

"Yippee ki yay, mother-" began the exclamation, suddenly interrupted by a shudder through the ship.

"You alright Mr. Korza?" Lance asked, noticing the look of panic that crossed the billionaire's face and trying hard not to laugh at it.

"Everything is alright, right?"

"Yes, of course." Lance assured. "Everything is on track. We'll be in Low Earth Orbit in a few minutes."

Korza nodded, the grin coming back to his face. "Merry Christmas, right?"

Lance nodded. "Merry Christmas is right. When we're high enough, we should be able to see the Earth lit up just like a Christmas tree."

The ship and everything in it kept rumbling like crazy, the power of the rocket underneath them powerful enough to affect a person's hearing for miles. Lance was rather enjoying watching Korza's face vacillate between thrill and terror. What was really satisfying was watching this man's first reaction to reaching a point of altitude where it was obvious that any flat-earthier was an idiot. As the Earth receded, the stars grew brighter, more real, the sky between them growing darker and darker. Korza's face held a state of awe that Lance felt to be appropriate.

Suddenly, Lance became very aware of how bright the sun had been, too, as they lifted out of the atmosphere, because it ceased to be there. A great darkness filled the inside of the ship and Lance felt an uneasiness in his stomach that had nothing to do with the diminishing gravity or the look of confusion on Korza's face.

"What's going on?" Korza asked, a quiver in his voice. The other pilot was already pulling herself from her seat to get a better look out the window.

"What is it?" Lance asked her. "Murphy?"

She didn't respond. Even from this angle, Lance could see her shake her head. It seemed like she didn't even know how to respond for a minute. "It's not possible," she whispered.

"Murphy," Lance tried to get her attention. "What is it?"

"I don't know," she finally answered. "It's not natural, but it's bigger than anything I've ever seen."

That sent chills down Lance's spine. That meant that what was out there was either some secret project built as some country's space program that America wasn't aware of, or it wasn't from Earth. "What does it look like?"

"Some kind of sphere structure, with a light in the middle, maybe some kind of reaction mass."

That was weird. Lance unbelted himself and pulled himself over to the window, already acclimated to the microgravity. Once the object came into view, he couldn't figure out what it meant. It was like a wireframe of a globe, at the center of which was something very much like a mini star, one that brightened when the object moved and dimmed when it stopped.

"Guys," Korza sounded scared, now, "what's going on?" On top of that, Lance could hear the control center over the radio trying to get in touch with them. He sighed, his mind slogging through the confused background noise of his anxiety like it was molasses. He slowly pulled himself towards his seat, pulling himself down into it and buckling himself in so he could orient himself in line with the instruments.

"Come in, control," Lance activated the radio.

"Where have you been, Malonie?"

"We have an object forward and starboard of us," Lance tried to explain. "Do you have anything on radar?"

"Negative, Malonie," control's response came after a moment. "What kind of object are you talking about?"

"Unknown," Lance shrugged, as if they'd see that. "It appears to be artificial, but not terrestrial."

There was silence for a long time after that. Lance almost thought they got disconnected somehow, but wasn't surprised by the skepticism in the voice that responded. "You say you've made visual contact with an extraterrestrial object?"

Lance took a deep breath. He knew he'd be the laughing stock of the world if this turned out to be nothing. But if it was genuine?

"That's affirmative," Lance turned to see that Murphy had found her own place back in her seat. "Commander Malonie's report is accurate. I've also made visual contact with the object."

There was another long silence from control.

"Are you saying we're going to make first contact with aliens?" Korza seemed terrified and ecstatic at the same time.

"Unknown, sir," Lance glanced back at the billionaire. "Control, you there?"

"What is the object doing now?" Was the eventual reply. Lance used his chin to point Murphy back to the window. She nodded, pulling herself across the small cockpit. She shrugged, shaking her head.

"Nothing, control," Lance responded. "Have you made radar contact, yet?"

"Negative, Flier One," control responded. "However, we have verified the video feed on your ship. We have visual verification."

"What do we do, control?"

"Standby, Flier One, we're trying to establish radio contact down here."

"Any luck?"

"Standby."

