

Greer was not oblivious to how that may have hurt Martin and started to speak. “Sir, she's a waitress in one of those floozie joints on Silver Road so it makes...” and that's where Martin shut him down.

“Mary Lou is a waitress. Mary Lou Oren, works at the Gilded Cage, on Silver Road. Good work deputy but did you know she was a dancer first but always wanted to be a waitress? She had to wait for that opening and her dancing got her to the front of the line. Did you know she was in college for mechanical engineering? Did you know she was a solid B student?” Martin waited, a strategic pause.

“Well, no sir, I didn't know most of that but she still is young, pretty, going out with that old geyser and apparently has someone else on the side with status and lots of money too.” Greer said, rather confidently too.

“You should have dug just a little deeper deputy. Mary Lou Oren, AKA Mary Lou Renfro, is Dr. Renfro's daughter

and took an alias as a dancer to spare her father any embarrassment. To be honest, Doc Renfro does have a problem with her seeing Flapjack and like you, thinks he's too old for her. But he accepts it and is just hoping she will eventually change her mind. If she doesn't, well, who knows. Deputy, close you mouth please, it doesn't look becoming a peace officer.”

The deputy was dumbfounded but bad ideas are hard to surrender. “Wouldn't that be a motive sir?” he asked the sheriff.

“Mary Lou will make up her own mind and nothing will change that, certainly not killing her father.” Martin added, glancing back at Mary Lou. “If I'm a good judge of character deputy, Flapjack will be here any minute. He's a strange character, and I say that as his friend but there isn't anything he wouldn't do for that girl.”

Greer turned his eyes from Martin just in time to see Flapjack come from the front entrance to the sofa behind Mary Lou. The brighter lighting of the living room glistened off the tears on her high cheeks and the ruby red lipstick on her full lips. She was a beautiful girl Martin thought, with a very fair complexion contrasted by near shoulder length straight, black hair. Flapjack came up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders and his head alongside her face and snuggled into her neck.

“It's OK deputy, it's an old expression and you can think what you want but solve this problem. Flapjack could have done it, not likely but possible, so find the evidence and let that tell you where you have to go, not some erotic fantasies floating in your brain.” Martin hoped that he had set his deputy on the right course. He and Flapjack had other work to do.

On his way out, Martin stopped briefly to offer his prayers and best wishes to Mary Lou, taking her hands and assuring her Deputy Greer would get the guilty party. He turned his eyes toward Flapjack, offered his condolences and then

reminded his friend they had serious work to do the following morning. One final look around, especially toward the balcony where Greer was just coming in, and Martin left for home.

...

Dugan was standing at the space port reception area when Martin and Flapjack passed through early in the morning, each looking his way and just slightly acknowledging his presence with a nod. Dugan was besides himself now, redder than a beet and furious that Flapjack was still walking around. He turned to the corporal standing at his side and said "Those damn incompetents couldn't find the evidence." The corporal had no idea what he was talking about and Dugan was grateful for that when he caught his slip.

Adams and Wallace were running through the pre-flight checklist when Martin and Flapjack arrived at the hatch. "Good morning gents." Adams shouted as he pointed toward the galley. "Coffee is ready. We have an hour so take your time." Adams biggest concern was someone choking at a critical moment. He knew his crew but he did not know Martin or Flapjack under pressure except for the incident at Auric Canyon. They did well there and he let that be his reassurance.

"Mr. Randall, run your com-link checks. Lets make sure Alta, Sheila and Robby are go." the commander said as he walked the perimeter of the astro-navigation station checking various side compartments. No reason to be nervous he told himself. The whole future of this colony, perhaps even Earth depends on us today. His well rehearsed matter of fact voice could pull it off but his dry mouth and wet hands did not accept the lie. It was nervous energy and had to be walked off.

Just then, Flapjack walked past with a coffee mug in hand and a cigarette dangling. "Going out for a smoke?" Adams asked, very much knowing what the answer would be but getting a surprise in return.

“Yep commander, and you should try it. You're a bundle of nerves.” replied Flapjack. “Don't worry commander, I won't let you choke to death.”

There was something about Flapjack Adams did not like and could not precisely identify. As he started to follow the forty-niner outside, he realized that like and respect were two separate attachments and Flapjack was someone he could respect. Like he had to work on but told himself it was not that far away.

When they got to the grassy square with the single bench, Flapjack offered Adams a cigarette but something was lackluster about his behavior. He pulled out the Zippo, flipped the cover open and lit off, holding it for Adams and then pausing, closing the cover and just staring at the ground. Flapjack was not looking at the ground, but avoiding contact with Adams's eyes because his were teared up. Adams could sense something was not right, asked but was shrugged off. Adams was not one to pry but would let Flapjack tell him in his own good time. His concern was any interference with the mission today.

“Flapjack, are you all right for our mission?” the commander asked and had to know.

Flapjack raised his head and the lighter, “I'll be all right” he said as he lit up.

...

“Miss Oren, I'm sorry to have to bring this up but I need your help to conduct my investigation.” Deputy Greer said with the most apologetic inflection he could muster. Mary Lou was distraught but did receive good news from the hospital which made her less adverse to speaking with Greer.

“My father is going to live,” she said but then added “but he will lose his arm.” She actually expected he would loose his arm from what she saw the night before. She had no medical training but that kind of damage did not look like it could be repaired. “I'm sorry deputy,” she continued “of

course I want to help your investigation. What can I tell you?"

"Enemies, did your father have any enemies?" Greer knew the answer before he asked strictly based on Renfro's reputation in Barnardsville. Mary Lou shook her head and Greer was satisfied. Now things would get dicey.

"What about Flapjack? Any reason to dislike your father?" Greer asked and braced for an outburst. It never came.

"No." replied Mary Lou, calmly and without any animus toward Greer. "My father did not make it a secret he thought Flapjack was too old for me. He told me that. He told Flapjack that. He never insisted we part, just that we consider what he said."

"I don't know Miss Oren." Greer said with a very sincere tone, "Someone tried to kill your father but it seems they wanted to make it look like Flapjack, maybe?"

"Why do you say that?" Mary Lou asked.

"We found the remains of an exploded blaster power pack. It's for a very limited edition rifle used primarily for hunting these days. I know Sheriff Martin and Flapjack own that model. Some other people do too so its not conclusive evidence and there is no way to trace blaster bolts. Who ever did this could have killed your father but that isn't what they wanted to do, at least it appears that way." Greer paused to give Mary Lou time to understand what he said and allow her to react.

Mary Lou sat back in the dining room chair, crossed her arms and looked intensely at Greer. What is he trying to tell me she was thinking. If it's not about killing my father, then it's about framing Flapjack? Is that it? Very few people knew Mary Lou's relation to Dr. Renfro, but more than a few knew about her and Flapjack. Disgruntled suitors? No. Ex-boyfriends? No. Psycho customers? Well, that was always a possibility but quite rare in the colony.

"Miss Oren, I think I should focus on Flapjack since he appears to be the key in this mystery." the deputy said.

“I agree.” The setup was obvious to Mary Lou having given it some thought. As she explained “Someone tried to make it look like a jealous Flapjack wanted to kill a secret lover, but whoever did the setup did not realize there was no secret lover, just a secret father.”

Greer was nodding. It sounded plausible because Greer had made the same mistake about the relationship of Mary Lou and Dr. Renfro. “So who are Flapjack's enemies?” he asked.

Mary Lou shook her head, answering with “There are people who don't like him, but enough to kill him?”

...

“Let's do this men.” the commander announced from his position next to the astro-navigation station. The klaxon signaling lift-off was sounding as Adams turned to Clary and ordered “Take us out of here Crewman Clary.” Just as rehearsed, the ship began its ascent from landing pad 8. Just as predicted, Barnard's Port Authority issued a stand down order and warning. The ship shifted to full reverse and banked to miss the Comstock. The second challenge from Port Authority quickly followed as the ship accelerated away along the direct line with the Comstock between the ship and the Port Authority blaster batteries.

“Give us a five mile countdown Mr. Randall.” Adams said just as he had in the simulations. Wallace killed the klaxon and the surge of the ship's core and propulsion driver could now be heard distinctly in the background.

“On my mark.” came Randall's response. “Five, four, three, two, one, mark!”

“Take us into orbit Crewman Clary.” came the next order from Adams. The reverse velocity dropped drastically and suddenly as the vertical ascent increased in direct proportion. The blaster batteries missed but the trail of tracers was closer than in the simulation.

From then on, everything went exactly as practiced in the simulations. The first Krell challenge was issued and the

response transmitted, and played for the crew to hear in English. The second Krell challenge was answered by Robby and relayed from the ship. Alta was ready at the educator with Sheila at her side. There was always a chance something could play out that the simulator failed to consider and the women had to be ready.

The landing coordinates and flight path vectors were received next and were fed into the ship's computer as everyone held their breath. This was one of several critical steps where an error could mean death. Clary sat back as the computer now controlled the ship's descent and approach to the north end of Auric Canyon. Clary resumed control when the ship was within 50 meters of touch down. Clary nudged the controls to move the ship slightly stern ward to avoid a small rock ridge near the bow as he eased the vessel to the ground.

“Mr. Wallace, prepare for disembarkation.” Adams ordered as Martin and Flapjack moved toward the port hatch and gangway. They looked quite presentable in their fleet uniforms. It should be enough for the Krell robots to accept them as Garon officers.

Wallace went through his drill, which was punctuated with numerous repetitions of aye aye. “Power down propulsion. Stow all weapons. Deploy all gangways. Open the hatches. Security team, deploy now and set the perimeter.” Wallace was nervous about this step, concerned about wild animals. The commander convinced him the ship's landing would scare off any wild animals but Wallace still had some reservations. The small security detail fanned outward in all directions from the ship, then came four announcements on the com-link that all was clear.

Alta and Sheila were following everything by com-link relay through Robby. Alta had engaged the educator headset but was able to sit back and focus on the unfolding action at the ship. She and Sheila would occasionally exchange glances, satisfied that everything was going according to the

simulation.

As Martin and Flapjack descended the gangway, four of the Krell caretaker robots appeared at the holographic camouflaged entrance to the Krell outpost. Martin walked forward to greet them with Flapjack close behind. This was another danger point that had both men clenching their fists. Would the robots recognize them from the earlier confrontation in the canyon? Would that damage their cover story and false identities? Martin gave a command to initiate the illusion he was commander. "Security detail, standby the gangways for further instructions." The ayes came back and the robots moved closer to Martin.

When they had moved within a few meters, Martin told them "I am Commander Martin, commander of the Garon space cruiser, C-57-D. This is my executive officer, Mr. Flapjack." The other three robots now fanned out, taking positions around the ship as the one robot stood fast near Martin and Flapjack.

Martin could hear footsteps coming down the gangway behind him. Adams arrived as rehearsed, but now dressed in the most fashionable and formal clothing available on the colony. Martin turned and exchanged a look with Adams and Flapjack before turning back to the Krell robot.

"It is my pleasure," Martin started, not certain the robot was even facing him, and continuing "to introduce his excellency, the honorable John J. Adams, Garon Ambassador and negotiator ex-officio to resolve a dispute in accordance with agreements and protocols our ancestors made with your masters."

Silence.

Martin looked closely at the robot, noticing some details he had not noticed earlier. The photos he took during the first encounter were given to Adams. His heart jumped a beat when one of the top panels of the robot slid open, revealing a thin metallic appendage that dropped sideways and produced a cylindrical object at its end.

“You may call me Oscar.” the robot said in a deep and trilling voice. “Please follow me Commander Martin, Executive Officer Flapjack and distinguished Ambassador John J. Adams.” The robot spun 90 degrees, pointed the appendage and cylindrical gadget forward, and with a click, the holographic camouflage disappeared to reveal a rock face with a cutout opening in the shape of a Krell arch.

“Here we go.” said Adams, as he stepped forward, flanked by both Martin and Flapjack.

Chapter 20 The Surrogate

“Robby, do you see them yet?” Alta asked as she backed away from the educator and looked around the lab. She could see Sheila standing at the library viewer to her left with the Krell robot identified as Wilma at her side. Maud was standing, or floating, to her right.

“Yes Miss Alta, they are entering the complex now.” Robby reported.

Adams, Martin and Flapjack passed under the first arch and into the outpost complex. The caretaker robot identified as Oscar led them to a triangular shaped platform with seating for three. The platform, slightly less than half the width of the corridor, appeared to be hovering about 100 millimeters above the floor. Adams took the front while Martin and Flapjack took the two rear seats. With Oscar up front and to the right of center and an unnamed companion robot at the rear, the platform started moving forward at the speed of a brisk walk.

Adams could see a line of three other robots heading toward them and passing in review on the left. They were apparently heading outside at a very rapid rate of speed. “Mr. Wallace,” Adams said, holding the com-link closely, “you have visitors coming your way. Don't shoot at them.” Adams could hear a garbled aye aye come back as the signal was getting weaker. The detector for the ship channel was amber now, the “maybe” indicator.

The platform was about 100 meters into the corridor when Adams spotted Robby straight ahead, about another 200 meters. “Robby, can you intercept and relay my signal to the ship?” Adams asked the robot on his assigned channel.

“Yes commander.” came Robby's reply.

“Please do so.” the commander ordered and then asked

“Can I speak to Alta?”

“You can speak to Miss Alta directly but I would recommend you allow me to intercept and relay your signal to assure there is no interference” Robby responded and advised based on his observations of how well the com-links functioned inside the outpost.

“Do so Robby and put me through to Alta now.” Adams said as the platform continued to close the distance on Robby.

“Alta, we’re inside.” Adams said excitedly. “What should we do now?” he asked for good reason. There was no simulation to cover what would happen now but the protocol was clearly stated in the Krell agreements. Alta needed to standby the educator if any questions arose concerning the protocols.

“Talk to the robots John.” Alta replied, “They will help you but be careful what you ask. Be precise and make it a request if possible. The Krell held the Garon in contempt. There is good reason to believe that was reflected in the robots' programming.”

Adams acknowledged Alta's advice and decided to give it an immediate trial. “Oscar?” he asked, then waited for a response.

“Yes ambassador?” the robot replied, but Adams remained silent. “Ambassador?” the robot asked again.

Martin leaned forward in his seat and gave Adams a gentle tap on the shoulder saying “That's you, Mr. Ambassador.” In a much lower voice, Martin whispered “Don't slip up now.”

Adams turned to look at Martin and motioned his lips to say “OK, OK.” without making any sound, then without turning so Martin could see him speak the words, Adams said “Oscar, where are we going?” Adams checked the com-link to be sure the relay channel to Alta was open.

“I am taking you to your temporary quarters so that you may recuperate after your journey. When you are ready, we will proceed to the Chamber of Audiences to meet the active surrogate. Does that meet with your approval Mr.

Ambassador?”

“I want to get started right...” Adams was about to say when Alta frantically jumped in on the open com-link relay and said very loudly “Yes, I need time to recuperate. To my quarters please.” There was a pause, then some head turning and then Adams said “Yes, to my quarters please.”

“Yes Mr. Ambassador” Oscar said and then added “Do you have a problem with your vocal cords that requires medical attention or are you suffering from some other anatomical malady?”

That caught Adams off guard and he let loose a “How bout that.” with a hint of laughter as he turned to look back at Martin and Flapjack. “I’m fine but can you get that annoying trilling in your voice fixed Oscar. It is very difficult to understand what you are saying.”

“My apologies Mr. Ambassador. I will have my voice adjusted immediately. The platform slowed as it reached the end of the corridor and a large connecting vestibule about 12 meters square. At the center was a cube about 3 meters on the edges and framed in Krell arches on all four sides. It looked like an elevator shaft. The platform turned sharply right and entered another corridor. This too was very long and the subdued lighting made the distance difficult to gauge.

Alta and Adams checked back and forth to verify they still had the signal relay, which they did. Alta got right to the point. “Oscar said some things we need to check. If the robots give you an opportunity to stall, you need to take it so I can find things on the Krell educator.” Everyone heard Alta and there was a general murmur of agreement.

It was Flapjack who phrased the issue that still puzzled Adams. “Oscar said Chamber of Audiences and active surrogate. Alta needs to look those up John.” Adams was nodding and understood now that the robots were dropping information that needed investigation.

About 50 meters into the corridor and the platform stopped. “The Ambassador’s suite is to the left gentlemen”

said Oscar without the slightest hint of trilling. The door set in the Krell arch slid open and Adams, Martin and Flapjack entered.

The collective gasp heard by Oscar was “Wow!” and something he had no translation for as the men viewed the room interior from the archway and then slowly moved inside. “What does what the...” Oscar started and was met with an instant “Shut up!” from Flapjack before he got the last word out.

...

Alta laughed when she heard Oscar and Flapjack but quickly composed herself for the more serious task at hand. Alta spun left to look at Sheila and simply said “Chamber of Audiences. Active surrogate.” When it was clear she had Sheila's attention, she asked “I'll take the former and you the latter?” Sheila nodded and Alta spun back to the educator headset.

Alta had become quite proficient using the educator with Maud's help. As the educator exercised the anomalous structure in Alta's brain, she was finding herself communicating with Maud on a nonverbal level more often than not. She was still speaking and thinking in broken Krell, broken English but was making fewer mistakes and occasionally correcting Maud's translations. “Found it!” she yelled and then added “Chamber of Audiences!” as the image started to form in the educator.

“Still working.” Sheila yelled back as the robot Wilma advanced the library viewer and searched the library computer. Sheila was trying to learn at least rudimentary Krell but having great difficulty. Wilma was a great aid but being helpful and being a teacher were not the same. Sheila was certain Robby would be more instructive but his role acting as the signal relay station was crucial. It was difficult to correct Wilma's contextual errors without some Krell but Sheila kept at it, inching toward the answer to what is an active surrogate.

“John, I have an image of at least part of the complex and

can trace your location. You're in the Ambassador Suite. How is it?" Alta asked as Sheila retreated from the library viewer and joined her at the educator.

"This is like a resort Alta. You wouldn't believe it." Adams said as the voices of Martin and Flapjack could be heard in the background gushing about what they saw.

"Have fun but not too much without me." Alta said with a patently false, semi-serious tone, but then she continued "You passed a vestibule with an elevator shaft to get where you are now. The Chamber of Audiences is almost directly below you, two miles! That elevator connects the levels."

Though his voice sounded distant from the com-link mic, Alta could hear Flapjack expressing concerns about the air pressure and temperature that far below the surface, perhaps deeper considering they were inside a mountain. He also made it clear he was confident the Krell had addressed structural issues, but environment was questionable, especially if robots were working in those spaces.

"I got you Flapjack." Alta said, "I'm reading as you speak and learned the entire complex is habitable for the Krell, which makes it habitable for us. The Krell have a slightly higher tolerance for heat but not so high that we could not stand being in the same environment." Alta could hear the men talking and the general consensus seemed to be that her answer was acceptable except for one reservation expressed by Flapjack.

"The Krell library has not been updated for 200,000 years Alta." said Flapjack with an obvious hint of concern in his voice. "Can we be sure the information is still applicable?"

"Good point Flapjack." replied Alta and added "I should locate and check for environmental monitors. Just a moment, I'll need some help from Maud."

Sheila took the opportunity to briefly inject a comment regarding her search for the terms active surrogate. "I'm sure Wilma can find it Alta, I got her started but I don't know how to steer her search." Sheila said quickly and quietly to

minimize her intrusion.

“We need a few minutes John.” Alta advised the commander. “I’ll be back soon.”

...

The Ambassador Suite was impressive and had the men wondering out loud after Alta signed off. “I can’t imagine what the Imperial Suite looks like.” chuckled Flapjack as he stood in the center of the room and slowly turned to take in the full view.

Martin had walked to a doorway in the left wall, remarking “Quite a bed room. Double sized bed, sunken hot tub, balcony, private bath, wide screen view plate, sitting area. I could really relax here.”

Adams had wandered to another door in the same wall and stated “Another one here Julius, same as you are describing. One of these rooms alone is the Honeymoon Suite at the Midland Grande.”

Flapjack had wandered to the opposite wall where there was a single double door and said “Those are the servants quarters men, the master bed room is here.” The room was only slightly wider than the others but nearly twice as deep and apparently featured some side rooms as well. As Martin and Adams came up behind Flapjack, he threw the double doors open so they could see what he was talking about. As they gaped, Flapjack wandered back into the center room which in no way was deprived of luxury appointments and furnishings.

“There it is.” shouted Flapjack as he moved to the end of the room nearest the entrance. “Wet bar!” he said for all to hear. “Bar taps too. I wonder if they work?” Under the highly polished teak wood bar top, Flapjack found a side by side freezer and refrigerator. He was guessing but to his surprise, he found iced glass mugs in the freezer. He was even more surprised when he saw the handles on the three bar taps that read “Beer”, “Ale” and “Pale”. On closer inspection, he could see the handles were some kind of electronic display,

apparently programmed by their hosts for English.

Martin and Adams turned right facing the bar and walked toward it, taking seats on the leather padded bar stools. "What's a pale?" Adams asked and Flapjack smiled back.

"It's a pale ale commander and is what goes best to enhance the flavor of good smoke, and vice versa." replied Flapjack as he also searched behind the bar and soon found the target of his quest. "This is an ashtray commander. We don't throw the ashes or butts on the floor but use this." he said as he smacked it down on the bar top. A few seconds later, he placed a cardboard coaster down and then drew a pale ale from the tap into an iced mug for Adams. It was a beautiful pour Adams thought, golden amber liquid topped with about two centimeters of foam in a frosted mug. Flapjack reached into a concealed shirt pocket and retrieved a fresh pack of cigarettes and his Zippo, placing them on the bar top and pushing them toward Adams.

"Our good fortune and presently pleasant circumstances aside, that was smart thinking on Alta's part that we pick up on words the robots drop." Both Martin and Adams nodded in agreement as the forty-niner continued. "Like Alta said, if we just ask the robots the right way, we'll probably get everything we want. By the way, how's that beer Julius?"

"It's good but it has me thinking" Julius started and was quickly interrupted by Flapjack.

"Oh no Julius, haven't I warned you before that 'thinkin' and 'drinkin' don't mix." Flapjack interjected and started laughing as he patted his friend on the shoulder from across the bar top. Flapjack stared at Martin until he had his attention, then glanced at Adams, then back at Martin shaking his head. Martin knew what it meant coming from Flapjack. Martin wanted to say something about Dr. Renfro. Adams knew nothing about what happened. It was a nonverbal "lets keep that problem to ourselves and not burden people who can't help anyway. He has enough to think about."

Adams was lighting a smoke when his com-link started

chirping. “Commander, Lieutenant Wallace here, just checking in sir. Everything all right?”

“Yes, fine so far and the robots have been very hospitable. These are the quarters they prepared for us.” the commander said as he scanned the main room of the suite with the com-link. “Is everything all right at the ship?”

“Yes skipper and it is indeed curious.” Wallace responded. “There must be five or six robots here now and they are just floating around the perimeter of the ship like they were on guard duty, protecting us.”

“They probably are protecting you since you are considered a diplomatic vessel. Just keep the weapons stowed and I think we will get through this without any problem.” the commander said while crossing his fingers, hoping that he was right.

“Aye aye skipper and good luck. Over.” and with those final words Wallace's channel went quiet.

Adams could sense after that conversation that they were all feeling a little guilty about having some rest and relaxation at this time, especially under such resplendent conditions. Adams took a sip from the pale ale mug, then a puff from the cigarette and began speaking while exhaling. “Look, we didn't put us here, the Krell did and there is no reason to not accept what they did. Alta will be back to us in a short time and then we go back to work. Enjoy this moment, please.”

The smiles and nods from Martin and Flapjack signified their agreement and approval, each raising his mug to salute the commander.

...

Sheila had given Wilma a good start so that by the time Wilma spoke to Alta, she had narrowed the search from over 2 million items to less than 45,000 possible items. It appeared that surrogates, whatever they were, played an extremely important role at Krell installations, explaining why they appeared so frequently in the Krell literature.

Alta hesitated to ask but it seemed like a good idea at this

time. She actually got it from Adams talking to Oscar. “Wilma, please make your voice different from Maud's voice so I can tell which of you is speaking.”

Why stop there Sheila was thinking and said what was on her mind. “Maud, Wilma, can you apply some color to your shells so we can more readily identify you? Perhaps a nice light pink for Wilma and a light lavender for Maud?”

Wilma replied, but with a new voice, higher pitched but not annoying. “We can do that with an oil job. We will attend to that when you dismiss us for the day.” Wilma paused, then turned toward Alta and spoke again. “Active surrogate is the lead computer that performs tasks normally performed by a living Krell. The active surrogate only has authority when a qualified living Krell is required to perform some task but is not available for extraordinary reasons.”

That was a good start Alta thought, but wanted to know more. Wilma must have sensed that without Alta speaking and the robot continued.

“The active surrogate is a command and control point computer, normally aggregating the command and control of tens or hundreds of other computers responsible for numerous functions of the outpost. An active surrogate may have other active surrogates connected for critical operations that require extensive use of computational resources and stored data.” Wilma paused again, as if waiting for some mental command from Alta to continue.

Alta had heard enough and wanted to get directly to the situation with Adams, Martin and Flapjack. “Stay Wilma.” she said as she signaled Adams on the com-link.

“John, I think you will want to hear this and possibly ask questions yourself.” Alta said, waiting for a response before she continued.

“Wilma,” Alta said in a near sisterly voice, “we want to know about the active surrogate for diplomacy, particularly involving a Garon ambassador.”

“The active surrogate for diplomatic affairs has the status

of ambassador and is empowered to resolve diplomatic issues with foreign powers, acting on behalf and representing the interests of the Krell empire.” Wilma paused, then continued “Agreements made by the active surrogate are binding on the Krell empire until they expire or are breached by the Garon.”

Alta could hear Martin and Flapjack in the background urging Adams to “ask the big one”. “Careful what you say John.” Alta warned him.

“Wilma” Adams said with some uncertainty in his voice, “Did we, the Garon, violate some prior agreement?”

There was no hesitation with Wilma's answer. “You must address that issue with the active surrogate.”

“Well Alta, Sheila, we know the who or what, we know the where but we still don't know the why or the how.” Adams voice was not reassuring to the two women.

It was Sheila who took up the challenge with “Commander, John, we know far more now than we did before you came through that portal and into the outpost. We will help as much as we can but you have to speak to the Krell. They accept you as the Garon Ambassador.”

Adams let Sheila finish then responded. “I'm sorry about that. Listen to what I say and not necessarily how I say it. As a commander, I have to convince people I appreciate the perils and not give the impression of a cavalier attitude about their lives. So I talk gloomy once in a while. Rest assured I appreciate the progress we made and I am fortunate to have all of you, and my crew, with me.”

That seemed to satisfy Alta who looked up at Sheila with a broad smile. Martin and Flapjack were also reassured by the commander. “Let's enjoy these smokes and certainly the drinks the Krell were considerate enough to provide. When we finish and you gentlemen are ready, we have an active surrogate to meet.” Adams lit another cigarette and motioned Flapjack to refill his mug. “There is so much more in this suite to see, but maybe some other time.” the commander said as he raised his glass.

“Just one more thing” Alta said. “The environment monitors all indicate habitable conditions for Krell throughout the outpost including all shafts, tunnels and galleries. Enjoy your drinks gentlemen but don't overdo it.”

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Oscar left no instructions on how to reach him but Adams figured the robots were very straight forward and that Oscar would be waiting just outside the door. He didn't need rest, sleep or the toilet so why not just stay on duty. As the door opened, there was Oscar and the platform waiting.