"That means, 'no,'" Murphy said softly, her comm off. Lance smirked.

The silence stretched out for what seemed like long, long minutes. It must have only been seconds. Even Korza seemed mostly speechless, reduced to observing and understanding that he was the very definition of a guest up here. He knew how to let professionals do their jobs, even when there was no precedent for that job, yet.

"There's something coming out of it," Murphy said in a heightened voice. Lance couldn't tell if it was nerves or fear. "It's coming this way."

"Control," Lance reached out to control again. "Control, we have a smaller object detaching from the first one, perhaps some kind of shuttle or something. What are our orders?"

"-come in, Flier-" came the response, swallowed up by static.

"Crap," Lance muttered.

"They've got to be jamming us," Murphy said what Lance was thinking.

"What does that mean?" Korza asked, his voice trembling.

"It's not good," Lance muttered. "Means they're familiar with our technology, and probably don't come in peace."

"What?" Korza squeaked.

Before they could talk about it more, Murphy announced from her position by the window. "It's a lot closer, now. It looks like some kind of sphere."

"Any sign of aggression?" Lance asked.

"You mean other than cutting us off from control?" Murphy responded sarcastically.

"Yeah," Lance answered honestly.

"I assume if they wanted us dead, we'd be dead already."

Murphy was probably right. Lance felt a little heartburn lap the back of his throat, a combination of microgravity and nerves.

Suddenly, something happened. Something happened **inside** their ship. A light appeared in the small empty space left between them all. It changed shape, forming something like a face.

"Season's greetings, folks," the face spoke. It spoke English.

"Did that thing just reference-?" Murphy whispered.

"Christmas?" The voice seemed to be dialoguing in real time, as opposed to playing some kind of recording. "That's right. Merry Christmas, everyone."

"You've been here for a long time," Lance finally worked up the courage to say something.

"You can say that," the face seemed to laugh. "I was born here, after all. I'm human."

"Human?" Korza seemed incredulous. "I think I'd know if there was some kind of human that was capable of something like this."

"Oh," the face laughed, "I don't think so. I've been at this a lot longer than any of you. Nearly sixteen hundred years."

"Sixteen hundred years?" Even Lance found this unlikely. "Really? If you were really human, you'd know not a single one of us can live that long."

"Normally, that's true. I found most of this pretty hard to believe, too. I'm going to bring you to my home, where we can talk."

"Your home?" Korza demanded. "Do you know who I am? You're kidnapping me."

"I know exactly who you are," came the response from the ghostly glowing face in the middle of the cockpit. "That's why you're here."

"Who are you?" Lance asked quietly.

"My original name was Nicholas. I've had a lot of names since then. We can talk about it when you get here." Then the face blinked out of existence.

"The sphere outside has latched onto us," Murphy said from her place near the window. The press Lance felt sinking into his seat confirmed what she said next, "it's tugging us, toward that bigger structure."

In moments, the ship shuddered as it was latched onto by the bigger structure. In a few more moments, they all settled into their chairs, as if under gravity again. Lance recognized the use of acceleration for gravity, like when they take off. But he kept waiting for the acceleration to stop, kept waiting for the feel of microgravity to come back. And it didn't.

"We're accelerating at one gravity," Murphy whispered, the unspoken understanding that such technology, prolonged acceleration at one gravity, was beyond current levels of rocket tech.

"Did that guy just say he was called Nicholas?" Karza recounted incredulously. "Like Santa Claus??"

Lance took a moment to think through the events of the last few minutes. He could only shrug. "Where do you think we're going?" He asked Murphy.

"I don't know," she responded. "Wherever it is, we'll get there pretty quickly."

"Quickly, what do you mean?" Karza asked.

"The Moon is only about three hours away if you can keep up the one gravity of acceleration."

Karza whistled. Lance couldn't help but agree.

"Do you think we're going to the Moon?" Karza asked. Murphy shrugged, too.

Lance responded. "There's no way to know, yet. Not until we are going long enough to extrapolate a course."

Karza nodded, the fear clear on his face. Lance went back to his radio. "Control, come in," he tried to get back in touch with them. He got nothing but static.