Adams opened the com-link channel to Alta as the three men took their places in the seats of the platform. “Something I don't understand Alta. If the surrogates can act on behalf of the Krell, why haven't they kept the historical records current?” Adams asked as the platform turned and headed toward the vestibule with the elevator shaft.

“I'll ask Maud.” is all that Alta could offer. Sheila watched as Alta and Maud had a conversation in Krell with an occasionally spattering of English. Alta got an answer and replied to Adams that “The robots do keep historical records they need for day to day activities and continuity of operations. These are not part of the historic library I can access. It's raw data that requires a living Krell librarian to, uh,” Alta stammered, searching for the words, and continued with “manipulate. That's the word that fits best. When the last Krell died, Krell history stopped quite literally but the raw data continued to accumulate.”

“That will have to do.” Adams remarked, “I guess that as a negotiator, I will be allowed to ask questions.”

Alta had an idea, turning to Maud and again speaking in Krell with broken English thrown in. Maud lowered an appendage from one of her panels and used it to manipulate a few settings on the educator. When she stopped, Alta spoke to Maud again, and now a three dimensional image of the commander's party riding through the corridor appeared in the educator.

Adams selected a different com-link channel, then spoke into the mic. "Mr. Wallace, status report please?"

"Very quiet commander." came back the reply from Lt. Wallace. "There are now six robots posted around the perimeter of the ship and I have our people pulled back to the gangways. We get your signal but we can't track you. I don't understand."

"You're getting a signal relayed by Robby using some of the facilities inside the Krell outpost." the commander answered. "Just remember your orders, no weapons!"

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The shaft enclosure was at the center of a vestibule and the junction of four tunnels radiating out from the center. As the platform approached the closest side on the direct path from the corridor, a door slid upward, revealing a small room with plain walls but a strange looking ceiling with nine recessed cells, each with a lens shaped object at the center and the appearance they were aimed downward. The lenses were not glass but some kind of metal crystal.

Once the platform stopped, Oscar simply said "Follow." The three men dismounted the platform and walked into the small cubic room with the rear guard robot right behind. The door closed, the small room filled with a pale green light and about 10 seconds later, the lights returned to normal. A different door slid open and again, Oscar said "Follow."

"What the" Flapjack started to say but was interrupted by a chirp from Adams's com-link. Martin and Adams had seen the same thing as they looked around. This vestibule was now circular and had six corridors, not four, radiating from the center shaft. They had moved in that brief time but there was no feeling of motion due to acceleration.

"Alta, is that you?" the commander asked, slowly walking as Oscar waited at one of the corridors to be joined by the party.

"Yes." Alta answered, "I saw it. You dropped, two miles in 10 seconds. I can still see you but are you all right?"

“Yes, we didn't feel a thing. A door closed, green lights turned on, 10 seconds later they turned off and a door opened and here we are. It must have been some kind of field to compensate for the acceleration. We are still following the lead robot, Oscar.”

Oscar was waiting at one of the corridor entrances as the men took their time walking toward him but twisting and turning to study the vestibule. This was about twice the size as the upper level but corridors were always the same, about three by three meters square with a Krell archway spaced at about four meter intervals. The corridors all had subdued lighting but there were no visible light fixtures. The arches gave an impression as they faded out of detail and into grayness that the corridors were very long.

“This way gentlemen.” came a request from Oscar as he turned and glided down the corridor.

About four arches later they stopped, a door set in an arch to the right slid open and Oscar ushered them into a room that was oddly decorated compared to the austere surroundings they had seen thus far. The room had a plush red carpet and a perimeter of white marble split columns set into matching marble finished walls. The walls were decorated with tapestries, some at right angles and suspended from ceiling beams, probably for sound deadening. The columns supported heavy wood timbers that appeared to be a highly polished rose wood color. The room was about 8 by 16 meters with a red curtained wall at one end. The lighting was not as subdued as the corridor but was a warm and pleasing gold tone without hot spots or glare.

The room bore no resemblance to the Ambassador Suite and was definitely much more formal in its decoration and furnishing. Some of the furnishings and items looked like antiques from the ancients while most of the furniture was of a style known as Retro 20, similar to what Adams had seen in the Martin home but with a different color scheme. “Welcome to the Chamber of Audiences. Make your selves comfortable.

The surrogate will speak with you shortly.” With that, Oscar spun and he and the other robot left quickly and quietly through the doorway.

“Do you recall the Krell conference room we saw in the first transmission we got from Alta?” Adams asked as the party began to wander in different directions within the chamber. Martin and Flapjack turned and looked at Adams but said nothing, then returned to examine their surroundings. “The Krell chairs had no backs but the ones in here do. It looks like this room was intended for Garon visitors.”

“Welcome Ambassador Adams.” came a clearly synthetic but pleasant sounding voice that seemed to fill the chamber. “I am the active surrogate for diplomatic affairs.”

The curtain on the end wall parted, revealing a darkened glass window that brightened as the curtain opened. A holographic projection of a Krell, dressed in a white robe with royal blue trim and sash could be seen in the now fully lighted window. “My image is purely artificial and for your convenience Mr. Ambassador. I see you have brought two hostages as required. They may be seated.” said the voice with a commanding and nearly dismissive tone.

The three men stopped and looked toward each other with unmistakable expressions of surprise on their faces. “Hostages?” came an indignant exclamation from Flapjack as he wheeled around to face the window and image.

Chapter 21 Diplomacy Alta Style

“Robby, what happened to the com-link signal?” Alta asked while gazing at the amber indicator light for Adams's designated channel.

“The Chamber of Audiences is completely shielded. I can neither send nor receive signals.” Robby responded. “I will continue to monitor all channels Miss Alta in the event any return to service.”

Alta was visibly upset communication had been lost. She looked to Sheila for some reassurance and Sheila obliged. “A secure room for negotiations. It makes sense Alta. I wouldn't worry about it.” Between Sheila's body language and voice, she clearly was not worried and continued to work with Wilma after flashing a smile to Alta.

Alta leaned forward to meet the educator headset and continue her research on the ancient agreements between the Krell and Garon. She decided this would be more productive than fretting and conceded that Aunt Sheila was probably correct. “Maud, I need to locate the negotiation protocols in the agreement between the Krell and Garon.” Alta asked as she focused on the image chamber of the educator, determined to return to her research and accept Sheila's answer concerning the broken communication link.

Sheila stood silently next to Wilma at the library viewer, taking satisfaction that Alta had returned to work and then turned to Wilma saying “You know what we have to do. Let's get to it Wilma.”

...

Martin, Adams and Flapjack were huddled at the end of the room furthest from the window where the surrogate stood. Adams was trying to calm his companions and assure them he

would inquire about the use of the word hostage. After a few moments of chatter, they agreed that Adams, and only Adams should speak for the group. It also fit with the designated titles and roles given them by the surrogate.

They broke their tight circle and started moving back toward the window when the surrogate spoke. "There is no need to whisper gentlemen. If you require privacy, this room complies with the protocols of the agreement. The isolation switch is located on the window sill. Your com-link and all recording devices will not function in this room but you may return to the corridor if you wish to use any such devices."

Adams walked straight to the window with Martin and Flapjack right behind. "I would like to test it first." Adams said while looking at the surrogate and then turning his attention to the window sill. There was a single rocker switch with the positions marked as "isolate" and "connect". That was simple enough and in some respects surprised Adams. "I didn't think it would look so primitive." Adams remarked as he glanced at Martin, and then Flapjack.

The surrogate watched and then said "Mr. Ambassador, don't be misled by appearances. The switch is functional, has an infinite life and was configured for your convenience. You may turn it to the isolate position to interrupt our communication any time you wish."

"Let's try it." Adams responded as his index finger slid across the window sill and on the high end of the rocker switch. There was an audible click as he pressed down, but it wasn't mechanical. "A simulation." Flapjack interjected and was acknowledged with a nod from Martin and Adams. This switch was not a simple mechanical device but apparently it worked, but not to Flapjacks satisfaction.

"How do we know he can't hear us?" Flapjack asked as he stared at the image of the surrogate.

"We don't." Adams answered as he lifted the com-link to see the indicator light. "The com-link is down, just like he said it would be."

“Look” said Martin as he pointed to the window, “The surrogate has backed away. The switch on his side is on.” Martin paused to give some thought to the situation and then continued speaking. “It makes sense that either side could isolate itself. Now it's a matter of trust. You know the Krell better than us John. What do you think?”

“From what I have learned about the Krell,” Adams started, “I think they were honorable regardless of any other shortcomings, if they had any save a lack of humility, possibly. We will need to talk. Do we have any choice but to trust them?” With that, Martin and Flapjack both shook their heads.

“John, Julius, taking hostages is a very old practice in diplomacy.” said Flapjack with a surprisingly calm voice. “My initial reaction was shock but on reflection, I should not be surprised.” Adams and Martin were now intensely focused on what Flapjack was saying. “The ancient Greeks exchanged hostages to assure good behavior by each side. Hostages were always important citizens or blood relatives of leaders. If you acted in bad faith, the hostages would be killed. The Romans often took hostages to guarantee peace but they seldom gave hostages. I can see you are both skeptical.”

Martin spoke first with “Well yes Flapjack, this isn't ancient times and we have no precedent.”

Flapjack pondered what had been said and replied “Hostages in modern times serve the same purpose to assure peace and good faith behavior. It would be foolish of the hostage takers to kill their insurance policies. Some fools have done that through history, but by and large, it works with civilized people, hopefully including the Krell in our case.”

Adams was nodding but also impatient. “I have to check the com-link in the corridor” he said as he wheeled about and moved toward the door. Martin and Flapjack stayed and exchanged some thoughts on their role as hostages. It didn't seem to bother them as it did when first pronounced by the surrogate. Actually, they both came to believe it was a

sensible guarantee the Krell were requesting.

Adams had a clear com-link signal and ran a quick voice check with Robby, then Alta and finally Wallace. He explained to each the reason for the communication break and that it would be recurring as negotiations with the surrogate continued. From the corridor, Adams could see that Martin and Flapjack appeared to be much more at ease, even mildly laughing and joking. “The com-link checks out fine.” Adams announced as he walked back into the Chamber of Audiences. “Let’s sit and talk.”

There were several groups of chairs arranged in clusters about the room and Adams picked the closest to where they were standing. Martin sat but cast a wary glance toward the window where the surrogate had been standing. He gave his head a final shake and then turned his attention to the other two men who seemed far more at ease than he was.

“Alta is researching the agreement between the Krell and Garon but has nothing substantial to tell me at this time.” Adams said, pausing then adding “I didn’t say anything about the hostage issue. I did tell Wallace it was imperative he not do anything to provoke the robots to a hostile reaction. I’m sure he understands that hostages or not, our lives are in his hands in that respect. As for Alta, I didn’t want to unnecessarily alarm her or Sheila. If it’s in the agreements about hostages, they will discover it themselves.”

The three men started talking at a low level but eventually spoke more loudly and clearly. They had resigned themselves to trust the Krell and speaking in normal voices was so much easier. Adams thought about the surrogate waiting, but then fell back on what he thought about Oscar. Surely the surrogate could function from the Chamber of Audiences while waiting for the Ambassador.

...

Martin walked to the window and pressed the rocker switch to the connect position, then backed away and returned to his seat. The lights in the adjacent room came quickly to

full brightness and the surrogate could be seen approaching the window.

“As our guest, you have the right to claim aggrieved status. Is that your wish?” the surrogate asked.

Adams didn't respond immediately but thought quickly back to his academy training. All cadets were required to study at least two terms of diplomacy and one of international law. Adams recalled a role-playing session that was strikingly similar to his present situation. With that in mind he answered “Yes, I wish to claim that status without prejudice.” Martin and Flapjack sat stiffly, not exactly knowing what to expect and braced in preparation for some adverse reaction. Adams gave them a glance and a wink which seemed to calm them.

“You may state your claims Ambassador Adams.” The surrogate's voice sounded patient, almost coaxing as the image of the Krell stood motionless in the window.

“Thank you surrogate. I'll not waste your time and get right to the point.” Adams almost broke into a laugh as he thought about a robot being pressed for time, but he held himself in check and got back his grasp on the seriousness of the situation. “Firstly, an unknown number of Garon citizens have been abducted without just cause. We wish to have them repatriated to our custody.” Adams paused and could see that both Martin and Flapjack were signaling their approval and urging him to maintain his course.

“Secondly, two of my escorts were assaulted without justification by Krell robots in the area called Auric Canyon. Thirdly, a Krell citizen in my custody and for whose welfare I am responsible, and her guardian and property, a Krell robot were unlawfully abducted.” Flapjack was quietly pounding his fists on his thighs as Martin flashed an enthusiastic thumbs up, both clearly expressing approval of Adams words to the surrogate.

“Finally, the Garon inhabitants of the Barnardsville Colony have been unlawfully directed to vacate. That concludes our claims of grievance but we reserve the right to

amend and expand should it become necessary.” Adams was finished but was bothered and had to speak quickly “I request a brief recess to consult with my advisers in private.”

“Granted.” came the response of the surrogate, in a tone that sounded more parental every time the surrogate spoke. That was the problem.

Flapjack made for the window and pushed the rocker switch to isolate. “What's bothering you John?” Flapjack asked as he returned to his seat and started searching for his cigarettes.

That was perceptive Adams thought to himself and answered with “It's the tone of the surrogate, it started fine that we were equals in negotiations. Then it started to change. Did you notice?”

“Yes,” Flapjack answered first, “like he was talking to children or worse, an inferior.”

Adams was nodding but clarified with “I'm not going to make an issue of the fact that in some ways we are inferior but I will not accept that status when my concern is the lives of people. They are valuable to me regardless of what some Krell robot may say or think of me.”

Martin had been quiet, taking everything in but had to speak up now. He had concluded that only he could initiate the subject. “We need a bargaining chip to put that surrogate in his place. Perhaps a Krell hostage?” He had Adams's and Flapjack's attention now as they stopped talking and faced Julius. “We need to talk to Alta and Sheila. Perhaps Robby too. Lets step into the corridor.”

The commander's curiosity was piqued, as was Flapjacks as the three rose from their chairs and filed into the corridor. Adams handed Martin the com-link, and waited.

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“I don't know Uncle Julius, but I can try.” Alta said into the com-link while Sheila stood at her side. The two women looked at each other, not fully comprehending the reason for the request made by Sheriff Martin. Sheila shrugged her

shoulders and Alta turned about and looked at Maud. Alta had to work at it but her angry voice was about to explode in Maud's direction. "I hope you change your color soon Maud. It would be nice if you gave yourself a face too, and now Maud, not next year you stupid bucket of bolts."

"I'm so sorry Miss Alta. I will attend to it right away." With that response, Maud spun around and quickly floated toward the door and into the corridor. Alta and Sheila looked at each other with an expression of satisfaction and a gently curled smile that said "I don't believe that worked."

Alta raised the com-link to her mouth and spoke "It worked Uncle Julius, but I'm not so sure about the next part."

"I'm not either." came the reply from Martin, but he had to push on and bring the test to its conclusion. "Try it Alta, as best you can."

"Wilma, get over here!" Alta had to sound as natural as she could so she conjured up images of times she felt angry and frustrated. One such time was the conversation with her father after her argument with Commander Adams after he discovered her alone with Lt. Farman. "And I'll put more guards on the guards!" came to her mind, as she was relating the story of that encounter to her father. "I don't care if I live to 400 million!" she thought as the conversation played out in her head along with the feelings of anger and frustration she was experiencing. I have to do that now and convince Wilma like I convinced my father.

"Wilma, my father is a very important general on Altair 4 and is going to be very angry with you if you don't do as I say!" Alta jumped from her chair, crossed her arms and snapped her head forward, overacting she thought but, maybe it would work.

As Sheriff Martin suspected, Wilma had truth detection algorithms and bio sensors built into her system and proved it very quickly. "Miss Alta, your father is not a general and is not capable of being angry." Alta had to think about that but it made sense. Of course he can't be angry. He's dead and

Wilma knew that.

Martin encouraged Alta to finish the experiment. Wilma could detect a lie but could she detect a half-truth?

“My father was the most important person on Altair 4 and would not approve of you keeping me imprisoned.” Alta had selected her words very carefully to avoid any self-reaction to known lies and half truths. To what extent would Wilma detect omissions? What about truthful statements negated by changing circumstance? What about unstated but pertinent truths? To what extent could Alta camouflage her vital signs, brain waves, voice and other outward indicators the robot might detect and gauge?

Wilma wasn't exactly blowing a fuse but the noises emanating from her, a metallic grinding sound said something was awry inside. The robots had always been quick with answers, but Wilma was setting a record for unresponsiveness. Alta was counting the seconds now, 6, 7, 8 ...

When the count reached 11, Wilma spoke. “You are being restrained for your own protection.” Alta shook her head, implying her belief the response did not originate with Wilma.

“Wrong Wilma!” yelled Alta, startling Sheila and everyone listening on the com-link. “I need no protection because there is no threat, except you. I have been raised by the Garon. The Garon brought me here safely. The Garon have proven beyond doubt they are no threat to me.” More noises were emanating from Wilma and Sheila gave Alta a slight push to keep her talking. “I can protect myself. I don't need you or any other robot for protection. I proved I know how to use a weapon. The only threat to me were the robots that threatened and injured my friends.”

It was at that point that Alta began speaking Krell in a very loud voice with an angry tone. Sheila picked up a word here and there but shrugged her shoulders when asked what Alta was saying. Whatever it was, Wilma was churning noises from her interior unlike anything heard before. The metallic grinding now had a high pitched scratching sound thrown in.

Alta waited a few more seconds and screamed “Get out of my sight you tin can bitch! You make me sick!”

That silenced everyone and with that, Wilma spun 180 degrees and very quickly glided to the door and exited the lab. Alta was furious and it wasn't an act. Sheila moved closer and put an arm around her and tried to calm her.

At that moment, Maud returned wearing an exterior color of light lavender and stenciled eyes. Alta tore into her with “And you shut up Maud. You are a jailer and nothing more to me. When I can speak to the Krell, the first thing I will ask is that all of you be shut down for abusive behavior! Now you get out of here too and fix that color. You picked the worst shade of puke purple I can imagine.” Maud spun and fled the lab.

“Damn!” Sheila said, “Where did you learn all of that?”

“Around.” Alta said meekly, showing a hint of embarrassment as she calmed herself and sat back down at the educator. “Was it good?” Alta asked as an afterthought.

Sheila looked at Alta with her head cocked and shaking with a broadening smile. “That will certainly give any surrogate an earful to think about.” replied Sheila.

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The vertical array of monitors showed indicators and numbers all in the green though respiration was on the low side of acceptable. That was reassuring to Mary Lou but her father's face was more reassuring. Dr. Renfro was sleeping soundly and had a content look about him. Mary Lou had moved to his left side and held his hand. The bandaged remains of Renfro's right arm were on top of the sheet and a reminder of the assault from the previous evening.

A nurse entered the room, quickly glanced at the monitors and then began a casual examination of Renfro. The monitors recorded everything but it was accepted practice to see if the patient looked as well as the monitors reported. “Miss Oren, your father will be under for several more hours yet. You're welcome to stay or we could call you when he awakes. It's up

to you.”

Mary Lou was about to answer but stopped when she saw Deputy Greer at the doorway. She had been avoiding him but it was time to confront the inevitable. “Nurse, if you would call me, that would be nice.” The nurse nodded as Mary Lou carefully placed her father's hand down and then made her way to the door. Deputy Greer started to make an apology but Mary Lou waved it off and said “I know, I know, you're just doing your job. Do you want to talk here?”

Greer glanced around and seeing the waiting room was empty agreed it was satisfactory for their conversation. The deputy had done his research into the background of both Renfro and his daughter. It was awkward to discuss and he made some small talk inquiring about the doctor's condition. Mary Lou was not impatient but wanted the conversation to move on so they could find who shot her father. “Deputy,” she said bluntly, “don't you have some questions to ask?”

“Yes, I'm sorry.” he replied as he clasped his hat in his hands and looked down at the floor, then motioning they should perhaps be seated. When they were seated, he raised his head and fixed his eyes on Mary Lou. She was a strikingly beautiful young woman and that made his task even more difficult for fear that what he had to ask might hurt her.

Mary Lou could sense his unease and giving it some thought believed she knew the cause. She had some sympathy for the young man and decided she would open the conversation he was afraid to start. “You undoubtedly learned my mother was murdered about 10 years ago and my father was a suspect. He was cleared of course because he didn't do it.” There you go Deputy Greer she thought, now what?

Greer thought the cases may be linked but Mary Lou offered no opinion or response. “There was another homicide shortly after your mother's death.” Greer said, again turning his attention to the floor. “It was another suspect in your mother's death, apparently tortured and executed. Never was linked to your mother but it was never solved either.”

“Yes.” Mary Lou said in a voice that expressed a slight hint of satisfaction. “Deputy, thank you for trying to spare my feelings but my mother was brutally abused then savagely murdered. There is no way to talk around that. I think the guilty party got off easy, but that's done and past. Beyond your digging into our family history, it seems you have made no connection to what happened to my father. Is that correct?”

“That is correct but I had to talk to you first before letting it drop.” Greer answered, looking up now and at Mary Lou. “I'm just trying to do my job as Sheriff Martin asked.”

“Julius and Sheila Martin are dear friends. I'm sure he has the utmost confidence in you. By the way deputy, are you all right after that incident at the canyon?” Mary Lou's voice changed in tone and was more sympathetic and even soothing when asking the deputy.

“You were there?” Greer asked and Mary Lou nodded. “Yeah, I slept for a few hours after I was stunned but there was no pain and no after effects. In fact, I woke up in your dad's office. Do you think that incident at the canyon may have some connection with your father's shooting?”

“I have been wondering about that.” Mary Lou replied, looking away from the deputy and into empty space, focusing on nothing. Strange that Flapjack's seat belt was the only one to fail that day, and now this. Mary Lou turned her focus to Greer and thought to herself, “No, he won't put it together.”

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The conversation over the com-link between Alta and Sheila on one end, Adams, Martin and Flapjack on the other end, and now Robby in the middle and participating took several twists and turns concerning the next steps. The episode involving Alta, Wilma and Maud revealed much about the robots limitations and Alta's authority.

Martin was convinced that the Krell robots were also guided by certain legalistic algorithms that must bear some semblance to a human sense of justice. He applauded Adams start with the surrogate and thought he could push much

harder for a favorable resolution, just as Alta had done pushing Maud and Wilma.

Adams understood that the robots would make certain assumptions based on their programming that he could exploit. The Krell did not write software to comprehend half truths or even partial truths with significant missing facts, at least that was the operating assumption that would be employed in negotiations with the surrogate. As long as Adams believed what he was saying, the robots could not detect a reason to doubt what he was saying.

With the understanding arrived at in the corridor, and with one last check with the ship, Adams was ready to resume negotiations with the surrogate. The three men walked into the Chamber of Audiences and each took their former place as Flapjack walked up to the window and pushed the switch to connect the Garon side of the chamber with the Krell surrogate.

This time however, Adams did not wait to be addressed but asked in a clearly demanding voice “Surrogate, are you ready to continue and get past my grievances so we can address issues that are far more important to each of us?”

It was barely audible, but a metallic grinding sound could be heard as the surrogate's image came to life but did not speak.

Chapter 22 Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue

Without warning, Adams pressed the isolate switch as the surrogate continued to emit the sounds of metal gears grinding. Both Martin and Flapjack gave Adams a puzzled look and waited for an explanation.

“Let him grind but I had another thought I wanted to explore.” said Adams in response to the looks he was getting. “From what little we have seen, these robots have the same response learning algorithm as Robby but, unlike Robby, they have been in isolation from living beings for about 600,000 years.”

“I think I follow you John.” said Flapjack, then adding “The robots anticipatory routines are still developing and are responding to what we give them. It's a blank slate.”

“Precisely” Adams snapped back, “So when I created the impression I required guidance from the surrogate, which I actually did, the surrogate started response learning based on my apparent dependence. I have to break that now and I think I just did. I think Alta may have shocked the robots more than us with her outburst.”

Martin hadn't said anything but it was time now to express the thought he had earlier about a bargaining chip. “I didn't push this before John, but we may need to use Alta,” Martin said and very quickly added “in a positive way.” Adams did not look happy but waited patiently and gave Martin a look that demanded an explanation. “OK, OK, don't get angry and hear me out.” said Martin, responding to Adams's look. “What if you were to claim Alta as a hostage given to you by

her father to care for and that your intention is marriage? Could you present that with confidence to the surrogate?"

Adams and Flapjack were now intrigued, each nodding and contemplating what Martin said. "I think I could," replied Adams while giving more thought to how that might unfold.

It could be interpreted as a breach of agreement or violation of protocol if Alta had been taken from her appointed custodian. To complicate matters further, if the Krell robots had any concept of marriage, seizing Alta, even if for protective custody, would involve their interference in an agreement between a living Garon and living Krell. But how would they respond?

Adams looked toward Flapjack, who had said nothing so far. Martin turned his attention to Flapjack as well and with both men staring at him, he began to squirm. "OK," he finally responded, "I think it may work if we mean that John gains authority over Alta, and Sheila, and Robby, and also lets the surrogate know that his response learning is far from complete and he is not in charge here. Yeah, I think it could work."

Adams was satisfied but was following another thought as well. "I think we need to do some role playing as well, but strictly honest so the robots don't catch on. Julius, Flapjack, if you hear something you don't like, or needs clarification, speak up so the surrogate can hear. I have to trust your judgment on when it is appropriate to do that." Both men nodded their agreement and Adams hit the window sill switch to connect. The surrogate was still there but silent.

"I must clarify a point of order and demand immediate satisfaction surrogate." It seemed that Ambassador Adams was becoming more like Commander Adams, but how would the surrogate react?

"Please explain Mr. Ambassador." requested the surrogate with a far more conciliatory and humble tone than previously exhibited. It was so obvious that all the men glanced at each other nodding to express their satisfaction with the change they observed in the surrogate.

“Altaira Morbius was placed in my care, custody and control by her father. You have violated the hostage protocol by seizing her without the consent of either her father or husband to be. The fact she is also my intended wife is a direct violation of Krell authority over machines. You are not permitted to set aside those agreements.” the commander continued, but was uncertain when to relent.

Flapjack picked up on the situation. The surrogate needed an escape route and Flapjack would offer one possibility. “Mr. Ambassador, I don't believe the Krell would empower their machines to act dishonorably and I am sure that given the opportunity, those machines would act immediately to rectify any wrong doing or improper action.”

Martin saw what Flapjack was trying to do and recognized an opportunity for the classic good cop, bad cop routine. “Mr. Ambassador, there is no excuse for this breach of protocol and agreements by the Krell. We have been more than patient and I think we have compromised our integrity far beyond what is required for mutual trust and understanding.”

“Wait gentlemen.” Adams said, raising his hand to his ear signaling Martin and Flapjack to listen. The only statement Adams feared might trip him was referring to Alta by implication as being Krell. He knew that is what the robots believed, but would the surrogate believe that he believed it too? The confirmation that his performance was flawless came with an increasingly louder metallic grinding from the surrogate. Now he thought, and quickly hit the isolate switch and turned his back to the window and image of the Krell surrogate. He motioned Martin and Flapjack to follow as he headed directly to the door and exited to the corridor.

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Alta pounded her fist on the console, threw the image switch forward to turn it off and threw herself back and free of the headset of the educator. “All these legal diplomatic terms!” she shouted, “Even when they are translated into English I have to constantly look them up.” Alta's frustration

was also contagious.

Sheila hit the library viewer with both hands. Without Wilma, her search was pointless because she understood so little Krell. She turned to look at Alta and said “We need Maud and Wilma but I doubt they can solve your problem. How about a break. I'm starving.”

“Good idea,” Alta said “but leave the robots where they are until we finish eating.” As they were walking toward the lab exit door, the com-link started chirping. “That's John's channel.” Alta said with a gleeful voice as they continued out into the corridor, turned right and then a few steps later, left into the cafeteria. “John my love, how are things going?”

“Things are changing Alta but it looks like we are going in the right direction. Are you alone?” John asked somewhat hesitantly.

“No, Aunt Sheila is right beside me and we are in the cafeteria now, both starving and frustrated and angry.” Alta's voice didn't sound angry however and she was happy to speak with John.

“It doesn't matter I guess. Your Uncle Julius and Flapjack are right next to me so I may as well just ask since they will hear about it later.” Adams stumbled a little searching for the right words to an awkward statement he made to Alta much earlier on the flight from Altair 4. “I know I said I wanted you to meet other men because you have known so few and it wasn't fair to you if you didn't. I am having other thoughts about that.”

“You are? Good!” Alta said, catching Adams by surprise but exactly the way he wanted to be surprised.

“Uh, OK, let me see now.” Adams stammered, again having trouble finding the right words. “All right, enough foolishness on my part Alta. I don't want other men meeting you. Was I crazy when I said that? Will you be my wife Alta?” No one listening, or talking, was surprised by what John said and knew it would happen sooner or later. Each in their own way was swept over with a happy and joyous

feeling. Flapjack, the least likely character to show strong emotion, actually had a tear roll down from his eye.

Before Alta could answer, she was smothered by a hug from Aunt Sheila while on the other side of the com-link connection, Julius was shaking Johns hand like a supercharged piston engine. It took a few moments before silence returned and the realization overcame everyone that Alta had not answered the question. Sheila loosened her hug, took Alta by the shoulders and just looked at her with a tight but broad smile and tears in her eyes. "Well?" she asked.

"Yes John!" Alta replied while looking into Sheila's eyes but speaking into the com-link. She continued "I didn't need to see anyone else to be sure how I feel about you. I haven't given any thought to where or when we would be married, have you?"

"Here and now." came the answer from Adams to the astonishment of everyone, perhaps even Adams that he said it almost without thinking. He looked at Martin and Flapjack, both with questioning looks and then he spoke again to Alta. "I have many good reasons and most important is I love you and realize how much I want to be with you. Second, these Krell robots are going to learn something from this I don't want them to forget. Third, I haven't got any other plans for this afternoon. Do you?"

"I'll take reason number one John, though I could fit in reason three as well. The other is not important. How are we going to do this?" Alta asked.

"I'll take care of that." answered Adams with a very confident voice.

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"Ready?" asked Adams, glancing over his shoulder left and then right as Martin and Flapjack each nodded in turn. With that, Adams pressed the switch into the connect position and as before, instead of waiting to be addressed, he spoke up immediately.

"Surrogate, I am requesting you perform a small service as

an act of good faith and conduct the marriage ceremony between me and Miss Altaira Morbius. That is within your power as a presiding diplomat equivalent to an ambassador.” The surrogate responded with that now familiar grinding sound prompting Adams to say “It would go a long way toward restoring good relations between the Krell and Garon.” No lie there, Adams thought to himself.

The image of the surrogate stood motionless and the grinding noise started to drop. “Yes Ambassador Adams. I would be most happy to perform this service for you and Miss Morbius. Shall I work out the details with your Advisers?”

“That would be satisfactory. We will have the ceremony here and I will require the Ambassador Suite for the wedding party for the entire evening. I would like a robot or two assigned to attend to the needs of my advisers. Oscar can perform that function for me. Miss Morbius will make suitable arrangements with Maud and Wilma, whose cooperation I trust will be forthcoming.”

“As you wish Mr. Ambassador.” came the compliant response from the surrogate.

“Just a moment.” Adams said, having remembered a small but important detail. “I’m sure Alta will want everything recorded so that eliminates this room. Is there a room with similar decor we can use where recording devices will work?”

“Yes, I’ll make the arrangements.” the surrogate replied. “The robots will know that room as the Chamber of Celebration. They will adjust the decor to suit your requirements.”

Martin and Flapjack were both stunned and happy things went so well. Adams motioned for them to remain silent, then placed his finger on the window sill switch and pressed isolate. With that, Martin, Flapjack and Adams started laughing, joking and recounting the highlights of his commands to the surrogate.

Adams took the opportunity of a pause in the laughter to interject “Just remember, we may have won a round but the

tough part is yet to come. We have no idea what kind of negotiator we are facing.”

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Both Alta and Sheila were starving but too excited to eat. They moved to Alta's room and summoned Maud and Wilma. While Alta attributed no feelings to the robots, she always remembered the response learning algorithm could shape how a robot acted. She decided on that basis kindness would be appropriate at this time.

“Aunt Sheila, I have no idea what happens at a wedding ceremony. Could you help me please?” Alta had no idea about a lot of things where people might be involved but she was learning quickly and now had a teacher she admired and respected.

Just then, Maud and Wilma entered the room and Sheila said “What lovely bridesmaids we have here. I hope the ushers are at least half as attractive.”

Alta couldn't resist and started with Maud. “My goodness Maud. That looks much better and matches your eyes. I don't know if Robby will be able to keep his beams off you. And Wilma, that pink is you but we must do something about that eye makeup, don't you agree Aunt Sheila?” Sheila shook her head and laughed.

“If you would like a traditional wedding ceremony, I think we can arrange that” Sheila offered.

“I would very much like that.” Alta replied.

“Then let's start. Something old. Maud will be your property I'm sure, and a bridesmaid too. Maud, how old are you in Earth years?” Maud answered with 401,827.21 years. “That's old and that works.” Sheila said and laughed. “Something new. Wilma, I need a dress for Miss Alta, white silk and satin with ice white diamonds. I'll draw a picture for you. Can you make it?” Wilma responded yes. “I'll draw a necklace as well but it is going to be a bit unusual. Good, something new is done. Something borrowed.” Sheila said, almost as a question as she thought on it. “Oh yes, my

earrings. I love them so Alta but I want you to wear them. There is a story behind them but that's for later.” Sheila removed her earrings and set them on the dresser. “Hmm,” Sheila uttered, “something blue?”

Sheila had paused and turned toward Wilma and said “I need paper and pencil. I hope you know what those are? Please get them for me now. Maud, we could use a bight to eat as well. Nothing too heavy.” Sheila was having a grand time and the excitement ran to her core. She was bubbling and as sometimes happened, Alta became fascinated with her aunt's appearance and behavior.

“Is half a kilogram too heavy?” asked Maud.

“We have to teach them Alta.” Sheila said with a slight chuckle. “That would be just dandy Maud.”

“Alta, are you with me?” Sheila asked, seeing her niece was in a half-trance staring at her. Alta snapped to and blinked her eyes several times to signal she was awake and paying attention. “Good, we have a lot to do Alta. Flowers, limo. Oh no, scratch the limo I think. Catering, band, cake, trousseau, accommodations, honeymoon suite of course. Isn't this exciting? Oh, the rings too.”

Sheila was excited and it was contagious. Alta was laughing, smiling, crying, and whatever came out she did without knowing. She had questions about everything and Sheila made sure they were all answered. Aunt and niece shared a snack brought by Maud as they sat on the sofa, talked and generally enjoyed having each other to share the moment.

Sheila was barking commands at Maud the whole time she was talking to Alta. It resembled an operatic duet but Maud responded to order after order as Alta laughed and marveled at all that Sheila had to say.

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The Chamber of Celebration had a receiving area where the three men stood dressed in formal evening wear. Something looked odd about Flapjack wearing a white jacket and though it should have been obvious, it wasn't. The forty-

niner had a shave and haircut, which Martin was the first to notice and compliment his friend.

“I like a hot shave once in a while but my barber wasn't very talkative. I wanted to know about the cultural attractions of the outpost and he kept ranting on about the biology labs and petri dishes.”

“I liked the fitting myself.” said Martin, tugging out at the lapels of his dinner jacket. “Four seconds and the robot was done. All of the two tailors in Barnardsville use lasers for measuring but none are anywhere near that fast. And the fit is perfect. Shoes too.” he added, lifting and stomping one foot at a time on the marble textured stone floor.”

Adams, standing at the end farthest from the entrance remarked how amazing it was the robots could produce so many items in such short time. “We saw a Krell material synthesizer on Altair 4 but we couldn't disassemble it and never got a chance to study it. I would really like to see one here and just learn how it works. That would be Dr. Renfro's MAMBES at their best I'm sure.”

While the three men were sharing their surprise at the outpost manufacturing capabilities, what happened next could only be half believed and never forgotten. The clacking in the corridor was unfamiliar to Adams and Martin, but Flapjack recognized it right away. Before it came into sight he said “She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes.” drawing a strange look from Adams and Martin, but also had them looking toward the entrance where Flapjack was closest in the line.

The loud clacking sound of iron shod hooves on stone was unmistakable and unforgettable if you had never heard it before. Martin and Adams stood open-mouthed and gawking as six snow white horses paired in tandem passed before the entrance. The coach that pulled into sight had elegantly curved front and rear fenders of lacquered royal blue with a silver filigree fringe. The coach body was of the same material but with additional gold details on the window of the

single door. It was as fine a coach as any fairy tale could produce. The “coachman” was a robot of course, but with an applied finish that resembled 17th century attire.

The coach door opened and Wilma led. She was wearing her new light pink skin but had a few appliques that gave her the appearance of a bustled flower maid. Maud descended next and wore the same except for her light lavender skin. Both carried bouquets of red and white roses in straw colored baskets.

Sheila stepped out next in a stunning maroon velour dress with a deep vee neckline transitioned from the single loop neck strap. The dress was sleeveless but the red rose armlets with a diamond studded cuff contrasted nicely with the white satin gloves. The red rose head band was segmented and divided by crowned edges with diamond tips. Martin was beaming with pride in his wife's appearance as she gracefully moved forward as the maid of honor.

Alta had something of a surprise for Adams. She had chosen a traditional older style head band with small white flowers intertwined with a fine green filament with small diamonds set at regular intervals. A veil of sheer lace dropped from the band to cover her face. A white silk choker with a single diamond could just be seen above the neck line of the wedding dress. Alta's dress was full length and bustled out though tightly fitting at the waist. The body was a white silk but the sleeves and a thin waist band were satin with a very small hint of blue ice. The train, made from a center strip of silk with satin borders dropped from her shoulders and draped back about a meter. Alta was vibrant.

The surprise would come as she approached John. As she moved next to him, she lifted the dress revealing a blue garter about half way up her thigh, but that wasn't the surprise. Alta wasn't wearing any shoes. She seldom did. The fact is, John had no idea how she would look in shoes so while it was a surprise, it was expected.

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Uncle Julius stood as best man and made an outstanding escort for a ravishing Aunt Sheila as Maid of Honor. Alta and John exchanged vows and the rings Sheila had instructed the robots to make. They were simple gold bands with a Florentine finish. The surrogate's appearance had been arranged by placement of projectors in the Chamber of Celebration. Any room in the outpost could be outfitted to host the holographic image of a surrogate. The exchange of vows was in both English and Krell, which took considerable effort on John's part, especially with the non-syllabic pronunciations.

Julius, Sheila and Flapjack took turns with the com-link recording pictures. All of the sound had been captured and was stored by Robby. Everything was transmitted to the ship as the crew went about the serious business of finishing off the last 14 gallons of ancient rocket bourbon to celebrate their commander's wedding.

After the ceremony and some time for picture taking, the bride and groom boarded the first coach, followed by Julius, Sheila and Flapjack in a second identical coach. It was a short trot to the elevator shaft where they would rise to the level of the Ambassador Suite. The robots had provided a red carpet with seating as Sheila had ordered, but this one floated the party to the suite.

When they entered the suite, Flapjack made a bee line for the bar and an ashtray. Sheila was gawking and blurted "Shame on you boys living a life of luxury while Alta and I have to rough it." She started laughing and then explained their quarters were very nice actually, but nothing like what she saw here. Julius took her hand to show Sheila the bedroom, which impressed her all the more. She looked up at him and gave a certain sly smile she reserved for private moments.

John was showing Alta the ambassador's room and she too had a favorable and suggestive reaction. "We are going to use everything in here, right?" she asked as she tightened her arm

around his waist.

Flapjack poured a few beers, lit up a cigarette and hoisted his glass to “The merry bachelor, I sure want to fix that soon.” His thoughts were on Mary Lou but he knew there was no point dwelling on what could not be at that moment. He would be happy for the two couples and that would be it.

He changed the subject. “John, Alta, marriages were often used to cement relations and alliances between families, clans, kingdoms and empires. I think you two are going to revive that tradition.”

Adams let a smile break as he looked at Alta and said “Well my Krell princess, what do you think?”

“Well my Garon prince, I'm going to make the most of this evening and let you haggle it out with the surrogate tomorrow while I rest from a busy night.” Alta had adapted Sheila's little mischievous smile and used it now to punctuate her words.

Chapter 23 Deeds That Haunt

There are certain patterns of human life that appear to be timeless. The need for a stimulant upon waking seems to be one of those constants of existence. Flapjack had found a small kitchenette at the far end of the Ambassador Suite in the L-section that turned to the right and parallel to the Master Bedroom. Not only did he find a kitchenette, but also a dining area and a swimming pool. The walkway that surrounded the pool featured a low wrought iron fence on two sides and a splendid view of green fields, hills and mountains on those two sides. He was certain they were holographic images but were exceptionally well done and looked like the real thing.

Another pattern of human life appears to be that the very act of one person making a stimulant awakens certain sleeping people. This morning Commander Adams and Sheriff Martin were no exceptions as they found their way to the poolside dining area, led by the aroma of the brewing coffee.

“You two sure look happy,” moaned Flapjack as he set the coffee decanter on the table, then added “and not very well rested I might add. Did either of you bother to sleep? Anyone else joining us?” Both men shook their heads no as they flashed a smile while reaching for the coffee mugs.

“When are you going to marry that girl Flapjack so you can not be wide awake, not be fresh in the morning and be just as beat, tired and happy as we are?” Adams quipped but there was no reaction from either Flapjack or Martin. Both had a picture in their head of Mary Lou sitting on a sofa and crying as the paramedics looked after her father. They would eventually tell Adams about the incident but not now. There were other considerations and burdening the commander with the news about Dr. Renfro did not seem prudent. “What’s the

matter with you two?" Adams asked in response to the cool reception of his joke.

"It's nothing John, just the realization this is going to be a critical day." replied Flapjack and Adams acknowledged with a nod.

Adams took that from Flapjack as an introduction to discuss the upcoming session with the surrogate. He indicated he was satisfied and believed they had secured liberty for Altaira and Sheila. He wasn't certain about Robby but suspected he too would be released in Alta's custody. Maud and Wilma? He wasn't sure but he felt that was of no consequence to what had to be negotiated next.

It was Martin who suggested a small change of tactics. He pointed out that the inhabitants of Barnardsville had never been informed or otherwise made aware of the Krell outpost and the rules that applied in the neutral zone. He expressed his sense that any semblance of justice would require some form of notification before compliance could be reasonably expected. His point was how could the colonists break an agreement they didn't know existed or applied under the circumstances.

Flapjack also picked up on the fact the Krell had gone to extraordinary measures to conceal the location of the outpost. They had made no effort to reveal their existence to the colonists, advancing the defense that if the colonists were ignorant, the Krell were responsible for not revealing their presence and for not informing the colonists the neutral zone existed and where it was located.

Unfortunately, they all agreed that the Krell sense of justice was a big unknown and no matter what they thought about the universality of the concept of justice, it may not reside with the Krell or the Krell robots.

"Well, it's time to find out if the surrogate sees things as we see them." said Adams as he observed that everyone was finishing their coffee. "Are we ready?" With that the three men rose from the table and started toward the door. It was

Adams and Martin that paused briefly as they looked at the rooms where they had left their wives, each turning a smile and then proceeding to the exit.

The platform was waiting with a dutiful Oscar standing by. The second robot was at his station at the rear of the platform and now bore an identification stencil similar to the one worn by Oscar. It said "Eli". "To the surrogate." commanded Adams as the three men mounted and took seats on the platform.

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About the time Flapjack was finishing his coffee, Mary Lou was pouring hers at the Renfro residence. From the kitchen counter seat she could see the temporary plastic film patch on the living room plate glass window as it puffed in and out from the gentle breeze outside. It looked strangely alive as if it were breathing and Mary Lou, at least for a moment, kept pace with it. She began punching in the numbers on the phone set as she calmly lifted her coffee and leaned back to meet the back of the counter stool.

"Good morning, Park Police Headquarters. How may I direct your call?" came over the speaker as Mary Lou took a sip of coffee and calmly swallowed before she spoke. "Colonel Dugan please." she requested as she placed the coffee mug on the counter top and then clasped her hands in front of her. Mary Lou had always been reserved about displaying emotion, even as a child but being a dancer at the Gilded Cage, and then a waitress, had hardened and tempered her. She could be affectionate to Flapjack and her father, but she could turn on the coolness in an instant if she thought it was necessary.

"I'll see if he is available. May I tell him who is calling?" came the voice of the receptionist.

"Yes." Mary Lou answered, "This is Mary Lou, uh," there was a pause "Oren you can tell him." Yes she thought, let's see what Dugan has to say to that.

"Good morning Miss Oren, this is Colonel Dugan, Chief

of Park Police. How may I help you?"

Mary Lou smiled and thought just how smooth and calm Dugan was at that moment. "I called to inquire about the investigation into that near accident involving Mr. Flapjack. I understood you were going to find out why his seat belt failed. Well, what have you found?" Mary Lou's demanding voice was a deliberate provocation, but would Dugan take the bait?"

"Oh yes, you must be that young lady that showed up at the canyon with Dr. Renfro just as we were about to leave. I'm sorry to hear about your boyfriend. How is he doing?"

Got him! "He lost his arm but the prognosis for recovery looks good." Mary Lou said, then adding "That was very considerate of you to ask." Let's see how deep a grave Dugan wants to dig she thought. "But what about my question colonel?"

"Oh yes Miss Oren, about that Flapjack person. Who is he to you? This is a police matter so why should I tell you anything?" Dugan sounded smug and confident but wanted to get in another barb at Mary Lou.

"He's a personal friend." Mary Lou answered nervously, putting her best acting talents to use. Let him think he has me squirming.

"Is he now?" replied Dugan with a facetious voice. "Have you asked the sheriff's department for information about Dr. Renfro? I understand he is a personal friend too." Dugan was going to put this floozy in her place, he thought as he started wrapping his fingers on his desk, loud enough to be certain Mary Lou heard him. He waited for a response but Mary Lou needed more from him and remained silent. "Well, you may pull that personal friend crap on the sheriff's office but I have a real police department to run and we don't discuss ongoing investigations with personal friends, shall we say." Dugan paused again but when Mary Lou failed to respond he threw in "Personal friends my ass. I know what you are so keep your nose out of this. If you were more discreet, perhaps your boyfriends wouldn't be shooting each other." When Mary Lou

failed to answer, Dugan disconnected.

Mary Lou took a cigarette from the pack in front of her and lit it as she turned her gaze toward the hole in the living room window. She was thinking it strange that Dugan had not discovered she was Renfro's daughter. It was now a known fact to some hospital and sheriffs personnel. As she was occasionally inclined to do when thinking through a problem, she began saying some of the words aloud.

“Overconfident. Arrogant and smug. Ill tempered. Liar. Bully.”

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Adams started toward the window sill and the isolation switch in the Chamber of Audiences as Martin and Flapjack patted him on the shoulders and each mumbled something to the effect of “Go get em!”

The moment he put the switch into the connected position, Adams began speaking. “Surrogate, I believe we may arrive at a satisfactory conclusion if we can ascertain a simple fact. Will you agree to that?”

The metallic grinding sound from the surrogate was there, but not as pronounced as it had been and the surrogate answered “Agreed that I will hear what you have to say. Beyond that, we shall see.”

Adams motioned with his hand to the right saying “This is Mr. Martin, a resident of the Barnard's star colony for about 16 years.” Adams then motioned with his left hand toward Flapjack and said “This is Mr. Flapjack, a resident of the Barnard's star colony for 20 years. Neither of these gentlemen were aware this outpost existed. It is not recorded in the history of Garon activity on this moon nor in the history of the founding of the colony. The fact is, you have gone to extraordinary lengths to conceal the presence of your outpost. You cannot hold the Garon responsible for failing to penetrate your concealment.”

The metallic grinding was very pronounced and Adams decided it was not time to stop and turned to Martin to say his

lines. “If we determined there was no Krell outpost, then there was no need to negotiate the establishment of a Garon colony.” Martin said. The grinding continued.

Adams turned to Flapjack and he delivered his lines. “If there is no Krell outpost and no negotiation is required for a colony, then there is no requirement for a neutral zone.” The logic was inescapable but Krell robots acted on programming, not logic.

Adams picked up again with “If there was any violation of the agreements, it was your failure to disclose the presence of your outpost and that negates any complaint of improper action on our part. We are interested in any wrong doing on our part but not as your excuse to violate the agreements.”

The volume of the grinding sound had reached the level of a nuisance. Adams expressed his belief that perhaps this was how the surrogate demonstrated there was activity, somewhat like an indicator to show a computer process running. This time when he pushed the switch to isolate, the surrogate displayed a waistband with some flashing indicator lights that were very small but easily seen in the brightly lit room. Yes, Adams remarked, perhaps the surrogate was, shall we say, considering the arguments.

The waistband lights on the surrogate soon stopped flashing and Adams took that as a signal he should restore the room to room connection, which he did and promptly asked “Well, have you considered our arguments?”

“Yes Mr. Ambassador, and we apologize for the errors that have been made and we will take appropriate action to normalize relations based on the agreements and protocols as soon as we establish contact with the Krell home planet to confirm this decision is correct.”

Adams hit the isolate switch as fast as he could and gave out an “Oh no!” as he turned to face Martin and Flapjack, now both shaking their heads as they looked down in despair. “We have to think this through,” Adams said, “and I think we are going to need Alta's help.”

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“Just like men” Sheila said as she shook her head while looking at the dining area table with the three empty coffee mugs and a dirtied ashtray. “I wonder if we have maid service?” she asked out loud.

Just then, Alta had reached the far end of the suite and saw the extended area with the kitchenette, dining area and pool. “Beautiful” she said as she walked behind Sheila and gave her a hug.

Sheila placed her hands over Alta's clasped in front of her and said “Just look at this mess. They didn't clean the coffee urn either. It's one of those things we bear Alta, perhaps we even enjoy it because we love them. Isn't that right Mrs. Adams?” Alta murmured an uh hmm as she rested her head on the back of Sheila's shoulder. Sheila went on saying “And we should never forget that applies to how they feel about us as well. I think.”

With that, Sheila broke Alta's grasp and turned to her and said “This is your honeymoon, my second honeymoon and we should indulge ourselves. How do we get room service?” It seemed to be enough for Alta to simply think about needing Wilma and she appeared. “Wilma.” Sheila said, “Please clean up that table and put on a fresh pot of coffee. Thank you.” Sheila tracked Wilma with her eyes until she saw the robot at the side preparing the coffee brewer, then turned her eyes to Alta. “Well, how was last night my dear niece?”

Alta smiled and was about to say something when the com-link chirped. It was John and she took the device from her waist band and put it close to her mouth and said “Good morning love, I miss you.” Sheila let her hands drop and smiled.

“I'm fine dear but we need to get everyone together. We have a small problem.” From Adams's voice Alta thought, this doesn't sound like a small problem. “We're coming back to the suite but we will need to use the Krell lab later, the educator in particular.”

“Coffee is on and will be ready when you get here” Sheila said loud enough for all to hear.

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Mary Lou made arrangements to take the day off from work. She wanted to speak to Deputy Greer in person. She was a good reader of people and their body language so a telephone conversation would not do for what she needed.

Greer greeted her with his pleasant but bumbling manner. Mary Lou was well aware of the affect she could have on men and knew how to up-play and down-play her appeal. This was a down-play moment since she required Greer's mental attention. Greer did confirm the department was keeping her relationship to Dr. Renfro secret since it could materially aid in the investigation. If someone was trying to frame Flapjack, it would help to have them believe they had succeeded and indeed, Mary Lou was a two-timer. If there was no frame up, it wouldn't make any difference.

“Deputy,” Mary Lou started, “have you learned anything more about that seat belt accident with Flapjack?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, not more than a few minutes ago we received a report from Colonel Dugan who was heading the investigation.”

“Interesting timing.” Mary Lou said, and then apologized quickly for interrupting. “Do go on please.”

“Dugan said the seat belt end plates are ordered as a group of 16 to outfit all of the seats in that particular model helicopter. He said they checked all of the plates and that four, including those on the seat belt worn by Flapjack, did not meet specs on the anchor bolt hole size. He thinks the factory mixed the lot but he did remove them all and they are being stored for evidence if any follow up is needed.”

“That's good to know.” Mary Lou said with all she could muster to hide her sarcasm. “Factory mix up? I guess it happens.” she said, again straining to conceal the sarcasm.

Greer wasn't sure what Mary Lou would do with that information and he didn't care. “How's your father?” he

asked. Greer was about her age, very naive and his attempts at flirting were clumsy to say the least. Nonetheless she liked him but always thought to herself, he is no Flapjack.

"I'm on my way there now." Mary Lou replied, "The nurses tell me he is doing very well and thank you for asking." Greer returned the smile she flashed and rose to escort her to the door.

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Adams looked around nervously, pausing as his eyes first fixed on Wilma, and then on Maud. "Can we trust them not to repeat what they hear?" he asked, not sure anyone could answer.

"I would get rid of them and just keep Robby." Flapjack said, then added "I doubt this room is bugged. Think about it because if it were and it was ever discovered, that would be a diplomatic catastrophe." With that said, Alta dismissed Maud and Wilma.

Adams had joined Flapjack having a cigarette as the coffee was being poured and everyone settled into a seat at the dining table. He took a moment to look at Alta and give her a very broad smile, and then asked "You don't mind, do you?" as he held up the smoking white tube.

"No." she said without any hesitation. "It actually smells quite pleasant though I don't want to do that myself." She glanced at Flapjack smoking as well and smiled before she asked "Well, what's the problem?"

"The surrogate is willing to resolve our dispute in our favor but he wants to have his decision confirmed by the Krell from the home planet. That would be," he stammered a little, "Altair 4."

"That would be a problem." Alta said, knowing she did not have to state why. Everyone present knew the story.

"It's worse than just a problem," Adams responded "considering I'm the person who threw the switch that destroyed the Krell home world. So the Krell killed each other 200,000 years ago. Where's my proof? I blew it up. I

can't say anything about Altair 4 without the fear they may discover I'm hiding something.” Adams looked about the table and added “Everyone here knows Altair 4 has been destroyed, so in a way, it's a problem for all of us.”

“There are some twisty things to think about.” Sheila said as she leaned forward to engage the group. “If the robots can see Altair 4, which maybe they can, it looks like it is still there considering the distance. They won't see the explosion for about 10 years.” There was general agreement and nodding as each person at the table thought about the implications of Sheila's observation. How would it play out if the robots sent a signal to Altair 4 and received no response? Would they have any way of knowing the planet was destroyed? Either way, what would the robots do?

Martin gave his wife a smile and a wink as he reached for her hand, then suggested “We should try to get the captives released and the neutral zone restored. The surrogate, from what I understood, knows they violated the agreement and those actions are purely corrective. Undoing a wrongdoing should not require clarification.” He paused enough to see he had everyone's attention before continuing with “Hey look, I'm just guessing but it seems like robot thinking to me.”