They were traveling under one gravity for about four hours. There was no further attempt at communication. It got boring. Lance wasn't sure what to make of it. He was kind of glad that they ran out of things to talk about towards the beginning of their journey. He needed the time to process. They had encountered a technologically advanced agent, one that claimed to be human, but was lightyears beyond anything they had available, even in the most top secret halls of the world's most advanced militaries and corporations.

They were landing on the dark side of the moon. Made sense. Any kind of base here wouldn't be visible from Earth. Easily could have gone unmolested for centuries. But the space agencies of Earth regularly sent probes out here. Astronauts, even. Couldn't possibly have the freedom to act unmolested or unnoticed the way whatever this was was used to.

From the scanners, from looking out the windows, Lance and Murphy were able to deduce that they were going under the surface. There were camouflaged ports they were moving through, but they were being brought inside the moon. Once they landed, everything went dark outside. Their own ship was still operational, though now they knew they had no chance of ever getting back home without the assistance of their unknown captor.

The face came back.

"We combine spin gravity with the native lunar gravity here to create an environment that feels about Earth normal," he announced. "I want to meet you, Mr. Korza."

"Me?" The billionaire muttered. "Why?"

"Everything will be made clear once we meet in person. You will have to move under normal lunar gravity for now until we get you into the habitat ring."

"Understood," Lance responded. There was no way out but through, now way back now but forward.

"Follow the green arrows," the face said, "to the cab that will bring you in sync with the habitat ring. See you soon."

Then the face was gone and they were back in the ship's own lighting. Outside the windows, however, their surroundings went from pitch black to a pure white. The ship was upright, as if it had landed itself back on its landing pad in Texas. There was a tower of stairs outside the ship, set up so they could walk down once they exited the airlock.

It took them a good twenty minutes to unstrap themselves and remove themselves from the ship with all their equipment. Murphy insisted on them going with their EVA suits on and functioning: she didn't trust their host as much as Lance felt himself wanting to do.

There were green chevrons, on the floors, on the walls, guiding them through the large space that was obviously a hangar, through the equally white halls, through the equally white bulkhead doors. Eventually, the chevrons led them to what looked like an elevator. Must be the shuttle that would bring them to the spinning habitat ring that combined lunar gravity with spin gravity to make a habitat with Earth-like gravity. Lance found it disconcerting that he understood all the theory behind the technology he was surrounded by. Even coming here, he understood the gravity in their ship was from acceleration. Whoever this was had access to a torchship, which were easy enough to understand, even if most of humanity didn't have access to reliable torchship technology, yet. The holographic projections, they were easy enough to understand, even if they couldn't do it, yet.

The floating head was right about the gravity, too. Once they got into the cab, they slowly began to feel all the weight of their suits and their oxygen equipment and their own bodies. Karza obviously slumped under the weight, having barely received training to handle it all, being a tourist, after all. Even Lance had to admit that the equipment was heavy, about as heavy as it would be under Earth gravity.

This was still physics they understood. Why was Lance having such an issue with this? What did he expect? Technology so advanced it was indistinguishable from magic? Aliens so advanced they would be indistinguishable from gods? What did he expect?

The man in the white trimmed, red fur suit was not what he expected.

"What the hell?" Karza exclaimed. He started laughing. Lance couldn't help but laugh, too. Even Murphy started laughing, towards the end.

"Not what you were expecting, is it?" The man in red joined in the laughter. "It never is."

"So I guess we were wrong about the North Pole, huh?" Lance countered.

"I had a base there for a while. It was hard enough for anyone to get there on a regular basis. I've had to retreat more and more the more capable you people have gotten."

"Wait," Murphy shook her head. "How is this even possible?"

"I don't know," the man said seriously through his white beard. "Honestly, that's a question I've asked myself for years. Decades. Centuries, even."

"What do you mean?" Karza asked. "You don't know?"

"I know some of it," the man shrugged. He indicated they sit at what looked like a conference table. "Have a seat, I'll tell you what I know."

What else could they do? They sat.

"You know my story obviously starts in Lycea. Turkey, today. You knew that." He seemed strangely uncomfortable. "It's been a while since I've talked to anyone new. I don't bring people in very often."

"Are you bringing us in?" Karza asked. He seemed appropriately humbled by the possibility. Lance was sure he felt somehow like he was a natural pick for someone in their host's position to want on hand.

"No," the man shook his head. "Let me finish. You know where and when my story starts. But that's not where *the* story starts, is it? We all know that one started at least a few hundred years before my own did. Almost twenty one centuries ago, something special happened here on Earth."

"We're not on Earth," Murphy corrected.

"You know what I mean," he acknowledged. "What happened was so special, it got the attention of some folks not from around here."

"Are you saying that aliens came to visit because Jesus was born?"

He smiled. "I know how silly that sounds."

"We're on the moon, in Santa's secret workshop," Lance pointed out.

"Fair enough," he responded. "Well, they detected a supradimensional incursion. Apparently, from what I can tell, that's really uncommon. So they came to investigate. They decided to stay and observe. This being was at once a capsule of something, or someone, from a higher reality, as well as a completely mundane example of the human race."

"God and man," Murphy seemed to quote. "Following you so far."

"Their visitation was noticed," their host went on.

"Wait," Lance held up his hand. "I need a little help grasping what's happening. What do we call you?"

"Nicholas is close enough," he shrugged. "I've obviously had enough names that if you want, you can refer to me as any one of those."

"Fair enough," Lance nodded. "Sorry, go on."

"Right," Nick smiled, "anyway. They were the Star of Bethlehem. They didn't even know their presence was prophesied. They decided to stay, based on what Jesus taught. But just as the supradimensional being decided to handle humanity with a gentle hand, they decided to follow suit. They would watch over us, but quietly. They would try to teach us the values that the supradimensional entity championed, but they followed his example and realized that they couldn't do it with too much of a firm hand."

"Where do you come in?" Murphy asked quietly.

"I guess it was my involvement with the early church. A lot of legends started to circulate about me, even while I was still a normal human living on Earth. And they couldn't stay here for much longer. They had detected the turbulence caused by another supradimensional incursion lightyears away. Hundreds of years away, even at their advanced speeds and abilities. They decided to leave. But they approached me, first."

"By approach," Murphy asked skeptically, "does that mean they abducted you? Kidnapped you?"

Nick's face scrunched, his eyes closed. Then all that tension came out in a sigh. "Yes," he admitted. "Obviously, at first, I thought they were angels."

"Obviously," Karza scoffed. "But they weren't."

"No, they weren't," Nick confirmed. "They educacted me. They taught me a lot. They treated me, medically."

"Before you knew how to consent," Murphy added. Nick shrugged.

"They made me smarter, expanded my mind. Then they made it so I wouldn't age." He shrugged. "I decided that their experience with Jesus was enough for me. I came up with a plan. A way to nurture the world they were leaving behind, to try to teach them about the ideals that Jesus stood for."

"What happened?" Lance demanded. "We're no closer to that ideal than we were the day he was killed."

Nick looked away, shame all over his face. "I know. There were some years I thought we were close. I tried to keep hope alive, by leaving gifts to the poorest of the poor, simple gifts that brought bits of hope and appreciation through the years. All I did was prolong the downfall of humanity, though. I kept it from getting as bad as it could have. I didn't do enough to uplift it to the reality Jesus wanted."

Murphy smirked. "Which is what brings us to today, doesn't it?"

Karza glanced back and forth. "I don't understand."

"You wouldn't," Murphy responded. "But you're the whole point."

Karza's eyes glittered at that. "Really?"

Lance sighed. "Don't give him false hope. He already thinks he's God's gift to the world."

Now Karza's eyes glinted with indignation. "What do you mean? I've performed a service to the world."

"Oh, please," Murphy rolled her eyes. "Can you tell him, already?" She directed this last in Nick's direction. The short, stocky man sighed himself, then just nodded.

"You are one of the wealthiest people in the world," Nick began. "And you have achieved that status by perpetuating some of the deepest evils the world has ever seen. You go out of your way to take advantage of both your customers and the people you have working for you."