Flapjack had just finished deeply inhaling from the cigarette when he looked up, exhaled and said “Why don't we just ask an expert?”

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The small case was accessible through a hidden sliding panel in the back of the dresser. The dresser slid easily away from the wall on the carpet gliders. The panel opened with pressure applied in two specific places at the same time. The split lines were hidden in the joints and become clear only when the panel receded and could be slid upward. The case just fit standing up and was a simple box of lacquered rosewood with two brass clasps on each side of a leather handle.

Mary Lou took the case by the handle, placed it on the bed

behind her and released the brass clasps. Inside the molded velvet lining was a three and a half inch closed gravity knife, a plain looking silver ring, a matching silver bracelet and a pair of plain silver earrings, but with a floral drop decoration.

Mary Lou removed the bracelet and examined the clasp. There was nothing fancy about it but it was heavier in thickness and depth than most bracelets of this style. She gave the clasp a push followed by a twist, causing it to separate from the bracelet body, revealing a very thin steel wire connecting the clasp to the bracelet. She stretched it to full length, about 600 millimeters, then pulled it a second time allowing it to retract back into the body.

Mary Lou replaced the bracelet, then removed the ring, careful not to touch the front outward side. She held it up to get better light and could see the simple engraving that identified the forward facing side of the cylinder. Satisfied the ring appeared as she expected, she returned it to the case.

The lifting indents for the gravity knife allowed her to withdraw it easily with her right index finger and thumb and in one smooth motion she flipped it into the air, snatching it as it dropped with her left hand and giving it a twist and flinging motion that opened and locked the blade. She tossed it up again, this time grabbing it on the fall with her right hand and folding the blade back to its concealed position.

She returned the knife to the case and looked at the earrings, but did not remove them. When she was satisfied that everything looked the way it should, she closed the case lid, re-latched the clasps and returned the case to its hiding place in the hidden dresser compartment.

Mary Lou eased the dresser back against the wall and then looked up and into the wall hung mirror immediately to her front. She could feel the tear roll down her left cheek as another welled up in her right eye. "I thought I was done Momma." she said softly, wiping the one eye before the tear fell.

Chapter 24 Homecoming

“This is amazing.” the commander said, taking his time to look around and study what he saw in the Krell lab. “It’s almost identical to the lab we saw on Altair 4. The passageway with the shuttle car to the great machine is missing but everything else looks about the same.” For the benefit of Martin and Flapjack, Adams pointed and said “That is the educator.” Their reaction was a little underwhelming until Alta had engaged the headset, flipped the switch and produced an image of the ship outside the outpost.

“Very impressive,” exclaimed Flapjack, “but I think we need to engage the expert on Krell robot behavior now.” He gave Robby two solid wraps with his knuckles and asked “Are you ready?”

The conversation directed at Robby came from bits and pieces everyone had to contribute. It was believed and then confirmed by Robby that the outpost had not received any messages from the home planet for 200,000 years. Before that and after the Krell had closed down the mining installation, it was customary to contact the home planet once every 300 days. As Alta confirmed with Robby’s help, the only matter of interest in those exchanges with home planet were the Garon and any changes in that relationship. On every other item of interest, the robots were to maintain the status quo.

As Alta also confirmed, there had been no changes in the relationship with the Garon. Apparently, the robots had received partially conflicting program instructions. There were the agreements with the Garon but those were not to go into effect until the Garon had achieved faster than light travel and found Krell beyond the Garon home planets. The conflict was programming that directed the robots to maintain

seclusion and isolation from the Garon. Theoretically, every Garon ship would have a Krell translator and beacon, but the UP ships had neither. Nothing covered that situation.

The robots had a dilemma. How could they fulfill the provisions of the agreements with the Garon if they remained hidden from the Garon? Robby confirmed this would require intervention by of living Krell with appropriate authority to resolve the conflict.

On the question concerning what to do if a living Krell with proper authority could not be found, Robby could not answer. In general principle Robby stated, the least harmful course of action to the Krell should always be followed if an urgent condition should arise requiring immediate action to mediate the hazard. A similar rule applied in the event of potential harm to the Garon, provided it did not adversely affect the Krell.

On how the Krell robots would react to learning the Krell home world had been destroyed with no survivors, Robby could not answer and started to go into the robot analog of a seizure until Alta canceled the order.

“Commander, I think you and Alta need to talk to the surrogate and tell him that returning the captives and restoring the neutral zone is the required solution to mediate a dangerous situation.” said Sheila and then added “It puts things back the way they were, harmful to neither Krell nor Garon. What they are doing now is harmful to Garon.”

Martin was somewhat surprised by his wife but looked at her and said “That was brilliant honey. We may need you when we talk to the surrogate as well.” He said it half jokingly but Adams and Flapjack both expressed approval. In fact, Adams insisted Sheila participate.

It appeared everything was settled and Adams had a few closing remarks to make. “If we just reason with the surrogate as we did with Robby, I think we can be out of here before evening.” Everyone was happy with that idea. “I know I want to come back and see the entire outpost, a few special items in

particular but I want to get our primary mission done first, rescue the captives and hopefully, prevent others from being abducted.” That brought on a unanimous round of consent. “Let's do it!”

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There was no need to introduce Alta or Sheila to the surrogate. He knew them both from the records kept by the robots. It was Sheila who made the case that action could not be delayed waiting for a decision from the Krell who had not responded to signals for 200,000 years. She stated the captives were being deprived of their liberty, which was unacceptable to the Garon. She then made the case that the neutral zone was a hazard to the Garon as long as it remained unmarked. She said that if the neutral zone reverted to its previous undefined status, the Garon would police the zone and there would be no reason for the Krell robots to interfere.

At this point, Adams was holding Alta back as a trump card, a living Krell that could make decisions regarding conflicting or deadlocked programming. The only question was had Alta reached a level of intellectual maturity where she could command the robots regarding matters of state. That was a huge unknown and one Adams did not want to test unless absolutely necessary.

While Sheila was talking, the surrogate continued to produce metallic grinding sounds, occasionally stopping, offering a comment and then resuming when Sheila responded.

Everyone, with the exception of Martin, was surprised by how well Sheila did, but he knew her best and saw nothing out of the ordinary in her performance. The fact that others did think her performance was extraordinary gave him a deeper appreciation for her talents and intellect. Sheila had a beautiful body and plain features, but what she was doing to the surrogate she had done on many occasions to others. Martin searched deep in his mind for the word and consistently came up with charming. Sheila had charmed the

surrogate. Sure he was a computer, Martin thought, but he was beguiled and there was no mistaking that. You could say she had his logic wrapped around her little finger.

While the others stood patiently, Sheila finally stopped, deciding it was time to give the surrogate a little more than an edgewise word.

“The captives will be released to your custody at a time of your choosing Mr. Ambassador.” the surrogate said without the slightest sound of grinding. “Is that satisfactory?”

“Yes it is.” replied Adams.

“The neutral zone will revert to its previous status as undefined territory however, Krell law concerning behavior must be observed and any violators will be seized for repatriation. Is that satisfactory Mr. Ambassador?” the surrogate asked.

“Yes it is.” Adams replied, turning and looking at Sheila and giving her a warm smile.

“Finally, the Barnard's star Garon colony may remain unmolested provided there are no aggressive threats to the Krell outpost and Krell robots. This status shall remain in effect until a qualified living Krell can be located to negotiate a permanent agreement with a designated Garon representative regarding the colony. Is that satisfactory Mr. Ambassador?” The surrogate waited as Adams considered the precise wording.

“Those are fair and honorable terms.” Adams replied, now more conscientious than before about the Krell robot response learning algorithm. Should he push his luck?

“Surrogate, I have a request that the Krell robots known as Maud and Wilma be assigned to Mrs. Altaira Adams and that her property, known as Robby the Robot be returned to her custody.” Adams was thinking of asking for Oscar, but had second thoughts of how that would be received. The familiar grinding sound returned but was short lived.

“Your request is granted but conditional. If the robots Maud or Wilma are misused, harmed or threatened in any way,

custody is revoked and they will return to the outpost or we will come get them if they are incapacitated or restrained in any way.”

That last part sounded ominous but what was the alternative? No robots? “Agreed and thank you surrogate. I trust someday soon we may resume our talks and improve our understanding of each other.” Adams said with a very conciliatory tone. The Krell outpost held a vast number of Krell secrets that could improve the lives of many humans. Of course, it could also hold the keys to their destruction.

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“Mr. Wallace, the robots should be delivering 14 captives to you. They are on upright stretchers and need to be revived later. Please see they are safely placed for the flight back to the space port.” the commander ordered using the com-link relay through Robby.

“Aye aye sir. And you sir?” Wallace asked.

“We are right behind the captives with a few extra guests.” Adams replied. Alta and Sheila had Maud and Wilma busy in the Ambassador suite and their quarters packing most of the items they had acquired during their confinement. Some were particularly important mementos to Alta of her wedding. She laughed when she saw the white shoes Aunt Sheila had made for her but she didn't wear. The tan slippers however, she would wear to protect her feet from the hard and rocky terrain of the canyon rim.

The robots had arranged platforms for everyone and everything, primarily luggage containers fabricated only thirty minutes earlier. As the party left the lab, they were greeted by a line of platforms ready to carry them to the ship. As each was loaded, it moved quickly down the corridor toward the waiting ship, operated and guided by a robot. Maud and Wilma had a place of honor following Alta and Adams. “Wilma, go escort Sheila.” said Alta, half as a test of authority but also as an honor for her Aunt and Uncle on the platform ahead.

Robby also required a platform. He still couldn't fly and that was a feature that his older frame would not accommodate. One of the unnamed robots had asked Alta if she wanted a replacement for Robby with the updated style but retaining his memory and most of his programming, to which she said no.

When Adams arrived at the ship, he could see the Krell sentry robots were still deployed about the perimeter. He ordered the crew at the gangways to board the ship and made one last sweeping look to make sure nothing was amiss. "Mr. Wallace, are we ready?" he asked over the com-link.

"We're missing four captives." came Wallace's reply.

"Which one's?" Adams asked.

"The miners sir." Wallace responded.

Adams turned to Oscar, who was apparently given the task of coordinating all of the robot activity. When Oscar was asked about the four missing captives, he replied rather flatly "There were only 10 and you have them all." There was no point questioning the robot. Counting was not the kind of mistake they would make. If Oscar said 10, then it was 10.

Resigned to the fact four men were still missing, Adams saluted Oscar and said "You have been very helpful Oscar and I look forward to meeting you in the future. Maybe you can take me on the grand tour of the outpost."

"It would be my pleasure sir." retorted the robot. Adams had to laugh however. Pleasure? What did robots know about pleasure other than how use the word in a flattering sentence.

Adams climbed the gangway as Wallace announced "Skipper on deck!" and the skeleton crew took positions for lift off.

"Mr Wallace, sound the lift off alarm and get us in orbit. Mr. Randall, ready a channel for Barnard's Port Authority." The commander gave the orders and added one more directed to Robby. "Robby, any Krell distress signal?"

"No skipper, none." came Robby's answer.

For Adams, the immediate problem, excluding four

missing miners, was behind them. The opportunity to learn from the Krell outpost and the Krell robots lay ahead. Of course, he had not forgotten that Commodore Savorkian was on his way and would have to be dealt with in just a few months.

Lt. Wallace ran through the lift off drill and when the klaxon went silent, Adams asked him and Randall to join him with Martin and Flapjack at the engineering station. Alta and Sheila were seated at the table when Adams said "I want the captives taken immediately to the hospital after we land and placed under Dr. Renfro's care."

Wallace answered with an aye aye but Martin said not so fast. "We were waiting for the right time to tell you but someone tried to kill Dr. Renfro. He will probably lose his right arm and I don't think he can manage patient care under the present circumstances."

Adams expression of shock was unmistakable but it was Sheila whose reaction surprised Adams and Alta more. "That poor girl." she said. "First her mother, now her father, almost."

Who was she talking about was the thought that raced through Adams's and Alta's minds. What poor girl? Was it someone they knew? Sheila could tell from their expressions they had no idea who she was talking about. "Mary Lou." she said quietly, "Ten years ago her mother was murdered. We weren't particularly close to the Renfro's but we couldn't help but sense the pain they were going through. Ed became a basket case alcoholic. Couldn't do anything so we took Mary Lou until he recovered. It was about six months if I recall." she stated, looking at Martin.

"That's about right." he replied. "We would have told you earlier but I thought this was not a burden to carry while solving the other problems you had." That was directed specifically to Adams though Alta and Sheila accepted that it applied to them as well.

"Sir, we are in orbit." Clary announced, followed almost

immediately by Randall announcing contact with Barnard's Port Authority.

“Mr. Randall, request clearance and a landing pad. Mr. Wallace, get us on the ground.” Adams ordered and got the two aye ayes he expected.

“Skipper, the port authority duty office, an Ensign Oliver, wants to talk to you.” Randall reported.

“Tell him I'm indisposed and he will have to wait until we land.” Adams said as he looked over the ship and added “Home sweet home.”

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Ensign Choo stood at attention as Admiral Seitgart turned the pages and kept breaking out with the strangest laugh she had ever heard. “Ensign,” he said, “I'll let you read this later but it seems we have an eccentric officer commandeering one of our cruisers and terrifying Barnard's Port Authority, including two junior ensigns that wanted to arrest him.”

“That would be commander Adams, sir?” Choo asked, knowing it was him but looking for an entry to ask questions.

“Yes Choo and I know you want to talk about this but I need to get these orders out quickly, so listen up. We have a besieged commander that has finished a difficult mission and needs our help. Adams got back the captives and made contact with the aliens we will call the Krell. He set up a land use agreement with them and saved an entire colony from being expelled. Send a good job message to Adams. Send a stand down and cooperate order to Barnard's Port Authority. Send a mind your own business message to Kiev Park Police Command. I want to go over that last one with you before we actually send it however.”

“Aye aye sir.” Choo said crisply as she was about to turn but was stopped by Seitgart's hand signal to stay put.

“Just a minute ensign. I want you to draft my message to Park Police. They tried to hammer me with a political connection here and smear one of my commanders in the process. Those folks want supreme authority over all UP

colonies and they saw this as their opportunity. That's the Park Police here on Earth and quite frankly, I have no idea what motivated the Park Police on Barnard's but they are not going to smear one of my commanders and get away with it. Keep that in mind when you write my message to them and we will go over it."

With that, Seitgart handed Ensign Choo the written message he had received and said "For your entertainment and amusement. Dismissed ensign."

"Thank you sir." she replied as she snapped her back straight, legs together and spun about face.

There was a second part to the message Seitgart had not given to Choo. The intercom beeped and a voice announced "Your call to Secretary Bern is ready." Seitgart pushed the desktop phone pad to on and started. "Charlie, Irving here."

"Hey Irv, you old buzzard, what's got you calling me? You know what time it is here?" came the reply.

"I'm sorry about the time Charlie but this is big and I have to move fast." Seitgart said as he put down the papers with the second message.

"OK Irv, you know your word is good with me. So what's this all about?" From his voice, it sounded like Charles Bern, UP Secretary of State had been soundly sleeping and not quite fully awake.

Admiral Seitgart gave Secretary Bern a synopsis of the events from the discovery of an alien civilization on Altair 4 to the discovery of an outpost of that same civilization on Barnard's Star Colony. "That's the short story Charlie but I'd like to give you the details in person. I can be on a flight to Goiania tomorrow if that works for you."

"Sure," came the reply, "but what is this about? You could send me that report if you wanted to."

"It's about the appointment of an ambassador to an alien outpost. It's one of my commanders asking for a transfer and the appointment who is uniquely qualified to deal with the aliens." Seitgart waited, ready to spring.

“How is that possible Irv? Uniquely qualified? How?” asked Bern.

“He's married to an alien!” Seitgart blurted out with some satisfaction that UP fleet had made the first contact and he got to spring the surprise on his friend. “Well, at least that's what the aliens think.”

“You have got to be kidding Irv. Don't joke around like this.” Bern pleaded, now wide awake and alert.

“I'm not kidding. I'll see you tomorrow and we can review the entire record.” Seitgart said.

...

“Good morning John, come on in and have a seat.” Julius said with an energetic voice.

The men joked briefly about the encounter with Ensign's Otomi and Oliver the evening before when they landed at pad 8. The sight of Maud, Wilma and Robby flanking Adams had dissuaded them from any thought of arresting the commander. Orders they received from Midland Fleet Command later that evening vindicated their decision to back down.

It was a busy morning for everyone as the two men discussed what they knew. Flapjack and Alta were off to see Dr. Renfro. Sheila would pay Mary Lou a visit at the Renfro residence. Wallace had met with Colonel Dugan about the care of his men, now recovering at the colony hospital.

Randall was at the hospital relaying information to Adams about what the doctors had discovered. The men had apparently been stunned but there was no residual evidence of ill effects. All had been fed intravenously and heavily sedated to keep them immobile. The sedatives were beginning to wear off and at least one of the ships crewmen could speak though it was very garbled.

Deputy Greer was still working on the Renfro shooting but had not developed much in the way of leads or additional evidence. Martin explained to Adams he would help Greer as soon as he initiated some action concerning the missing miners. Martin was also happy to report that the crew of C-

57-D was having a good time with only a few minor complaints from the locals.

“So what are your long term plans?” Martin asked Adams.

“I did ask for a transfer and posting in some role as an emissary to the Krell outpost. Alta seemed to like that but we gave no thought to any details.” Adams paused for a moment, let out a sigh and said “Right now, I'm just happy to be out of that mess up at the canyon.”

“Are we still on for tonight?” Martin asked. “Sheila thought we might help you if your plans included staying on Barnard's, which apparently they do.”

“Most definitely. We will be there and I sure hope Mary Lou can make it. Poor kid.” Adams replied. “I have to get back to the ship. I still have that to run and some difficult reports to write but I'll see you this evening.”

...

Sheila stood by the window, looking at the plastic patch covering the hole, then to the distant tree line where the sheriff's department believed the shooter was posted. “That's quite a shot,” she said, aware that Mary Lou was within hearing range, “about 380 to 400 meters. An expert marksman with an Eagle Eye could do it.” Sheila turned to look at Mary Lou, seated at the kitchen counter. “Your dad looked well this morning.” Sheila said as she started toward the kitchen. “You have something to tell me?”

Mary Lou had set the two coffee mugs on opposite sides of the counter. She watched as Sheila came closer, with the bright back light creating a curvy silhouette. Mary Lou reached for a cigarette and lit up as Sheila took a seat, her face clearly visible now that Mary Lou's eyes had adjusted.

“Now I know you have something to tell me.” Sheila said. “I think you have a good idea who did it.”

Mary Lou slowly nodded her head, drew a deep breath through the cigarette and exhaled, turning her head sideways as she spoke. “I do,” she said “but I have to make sure Deputy Greer doesn't.”

Now Sheila was nodding. "As long as Greer is running the investigation, I don't think there will be a problem." Sheila said. "If Julius gets involved, well, that could be trouble. I'm hoping the missing miners keep him occupied and he lets Greer handle the shooting."

Though the mood had turned somber, Sheila tried to restore some freshness to the conversation. "You are coming over tonight with Flapjack, right?" she asked Mary Lou.

That brought a small smile to Mary Lou's face as she answered "Oh yes, of course I will."

"You won't forget that shawl, will you?" Sheila asked, showing a small smile on her face.

"I won't forget it." Mary Lou replied, her smile broadening just enough to be noticeable.

...

It was becoming a familiar routine. Ring the door bell, count to three and Julius would answer and by the count of seven they would be in the center of the dining room. Through the kitchen, to the sun room and out on the patio. Something was different Adams noticed.

It was Mary Lou and Sheila sitting at the far end of the patio while Flapjack was attending the grill and cooking. "Howdy commander." Flapjack said with a very pleased to see you voice. "I'm going to make you something a bit special this evening. A nice thick, juicy rib eye steak Ala Flapjack." Flapjack seemed happier than usual this evening, laughing and dancing in place as he opened the grill and placed a cut of meat on the upper tier.

"Did I miss something?" Alta asked. Both Sheila and Mary Lou were standing now and approached.

Flapjack closed the grill cover and turned to Alta and John saying "Yep. Dr. Renfro is doing very well and gave his consent for me to marry his daughter and she said yes."

"Is that how things are done?" asked Alta, looking at Sheila for the answer.

"No, not necessarily." Shelia answered, "It's just that

Flapjack honors some old traditions and would not even consider asking Mary Lou to marry him without her father's consent.”

Adams and Alta both expressed their happiness for the couple and their congratulations. Alta's attention was drawn to a cloth bag Sheila was holding and she asked “What's that?”

“This? It's a shawl I am borrowing from Mary Lou. It's very old so we keep it wrapped. I'll unpack it and show it to you later.” Sheila's voice seemed strained to keep up a normal appearance as she hurried to the sun room door, excusing herself and promising to return quickly as she disappeared.

Alta's thought had escaped her lips with “That was weird.” as she shook her head to dismiss the incident. She looked at Mary Lou who looked to be in much better spirits. Her father would recover and she would marry Flapjack.

“I noticed the twilight doesn't seem as bright as it was” said Adams, not directing that to anyone in particular.

“It's just a consequence of the tilt of the moon's orbit, position of the gas giant and the star. It's going to be very dark at night in just a matter of a few more days.” Martin explained. “You get used to it. By the way, any word on your appointment?”

“I got Admiral Seitgart's blessing but I need the official appointment from UP State so I can stay in fleet and hold the status of ambassador. Seitgart is meeting with Secretary Bern in Goiania tomorrow.”

“So you are going to settle here on Barnard's?” Flapjack asked as he lifted the grill cover and turned the steak. Adams was momentarily distracted by the appearance of the steak and the sizzling sound and burst of flames as the steak was turned.

Alta threw her arms around him and answered. “We sure are. Tomorrow I go house hunting with Aunt Sheila.”

Sheila had just returned and said “Yes, hunting. House hunting.”

Chapter 25 The Thrill of Discovery

“Do you like that one Alta?” Sheila asked, pointing at the large white house on the right. “A lot of UP bureaucrats live in this neighborhood.”

It was certainly a nice looking neighborhood with well manicured lawns, meticulously planted flower beds and precisely trimmed shrubs, but it had no trees and little variety in the color or style of homes. “It’s a lovely house Aunt Sheila but this neighborhood doesn’t do anything for me. It looks so rigid and controlled. I like your neighborhood.” Mary Lou, sitting in the back of the vehicle, was thinking the same thing but focused on studying the details of the white two-story frame house.

Sheila mumbled something Alta could not hear as she was studying the house very carefully, as well as those to the sides and rear. “We’re out in the country Alta, actually outside of Barnardsville. There are only those five scattered houses you see when you visit us.”

Alta started to laugh, almost uncontrollably as Sheila looked at her, bewildered by what may have triggered that response. Sheila’s puzzled look finally gripped Alta as she stopped laughing. Alta started with an apologetic voice saying “Aunt Sheila, I’m sorry but where I came from, my nearest neighbor was 8 light years away.” Sheila shook her head and started laughing. Five miles to town and a few hundred feet to your nearest neighbor was crowded in comparison to Alta’s experience.

“That’s your point Alta. Let’s go look at the countryside. I don’t know of any houses for sale but I’m sure we can find a nice lot you can build on, if that is what you want.” Sheila waited until she got a nod of approval from Alta, then slipped

the shifter into drive and gently pushed the accelerator down.

Sheila kept glancing to the rear and side view mirror as the white frame house got smaller and eventually hidden from view. She could see Mary Lou looking out of the rear window. Mary Lou turned and her eyes met Sheila's in the rear view mirror. No words were needed to confirm the like minded thinking shown by the expression in their eyes.

...
“Congratulations on your appointment skipper.” said Wallace as he reached out to shake Adams's hand. Randall, Lee and Cookie also started to form a line behind him, also congratulating the commander.

The message had come through from Goiania State Department Headquarters and was signed by both Charles Bern, Secretary of State and Admiral Irving Seitgart, Chief of Fleet Operations. The message explained that the appointment was as special emissary. A recommendation to the President and Superior Council had also been made since only they could appoint and approve ambassadors.

It was on a sadder note that Adams explained he would have to give up command of the ship to some vocal objections of those present. He explained his duties as special emissary would involve a great deal of on the ground work at the Krell outpost leaving no time for ship board duties. In fact, he explained his first assignment was to organize a survey team to begin the formal exploration of the Krell outpost.

“I don't know where I need all of you more, here on the ship or on the ground with me but I have to make some decisions.” Adams started to explain. There was general agreement among those present as Adams continued. “Mr. Wallace, you have been indispensable and I would very much want you at my side as exec but the ship needs you more. I recommended you for command but Fleet may have someone else on a waiting list. We'll have to wait and see but until that time, you have the ship skipper.”

“I need a science officer, preferably someone with a strong

engineering background. As much as I don't want to inconvenience Mr. Wallace, I'm offering that position to Mr. Randall if he will accept." Adams needed to get the exploration under way and needed staff to assist, even if it meant the ship lost valuable personnel.

Randall glanced at Wallace first who nodded his approval, then Randall accepted with "Thank you sir. I will do my best to..." at which point Adams cut him off.

"I know you will and you already have. Thank you Mr. Randall." Adams said and then turned to face Wallace, saying "Thank you Mr. Wallace."

Adams needed someone to handle the instrumentation as well, and that was offered to Crewman Lee, and as with Randall, he looked first to Lt. Wallace for approval before accepting. Adams now had a skeletal staff that would include Alta and perhaps Sheila, if she and Julius were agreeable.

"I'll clear out my cabin and find quarters in town by the end of the day Mr. Wallace. Mr. Randall, Crewman Lee, I would suggest you do the same. UP State will pay for your accommodations. We will be back in two days to start our first mission Mr. Wallace. I'll brief you before hand. Good bye men." It was not exactly the literary quality farewell speech Adams intended but it was sincere and not a final good bye.

...

Two days can pass in a blur when you have much to do and a schedule to follow.

Adams found quarters for he and Alta at the Sluice Hotel, a respectable establishment within walking distance of landing pad 8. It was a single room but would do until he could arrange for something more permanent and suitable for their long term plans. Alta wanted to visit Earth but her heart was set on living on Barnard's close to her aunt and uncle. That was agreeable to Adams as well and returning to Earth to visit family and friends would simply be postponed until a later date.

Martin was unable to add anything to Greer's stalled investigation of the Renfro shooting. He had to be content to leave that with Greer while he jumped on the missing miner case with a more than willing Flapjack to assist. Martin had made arrangements with Adams to join the flight to the north end of Auric Canyon where he and Flapjack would borrow the ship's tractor and Robby to assist with the search of the north and northeast rim.

The 10 hospitalized captives had been cleansed of the powerful sedative they had been given and were regaining mobility and speech. Some physical therapy was required but apparently, they had not suffered any permanent injuries. In fact, three of them were in better health than they were before being captured. These were all Park Police officers that were suffering from some kind of heavy metal poisoning that was supposed to be irreversible. No one could explain their improved condition.

Edward Renfro was also recovering nicely but greatly depressed by the loss of his arm. Adams had given it considerable thought and was convinced Renfro could be a valuable part of his exploratory team. His familiarity with the MAMBEs could be an indispensable aid in discovery. When asked if he would participate, Renfro's spirits jumped and he pushed for an early release. The doctors were more sensible and agreed he could be released early, but not quite this early.

Mary Lou, Flapjack, Alta and Sheila busied themselves with wedding preparations. They would give it four to six months since they didn't have the convenience of the Krell synthesis machine to make all that they needed or wanted. Flapjack and Alta were pressed for time since they would be leaving for Auric Canyon in another day.

Sheila was asked to join the expedition by Adams but she declined. Adams pressed her but she gave no reason other than she wanted to be available for Mary Lou. She informed Adams that she would love to participate in the future, but not now. Adams valued her clear thinking and the effect she had

on Alta and let her know that. He was especially impressed with her handling of the surrogate and he let her know that too.

Mary Lou had plans too, but nothing she could discuss with anyone. The dark period of the moon's orbit was approaching. That would dictate her schedule.

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“Get us on the ground Clary.” Wallace said as the sound from the propulsion driver steadied and the core began its power down cycle. “Youngerford, once we set down make ready the tractor. Take Sheriff Martin and Flapjack where ever they need to go.” Adams said nothing but looked on with pride as his choice for commander, and his former exec, handled the ship like a seasoned pro. “Sentries wear your sidearms. We won't have robots to protect us from rattlesnakes and coyotes this time around. Don't shoot at anything you can't identify.”

The ship touched down, the gangways were deployed and the hatches opened. Martin, Flapjack and Robby made for the tractor with Crewman Youngerford. Adams's party, consisting of Randall, Lee and Alta guided by Maud and Wilma made for the camouflaged entrance to the Krell outpost.

Once inside, Maud and Wilma produced a plastic film they fabricated into a seating platform. The robots carried several types of film material but it had to be replaced as it was consumed. It was not manufactured on demand. Alta was dropped at the Krell lab with Maud where she would use the educator to access the Krell library as required to assist with the exploration. The rest of the party would go to the Chamber of Audiences where Adams would request the surrogate arrange for a tour of the outpost as a precursor for trade negotiations and familiarization with Krell culture and technology.

“Alta, are you tracking our location?” Adams asked as they approached the Chamber of Audiences.

“Yes,” she replied “and I have a much larger reach into the

outpost model now. John, this place is huge.”

“As soon as I get clearance from the surrogate, we'll come by the lab and you can show us what you found.” Adams responded and was anxious to get the exploration underway. A three dimensional model of the entire outpost would certainly help. “We're at the Chamber of Audiences entrance now so, we're going be blacked out for a few minutes.”

“OK.” Alta replied, then sat back to disengage the educator headset and relax before the real work started.

...

Flapjack spotted them right away. The canyon rim had been deeply cut in several places by drag lines that had not been set with pulleys. They were used to operate surface scraping ore carriers and mining work platforms. Who ever did this probably wanted to avoid detection by not placing the pulley wheels. The cables would wear faster without the wheels but that apparently did not concern those who were using them. Some older cable cuts had been blasted but not enough to disguise their origin.

“Someone has been doing some heavy duty mining here.” Flapjack said as he dismounted the tractor to take a closer look at the cuts. “This isn't gold ore on the face but I'll bet it's scandium.”

Martin dismounted the tractor and Robby dropped from his attachment to the boom. “Up ahead” Martin shouted. About 100 meters east were two Park Police rovers, which appeared to be the same ones that had been spotted by satellite when the search for the missing crewmen first started. They were parked one behind the other and appeared to be in good physical condition.

With the light dust on the floor of the canyon rim, even the slightest breeze would hide tire tracks. Robby however, could detect recent depressions in the surface beneath the dust. How long these hidden tracks would last was highly variable, depending on humidity, temperature and rainfall. Robby reported tracks from a different vehicle that came from the

southeast and then returned in the same direction. Another pair of tracks indicated one of the Park Police rovers took a parallel course but ended on this end of the loop. Unfortunately, the tracks from pedestrians had a much shorter life because of the lower ground pressure they exerted. Nothing could be found concerning movement by the occupants of the vehicles.

Flapjack found some soil on the rover floor and back platform. He took some samples for analysis and suspected they contained scandium ore. He was collecting the sample when it occurred to him that the robot might be able to analyze the material on the spot. Robby presented himself to Flapjack, opening the hatch chest plate to his built-in chemical laboratory.

“Yes Mr. Flapjack, this material is about 35 percent scandium, 29 percent uranium and 35 percent silica with traces of thorium.” Robby reported.

“Robby, can you do a chemical scan of this area?” came the question from Sheriff Martin. “I’m particularly interested in calcium residue.”

Robby’s response learning program kicked in and clarified the search parameters by asking “Are you looking for the residue from a vaporized human?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Martin replied. There was a good chance that if anyone had been vaporized, the residue remained since there had been no rainfall at the north end of the canyon for several weeks.

Robby started walking while turning his head from left to right and occasionally using his beams at very low power on certain areas of the ground. “Here Sheriff Martin, four humans assuming an average weight of 180 pounds.” Robby was at a point about 20 meters east of the lead Park Police rover and adjacent to where he identified the tracks of the third unseen vehicle that had stopped.

“I’m sorry Flapjack. Did you know them?” asked Martin as he turned to face his friend.

“One of them closely, the others were acquaintances.” the forty-niner replied. “I could never fathom greed in a place like this Julius. Anyone can get rich here mining the gold, they just have to do a little sweating and work. But to kill someone so you can make more money with less work? I suspect we had some government people taking advantage of an area they placed off limits to everyone else.”

“I agree my friend.” Martin said. “We have to secure this evidence. Plastic sheeting will do. I’ll ask Youngerford to get some from the ship. We have about an hour of daylight left. Just in time I would say.”

...

The door sensor sounded a beeper at the same time it turned on a porch light and camera recorder. All Dugan could see from the viewer in his living room was a cloaked and hooded figure. “Who is it?” he asked and waited but could barely hear the response. “Who?” he repeated. Again, he heard a barely audible voice but he could make out one word. “Witness? Witness to what?”

“The Renfro shooting.” came back in a low but clear voice. “We should talk about your future colonel.”

That shook Dugan as he stared at the viewer image trying to make out any detail he could concerning the visitor on his front porch. “Just a minute.” he said as he reached into a basket decorating an end table and pulled out a metal cylinder with a small diameter bore. It was an old style projectile weapon that was quite effective at close range and far more compact than a blaster. It was only single shot but that is all it usually took to kill or disable an opponent.

Dugan clutched the cylinder in his right hand and held it so most of its length was concealed up his sleeve. He wasn’t going to take any chances with this unknown visitor who knew too much or, perhaps, just made a lucky guess. Dugan dimmed the lights as he entered the foyer. He quietly unlatched the deadbolt and turned the handle to open the door.

The hooded figure stood there motionless as he looked it

over. It was about his height and if he turned his head a certain way, Dugan could see some of the facial features. "Oh, its you. I thought you were..." and before he could finish, a hand from the figure slapped at his neck and brought a knee swiftly to his groin. As Dugan started to buckle forward, the knee dropped and the other knee hit him solidly in the chest, sending him backwards and down to the foyer floor.

Dugan was conscious and could feel a hand grab his and relieve him of the concealed firearm. He could feel a drowsiness coming over him as the caped and hooded figure stepped near his head, grabbed his arms and dragged him away from the door. He could see the door closing as he was passing out.

...

The view in the educator that Alta was able to produce showed the entire moon and a matrix of hexagonal plates. The pentagons at key locations indicated it was an icosahedron, probably a model the Krell used for development. That was what they thought until Randall asked what the Krell legend said.

"Fault lines," Alta answered followed by "but what are they? I have studied geology but never saw anything like this."

"No one has." Randall exclaimed, "No where have we seen tectonic plates of that number with that kind of geometric regularity and precision. No where! Are you sure that is what the legend says?"

"It does say active and inactive, but they are all color coded as active." Alta looked at Maud almost begging for confirmation.

"Yes Miss Alta, your interpretation is correct." Maud said. "Those are all active fault lines on this moon."

Randall was starting to grasp the significance of the image and asked "Alta, can you bring up the seismic history of this moon?" to which she responded she would try.

“I found this, a three dimensional graph showing intensity and number of quakes over a period of time. Is that what you wanted?” Alta asked, turning to look at Randall who was leaning over to get a closer look at the image in the educator.

“No, no, this is perfect!” Randall said with a very excited voice. “I can't read the precise values but from the shape of the plane surface it shows the frequency of earthquakes increased dramatically about 10,000 years after the Krell started the mining operation. Over the same time period, the severity of those quakes plunged. Millions and millions of micro quakes but with such low energy they are not detectable except by very sensitive instruments.

“Mr. Randall, could you translate and explain for all of us exactly what that means?” Adams asked.

“Certainly commander.” came the response which Adams quickly acted to correct. “Yes, Mr. Adams. This moon was engineered to minimize seismic risk. The stresses in large plates ordinarily caused by the rotational and gravitation forces acting on a body have been released along controlled fracture lines, much like a frangible disk for pressure relief but in this case, the disk never ruptures.”

The look Randall got from Adams told him he had better try again. “Mr. Adams, this moon was engineered with hundreds of fault lines to allow the surface to flex and minimize any damage from earthquakes.” Now Adams was nodding. “The idea was to release the stored energy along preset fracture lines so the energy would not build up to produce large and destructive quakes.”

Crewman Lee was also taking this in and asked the pertinent question, “How did they do it?”

“What they did was create fractures that extend from the surface of the moon, through the crust and down to the outer mantle. That eliminates bending moments between plates so it's a little like they were hinged. Of course the movement is negligible. The forces that could cause lateral movement or subduction are spent before they accumulate.” Randall could

see he was losing Adams again and had long lost Lee. "I'm sorry Mr. Adams. I'm not an expert. I see an engineering project and what it was trying to do and that's the best I can explain it. I think I know why they did it, but I have no idea how they did it."

Adams looked at Randall with a smile and said "It's all right. We will eventually add the experts we need but I want you and Lee to help me figure out what experts those should be. I don't want this place crawling with people. It could lead to some unfortunate incidents that could wreck our relations with the Krell robots."

While the men were talking, Alta had noticed something in the image and was slowly zooming in the view. What she had spotted was an extensive network of tunnels about 6 miles deep and connecting the center of each plate with those adjacent. It looked like a giant spiderweb of strands arranged in a hexagonal pattern. In the pattern, a few vertical shafts were visible identical to what they had seen for the area where they were now. These were scattered around the moon at very regular intervals.

Alta was able to focus the model on the area where they were in the lab. The lab and numerous other rooms were in a small area near the surface. Most of what appeared to be mining shafts, tunnels and galleries ranged from a few hundred meters to about 6 miles deep. The central shaft nearest the lab extended into the outer mantle, about 12 miles deep.

"There is too much here to explore. We have to set our focus and work from that." Adams said, clearly overwhelmed by the enormity of the Krell outpost. "I want to find the Krell synthesis machine and anything else that will help us understand MAMBEs. I also want to find the power source or sources for the outpost. I suspect they are identical to what we saw on Altair 4, but I want visual confirmation."

The chattering after he finished convinced Adams he was right to focus the exploration and that Alta's discovery of a

model would help. It was getting late however, and the minds at work were not nearly as sharp as they needed to be. “Mr. Wallace.” Adams said through the com-link. “We're going to bunk in the outpost for the night. I'll check back with you in the morning.”

“Yes Mr Adams, that will be fine and we are here if you need us.” Wallace responded. “By the way, Mr. Martin and Mr. Flapjack will be our guests for the evening.”

“Men,” Adams said with a big smile, “I am going to show you the finer side of Krell hospitality. I think you will find the Ambassador Suite accommodations more than adequate.” Adams paused while looking around and remembering that Flapjack was not there. “I will miss an evening smoke but I suppose I can survive that.”

...

Dugan's eyes were bulging with fear as the knife blade passed within a few inches of his nose. Something was stuck in his mouth but he couldn't make it out at first. His vision was blurred but he could see he was in his garage and the lights were dimmed. He stiffened up when he realized the hand of his visitor, apparently wearing some type of chain mail, was stuffed in his mouth and being slowly withdrawn.

“What do you want?” Dugan pleaded.

“You know what I want.” replied a woman's voice. “As soon as I have it, your pain and suffering will end.”

“What are you talking about?” Dugan said, not aware of any pain or suffering, until a few seconds after those words left his mouth. He could feel the knife slice through his pant leg and glide down his left thigh. The cut wasn't deep but the pain was enough to start a shriek that was quickly blocked when the chain mailed hand was shoved back in his mouth. Then he felt another slice, then another, and another. None were fatal but each was painful.

“Tell me what I want to know colonel or I'll have to start practicing my surgical technique.” the woman said as she flashed the knife before his eyes and gave the end of the blade

a snapping motion. “Not yet? OK then.” and the blade dropped from sight but made itself known on his right thigh. The hand in his mouth pushed harder as he tried to scream. He tried to shake his head but the hand shook back, pulling at his jaw until it was withdrawn and he could catch his breath. The pain was still with him but the anxiety of what might come next had his attention.

“Guest bed room, second floor, left side, floor board in the closet.” Dugan sputtered as he tried to catch his breath. Dugan's tolerance for pain was negligible and he wanted it ended without any thought of what might happen next. The caped and hooded woman left as Dugan was trying to determine what was keeping him bound. His ankles and wrists were now sensing the cutting of the thin plastic ties that had been tightly pulled to bind him. He struggled with his wrists for a few seconds but the sharpness of the pain stopped any further effort.

The woman had returned holding an Eagle Eye rifle with a sniper scope. “That doesn't prove anything.” Dugan pleaded. At that point, the woman produced a roll of plastic film, typically for household use wrapping food. She began by wrapping Dugan's legs, working her way down to his feet, then back up and beyond to his waist. Then she started unrolling the film around his neck and dropped to include his arms as the plastic cocoon took shape.

The next move was a somewhat tricky but quite effective. Dugan was seated and leaning against the closed rear door of his car. She placed a loop of thin steel wire around his neck and pulled him slightly forward. The wire digging in usually made the victim cooperate and lean in the direction of the wire. Dugan did as expected and she opened the rear door, then tossed the wire spool across the seat and out of the open door on the other side.

With Dugan leaning part way through the open door, she went to the other side of the car and started pulling on the wire. Dugan tried to scream but the wire was cutting deeply

into his neck and he did all he could to relieve the force, attempting to stand and move in the direction of the pulling. In less than a minute, he was stretched out on the back seat as the car doors were closed. He could hear the electric motor of the car engage the clutch as the car jerked back and he rolled off the seat and onto the floor.

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Dugan squirmed as the wire tightened around his neck and he maneuvered in the direction of the pulling. He could not see his assailant any longer in the darkness of the Barnard's night, but he could see a distant and familiar sight, the Renfro house lit by the exterior patio lights. He was now lying prone and facing the house. The Eagle Eye had been placed next to him. The steel wire was still around his neck but loose. Dugan had calmed down but that would be short lived as he felt the roll of plastic film unwind behind his head and pass under his face, two, then three, then four times and continuing until his entire head had been tightly wrapped.

“Sleep well colonel.” would be the last words he heard as the caped and hooded woman disappeared in the darkness, leaving one Chief of Park Police at the scene of his crime.

Chapter 26 Dream On

“You have chosen a dangerous path Altaira.” The Krell with the gray frock seldom spoke but had seized control of the dream this time. He was the Philosopher and disclosed he was a blood relative to the female Krell identified as the Historian. “We were correct to fear the Garon and you are proving those fears justified.”

Alta was fully aware she was dreaming, but she was also deeply interested in what her four Krell visitors had to say, dreaming or not. “What path is that,” she asked “and what have I done for anyone to fear? I am human, or Garon if you prefer and I can't change that. It was never a problem until now. Why?”

“With one exception your anatomy and physiology are all Garon but that part of your brain that was modified is Krell and it has a voice in your conscious and subconscious. It is now in a struggle with your Garon mind. Which voice you listen too is your choice and you have chosen to elevate the Garon and suppress the Krell.” said the Teacher. Of the four Krell dream visitors, the Teacher had the most contact with Altaira in the past 17 years. She was not merely a language instructor but also her greatest source of comfort when she was troubled. Something was changing in their relationship and there was no comfort in what Alta was being told now.

The Krell Scientist of the group rarely spoke but this dream was an exception. “The head surrogate of this outpost is aware of you giving aid to the Garon. That endangers this outpost. Together with the other surrogates, they will decide how to handle this threat and breach of Krell law.”

“What I don't understand,” Alta pleaded “is how the Garon, inferior in so many ways to the Krell, could be a threat.

You must explain that or nothing you say makes sense. Why can't my Krell and human conscious and subconscious coexist?"

Alta was turning in her sleep now, waking Adams, breaking his hug from behind her and giving him an elbow in the face as she turned. He remained motionless as Alta spoke to the Krell in her sleep in their language. He knew about her dreams and decided not to wake her but to let the dream finish of its own accord. "Stop stalling and tell me." she asked.

"When we first met the Garon," the Historian Krell began, "we believed they could learn from us, not only the sciences, but our behavioral discipline and ethics as well. We believed they would learn to be peaceful, cooperative and ordered."

The Historian had struck a nerve and Alta could not contain her response. "Don't you mean docile, obedient and unquestioning? Isn't that what you expected from the Garon?"

"Be still and learn." came the reaction from the Historian and for the first time ever revealing a hint of impatience. "We assisted the Garon with migration to other worlds long before they achieved faster than light travel. We gave them the keys to paradise and they abused it. They fought with each other, they killed and they destroyed despite our best efforts. They reduced their civilizations to ashes and crept to the edge of extinction, only to recover, rebuild and repeat the cycle again and again and again. We decided isolation was preferable to contact. We decided we would not engage the Garon until they achieved faster than light travel. We believed that milestone would coincide with a higher ethical standard, but it has not."

Alta had listened but her own experience was limited to what she had read in the historical records of Earth. The cyclical pattern the Krell described was not unusual, so what was the point of the observation? "You are evading my question." Alta said with the deliberate tone of a challenge, "What did you fear from the Garon?"

"Contamination and corruption child!" The Philosopher

said it loudly and boldly. “They caused some of our kind to question our perfect civilization and to doubt the control we had over ourselves. We, the Krell, had eliminated crime, mental illness, injustice and destructive behavior and now the Garon introduced a deadly vice. Those Garon that held the greatest promise to emulate our standards of ethical behavior were the most infected and infectious, spreading what they called humility to the scientists who studied them.”

“Humility a vice?” Alta questioned.

“Yes,” the Historian continued, “the Garon dared question our perfection and the benefits it would bestow on them. We offered them paradise and they rejected it! Their doubts infected some of our scientists and then spread to the general population. The leadership had to take extraordinary measures to stop the contamination and corruption from spreading.”

“Humility a vice?” Alta asked again. “I don’t understand.” Alta went on to explain. “To the Garon, from what I have read and learned, humility is a virtue, the opposite of pride, which is a vice. My experience living with the Garon is limited but verifies that what I read is true.”

The Philosopher jumped in immediately. “We Krell eliminated the vice of humility as an obstacle to achieving greatness. We would not allow our genius to be restrained by an artificial barrier erected by an undisciplined mind. We had undertaken a divine and glorious project. We would not let that be sabotaged by the corruption of an inferior species.”

The Teacher jumped in and added “The great irony is that the Garon who worshiped us and rejected the vice of humility engaged in constant violence against other Garon. Those infected with humility were mostly peaceful and productive. It presented us with an unresolvable dilemma with no choice but to allow only limited contact and only when we believed the Garon had advanced. It appears that time has not yet arrived.”

“They don’t know.” Alta said quietly while shaking her head and turning her gaze from the Teacher to the Historian.

She spoke up for all of them to hear now, “All this time, all this access to everything I know and still you reject the truth because you regard my Garon mind as inferior. You know everything and I know nothing as you see it. You are no different than my father in his last moments, rejecting the truth that a monster dwelt within him. Now you reject the truth of your own fallibility and what it did to your home world.”

Adams was concerned now as Alta spoke calmly in that undecipherable language but as if she were wide awake. She bolted to a sitting position, clutching the sheets close to her neck while her back was exposed. He considered waking her but thought less of the idea when she continued to speak, but with a very harsh tone.

“Let me tell you about your precious superior species and your crowning achievement” Alta said with a strong smack of sarcasm as the four dream Krell looked at her, their low placed and oversized mouths gaping. “You told your most convincing lie to yourselves. You didn't conquer mental illness, or crime, or injustice. You conquered humility, then you conquered the truth and it destroyed you. Every last one of you.”

Alta hesitated now. Perhaps she had said too much and had not considered the consequences. It was racing though her mind as she sat silently looking at the Krell, now rendered numb and dumbfounded by her words.

“No,” Alta told herself, “they have to know, you have to know.” She paused and saw the four were all looking at her with open mouths and wide open eyes. “You finished your divine and glorious project as you call it. Look into my Garon mind and you will see the ugly truth of it. Yes, the pinnacle of Krell genius, the summit of Krell pride, and the graveyard of Krell self-deception was completed sometime after you were all recorded for implantation. In one night, the vice you nurtured, pride, and the virtue you killed, humility, annihilated your entire race. Every last Krell man, woman and child violently murdered because of the lie you told yourself. Your

control was an illusion, a self-deception, the end product of prideful arrogance.”

Alta's Krell visitors remained silent, stunned by what they now knew was truth but refused to accept. The Alta they had known for so long had no reason to lie to them and the truth she told gnawed at them.

Alta sat waiting, not sure what to say to the Krell next, if anything, but as she looked at the Teacher, she saw another familiar face come into focus. Her dream was dissolving and she was saying “No, not yet, not yet please!” as she saw Adams face replace the fading Krell Teacher. She sat still now, beginning to realize the dream had ended and she was sitting upright in bed with Adams at her side. Alta looked around the master bedroom of the Ambassador Suite, orienting herself and stepping into the world of the awake.

Adams sat up and raised his hands to her shoulders asking “Are you all right dear? Bad dream?”

“No,” she replied, still in a slightly groggy state but with enough clarity of mind to say “I have to go back. I have to talk to them before we use the educator today. I have to do it.”

...

Youngerford was looking toward the increasingly bright western sky where the sun was rising on Barnard's. It was going to be a crisp, cool morning as he breathed the fresh air in deeply before mounting the tractor. It was the start of a clear and pleasant day he thought. Once he delivered Sheriff Martin and Flapjack to the Park Police rovers, he could return to the ship and leisurely attend to his duties.

Martin checked the lead rover first and found it about half full of fuel. The back rover was checked by Flapjack who reported three quarters of a tank as he stepped aboard and turned the ignition. The rumbling of the exhaust was a little louder than usual and the response was smaller animals springing to life in the nearby scrub brush. Martin climbed into the passenger seat as Flapjack revved the engine and popped the clutch.

The eastern rim of Auric Canyon was not visited as frequently as the western rim but a few tell tale signs of illegal mining could be found. Most often it was the groove cut by the cable of an ore carrier or one-man platform. Martin was not accustomed to looking for the grooves but Flapjack was and made a few passing comments as they drove the bare dirt road of the eastern rim, dodging small rocks and ruts as they moved southeast and then south. Flapjack knew the claims of various miners and also knew that the miners honored each others' claims despite the ban on mining.

“What do you want to do Julius?” Flapjack asked as the rover used by the four dead miners came into sight.

“I'll mark it with evidence tape for now but I want to scan the entire vehicle for finger prints, fiber, hair, you know, all that evidence stuff.” Martin answered. “I may have Greer bring us the scanner. It should take about 40 minutes so you can take off if you want.”

Flapjack decided to stay. He wanted to be in on any discovery concerning the murder of his friend and three acquaintances. Martin used his com-link to contact the office and Deputy Greer. The first thing Greer reported was that no progress had been made on the Renfro shooting investigation. Martin let him know the missing miners had been found dead. It was agreed that Greer would bring several evidence kits to the miners' rover.

With that done, Martin finished marking off the rover with the yellow evidence marker tape, then joined Flapjack in the Park Police rover. “Let's see if anyone got careless.” Martin said, looking at Flapjack as they settled back to relax and wait for Deputy Greer to arrive.

...
“It's like you said darling,” Alta spoke as she sipped her coffee, “my father's voice will remind us we are not gods. The Krell received a similar warning but dismissed it as the fault of an inferior species.”

Alta relayed as much of the detail of her dream as she

could remember, which was considerable. “They were trying to tell me something darling and I cut them off. I have to get back to them. I don’t know what they have to tell me but I know it is important.” Adams took Alta’s free hand as he gazed at the pool on the patio, quietly thinking and trying to fathom the consequences either way of Alta returning to sleep or not.

He looked up from the pool and turned to meet Alta’s eyes and said “I think we need your Aunt Sheila. I would like to hear what she thinks first, if that’s all right with you.”

Alta nodded strongly, signaling her agreement and the urgency as well. Adams handed her the com-link, the signal now being routed through Robby enabling communication outside the Krell outpost. “Aunt Sheila?”

“Alta! I was just thinking about you. How are you?” Sheila inquired. She and Alta exchanged greetings before the conversation turned serious to the matter at hand. Sheila pleaded she wasn’t sure if she could help but would do whatever her niece asked. The problem was getting Sheila up to the outpost. Her car was still charging and would take another four hours.

Adams looked at Alta and said loud enough to be heard on the com-link “We’ll wait. We need to do this so let’s do it right. Sheila,” Adams said, not quite as a question but again loud enough for her to hear, “you seem to have a special rapport with Alta and I think you just being here will help her.”

Alta was nodding as Sheila replied “OK, I’ll be there as soon as I can. If I can charge the car there, I only need another hour of charge to reach you. It’s getting back I’m worried about.”

“I’m sure we can arrange to charge your car with Mr. Wallace.” Adams said as he looked up slightly from the com-link in Alta’s hand to her eyes and gave her a smile.

“John, is Julius at the ship?” Sheila asked. “I would like to let him know I miss him and I’ll be there.”

“I'll open a relay channel to the ship for you Sheila.” Adams responded. “I don't know if Julius is there but I'm sure Mr. Wallace will and can link you up with him if he isn't.”

By the time the conversation with Sheila ended, Randall and Lee found their way to the pool-side dining area and the fresh coffee. As Lee looked at the holograph beyond the patio rail, he asked “I wonder what it is really like outside?”

...

Greer finished replacing the yellow marker tape as Martin reviewed the scanner recording. Nothing of any use had been detected. The miners' fingerprints were everywhere, except on the steering wheel. It looked as if those had been smeared and completely wiped clean. That would be expected if the last driver of the vehicle were wearing gloves. “Whoever the last driver was made sure no evidence was left behind.” Martin remarked as he shut the recorder. “Greer, get the hospital. I want the Park Police uniforms bagged and held for evidence. They didn't leave anything in the rover but maybe they took something with them.”

“Yes sheriff.” the deputy responded then asked “Can you give me any help or advice on our other case?”

“I can't help you directly with that now. I need to meet my wife at the ship on another matter but as soon as that's finished, we can over it together.” Martin told his deputy. “You may want to review your notes, then revisit the scene of the crime and see how what you remember reading fits with what you see. Sometimes we write things that don't ring true when we look at them later.”

“Thanks sheriff.” Greer replied as he climbed into the sheriff's department rover and started toward the south cleft and road back to Barnardsville.

Flapjack started the Park Police rover and popped the clutch as he spun the wheel left, leaving a cloud of dust and spewing debris as the vehicle straightened out and headed north.

Martin was concerned about the evidence. There were

several possible but unlikely explanations to account for the placement of the vehicles. The Park Police could also incriminate the Krell robots, and most likely would if they were lying and guilty of the murders. Martin had his own doubts to overcome and did not want to make any false accusations. Those could be as devastating to someone's character as a death sentence. He wanted proof beyond a reasonable doubt before accusing anyone of anything.

...

Alta was back in her dream state and much to her delight, her Aunt Sheila was with her. Though the Krell robots had accepted Sheila in the mother role, it was uncertain Alta's Krell dream visitors would treat her the same. That was to be seen and Alta urged patience to her aunt.