"Wait one minute," Karza's face got red with anger, "what is this?? You're some kind of communist, is that it? Jesus Christ, Santa's a commie."

Nick's eyes glittered with anger of his own, for the first time since they arrived. Lance wondered what he would do if Karza got him angry enough. He said in a quiet, stone cold voice that was as weighty as any shout. "Jesus Christ was a commie, you callous donkey. He cared about the poor and the disenfranchised, he cared about all those that the rest of the world tossed aside."

"Boo hoo," Karza rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to apologize for being rich. I made my money honestly."

"Do you really believe that?" Murphy's eyes narrowed angrily. "Seriously? You can't have as many people tell you what you're doing wrong and really not understand. Can you?" Her voice almost softened towards the end. What were the chances this billionaire bigot was simply uneducated?

His eyes turned to stone. "Yes. Yes I do."

Nick sighed. Lance sighed. Murphy just scoffed. "Let me spell out what the future holds, because of you. There are two possibilities. I've done so many projections. I've consolidated the models into two primary ones, for your consideration." He waved his hand over the table, and a glowing image of the globe sprung to life. Lance was impressed, but realized after a minute he shouldn't have been surprised. "You are at a tipping point. Humanity will realize its potential because of you, or it will go extinct. You could go the route of Scrooge, and change your ways, going down in history as one of the most beloved, influential men in history, or you could go the

way of Marley, and go down as one of history's robber barons, paving the way for the world's heat death."

"What are you talking about? Between the longevity research and the advances we've been making in space tech, humanity isn't going to go extinct."

"But you're okay with making Earth unlivable?" Murphy asked scathingly.

Karza shrugged. "It's going that way, anyway."

"And you're going to leave the billions of people behind to die in the hell you're using them to make for you?"

Again, he shrugged. "In the long view of things, it's hard to imagine that really mattering. We'll get to start over. Recreate the world in our own image, a new image."

"Seriously?" Murphy couldn't hide the anger in her voice. "What about everyone that will die when the Earth does? You could go back now and be the savior of humanity and the world as we know it. You go back, push hard for green building, you could reverse climate change. You could solve world hunger, pave the way for a post-scarcity civilization, end the pandemics of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. You could usher the world into a golden age."

"Or I can let the leeches die, make sure everyone else is grateful I'm giving them any part of my pie, and be seen as the savior of humanity anyway when we free it from a dying planet."

"A planet your killing!"

"History won't know the difference," Korza shrugged. "The only people left alive who will remember will be gods among men."

"Like you?" Lance asked gently.

"In due time," Korza shrugged again. "For now, we have the advances to help us see two hundred. Eventually, we'll see the advances to carry us to five, then beyond. In fact, the existence of this very man proves that it's all within reach."

Nick sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"You have to do something," Murphy turned to him. "You can't have brought him all the way out here just to watch him go back and continue flushing all of humanity down the tube."

"What is he going to do? Call the aliens?" Korza laughed. "If he could have, he would have already. Is he going to pray? Billions of idiots already do that everyday back on the surface, see where it's gotten them."

Nick looked genuinely troubled. "Yes. I see where it's gotten them." He grew silent. Lance stared at him, at all the emotions playing out on his face. He turned his gaze on Murphy, who still hadn't stopped glaring at Korza. Lance wasn't sure what was going to happen next. But he knew he needed to keep his mouth shut. Suddenly, Nick seemed to have made up his mind. "I'm sorry, Mr. Korza. Everything will be done to keep you comfortable."

Korza's face washed over with confusion, then a slow, dread realization crept over it.

"Come in Flier One," came the staticky radio sounds. Lance grinned.

"This is Flier One," Lance responded. "Come in control."

They could all hear the collective sigh coming through the silence on the radio. "Jesus Christ, Flier One, where were you?"

"Adrift, control. Something fried our circuits. It took us a while to get the radio back online."

"You said something about an object?"

"Negative, control," Lance smiled. "It must have been some kind of flair or something. There's nothing up here."

"Roger that, Flier One. Let's get you home."

With that, Lance shared looks with Murphy, then they both turned in their seats to look at the man who looked like Karza. He smiled, put a finger to the side of his nose, and winked.