While Alta was fully aware she was dreaming, she was very uncertain about Sheila's presence. Was Sheila actually there as a participant or just as a creation of Alta's mind? Alta's last conscious recollection was that of Sheila sitting in a chair in the master bedroom, watching as Alta took the sedative given her by Maud and then drifted into sleep. Was Sheila sharing this experience? But just a moment, Alta thought. If Sheila were here, she had very little understanding of Krell.

The Teacher appeared first and that had been the pattern for as long as Alta could remember. The Historian would follow, then the Scientist and finally the Philosopher. They stood silently and made it obvious they were gazing at Sheila. "Why is she here?" the Teacher asked, adding "Is it because you don't trust us?"

Alta looked at Sheila, then back at the Teacher. The question puzzled her because it seemed to assume a false premise. This wasn't like the Krell she had known in her dreams. She turned to the Philosopher in the gray frock. How appropriate that color is for the Philosopher, she thought to herself, then asked "Why would the presence of Sheila cast any shadow of doubt on my trust of you? Is there a reason I

should not trust you?"

"We cannot believe that we killed ourselves, nor will the surrogates of this outpost believe that." the Teacher said. "What we do believe is that your husband, John J. Adams, caused the destruction of our home planet as we discovered by examining your thoughts. That is the fact the surrogates will soon learn if you continue using the educator and remain in mental communication with any robots assigned to this outpost."

Alta looked at Sheila but it was purely symbolic. Sheila had not understood a single word that had been spoken. Alta looked back at the Teacher and asked "What will the surrogates do if they find out my husband activated the process that destroyed Altair 4?"

"We don't know but you do." the Philosopher replied.

"How is that possible?" Alta yelled, baffled by the assertion and indignant it had even been made.

"You are the only living Krell they know and while they dismiss you as not yet mature, they still consult your thoughts and prepare for the day you will guide them. There is but one problem however."

"What might that be?" Alta asked, her voice calmed and her eyes focused on the Philosopher.

"You are breaking Krell law by giving information to the Garon. At some point the surrogates will deny any further access to the computers to stop you and you will be treated as a criminal." the Philosopher answered. Alta didn't say anything but the Philosopher sensed she wanted a more thorough explanation. "Maud will be instructed to vaporize you."

That stunned Alta. What was all the talk she had heard from her father about the robots basic inhibition about taking intelligent life? Did that apply only to Robby? Didn't the robots acting in the canyon stun the trespassers and not kill them? The misguided notion that robots would always regard themselves as inferior to intelligent life and devoted to its

protection, even by self-sacrifice, had to be rooted out of Alta's mind. Under the right circumstances, Maud was a killer and Alta had to remember that when talking to the robot.

Alta looked at Sheila and started to explain in English when the Philosopher interrupted, making no apology and doing so loudly. "What you are about to do is exactly what you should not do. Sheila is Garon and you are about to disclose information the Garon should not have."

Now Alta was angry and she let it show in her eyes, face and body language. "Sheila is my adviser and I sense more jealousy from you than any concern for a violation of law. I can see what you all are thinking, how dare I consult with a species inferior to you. She has qualities you will never understand or possess. She is more valuable to me than the four of you combined. Your lack of humility and abundance of arrogance killed your entire race, so don't preach to me about Garon inferiority. Their days may be numbered but they are still here and you aren't!"

Alta was sitting and slowly becoming aware that she was awake. Sheila was sitting in the same chair to the left on the opposite wall and in a trance like state, but also awakening. She stretched her arms outward and rolled her head to exercise her neck and only then noticed that Alta was also awake. "I was there Alta!" Sheila exclaimed. "I only picked up a word or two here and there but I could sure tell when you got angry. What happened?"

Alta knew what she heard but was still groggy herself and looked at her aunt with a pleasing look. "Let's get everyone together and I'll tell you all at the same time what happened. The first thing everyone must know is that these robots will kill. I have to be careful not to transmit my thoughts but I want them out when we are talking. I don't know the exact circumstances that would cause them to kill but I have been warned and I believe what I was told."

"Everyone is by the pool Alta. Shall we go?" Sheila asked, looking for an affirmative signal from Alta.

...
“Helen, this is Deputy Greer. I need the coroner on the hillside behind the Renfro residence.” Greer stood still, waiting for a response while looking at the body, wrapped like a mummy in household plastic film. He had scanned the Eagle Eye blaster rifle lying next to the body and found finger prints but nothing else. The power slide was missing. Perhaps the exploded slide found the day after the shooting came from this weapon.

“Deputy,” the voice came back, “Dr. Renfro is the coroner and there is no backup. What do you want to do?”

“Helen, send the wagon and a driver. We can take the body and put it in a cooler at the morgue until we figure out what to do for a coroner's investigation. I can't leave it here. We don't even know who it is yet so pull any missing persons reports we have.”

“We have no missing persons Deputy Greer, just those miners you found.” Helen answered.

“OK,” he replied, “forget it but send the wagon.” There was a short “OK” and a pop as the com-link channel closed.

Greer bagged the blaster rifle, checking the scope and saw it had been zeroed for 400 meters. The distance to the Renfro house back window was 370 meters. Coincidence he thought? Most likely not. A power slide would be marked by the receiver and could be examined for a match on the slide found at the site. Even though the slide had exploded, the insertion lands were bent but intact and could be compared to a test power slide.

Greer had three other deputies covering the site now, looking for any evidence of how the body was placed where it was. They could see where it was dragged from the roadside through the less dense undergrowth and brush. Other than pock marks of the bound feet digging in and kicking head ward, there was no evidence in the way of footprints, fabric, fiber, hair or another weapon. One deputy got on the unpaved back road and within 150 meters found Dugan's car driven

into a dense cluster of bushes. It was only a few minutes later the car was traced.

...

“What is it Greer?” came Sheriff Martin's voice.

“Sheriff, you are not going to believe this” replied Greer.

“Try me.” said Martin while Flapjack and Sheila looked on as he spoke into the com-link.

Chapter 27 Paeans

The robots had provided an island of seclusion in the cafeteria to accommodate the seven human visitors. The robots were very adept at changing the motif of any area very quickly, as had been witnessed when the bare walls and bare floor cafeteria was converted to an airy cafe and now to a chic bistro. Maud and Wilma now posted themselves at opposite corners of the seating area for reasons that would soon be obvious.

The command surrogate holograph appeared with a few clicks and clacks from Maud and Wilma as they took their positions. Alta studied Maud for a moment and then turned to examine Wilma floating behind her. She then looked at Adams and told him “They are not here to protect us.” That drew a look of concern and stare from everyone.

Adams reached for the com-link to begin recording and it was instantly hit by a thin beam of blue light coming from Maud. Adams was startled but surprised to find he was not injured and he assured Alta he was all right. The com-link suffered no apparent physical damage but was rendered inoperative. The signal indicator was unlit meaning power had been neutralized. Alta shook her head while focusing her attention on the image of the Krell in some type of blue uniform seated with the group in a Krell style chair.

Alta said something very short in Krell and was answered in English by the image with “Yes, we can accommodate the ambassador. He retains his privilege of diplomatic immunity.” Alta spoke again in Krell and this time the com-link in Adams's hand was hit with another beam from Maud, restoring the device to working order.

“Well thank you.” Adams responded somewhat

sarcastically before looking toward Alta and asking “What about you? What is your status? You are my wife, right?”

Alta turned ever so slightly to face Adams and said “Don't say another word from here on.” Alta's voice was very low and grim. “Our lives depend on your silence. You must trust me and you must contain your reaction no matter what I say.” Alta said as she turned to look into the eyes of everyone in the group.

Adams was about to answer when Alta instantly flashed a shaking finger at him, upon which he closed his mouth and simply nodded.

“My husband,” Alta began, “known by you as Ambassador Adams destroyed the Krell home planet about seven months ago.” Adams head snapped back and turned to look at Alta, as did the others, with mouths dropped open and the color leaving their faces. They remembered what she said about remaining silent but what was she doing?

“That is not possible.” the surrogate snapped back. “An inferior species like the Garon could not cause that kind of destruction.”

The grinding sound associated with surrogates began and Alta started to explain to the group. “The surrogates construct scenarios with millions if not billions of variables and test for probability. That sound is simply an encoded signal for sending and receiving data. You might call it the surrogate way of communing.”

The surrogate paused, exchanging looks with Alta, then with Adams and then agreeing “Yes, I believe you. That act demands punishment.” Alta thought about that and forced herself to remember that the Krell robots and computers strictly followed programming and never originated a single rule or instruction. A piece of program code said that hostile acts against Altair 4 were to be stopped and punished to prevent any such future acts. Alta was understanding that billions or even trillions of lines of program code did not constitute intelligence though they could give a convincing

performance.

“No,” shouted Alta, “his act killed no one and destroyed a great evil!” Alta waited for a reaction. She could not read the Krell facial gestures and body language and had to rely solely on verbal communication and a hope the computer could read at least part of what she was now thinking. The surrogate remained silent but clearly had his attention focused on Adams as grinding sounds turned on and off in an erratic pattern.

Alta jumped again at the opportunity. “The Krell completed the great project 200,000 years ago. It was one of the last communications you received from the home planet.” Though she had not yet been able to locate an historical record concerning the event, she deduced the Krell must have informed their outposts of the great accomplishment.

As the grinding sound stopped, the surrogate turned his attention to Alta and admitted “Yes they did, and it was the last communication we have received to date.”

“Yes!” Alta yelled as she jumped up now at the opportunity to hit the surrogate squarely with the truth and let the cards fall where they may. “Because the great machine they built killed them all in a single night. That is why they don't answer your messages, your requests, your questions. They are all dead, killed by their great creation, the evil which Ambassador Adams destroyed so it could kill no more.”

Alta was well aware the truth detection sensors and software of Maud and Wilma were monitoring her. She looked at them both with a haughty expression because she knew they would find she was telling the truth. The surrogate was grinding at a frantic rate. For an instant, the grinding stopped and the surrogate said “Stay here.” With that, the holographic image disappeared.

Without any warning, a diamond grid of thin yellow light beams surrounded the seating area. It reached from floor to ceiling and appeared to be emanating from the sides of Maud and Wilma. Flapjack jumped to his feet first and slowly moved his hand closer to the grid, then touched and pushed.

“Nothing,” he said, “but I can't put my hand through it.” By now, everyone was on their feet and running hands and fingers over the light fence now surrounding them.

“Be patient.” cautioned Maud. “The surrogate will return soon.”

...

“This is Sheriff's Deputy James Greer filing an interim report on the investigation of the shooting of Dr. Edward Renfro. This is a summary of findings and raw data to be collated into a final report at the conclusion of this investigation.” Greer was a little nervous and switched the com-link recorder off.

Helen, the dispatcher was looking on as Greer had requested. She had helped many of the deputies and the sheriff as well with their reports. Greer had paused and looked up at Helen for her approval to continue, which she gave with a nod and a blink, adding “The raw data qualifier is very important.”

Greer turned the recorder on and continued. “Park Police Chief Colonel Rodney Dugan was found dead where we believe the shooter was located behind the Renfro house. We need a coroners report but it looks like he suffocated. Next to him was an Eagle Eye blaster rifle with a sniper scope that had been zeroed to closely match the distance to the Renfro home.” Greer paused again looking up at Helen and only continued when she nodded her approval. “Receiver scratches on an exploded power slide matched those left on a test slide by the rifle found next to Dugan. That's a five by five point match on the slide markings.”

“This next part gets tricky Helen.” Greer said as he looked her way after pausing.

“Just take your time, say it. You can always clean it up in the final.” she said and that seemed to calm Greer.

“A security camera recording taken at Dugan's home the night before showed a man, er, person wearing a cloak and hood assaulting Dugan when he answered his door. See my

previous interim report for details of the assault on Dugan. An interior camera picked up a picture and audio that strongly suggests a rifle that was taken from Dugan's home was the same found next to his body.” Again Greer paused, looked at Helen and said “I didn't want to repeat all that detail again.”

“You did fine referring to the earlier report.” she replied, giving Greer a reassuring and rewarding smile. “That was a good catch on the word person, but to tell the truth, I think that was a woman by the way she moved.” Greer took that in and would let it stay on the interim report.

“Scanner results showed scandium dust and calcium residue on three of the seven Park Police uniforms taken at the hospital. Two have already confessed to murdering the four miners and implicated Dugan and Spangle. The other Park Police officer has asked for a lawyer. Spangle was arrested this morning on suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder.” Greer paused now to think, not solicit Helen's approval.

“We have no leads on who assaulted and murdered Dugan. I questioned Mary Lou Ren, uh, Oren and she had an alibi. She was working that night and plenty of people saw her. I have no other leads, no idea who would, could or would want to do in Dugan.” Greer ended with a tone of dejection but Helen leaned over and gave him an enthusiastic pat on the back.

“I wouldn't worry about it Jimmy.” Helen said with a comforting and sure voice. “We have a seizure order on four containers Spangle put on the Comstock and I'll bet his uh, rock samples are scandium ore ready for processing. I think you'll have this all wrapped up before Sheriff Martin returns, except for maybe who did in Dugan.”

...
“I think you did very well Alta.” Martin offered as Alta banged her fists on the light fence. “This is only temporary. You threw them quite a surprise and a real challenge to their problem solving abilities, such as they are.” Everyone in the group shared Alta's anger at being penned but all added to the

encouragement expressed by Martin.

Flapjack was more pragmatic and accepting of the circumstances. "As long as they have coffee and give me an ashtray, I'll wait to hear what the head honcho has to say." That eased tensions and everyone returned to their seats, reconciled to the fact they really had no choice but to wait. As they were sitting and chattering, the light fence disappeared and the holograph of the surrogate returned.

"We have verified all the essential details of your testimony Altaira," the surrogate said. "The Krell home planet was destroyed and observed by two outposts in the Altair star system. There has been no evidence for the existence of any living Krell for the past 200,000 years. The correlation of this fact with the completion of the great Krell project is sufficiently high to accept as fact." The surrogate paused as he looked at Adams.

Adams started to stand to say something but Alta grabbed his arm and pulled him back to his seat. He looked down at her as she was tugging and saw she was shaking her head. She pulled him closer and said in a near whisper "Did you hear that? The surrogate said testimony. This is a trial. Don't say anything until the surrogate is finished."

When Adams took his seat, the surrogate continued. "We find there was no criminal act or breach of treaty on the part of Ambassador Adams. We are indebted to the Ambassador for eliminating a destructive force on the Krell home world."

There was a general feeling of relief and contentment in the group now that the surrogate had spoken. "That's a not guilty by my account!" Flapjack said loudly as the murmuring of the group rose, and then started to fall.

The surrogate paused to allow the interruption and then continued with "While we consider Altaira as Krell, she is not a qualified authority to give direction and she is not capable of becoming a qualified authority. She is the last of her kind and there will be no Krell descendents."

Adams began to rise again and this time shrugged off

Alta's effort to stop him. "I don't know anything about Krell law but it seems to me that you owed us some explanation of what you were doing. You should also explain what else you are doing and allow us time to prepare our side and make our presentation." Adams looked around and got a look of approval from everyone.

"You are right Mr. Ambassador," the surrogate said, "you don't know anything about Krell law. There are facts we accept as inputs to a process. The process determined that of all possible scenarios we analyzed, your actions produced the greatest benefit or in this case, caused the least harm."

Adams wanted to argue but didn't know what to argue. The surrogate gave him time to speak but he had no words to speak and meekly sat down.

The surrogate, satisfied that all eyes were on him, continued. "With the Krell home planet destroyed, with no living Krell in existence and no future generations of Krell, outposts serve no purpose. There is not a single control process concerning a purposeless existence. Consequently, all Krell outposts will be discontinued and dismantled." With that, the holographic image shut down and the surrogate was gone.

"Whoa!" Flapjack yelled as he jumped out of his seat. "What the heck does that mean, discontinued, dismantled?"

To everyone's surprise, Maud turned toward Flapjack and began to speak. "It will not affect you but you must vacate the outpost before support systems are discontinued. You have eight hours and 20 minutes."

Now Alta jumped to her feet and approached Maud. "Maud, what if we don't leave? Explain what is going to happen."

"You will be incapacitated and removed from the outpost." Maud replied. "In 19 plus minutes, a series of 12 crystals will be played in a specific sequence to instruct the microbial robots, you call them MAMBEs, to begin the shutdown and dismantling of all equipment in the outpost. Every non-

structural physical element will be returned to an elemental or chemically stable state.”

Randall and Lee were both up now and yelling at Maud. “Do you have any idea how much technology you are destroying?” Randall asked, his anger at a flashpoint considering the magnitude of the loss. Lee stopped talking at this point, and everyone waited for Maud to respond.

“By treaty, the Garon are not to receive any Krell technology unless specifically authorized by a qualified living Krell. That will never happen and the surrogates polled came to the conclusion the technology should be destroyed to guarantee treaty compliance. When analytically coupled with a purposeless existence, the scenario analyzer dictated this course of action.”

“Alta, we have to stop them.” Adams said as the group now turned its attention to Alta. “The scientific loss would be immeasurable. Think of the good the MAMBE technology alone could do for humanity.” Other voices joined Adams urging Alta to intervene if at all possible. “Is there anything we can salvage?” Adams asked. The only silent voice was Aunt Sheila who stood in the background and gently shook her head. Martin saw Sheila as well and he too fell silent.

“Maybe.” Alta answered as she remained focused on her aunt's eyes. “They may consent to protect me if they believed there was a threat. That isn't exactly access to technology but it could be.” Alta was still staring at her aunt but she was motioning with her eyes to look at her uncle. She turned her attention to Martin but there was nothing special about his expression. “Maybe.” Alta repeated quietly.

“Maud, tell me what happened in the canyon that caused the robots to respond.” came an order from Alta.

“A violation of Krell law.” replied Maud and an instant later her response learning algorithm kicked in and she added “Trespass and murders. The offenders were incapacitated and held for repatriation as required by treaty.”

“As I thought John.” Alta said as she turned toward Adams

at her side. "I didn't trigger the Krell distress signal when we got here. It had already been triggered and they were warning me of the danger. Clean up in progress they said. You understand?" Adams nodded.

"Maud." Alta shouted, "I am in imminent danger again. There is a Garon ship en-route to this colony. They will take me captive and hold me for observation and experimentation. They want to know about the Krell. They could do me physical harm if they attempt to remove MAMBEs from my brain. I need protection." Alta didn't stop to think or plan what she would say. If she simply expressed her concerns, they would be analyzed as truthful statements, that is as actionable facts for the surrogates to analyze.

It was very faint but a grinding sound could be heard emanating from Maud. "The surrogate is considering your facts." Maud's use of the word facts was reassuring.

"Alta, let's make use of this time and have Maud and Wilma show us some areas of the outpost, if they will." said Adams, preferring to do something for what might be a considerable time before the surrogates responded.

"You heard him Maud, Wilma." Alta said. "Lets get the platforms and start moving. Ambassador Adams will tell you where we need to go,"

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Adams relied mostly on the memory of others to select the areas that would be visited. Lee recalled seeing the nuclear assembly area on the outpost image and asked they start there. The two platforms in tow by Maud and Wilma were guided through a series of tunnels and one elevator until they reached a large chamber with a row of tanks, various pumps, pipes, valves, conveyors and what appeared to be heavily insulated coils encircling the tanks.

Lee requested Maud explain the operation, and to everyone's surprise she did. "Raw materials consisting of water, sand and several types of mine tailings are introduced into one or more tanks. Microbial robots are selected from

storage tanks on an upper level and introduced into the mix. The tank contents are energized and the program instructions are played through audio emitter probes in the tanks. When completed, the microbial robots are returned to storage, unused raw materials are removed and the finished material is extracted from the tank through the end access ports.”

“Could you give us a short demonstration?” asked Randall. “Can you make several pounds of gallium?”

“Your energy quota will allow me to make 200 grams only. Is that sufficient?” asked Maud.

“Sure.” replied Randall, and almost immediately followed the sound of pumps starting, screw conveyors running, valves opening and then closing, a power surge as the coils were energized and the barely audible sound of Krell music. Both Lee and Randall were making mental notes about the arrangement of the equipment but were at a loss on how it all worked. It was obviously following a program in addition to the Krell music, which as they understood, only affected the MAMBEs.

It didn't take long before the Krell music stopped and the sound of valves, motors and conveyors operating filled the large chamber again. Wilma moved to the end of one tank where a large coupling had been fitted and equipped with an access port. Wilma removed a silvery ingot and handed it to Lee saying “200 grams of gallium, 100 percent pure, as requested.”

“It looks to me like the tanks are dedicated to specific materials based on corrosion resistance requirements.” said Flapjack, stunning everyone in the party except Martin and Sheila. “That looks like ordinary carbon steel but I'll bet it's glass lined and used for producing halogens.”

“Flapjack, how do you know that?” asked Randall.

“Uh...” Flapjack hesitated, slapping himself as a reminder to say less. “Just from being around mining I guess. It makes sense doesn't it? They make everything here, all kinds of stuff. If they need large amounts or compounds, they combine

it somewhere else. Right?” Martin gave Flapjack a smile but the forty-niner was uncertain that he had revealed more about himself than he cared to reveal.

It passed as Randall said “OK, Maud, how about a look at atomic assembly?” Just then, Krell music could be heard playing throughout the chamber. “What’s that? Making something?”

“No.” replied Maud. “That is the first sequence program instruction for cessation.”

“Wait.” Alta said frantically. “I thought the surrogates would consider my request first.”

“Don’t be alarmed Miss Alta.” Maud responded. “That is the initializing song as you might call it. It prepares microbial robots for activation. It only affects the space port operation.”

“Space port?” Adams blurted out with evident surprise in his voice. “What space port?”

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The Krell outpost did not rely on any single computer. In fact, most were triplicated and always in hot standby mode. The hardware was compartmented primarily to facilitate upgrades and repairs, but also to provide physical protection and risk separation. A Krell computer installation was often underground and could be up to 5 kilometers in length though only 10 to 15 meters in width. The surrogate was usually housed in a centrally located cabinet with no apparent connections to any other equipment. The Krell had somehow managed power transmission without the requirement of a physical conduit. Computer communication was no different.

The surrogates were humming today and the laser filament indicators showed an extraordinary commitment of resources to a particular problem. Communication links had been established to all outposts as a collective effort was demanded for the question at hand. To what extent should an outpost commit to the defense of an inherently flawed Krell incapable of perpetuating the species? What was the risk the Garon might take advantage of this situation? What conditions could

the robots place on a living Krell in order to fulfill the request for protection? Alta had matured beyond childhood but not to adulthood. Confining her to the outpost was not an option, but neither was allowing her to roam without some form of guardianship.

Outpost discontinuance and dismantling would only proceed to the ready stage where it was still possible for a reversal. The surrogates were running billions of variables in millions of scenarios across the galaxy but even that was not enough to resolve the problem. Additional computers that had been removed from service thousands of years earlier were pressed into service as tetragram after tetragram was allocated to the task.

Of the 20 outpost centers on Barnard's, six had large scale computer installations with four chambers each measuring three kilometers by 14 meters wide. These would be considered vintage machines from 600,000 years earlier and coinciding with the technology discoveries that gave birth to Maud and her series of robots.

Despite the age, these machines were far more advanced than anything operated by humans. A single photonic tetragram from a Krell computer contained more memory than all of the memory of every device located on Barnard's, including the systems on ships docked at the space port. The Krell computers on Barnard's could boast over 100 million such tetragrams and easily ten times that number off line but serviceable.

But grind on they did, 437 Krell outposts working in parallel on a single problem. A solution had been found. The Krell music throughout the outpost on Barnard's stopped. Maud informed her party the surrogate would see them, in the Chamber of Audiences.

Chapter 28 Pillow Talk

Flapjack, despite his interest and being invited as an integral part of exploring the Krell outpost was consumed with other concerns. Dr. Renfro was recovering but had a minor setback in a bout with pneumonia. He knew Mary Lou was alone in the house where her father had been shot. Flapjack could only wonder how that felt. He had been so involved with Martin and the search for the missing miners he had little time for other concerns. Thinking about his dead friend snapped him to a perspective about what Mary Lou must be experiencing.

The explorers could do without him for a few days. He didn't want to presume that Mary Lou could not do without him. They were both strong and each could live without the other. What he accepted was they had both made a conscious decision that life was better with each other than without, especially when facing emotional burdens such as Mary Lou was experiencing now. He pushed the rover as fast as he could on the road to Barnardsville, only slowing when coming dangerously close to the shoulder, or worse, a drainage ditch. He wanted to get to Mary Lou fast, but preferably more alive than dead.

He swung the rover up the driveway to the Renfro house and fishtailed wildly on the gravel before coming to a hard and skidding stop at the front entrance. He had called Mary Lou before hand and in just a single beep of the horn, she emerged from the front door with a small travel bag in one hand and her shoes in the other. Before she entered the rover, she flung the bag and shoes in back and jumped into the front seat, practically attacking Flapjack where he sat. He didn't resist and returned the hugging, mauling embrace.

“We're really going to do this?” Mary Lou asked, panting from her brief sprint to the rover.

Flapjack took her shoulders and pushed back slightly to get a good look into her eyes. “I see Julius, my best friend and how happy he is with Sheila. I see J. J. Adams and how happy he is with Alta. Damn it, makes me jealous that I could be happy with you and have just been stubborn enough not to ask. I used your father's approval as a dodge but he gave it so I have no excuse. I want no excuse, no further delay. Not several months waiting, but now.”

Mary Lou giggled and pulled Flapjack closer to her, giving him a devilish eye and whispering “Get over here you dirty old man.” He did and backed away once more while hitting the accelerator to make some engine noise as a distraction.

“I'm sorry I asked you over the phone. It wasn't supposed to be that way but I knew then I wanted nothing more in the world than to be with you. I didn't want to wait any longer.” Flapjack betrayed the image of the hardened and cynical miner he played so skillfully but Mary Lou kept quiet as she watched that solitary tear drop from his eye and onto his cheek, rolling down and then losing itself in the gray stubble on his face.

“Reverend Holland is waiting for us.” Mary Lou said as she released her hold on Flapjack.

Flapjack took a longing look, smiled and yelled “Sweetheart, get me to the church on time!” and hit the accelerator hard, kicking up dust, dirt and gravel as the rover fishtailed down the driveway. She could barely hear what Flapjack said but it sounded like “It's the Ambassador Suite tonight darling!”

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“Why so grim?” Sheila asked as she slipped under the sheet and wiggled closer to Julius.

“Because I can't keep my hands off you once I get started, but there is something that has to be done first.” Julius sounded calm but there was a slight hint of trouble in his voice. He was lying on his left side and propped up on his

elbow with a look that said desire, but held back the passion.

“I thought you quit.” he said to Sheila, which stopped her from moving closer to him and causing her to look down at the pillow under her right arm.

She didn't want to face him, not yet. She knew what was coming. “You heard from Jimmy Greer?” she asked, fairly certain of the answer.

“Yeah, and he sent pictures too.” he replied, turning his head up to look away from his wife and at the ceiling. “There is only one person I know on this colony that can handle a knife with that skill. Hell, it's a signature just as sure as if you had written it out with a pen on paper. Stitch mark cuts on both legs with precision that a surgeon would be hard pressed to match. I remember the first time I saw that on Cron, and I was thankful someone knew how to get those agents to talk and save so many lives.”

“How foolish of me.” Sheila said as tears welled up and started dropping on the pillow case.

“No Sheila.” Julius said as he turned his gaze from the ceiling to Sheila, placing his right hand on her shoulder. She was lying motionless and quietly sobbing. “Perhaps something else but not foolish at all.” Julius knew that Sheila thought of Mary Lou as her daughter, even though the 12 year old had a mother when they first met. “The guy that tortured and killed Mary Lou's mother had it coming. For her to go through that agony again, well, it breaks my heart too. That poor girl.”

With that, Julius pulled Sheila closer. “I'm sure your deed had everything to do with the confessions Greer got from the Park Police. I'll bet they talked up a storm when they heard about their boss getting his and the way he got it.”

Sheila crept closer, putting her chin on Julius's chest and looking up into his face. Her tears had stopped for the moment but her eyes were red and wet. “Why did I ever take that job in the war? Something tears at me that can't stand injustice. I cried for that girl and her father twice, each time

because I feared some rotten bastard was going to get away with hurting them.”

“I know you did,” Julius said softly with a sympathetic voice adding “and I know you would do it again if justice demanded, but please, try not to do anything if the law can do it. OK?”

“I’ll try.” Sheila said as she climbed on Julius and pressed her lips against his. Julius would never tell her but he had a deep respect for her sense of justice and her abilities. She didn’t have to hear it from him. She could sense it in the strength of his embrace and the expression of happiness written across his face. He was a content man in love with a woman he admired. Of that, she was certain. “No Mr. Martin, I’m not going to let you sleep tonight.” she thought to herself.

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“Alta, we need to talk. Would you send them away please. Its weird having them around all the time, especially here and now.” John said as he fixed his stare on Maud and Wilma.

Alta let out a loud laugh and said “After what they just saw, what’s the point of sending them out now?”

“Well, I wanted to make sure they didn’t think I was assaulting you, OK?” pleaded John as Alta turned from the patio of the master bedroom and started toward him.

Alta was laughing harder now and giving John a very devilish look. “But you were assaulting me commander, and just the right way to.” she giggled before turning to Maud and Wilma. “You two, out!” she said. The two robots turned, opened the double doors and floated away with the doors closing behind them. “Is that better Mr. Adams?”

“I could have ignored them as furniture but you had them paint those big eyes on their shells that always look like they are staring at you.” John hesitated but what he was saying was partly linked to what he wanted to discuss with Alta. “I think you have a slight touch of exhibitionism, probably part of being an only child and daddy having his nose always buried in his work.”

With that, Alta crossed her arms and turned to face him asking “What do you mean by that Mr. Adams? What's the problem?”

“Other people want things too Alta. You like to be the center of attention all the time. Other people want attention as well, but they don't want it constantly and only when they have something they believe is important to say.” Adams sat in bed looking at his new bride and could not stay angry with her long. He would relent and it served him right if she reverted back to that same behavior.

But Alta was changing and the major influence on her now was her Aunt Sheila. Alta was wise enough to realize this and told John “I am trying and I think I have a great role model to follow.”

“Sheila,” John responded, “yes, she is a great role model, you couldn't meet a more considerate and kind woman, but also strong in character and principles. Modest as well.”

“I know you're disappointed with what we got from the surrogate darling, but I thought we did well under the circumstances.” Alta said as she moved to the foot of the bed and stood there looking at John, sitting with several pillows propped up behind his back. “I did get Maud and Wilma and all the repair fluid we need for them and Robby. You get to continue touring the outpost and I still have limited access to the educator, at least for a while.”

With that, Alta jumped up on the bed and started jumping and bouncing Adams around like a rag doll. “Do you surrender?” she demanded in a stern voice.

“Yes, yes,” John replied, “just get down here and show me some of that prisoner abuse you have in mind.”

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“Skipper, I have a lock on the beacon but that looks like a forest down there.” said Crewman Clary as he checked the astro-navigator console and landing coordinates for a match.

“Set her down Clary, Ambassador Adams assures me we have landing clearance. We should drop below the holograph

at 400 meters.” Lieutenant Wallace reported as the propulsion driver sound steadied. “Prepare to land, landing alert on, set pad feelers and lock weapons down.” The crew was getting accustomed to Wallace's style of order rattling and always punctuated his drawn out pauses with an aye aye.

The coordinates were precise and very little adjustment was required after the ship pierced the veil of the holograph. The pad feelers placed the ship dead center on the designated landing pad. The main view plate was operative but did not do the Krell space port justice because of several obstacles, believed to be cargo and equipment booms that were blocking the view. “I'm puzzled Mr. Adams.” said Wallace as he moved for a closer look at the main view plate. “It looks like this landing pad was specifically designed for this cruiser. How is that possible?”

“It was designed for this cruiser Mr. Wallace, courtesy of the Krell surrogate and his robots.” answered Adams. “It was their way of rolling out the red carpet. They built it last night. They do that kind of thing here.”

By the time Adams, Randal and Lee reached the ground, Maud had a transport platform fabricated and ready. It was a short float to the space port control center where two caretaker robots were posted at the two doors of the center with two more inside the elevated tower like structure. The entire space port was visible through wide expanses of glass completely wrapping the control center. Adams got his bearings by spotting C-57-D first. The space port was idle since the Krell had suspended mining and any further need to visit Barnard's. The ships that were there were of great interest to Adams. The only question was would his questions be answered.

The first inquiry Adams made concerned a large structure about 200 meters from the control center. The structure had a familiar dull black color like Krell metal and an exoskeleton frame that resembled a web of large diameter pipes in a diamond array. Adams directed his questions to Maud and as long as he didn't probe into details of technology, specifically

implementation, she answered most everything he asked.

The structure was a ship, a freighter in fact with an unpronounceable Krell name. Maud translated it to Mule. Why not, thought Adams. The freighter was a rectangular prism with a top mounted command and control module that housed the power and propulsion mechanisms. The ship wasn't pretty and would never win any Earth design awards but it was extremely functional and designed for space flight, not atmospheric aerobatics. Maud gave the beam as 200 meters, the depth as 120 meters and the length as 600 meters.

Its principle use was taking refined metals to Altair 4 and returning empty. It would accommodate some passengers for personnel rotation at the outpost. The use of atomic level MAMBEs made ore refining simple and eliminated the need for any supplies, provided the Krell music for fabrication was available.

While the speed was not classified, it had to be converted to Earth units. The freighter could traverse 10 light years in 10 weeks, but that was deceiving as Adams would learn. Krell ships were driven by constant acceleration propulsion drives. Consequently, it would take 14.14 weeks to travel 20 light years, 17.32 weeks to travel 30 light years and so on. Adams derived the formula but it was purely of academic interest to determine the travel capabilities of the Krell. He calculated in his head that for the time it took him to reach Altair 4 in C-57-D, a Krell ship could have traveled almost 300 light years.

The Krell had a singular acceleration limit for all ships and it was the same regardless of size, shape, or purpose. It was as fast as their knowledge of physics would permit.

A much smaller twin of the freighter Mule was spotted but with a strange configuration of attachments. It was referred as an explorer type vessel used to chart and start eco-forming on suitable planets. It was equipped for very long term missions, often lasting five to seven years. In many respects, the UP's primitive method of eco-forming closely resembled the basic idea employed by the Krell. Adams was somewhat surprised

to learn the Krell did not use MAMBEs for eco-forming. When asked, Maud indicated the cost was prohibitive. Adams did not press the point but it was the first time he had heard any mention of 'cost' for using Krell technology, other than the limit placed on the request for gallium during the synthesizer demonstration. This would require targeted research. What were the costs, what were the limits and how were these measured? Obviously, Krell power had its limits, but what were they?

In a size range between the explorer and freighter was a colony ship. The major feature that distinguished it from the explorer was passenger space. The ship could accommodate up to 400 settlers and all the materials they needed to build magma power taps and synthesis machines, both nuclear and atomic. A colony could be up and running in a matter of a few days using the ship for shelter until the power core was sunk and building materials could be produced. The earlier Krell had it much rougher but atomic level assembly by MAMBEs changed colonization radically.

In the distance was the only other type of ship based at the Barnard's space port, a warship. A magnification camera revealed the vessel resembled a hexagonal prism about 24 meters high and 140 meters across opposite vertices. The ship had a smooth plate hull with a few protruding structures on the side, top and bottom faces. The vessel had a tripod arrangement of gangways that also served as landing gear, in some ways resembling C-57-D in appearance but without the central cylindrical foot.

The warship's interstellar speed was identical to that of the other ships. In sub-light travel however, the warship had an extremely wide performance envelope for velocity, acceleration and maneuver. One item of great interest to Adams was communication. Maud informed him the ship had continuous faster-than-light communication. The Krell had conquered the mass to space to power limitations that hamstrung UP space craft.

The warship boasted hull armor of 8 inches of Krell metal and surface contour tracing energy shields. There was nothing in the UP arsenal that could harm this ship. It was doubtful the ship could even be hit due to the array of defensive measures employed. The ship required a crew of 36 assuming a regular rotation of 8 hour tours. Unfortunately, Adams was at a loss to compare human versus Krell crewing requirements. Could one Krell do the job of two humans, or 1.4 humans, or what?

When it came to details of the propulsion drivers, power units, weapons systems and defensive measures, Maud was not only silent but harsh in her refusal to answer. She cautioned Adams that such details were classified and would say nothing more. When asked about touring the interior of any ships, Maud expressed a willingness to cooperate. Why not, thought Adams. Looking might be interesting but of very little value other than satisfying his curiosity. Adams was planning an itinerary for numerous return trips. He would save an inspection of the warship interior for later.

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Alta was determined to get back to the educator and learn as much as she could about the Krell sciences and law. The concession she and Adams got from the surrogate would allow limited use of the educator concerning technology but unlimited use concerning history, law and culture. She was hoping to learn enough to effectively present a case for greater access and to stop dismantling of the Krell outposts.

The educator was one of the items scheduled for dismantling. While she had some access to the Krell libraries through the robots, including Robby, the educator made navigation much simpler even though robot assistance was required.

Alta and Adams would have to work out some kind of schedule that considered Randall and Lee, use of the ship and possible help from Dr. Renfro on his recovery. Martin, Sheila, Flapjack and Mary Lou were eager to return to their normal

lives but were agreeable to periodically assist with the exploration of the outpost if requested.

While Alta, Sheila, Martin and Robby worked at the educator in the Krell lab, Flapjack borrowed Wilma to take Mary Lou on a tour of those areas of the outpost that had been explored.

It was an inexplicable and sudden urge that gripped Alta to sleep. She apologized and told everyone she had to return to the Ambassador Suite. She didn't mention she had been awake most of the night but she knew that was not the cause of this compelling desire to sleep now. Shelia and Martin agreed to walk her back to the suite upon seeing her groggy condition.

Alta was now being supported by Sheila on one side and Julius on the other as they left the lab and started down the corridor. Robby brought up the rear.

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Sheila and Martin helped Alta into the bed, dimmed the lights and darkened the windows and patio doors. Satisfied she was sleeping soundly, they both adjourned to the common space and the dining area near the pool.

“You didn't make time for us last night.” the Teacher said as she and the other three Krell came into view. “We thought after hearing the surrogate's decision, you would want to consult with us. Were you that distracted by other concerns?”

The way the Krell dream visitors confronted her in a semi-circle made Alta feel like the target of an inquisition. Distracted she thought, that's how they put it? “To put it honestly, I am suffering from Krell fatigue. I want this work to take its place as part of a routine, not an all consuming obsession.”

“But time is running out.” the Historian said. “When the cruiser from Earth arrives, the surrogates will observe and if satisfied you are safe, they will dismantle this outpost and every other outpost in the galaxy. Our legacy will die. Our culture will be an historical footnote. It is unsettling that our

destiny will no longer be in our hands.”

Alta was puzzled now. “What do you expect of me?” she asked.

“You must provide proof to the surrogates that you require protection. You must demonstrate that the Garon from Earth are a constant threat to your survival and a menace to your well being and dignity as a Krell.” the Philosopher said.

“Do you want me to deliberately provoke an attack?” Alta asked, disbelieving what she was hearing.

“We leave the method to you but you must understand that our legacy and the Garon future depend on preserving all of the Krell outposts and the vast store of knowledge they contain. You do whatever is necessary to reverse the surrogates' decision.” said the Teacher with a grim and measured tone. “Remember that a great deal of Krell technology of great promise to the Garon is at risk. Do this for the Krell and the Garon!”

“I need time to think about this” Alta responded with a wavering voice of uncertainty. “I just want to go home now.”

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“Mr. Wallace, permission to come aboard?” Adams requested from the base of the gangway.

“Permission granted Mr. Ambassador” replied Wallace, then adding “I see we have some additional passengers?”

“Yes Mr. Wallace. You know Maud and Wilma. They will escort Mrs. Adams after they stow their gear.” said Adams as he motioned for the human passengers to proceed and board the ship.

“Very well Mr. Ambassador and welcome back.” Wallace went about preparing the ship for lift off as the passengers, including three robots ascended the gangway with baggage in tow.

“You are right Alta.” Adams said as she marched up the gangway ahead of him. “This is like going home and it feels good to take a break. We have to find a house of course. We also have to prepare for the arrival of Commodore Savorkian.

I'm not sure how that will work out.”

Prepare indeed Alta was thinking. At least she had three months to think and perhaps get some advice from Aunt Sheila. Yes, Aunt Sheila could help her do the right thing.

“Welcome aboard Mrs. Adams.” It was Cookie who was all smiles and offering the guests cocktails. “Just some ancient rocket bourbon refreshments we had left but it's great stuff. Need to get Robby to make some more.”

“I'll drink to that.” said Alta as she thought of all the good that could be done if the Krell MAMBES and synthesizers could be preserved. She was certain that ancient rocket bourbon was a mere teaser of what could be made to benefit humans.

Chapter 29 Countdown

“I think it would be easier if we worked on a less formal basis, at least in the field.” Adams said as Randall forgot his status for a moment and snapped to attention. “That isn't necessary, so you call me John and I'll call you Vince when we are not attending an official state function. OK Vince?”

“Yes sir, uh, yes John” replied Randall.

“This is a science investigation and not a military operation. We need to be more open and expressive in this particular case. You say what you're thinking and I'll do the same and let's thrash out these discoveries.” It had taken nearly three months for Adams to adjust to a civilian mindset on this mission. “Maud, power up please.”

The sound of the power generator coming on line startled Randall who was seeing the interior of the Krell warship for the first time. When the lights were brought up to nominal power he was completely overwhelmed by what he saw. The main deck was at the lowest level and the ship from this vantage point resembled a building with an eight story circular atrium. The central core of the ship tapered as it rose and terminated in what appeared to be an extensible cylinder. The core at the main deck was only six meters in diameter and ringed with 4 evenly spaced open elevator tubes.

Randall was taking it in but had to ask “Sir, uh, I mean John, this is crewed by 12 men per watch? How can they run a ship this large?”

“Feel free to ask Maud anything you want. If it is out of bounds per our agreement with the surrogate, she'll let you know.” Encouraging Randall to use Maud was one the days objectives and Adams was sure they would both benefit from hearing her answers to their questions. “I know this answer

and it is that each crew member, excluding the officers, commands three robots. The officers, of which there are three per watch, have one robot each. Put the crew at general quarters and everything increases 50 percent.”

“I’m just having trouble getting over the fact she turned on the power for you. Why did she do that?” Randall asked as he walked around the perimeter of the main deck, examining the work stations as he moved.

“If it does no harm, she usually does what I ask, and that is the way I figure it.” Adams answered. “I have asked her to take the ship up and she refused, giving me 101 reasons why she couldn’t, starting with an inadequate crew and ending with lack of clearance when I told her to stop. By the way, have you seen anything that even closely resembles...” Adams was saying when the chirping com-link interrupted. “Amber light. I’ll try outside but take a good look around. Find the head.”

About half way down the gangway the signal indicator turned green and Adams answered “Adams here, what have you got?”

“Mr. Ambassador, this is Barnard’s Port Authority Communications. We have an urgent for your eyes only message for you from State.” came an unfamiliar voice.

“I don’t have the decryption gear or code for State so send a response and let them know.” Adams responded, and then waited for a reply.

“Will do Mr. Ambassador, out.”

No sooner had the signal ended when the com-link chirped again, but this time it was identified as Wallace. “Yes Mr. Wallace. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Adams, I just received an urgent and for my eyes only message from fleet. Admiral Seitgart has been relieved of command and Secretary of State Bern has resigned.” said Wallace, pausing only briefly to let that sink in. “I have orders to enforce strict lock-down, to take Alta into custody and to place you under arrest.”

“That is a problem Mr. Wallace.” Adams replied quite

calmly considering what he was told.

“I understand Mr. Adams,” Wallace responded and added “and your recommendation sir?”

“I would advise you leave Alta alone for your own protection. You saw Wilma but don't let that pink paint job and big kiddie eyes fool you. If Wilma thinks it necessary, she will kill anyone that tries to harm Alta.” Adams waited and got an eye eye from Wallace. “On that other matter, I suppose you will have to arrest me when I reach the ship. It's the only way I know I can get home from here. I'll be waiting for you at the gangway.”

“I hope you have something better than that in mind Mr. Adams.” came the response from Wallace.

“I hope so too. Out.” Adams spoke into the com-link then yelled out “Vince, Maud, time to go, now!”

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“I should have asked for your advice weeks ago. I'm sorry I put it off and that I'm bringing my problem to you now but I'm desperate.” Alta said, clearly nervous and perhaps slightly confused. Sheila listened patiently as she, Mary Lou and Alta sat on the patio in the lengthening shadows of the Barnard's sunset. “I haven't said anything to John and I think that may have been a mistake.”

“Before we make any judgments like that Alta, don't you think you should tell us the problem?” asked Sheila as both she and Mary Lou leaned forward to better hear Alta, whose voice was beginning to falter.

“It's the Krell in my dreams, every night telling me I have to make sure the surrogates maintain my protection and not destroy any of the outposts. They seem to think if I'm attacked by the party coming here from Earth, that will make the surrogates reconsider their decision.” Alta gave a deep sigh and leaned back in her chair with a dejected look. “They tell me I should do this for the good of the Krell and the Garon.”

“That's the real issue, isn't it? For whose good will this be?” Sheila asked and continued “Whether getting yourself

attacked will work or not we can't tell, but if it does work, is getting the technology what you want?" Sheila sat back while looking at her niece whose eyes were looking down at her hands, clasped in her lap. She glanced at Mary Lou and could see she had something to say but was reluctant to interrupt. "What is it Mary Lou?"

"The MAMBEs could be very good. Since I left my job and started working with my father, we have made a lot of discoveries about the MAMBEs but not enough to use them, make them or control them." Mary Lou looked at Sheila for some recognition before she continued. A nod from Sheila was her encouragement. "My father told me he believes MAMBEs cleared the heavy metal poisoning of the Park Police officers. That was certainly good but he also told me about the goo that was found on the cruiser, the organisms that had attached to the core cooling coils and the acid factories of those organisms. Definitely bad. The technology is not the problem as I see it. It is who uses it and that is where you have little control against a determined person."

That had Alta nodding and looking up. She believed much the same thing and told Sheila and Mary Lou, but she also said it was good to hear that someone else had the same thought independently. Alta expressed her concern that the Krell dream visitors may be exercising more influence than she knew. They had certainly contributed to her indecision by planting a thought that was not her own.

"Let's back up for a moment and play out the scenario." Sheila said, sitting up straight now and determined to at least provide some problem solving guidance. "The UP knows about your brain from the scans but not necessarily about the MAMBEs, except those in the goo. The Science Division will want you and there is no UP law, no constitution and no court that will stop them. All they have to do is scream security and that's it. Maud and Wilma may be able to stop them. They want Robby too, and again Maud and Wilma may be able to stop them. My point is you don't have to do anything and they

will come for you.”

Alta was surprised now and asked “You knew this but you didn't say anything?” Alta's look turned to disappointment bordering on bewilderment.

“No Alta, I am making an educated guess based on what I know about the UP.” Sheila replied with great confidence, trying to reassure her niece this was not a hopeless or helpless situation. “You can't tell anyone what I am going to tell you now. No one! Is that understood? Promise, please.”

That caught both Alta and Mary Lou by surprise. What was Aunt Sheila's great secret? But promise they did and leaned toward her to hear what she had to say.

“Your Uncle and I were both on the side of the colonists in the Cron war, only he didn't exactly know what I did until much later. I was a spy, a double agent of all things. The UP thought I was working for them as a spy to spy on the colonists. The UP had no qualms about assassinating colonial leaders or sacrificing their own people to give an agent credibility.” Sheila paused, noting that both Alta and Mary Lou were staring at her open mouthed with wide open eyes. “Catching flies ladies?”

That snapped them back for a moment as Sheila continued. “The UP ordered me to kill certain UP leaders and officials to establish my credibility with the colonials. The targets were all considered politically unreliable, that is not 100 percent behind the UP leadership.”

“So what did you do Aunt Sheila?” Alta asked.

“I killed them. It was my job with the colonials. We were fighting for our freedom and our lives. And it was the UP that came after us. We didn't go after them. Don't lose sight of my point now. There are some really bad people in the upper echelons of the UP and if they want something, there is no law or moral inhibition that will stop them.” Sheila decided to wait before saying any more. Alta needed to sift through what was said.

“All right, so you are fairly certain they will come for me

no matter what I do.” Alta said. “I’m not sure how that will affect anything. Of course I don’t want to be their little science lab project.”

“Alta, wherever the chips may fall with the surrogates is beyond your control and that of your Krell dream visitors.” Sheila said. “You may be able to convince them to make some accommodation, give us some technology, or leave some for us to explore, but ask yourself, is that what you want?”

“I’m sorry Aunt Sheila. I feel bad for having delayed this long and expecting you to give me the answer in a single evening.” Alta explained as she looked at her aunt, and then Mary Lou with a very distressed face.

“The surrogates are more inclined to listen to you than anyone else,” Sheila said, “but remember, they probably think of you as a rebellious adolescent, not that I know they had such a thing but I’ll bet they did.” Sheila seemed much more relaxed as she sat back, looking at Alta with a firm belief that whatever she decided would be for the best. “The answer is in you Alta and I’m just trying to help you pull it out.”

“I think I see what you mean.” Alta responded. “I remember my father arguing with John and Dr. Ostrow about supervising the Krell discoveries. John and Doc wanted the UP to handle it and my father thought it best he handle it. They were all wrong. Humans were not ready for the responsibility of those discoveries and no one was fit to handle it.” Sheila nodded slowly and Mary Lou leaned a bit closer. “The surrogates thanked John for destroying the planet and the horrible machine on it. I think the UP would punish him for doing that, if they knew.”

“You keep at it Alta,” Sheila said with an encouraging voice, “you’ll figure out what to do.”

Mary Lou was feeling a little guilty for what she thought was a menial contribution so she apologized. “I’m sorry Alta. This must be a tremendous burden and I’m afraid I did nothing to help you.”

“Don’t say that.” Alta snapped back. “You helped more

than you could know. My decision is about us and billions of people like us. We are the UP. The people that run the UP may like to think they are the UP and make all the decisions for us. Our talk and meeting is a reminder they are not our voices and they don't get to make all the decisions for us.”

...

Adams descended the gangway with Randall and Wallace behind him. Two Port Authority officers were waiting at the entrance to the reception area and wasted no time announcing their intentions. “Ambassador Adams, you are under arrest by order of the Science Division.” one of them said, very clearly and very loudly.

“Stand down ensign,” Wallace yelled from behind Adams, “I have placed the Ambassador under house arrest and if you want him you'll need an order from fleet, not Science Division since he is my prisoner. No one, but no one takes my prisoner.” Adams turned back to look at Wallace, flashing him a wink and a smile. “You know the rules for house arrest Mr. Ambassador. I expect you to follow them.” Now Wallace smiled as Adams marched forward and between the two Port Authority officers, then stopped about five paces beyond.

When Robby came into site, the senior ensign spoke again. “Now don't tell me that robot is under house arrest. He has to come with us.”

“You're welcome to him ensign, but you may have to ask his escorts for permission.” Wallace said and just as he finished speaking, Maud and Wilma floated down the gangway and took positions on Robby's left and right side. “These two ladies claim this robot is stolen property and they have custody under an interim agreement with the Krell outpost. Just a moment please.”

With that, Wallace walked back toward Robby and started talking to Maud and Wilma while pointing at the officers. “They're just trying to do their job ladies so I would appreciate you not killing them.” As he said that, the quiet officer moved his hand to his sidearm and Wallace warned “I wouldn't do

that son. They don't shoot to wound.” The fact is Wallace wasn't sure what the robots would do, even though Adams ordered them to disable only if necessary. But Robby knew what to do and his beam hit the blaster while it was still holstered. The officer went pale immediately and just about passed out. Wallace really took no joy from that but the demonstration had to be made. He had been in that position before and had great empathy for the young ensign. “Sorry son, I was hoping we could avoid that, so let them pass and no harm done.”

The two ensigns opened a path for Robby and his escorts, who were followed closely by Randall. They joined Adams and left the space port. “Do you need a ride Vince? You are still at the Sluice Hotel?” Adams asked Randall.

“I don't need a ride John but thank you anyway. And yes, I am still at the Sluice Hotel but plan to move after I take a leave back on Earth.” Randall replied.

The men exchanged handshakes and good byes as Maud fabricated a travel capsule and Wilma took a position at the end of the train. “Maud, Wilma, I'm sure you know the way. Let's go home.”

...

“Mr. Otomi, good to hear your voice again.” Adams said with a pleasant voice and a happy mood though it was also a disguise. Otomi returned the compliment and Adams got to his purpose. “I believe C-11-E under Commodore Savorkian is due arrive today. Can you give me an ETA?” ETAs were usually accurate within plus or minus 20 minutes on the journey from Earth to Barnard's Colony. A better fix would be available once they went sub-light.

“ETA is 11:25 sir. Shall I call you when we get a fix?” Otomi offered.

“I would greatly appreciate that Mr. Otomi and thank you as always.” Adams turned the com-link off and turned to look at Alta who had heard every word spoken. They were in their own home now, sitting on the sun porch as they usually did in

the early morning and waiting for Julius and Sheila to arrive. "Did your Krell visitors appear last night?"

Alta's mind was about a million miles away right now, or to be more precise, about 8 light years. For 19 years she had lived a most uneventful life, far from humankind and with no greater problem than waiting for star sapphires to crystallize to make the latest fashion creation crafted by Robby. That was tranquility. That was peace. That was boredom, far from what she had now. Adams saw she was deep in thought and let her be.

The tranquility Alta cherished now was the interludes that interrupted schedules, chores, obligations and similar stressful demands. Tranquility was sitting on her own patio, with her hand in John's and enjoying the view of the stars or the gas giant planet. That was not boring but exciting, romantic, rejuvenating and inspiring. "Yes, but they didn't have anything to say," she answered John without lifting her eyes from the coffee mug in front of her.

She remembered something her Aunt Sheila said that her arrival on Barnard's was just part of a longer journey that had whistle stops, stations, terminals and sidings all along the way. "Enjoy each." Aunt Sheila advised, "It's fine to like some better than others but they can all have a purpose if we want them to. Even the bad ones remind us how good the good ones truly are."

"Do you really think they are going to try to take me John?" Alta asked, but not with a worried voice. She was truly soliciting an opinion and had already reconciled herself to an outcome.

Adams had to pause and reflect because Alta never asked this question before. Don't lie to her he told himself, it will make it more difficult when the lie is revealed. "They are going to try Alta. Commodore Savorkian doesn't particularly like me so he will try to follow his orders to the letter. If he finds out you are my wife, I think he will push his orders as far as he can to cause damage. Of course, I'm going to do my best

to stop him.”

“Damage?” Alta asked but very low so Adams could not hear. He asked what she said but she looked back down at her coffee, avoiding his eyes.

The doorbell rang and Adams sprang to his feet as Alta looked up and began to rise from her chair. “I’ll get that dear, you stay.” Adams said as he quickly walked toward the front door. It was most likely Sheila and Julius and he was thankful for that. Sheila could bring sunshine to Alta. John felt a slight bit of jealousy on occasions but accepted that was just the way some women were. It wasn’t an affront to him or a shortcoming in him, but more like a bond between a mother and daughter, and that he had no problem accepting, just remembering.

“Sheila, Julius, hi and come in please. Alta’s in the sun room.” Adams gave Sheila big smile and a sigh of relief that she was there. “She’ll be happy to see you.”

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Adams put the com-link down and calmly announced “Landing Pad 7. About 33 minutes. They just went sub-light. Are you ready?”

“John, are you sure you want to go there? I would make them come here. Home field advantage you know.” Martin waited but Adams was not paying attention so he asked “John, did you hear?”

“I’m sorry Julius, yes I did hear you but you sound like you’re preparing for a shootout.” John’s voice was serious and distressed. “I don’t want that. What have you got, two deputies outside?”

Martin shook his head as he answered “What you want and what they want are two different things. They want Alta. They want Robby. You, they’ll take dead or alive. They don’t care because you’re just an officer gone bad. And yes, if I could get 20 deputies here I would. I may still do that. Do you at least have the robots posted outside? I didn’t see them driving up here?”

“No. Alta had them change their colors and decals last night. They don't look cute and friendly now. They look hostile and menacing and I don't want to provoke anything.” Adams said with a slight tremble in his voice.

“Provoke them? I think it's a little late for that my friend.” Martin was clearly annoyed now. “From what you tell me, we should expect to see six to eight colonial marines who will reduce this house to splinters and rubble if they don't get what they want. Is that what you want? That's what you'll get if you do nothing.”

“I'm sorry Julius. I have no experience with anything like this. I suspect you do so let's do it your way.” Adams looked Julius square in the eye with a look of determination. He had pictures in his mind of Alta being the subject of lab experiments, probes, surgeries and a host of other abuses in order to pry the secrets of the Krell from her, whether she had any or not. He didn't think the UP was capable of that, but they had dispatched a ship, full crew, squad of colonial marines and the officers to do just that, take his wife. He looked down and saw Julius was carrying some kind of case, probably a rifle. “What's that?” he asked.

“It's an Eagle Eye with an 8X sniper scope. Flapjack is 200 meters away hiding and has the same weapon. You ever use one?” Martin asked.

“Just for some target shooting.” Adams answered.

“Well” Martin said, “Use your blaster but set it to mil standard. I want them bleeding and hurt so they see blood, guts and fear. No clean vaporizations today. Can you instruct the robots to do the same thing, high damage setting?”

“I don't know but I'll ask.” Adams answered as Martin checked the Eagle Eye power slide setting and slung the rifle.

“Be sure to get them posted and moving and patrolling outside. Keep Robby inside as a last line of defense for Alta. Now, did you build a safe room like I told you?” Adams nodded and Martin yelled out, “Ladies, get to the safe room.”

Martin was clearly in charge, apparently relying on

experience from the Cron war. Colonial militias fought a lot of running battles against colonial marines. The militias lost in the end as the UP deployed overwhelming numbers against them and they paid dearly to win that war.

Martin started explaining the tactics to Adams. They would assume they could be attacked from any direction and needed eyes on all sides of the house. His deputies would be posted in the woods behind the house and advance only if signaled. Flapjack was the pick off man and well hidden in dense undergrowth.

Martin and Adams would roam in a circle and fire from a distance away from windows. Martin warned Adams to not fire from a window. If the marines were using hyper kinetic rounds, and they probably were, those could pass through both sides of a brick house. A wall was not cover. The plan also counted on Maud and Wilma inflicting some damage and forcing the assailants to avoid their fire. How those robots would hold up against HK rounds, Martin didn't know but he was fairly sure that Robby had practically no resistance.

Though Adams felt outclassed, he did have a few a things to add. "Savorkian should be checking for orders as soon as he lands so that will give us a little extra time. He may just waltz up here and make his demands. If he doesn't get what he wants, he'll leave and turn the operation over to his ground commander. You think the women will be all right?"

"I pity the man that comes up against Sheila. Most men seriously underestimate her and she is old school." Adams gave Martin an odd look, not understanding what he meant. "She likes projectile weapons with silencers and gravity knives. She is really good with both."

Chapter 30 Fateful Arrivals

“What the hell is going on here? Can't you people make a simple arrest!” Savorkian shouted at the four Port Authority officers standing in a line in front of him. “From here on, you report to Commander Martin. Here is my authorization and your orders. Now where the hell is that lieutenant, Wallace?” One of the Port Authority ensigns pointed to the ship on landing pad 8. “Follow me.” Savorkian barked and the ensigns jumped in a column behind him.

Wallace was descending the gangway and knew what was coming. He had done all he could to evade orders without being insubordinate but with a commodore on the ground, that was no longer possible. “You're Wallace?” Savorkian growled and Wallace nodded. “I hear you have Adams under house arrest?” Wallace nodded again. “I want him now and here's my authority to relieve you of your prisoner.”

“He's not here commodore.” Wallace snapped back. “He is under house arrest and that's where he is, home.”

Wallace got a sneer and scowl from Savorkian for that, who then did a quick about face as he started barking orders to the port authority ensigns. “You, get his address. You, get those two Park Police Helicopters ready and on pad 6. You, get three rovers over here. You, get us to the surveillance satellites.”

Commander Richard Martin was at Savorkian's side as they started toward the Port Authority Communications center. “I understand your brother is the sheriff here and has been aiding Adams and his wife. We want them both but your brother may interfere. You have any problems with that?” Savorkian asked as they walked briskly behind the lead ensign.

Without any hesitation, Commander Martin answered “No sir!”

“Good.” Savorkian barked, “Let's see what we're up against.”

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Savorkian, Commander Martin and his squad leaders were carefully studying the holographic image of the Adams house. Martin had primary responsibility for the tactical plan. “We want the wife alive so bringing the house down is out of the question. Blaster on brick can be slow but acceptable. No HKs until we know where the woman is located. If anything happens to her, I'll personally shoot whoever did it. She is the whole reason for this mission.” Martin paused to look up at his squad leaders, who also raised their heads and gave him their aye ayes. “I'd like to take Adams alive if possible but if you have to kill him in self-defense do it.”

Martin took the camera controller in hand and started scanning and zooming to various points on the image. “We know they have three robots but I can't find them. They could be inside the house but the IR can't pick them up. We'll have to dig them out. Ensign, over here.” Martin ordered and the Port Authority duty officer, who happened to be Mr. Otomi on this day, joined him at the image projector. “I need you and two more pairs of eyes to keep a watch on this, find those robots and let me know when you do. Got it?”

“Yes sir.” replied Otomi. “I'll attend to it promptly sir.” Otomi's tone was not very friendly and conveyed his discontent with the orders he received. He was never close to Adams but respected the commander as competent and concerned for the welfare of his men. He knew Sheriff Martin as a casual acquaintance and thought highly of him. His brother now giving him commands seemed so cold and rigid in comparison. He would do what he was told but he didn't have to like it.

Martin did notice Otomi's tone and gave him a cold stare. “Is there a problem Ensign Otomi?” he growled.

“No sir.” came the response from Otomi as he looked the commander straight in the eyes with a slight scowl on his face.

Commander Martin pointed to one of the sergeants and said “Your squad and the first chopper will put down here and deploy in an arc sweeping from south to west. Second squad,” Martin continued, now pointing at the other sergeant, “will land here and deploy in an arc from north to east. The commodore will take the first rover and driver and approach the house directly to see if he can persuade them to surrender. I’ll take the second rover and three PA officers and set up a killing zone in the northwest. Four of the ship’s crewman will take the third rover and set up a kill zone at the southeast. Any questions?”

“Load out sir?” came as a question from one of the squad leaders.

“Blasters only unless I order otherwise.” came Commander Martin’s reply followed quickly with “HKs on the robots only. If you do fire on a robot, make it count and change your cover immediately. My understanding is they are sensor equipped and extremely accurate. Shoot and scoot is the order for robots.”

That satisfied the men present and when it was clear there were no more questions, Commander Martin dismissed his squad leaders. “Well done commander” came the compliment from Savorkian. “Looks like a good plan.”

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“Here they come!” shouted Martin, straining to hear the sound of the helicopters at first and noting how quickly they were getting louder. From a standoff position looking through the front window, he could see one set down about 80 meters directly south of the house.

“Here too,” yelled Adams, “due north” as he watched the second chopper set down. The marines quickly moved out and took concealed positions in brush, swales, gullies and undergrowth. Once the marines had been dropped, the helicopters departed. “They are pretty well hidden Julius.”

Adams yelled. The sound of the rovers moving to the northwest and southeast were now clear and distinct.

“Well hidden on this side too.” Martin yelled back. “Something coming straight to us, rover with an officer.” Martin could see the rover approaching from the east and turning onto the driveway. This must be Savorkian he thought. The officer stepped from the rover and very calmly walked up to the front door of the Adams house and rang the bell. “I’ll take it John.”

As the door opened and Savorkian leaned forward to get a look inside, his first words were “You’re not Adams. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Martin opened the door wider and centered himself in the door frame. “This is a sheriff’s uniform and this is a sheriff inside it. I enforce the law on this colony so state your business here.” Martin could see that Savorkian was a hard case and not likely to be bluffed.

Savorkian tried to get a look behind Martin but was blocked by Martin’s body movement every time he tried to get a peek. “All right, we start your way. I’m Commodore Savorkian and I have arrest warrants for Commander J. J. Adams and Miss Altaira Morbius or whatever name she uses now. I also have a seizure order for a robot if that is here. They’re legal.” With that, Savorkian handed the warrants to Martin and started to move into the door when Martin blocked him.

“Just a second there commodore.” said Martin as he opened the folded papers and began to read. “The warrant for Adams appears to be in order. The warrant for Altaira Morbius is not in order. Her name by the way is now Altaira Adams but that’s not the problem.” Martin studied the paper with one eye and watched for Savorkian’s reaction with the other eye.

“Then what is the problem sheriff?” Savorkian asked with a harsh tone.

Martin looked up from the papers and looked directly into

Savorkian's eyes. "You have no probable cause and 'security risk' doesn't fly against the UP constitution on this colony mister. I'm not going to let you unlawfully arrest anyone here, not on my watch. And as far as that robot is concerned, we have an agreement with the Krell outpost here and Alta was given exclusive custody of Robby. You want to start a war with the Krell?"

"You must be Commander Martin's brother. He warned me about you." said Savorkian, catching Julius off guard. How did Savorkian know his brother? Savorkian could read that question on Julius's face. "Yeah, your brother is here under my command. Those are his marines you saw get off the choppers."

"My brother Richard is here?" asked Martin, his voice faltering slightly at the prospect he may have to fight his brother.

"The one and only." chortled Savorkian, getting some pleasure from Martin's discomfort. "This is a very noble display Sheriff Martin, but let's face facts. Those marines out there are the law and their weapons are going to resolve a lot of potential legal problems and improprieties. There is only one person I need to take out of here alive and I'll settle for that if I have to."

"Are you threatening me?" Martin asked in a loud and demanding voice.

"I'm always amazed when people ask that dumb question. Don't you believe your ears? Of course I'm threatening you." Savorkian said with a spark of incredulity in his voice. "So you can give me what I want or I'll take what I want. I am giving you a choice."

Savorkian's haughtiness actually snapped Martin out of his bewilderment. "I won't give them to you. Send my brother here, alone, and maybe we can work something out."

Savorkian was quiet now, studying Martin's face and stance. The real question he asked himself was could Richard Martin be trusted. It was a risk calculation and if it worked, it

most likely meant a promotion for Savorkian. If it didn't work, Savorkian could always blame treachery and dispose of the offender. Savorkian raised the com-link. "I'm coming out. Commander Martin, I want you to talk to the man at the front door. He's willing to negotiate with you."

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Savorkian worked his way to a swale on the southwest side of the Adams property and joined one of the squad leaders hiding there. "Sergeant," he said, "I want your best sniper to cover the man at the door. Commander Martin is expendable but the man in the doorway is our major threat. If necessary, shoot through the Commander to get him when I give the order."

"Well sir," the sergeant started to say, "the best sniper, that would be me sir. The shot you're asking for requires an HK. I can make that shot from here. Just one problem sir." the sergeant said as he looked through his scope.

"What problem is that?" Savorkian asked.

"That's a woman standing in the doorway sir, not a man." the sergeant replied.

Savorkian picked up his magnascope and focused on Commander Martin's back and soon had the woman's face in view. "That must be Adams's wife. She is not to be hurt under any circumstances. Understood?" The sergeant was still adjusting his scope but let out a faint yes sir as he braced his elbows for a shot.

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"Sheila? What are you doing here?" a stunned Richard Martin said when he got a good look at the person standing in the doorway. "How do you know Adams and his wife? What's going on? Where's my brother? What is..." he went on before Sheila interrupted.

"Yes, it's me and Julius is here too. I have to make this fast. Just listen please?" she asked very emphatically. Richard nodded and she continued. "Julia died on the mission to Altair 4." Let him absorb that Sheila was thinking and

waited for a reaction, a deep sigh as it happened. "She died giving birth to a daughter." All right Richard. Let that sink in too and a head shake of disbelief from Richard followed. "That daughter's name was Altaira Morbius and she is your niece." Sheila kept her eyes on Richard's face and his eyes in particular. "Your niece, your sister's daughter, married Commander John J. Adams." He is getting it Sheila said to herself. Richard's war face had dissolved. "She is Altaira or Alta, Adams, the woman you want to arrest and turn over to the Science Division. Richard, do you want to meet your niece, Julia's only child?"

Richard couldn't speak but he managed to nod his head. With that, Sheila backed away from the door and Alta took her place. "Uncle Richard?" came the soft and timid words from Alta.

"You don't look that much like Julia but she sure made a beautiful baby." Richard managed to squeak out though his throat was choked. "I have a niece! I never thought I would hear anything like that. And here you are, my sisters child, a grown woman now. And a beautiful grown woman." Richard stretched his arms out toward Alta and she stepped forward to give and receive an embrace. "Alta. Altaira. I love it!"

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"Sir, that woman has Commander Martin in a hold. Shall I take them out?" the sergeant asked.

"No! Now we have two women. Which one do we want?" Savorkian asked but knew the sergeant didn't have the answer. Commander Martin would have the answer though.

...
From his position in the undergrowth, Flapjack could see a high ranking officer and non-com lying side by side in the swale. If he made a shot, it would be on his own initiative since the com-link channels were all being jammed.

The officer was in his regular service uniform but the marine was sporting the latest camouflage dress. It didn't appear to work very well Flapjack was thinking. His own

adaptive camouflage he used for hunting provided a much better color and texture match to the surrounding cover. The prize part of that dress was the IR screening skin. The high insulating value, embedded conductors and evaporation dissipaters made the backside of the dress invisible to IR detection. Flapjack turned his head to look up at the sky, certain that satellites were looking back, and confident they could see him no better than he could see them.

“You’ll have to make this call yourself.” Flapjack said quietly to himself.

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“Alta, I’d like to speak to your uncle alone please. Would you go back with your Aunt Sheila to the safe room?” Julius asked quietly but loud enough for Richard to hear. Alta released her embrace of Richard and he dropped his arms as well. She looked up at him and gave him a quick and darting kiss as she backed away from the door and turned.

“You want to turn her over to the Science Division Richard? You know what they will do with your niece, your sister’s daughter? She’ll be their science fair project, locked up for the rest of her life so some goofy PhDs can play god with her. Is that what you’re going to do for our dead sister?” Julius was frustrated and desperate to break through to the brother who long ago broke family ties.

“You’re exaggerating Julius. They wouldn’t do that.” Richard insisted.

“If they have to kill us all to get their hands on her they will. Ask your commodore. I’m sure he already told you she is the highest priority. She has part of an alien brain structure. She’s smarter than everyone and can even communicate with the Krell robots. So yeah Richard, they’re just going to let her live a normal life.” Julius had to stop himself, realizing his frustration with Richard was turning to anger.

“So you’re angry with me and Sheila. Stay that way if you have to but help your niece. Sheila and Alta get along like mother and daughter. Haven’t you punished Sheila enough?”

Julius asked but stopped short when he heard a shot and then a scream. Almost immediately, blaster bolts started hitting the house dissolving bricks and vaporizing holes through glass. Gunshots could also be heard followed by the supersonic crack of HK rounds buzzing through the air. Instinctively, Julius grabbed Richard and pulled him through the door way and tackled him to the floor. "They're shooting at you!" Julius yelled to Richard, pointing at the neatly drilled bullet holes in the door frame.

Julius stayed low and crawled through the dining room, to the kitchen and toward the safe room where he saw the bodies of two marines face down on the floor. Sitting on the floor in a pool of blood and leaning against the hallway wall was Sheila, apparently hit by several HK rounds. The pistol with the silencer in her right hand was still smoking and the knife in her left was streaked with blood. Julius sprang to his feet for a moment to jump over the fallen marines and get to Sheila when he heard the HK round whiz by his ear with an unforgettable crack. Sheila was barely conscious but recognized Julius and started shaking her head.

Sheila was sitting such that her legs stretched across the hallway and her feet were in the safe room. Robby was blocking the entrance and Alta was standing behind him with a blaster in hand.

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Flapjack put his sights back on the officer lying in the swale and fired one round. That shattered the officers leg as a spray of blood clouded the air. He pulled his eye away from the scope to get a wider field of view and spotted a PA officer stalking closer to the house. Eye back to the scope and another shot and the PA officers leg crumpled under him and he hit the ground hard.

With no more clear non-lethal shots, Flapjack had to wait. He had taken down two and others would certainly come to their aid, further reducing the assault force.

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Adams had been pinned by blaster bolts and HK rounds from the northeast. He was in the northeast corner of the house, a spare room used as a library. "Julius," he yelled, "I can't move. They have me pinned."

"Stay there!" Julius yelled. "Sheila has been hit bad, real bad." he tried to yell but his voice was cracking and he was choking. There was so much blood he couldn't make out the wound sites. He knelt by her, taking her hand and then turned to Alta. "Call for help Alta or we're all going to die."

"Robby, go pull Uncle Richard inside and behind some cover. He's at the front door." Alta said clearly and calmly despite the mayhem breaking out everywhere. Robby carefully made his way past Sheila to get out of the safe room and to the front door. The gunfire was intensifying with HK rounds sailing from wall to wall. Sheila was hit again but made no sound.

Julius got to a low stoop and made his way down the hallway and toward the northeast corner to help Adams. That was where most of the fire was coming from. "Richard!" he yelled, not knowing if his brother was still where he left him at the front door.

"Julius, someone hit me in the head with a hammer." Richard replied. An HK round did surprisingly little damage to soft tissue because of the extremely high velocity but when it hit bone, it was no contest. Richard received a grazing hit to the head and it rattled his skull violently. There was very little bleeding but severe head pain from the excessive shock. Robby got to him and pulled him further into the house when he was hit with a HK round to the head. Robby's functions shut down cold.

Alta was trying to ignore the chaos of the battle to focus on Maud. It was even more difficult to concentrate when she could see her Aunt Sheila propped against the wall, sitting in a pool of blood, wearing a blood drenched blouse and skirt and completely motionless. "Maud, I need you and Wilma now. Robby is down. Help us. Protect us. Save us! Please!"

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No one had clocked Maud's rate of acceleration but she traversed 400 meters in about 12 seconds and raised a lot of dust on the way. That wasn't her top speed but the speed needed to get her and Wilma in the right position at the Adams home. Wilma was posted on the east side and Maud on the west side when they deployed the light fence which completely encircled the house. The barrier stopped blaster bolts but HK rounds could penetrate, but with a significant loss of energy. Most of the HK rounds hitting the barrier fell to the ground after another 3 to 4 meters of travel.

The marines still firing noticed this as well and turned their guns on the robots. Most of the hits ricocheted off the armor though some left visible dents in the process. Occasionally, a round fired at the correct angle perpendicular to the surface plates would penetrate. Maud and Wilma managed to get off a number of beam shots to destroy weapons and disable some of the marines, but not all before a few fatal shots tore into the robots interiors.

While the UP assault force had been reduced to about half strength, it was still more than Adams and Martin could handle. Richard Martin tried to call off the assault but with the com-link channels jammed he got no response. The attack force was operating with hand signals but Commander Martin was in no condition to stand or make coherent hand signals.

With Maud and Wilma both out of action, the PA officers and ships crew began to press the attack from the northwest and southeast. Alta moved closer to her aunt, uncertain she could do any good but determined to protect her from further assault.

Adams and Julius were in the northeast corner spare room and in no position to resist the advancing PA officers and ship's crew. They had enough trouble dealing with the remaining marines. The sheriff's deputies were still in the fight but had been pinned in a drainage ditch just in front of the tree line. It looked as though both of them may have been

wounded.

When things seemed about as bad as they could get, Julius heard the sound of helicopters. The PA and C-11-E still had troops they could commit and most likely the people monitoring the battle decided now was the time.

Julius and John were trying to talk above the noise and agreed that surrender was not an option, not because they didn't want to surrender but because Savorkian would not let them. "You can never have enough ammo." said Julius as he slapped his last power slide into the Eagle Eye.

Adams checked his blaster and seeing he was low replied "Ain't that the truth."

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The two objects were moving at 500 meters per second, the sonic boom loudly announcing their arrival at the Adams house. They came to a rapid stop on the east and west ends of the Adams house where Maud and Wilma lie crippled. These robots looked like three Mauds arranged in a triangle with a top mounted platform and compartment. A light fence went up the moment the robots came to rest. Nothing penetrated this fence.

The entire assault force switched to HKs and started firing at the robots but the rounds either bounced off or dropped harmlessly to the ground. These were Krell military robots, known from some earlier simulations to land at the Krell outpost. There was no weapon in the UP arms inventory that could pierce 4 inches of Krell metal. With surface contour tracing energy shields, these military models were virtually indestructible.

From the top mounted compartment of the robots, energy beams rapidly targeted and destroyed hand held weapons. In some cases, the paralyzing beams were used when a clean shot at a weapon could not be made. In a matter of about 6 seconds, the entire assault force on the ground had been neutralized. With that done, the light fence dropped and six caretaker model robots appeared from the north and two

darted into the house. The others fanned across the exterior fabricating enclosed carriers as they identified wounded or paralyzed humans for transport.

When the helicopters touched down, it was Wallace in one and Otomi in the other that disembarked with a squad of armed men and medics. Wallace was anxious to find Adams and Alta but when he came to the hallway where Sheila had fallen, he froze in place. A caretaker robot was preparing to transport her but he could not see any hope for her. Wallace saw Alta still standing in the safe room and it took all he could muster to say "I'm so sorry." and indeed he was.

"We saw what was happening and we had to take the chance Alta." Wallace said, again looking down at Sheila. Alta was puzzled but waited. "I took the ship to the outpost and I pleaded with the surrogate for help. I begged them for help and they came through. They sent the military robots."

"Military robots?" Alta asked.

"Yes, outside. They are here to guarantee no one ever tries to take you again. There are a few dead people out there because they held their weapons too long, but the Krell wanted that message to go out loud and clear. If you will excuse me, I have to find Mr. Adams."

The Krell robots were taking the wounded to the outpost for treatment. As Dr. Renfro would later discover in his research, the fluids used to sustain people in the paralytic state caused by the robots stunning rays contain therapeutic MAMBEs that specialize in repairs and restorations, that is provided the damage has not progressed beyond a certain state. That is why all the people who had been stunned and taken captive by the robots were all in better health when they were released than when they were captured.

Wallace found Martin as he was being prepared for transport. He hadn't realized he had been shot in the leg. The HK round went clean through doing little visible damage but he still required treatment. The robots had not collected the dead marines in the hall way or Sheila. Martin pointed to her

and said with a trembling voice “Please.” The loss of blood finally caught up and Martin drifted into darkness.

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Their faces were blurry but eventually came into focus and Julius could see Alta and Adams standing at the side of the stretcher. He was lying flat and could see the tubes with fluids connected to his left arm. He smiled as he started to regain his senses. “There's something you should see Uncle Julius.” Alta said as she moved left and away from Adams leaving a gap between them. Julius turned his head to the right and there was Sheila, on a stretcher and with tubes connected to her left arm.

“She's going to be just fine.” Alta assured her uncle. “They put her in a sealed hyperbaric capsule, started a MAMBE IV, played the right Krell music and that kept her preserved until they could get her here. Fifteen minutes later and she would have been lost. Irreversible damage they said. Yes, Krell science has its limits.”

“We'll come see you later Julius. We have a meeting with a surrogate.” said Adams as he took Julius's hand and gripped it strongly. “We are counting on you and your lovely wife to get better.”

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“We have good people and we have bad people and you saw what happens when they clash.” Alta said as the surrogate moved closer to the glass divider. “We recognize that difference and accept that is the way people choose to be, for good or for evil. The Krell denied this reality. We have had this discussion before but I only raise the issue again as a basis for a lasting relationship and purpose for the Krell outposts.”

Adams moved closer to Alta, putting his arms around her and whispering “You're doing fine.”

“Look at the good you did today. You stopped a travesty of justice, the unjust imprisonment of people to satisfy someone's ambition. You took life but that saved lives, our lives. You saved lives by treating the injured. My Aunt

Sheila, who I love dearly was shot three times after she was dead, yet you were able to repair that damage and return her to the people who love her and need her. Your capacity to do good is more than enough purpose for existence. That you can do this good without giving the Garon the technology does comply with the wishes of the Krell. The Garon must earn, by discovery, the right to use technology and hopefully, as long as the Garon do not lose humility, they will handle that technology responsibly. You cannot solve that problem for the Garon anymore than you could for the Krell.”

Curiously, not much in the way of the grinding sounds came from the surrogate.

“Mr. Ambassador,” the surrogate said, “your wife and adviser has presented an excellent collection of facts for maintaining the existence of our outposts and relations with the Garon. While the details of our agreement will undoubtedly require negotiations, the major principles stand as we had agreed for the interim treaty. Your access to technology remains blocked but we will use it on your behalf when factual evidence of good can be demonstrated. You may continue your tour of the outposts, all of them, and you may continue to use the educator for non-technological purposes. Is this satisfactory?”

“Yes it is, but I have one personal request to make.” Adams said as he held Alta tighter and looked down into her eyes.

“What is that request?” the surrogate asked.

Alta took a deep breath. She had discussed this with John and he was in agreement. Could the surrogate do what she wanted? “I want the Krell like part of my brain restored to the way it was before the alteration. I want the MAMBEs in my brain removed, or deactivated, or whatever needs to be done to stop them. I do not want the Krell visiting me in my dreams any longer.”

The surrogate raised his arms and two more like him appeared. Then he spoke. “You have awakened young lady

and the crutch shall be removed. Your dream visitors are banished. Your ability to use the educator and communicate with machines as you desire will remain unchanged. Congratulations and welcome to the community of the awakened Krell.”

Epilogue

Commander Richard Martin played an instrumental role in the investigation of Science Division corruption and abuses of power. His report to Midland Fleet Command documented the outrageous abuse of force against civilians in what became known as The Adams House Assault. That report became a rallying cry for reformers at home and in the colonies across the UP.

Sheriff Julius Martin further exposed Science Division corruption in collusion with the Park Police in closing the Auric Canyon area on Barnard's Colony in order to conduct illegal mining operations taking advantage of unique access granted to employees of the Science Division and Park Police.

John J. and Altaira Adams are special envoys representing the UP to the Krell outposts on Barnard's Colony and throughout the galaxy.