

*Warning: This story contains strong language and adult situations (which may be unsuitable for children), discussions of philosophy and science (which may be unsuitable for adults) and depictions of moral atheists (which may be unsuitable for fundamentalists).*

## Prologue

*“Sergeant Major, Sir!” The young soldier, his fatigues ripped, stained with mud, blood, grease and other pigments of unknown origin, ran into the fabrication shop and saluted. Sergeant Major Tarrant “Terry” Smitts, US Army Corp Of Engineers (Reserve) looked up from the equipment he was assembling to the young man.*

*“At ease, private,” he said, scowling. Couriers, he thought in disgust. All of those advanced telecommunications, and the TITANs have reduced us to using couriers. “You have a message?”*

*“Yessir! Captain Wallace wants to know your estimated time to completion, sir!”*

*Terry put down his tool and gave a very direct look at the young man, trying hard to avoid seeing the hero worship he saw in the grime-stained face. That’s what you deserve for getting a reputation as a miracle worker, he thought. People start expecting more miracles.*

*He opened his mouth, getting ready to unleash an exquisitely polite and extremely harsh verbal flaying for the young man to relay to the anxious captain, starting with a ‘thirty minutes less than when you asked half an hour ago,’ when the room shook. Then the alarms started blaring -- the hardwired, hardline alerts that couldn’t be spoofed unless one had physical access to the control station.*

*Terry got up from the bench with a speed that left his spine screaming with the sudden motion after hours of hunched over sitting. With a barked, “Move!” to the rest of his technicians and the young courier, he rushed to the door, people following in his wake, his mind racing through the possibilities -- all of them bad. They were on the eighteenth sub-level down here, buried under a mountain, and that strike had felt like an earthquake.*

*Of course, he thought, it’s not like it was a secret military base. Not anymore. But still, the TITANs seemed to avoid using WMDs... if only because they had a whole stable of other nightmarish means of killing -- and worse -- that they used. Still, someone had knocked on the front door -- hard. It was time to get going while the going was good.*

*They ran to the elevator, which opened a few moments later.*

*Onto a small room of hell.*

*Inside the elevator, Terry saw bodies and bits of bodies covering the floor, walls and ceiling of the large space, so mutilated that he couldn’t count them or tell where one left off and another began. They were liquefying as he watched, as if they were lumps of wax in an oven, while three insectoid bots, clinging to the side of the elevator and covered in blood and bits of flesh and bone, launched themselves at the assembled humans, buzzsaw blades whirring.*

*The young soldier wasn’t fast enough.*

*Terry dodged and hit the door close override, hot blood hitting his face, getting in his eyes, his mouth--*

*He jerked awake, gasping, heart racing, the phantom sensation of that young man’s hot*

blood rapidly fading as his muse's voice entered his mind.

[Bad dreams again?]

Yeah. Terry gulped air as he directed his thoughts towards his muse. *Thanks for the wakeup. That was wasn't the worst one, but it was still pretty bad.*

[Indeed. Your vitals signs reached into the danger zone--again--and I was compelled to wake you. However, you still need rest.]

Terry sighed. *We've had this discussion before, Sera. I don't trust psychosurgeons.*

[There are other means of treatment.]

Yeah, and they'd all take months. *When was the last time I had months?*

The AI was silent, conceding the point.

Terry fought down a feeling of guilt. He and his muse had been together through so much, and she knew exactly how stubborn he could be. She kept bringing this topic up because she cared.

Afterall, she had been programmed to.

Sighing, Terry checked the time in his entopic displays. *How long was I actually out for?*

[Two hours and sixteen minutes since entering stage one sleep.]

Eh. *That's enough for now. I'll catch a catnap later.*

He stretched all four limbs, feeling the muscles protest slightly, then undid the zipper on his free-fall sleep sack. Thus freed, he pushed off into the small chamber that he currently hung his hat in, aiming for the door. His roommates were either asleep themselves or in the boneless slump of VR. Floating there in zero gravity, Terry drifted into the corridor, Sera already checking on the availability of a bulb of real engineer-style coffee via his mesh implants, while Terry looked over the emails detailing the progress of his current project, a Cole Bubble habitat named Sophia, which he was helping build for another group of anarchists.

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Tsukino Mariko growled at the mass of data, giving it a look that, by all rights, should have forced it to spontaneously rearrange itself into something *useful* out of pure fear and shame.

Alas, it did not work, and the petabytes of records of financial, transportation, industrial and other commercial activity coming out of some of the Planetary Consortium's Martian concerns remained stubbornly obtuse. Someone skilled had been over this data already, and had apparently spent not a small amount of time and effort making it as useless as possible, while still being technically accurate. Which meant that there *had* to be something of use in here.

Didn't it?

Mariko started to pace -- which, in her presently extremely low gravity, meant pushing off from one wall, doing a slow flip in mid-air and landing on the opposite wall. Then repeat until either one messes up and hits the wall or hits on an idea.

*Alright. What do I know? Push, twirl, land, push, twirl, land... Yuzuki, give me a spread, see if that jogs any connections. And start rerunning the relationship mapping software on this mass of crud, see if it comes up with anything.*

Yuzuki, her muse, began helpfully laying out what she knew so far about her quarry as the program began shoveling through the mound of data for the fourth time, looking for diamonds amidst the crap.

[Anton Kawalski, presumed false identity of Howard Niles, which has a sixty-eight percent probability of likewise being a false identity, guilty of mass endangerment, destruction of private property, theft, ego endangerment, ego-napping, and suspected trafficking in weapons of mass destruction, amid various other lesser crimes. Current primary bounty on his ego, from the Dorfl Trust Habitat Plurality, totals one hundred and sixty-three thousand, four hundred and twenty-five credits.]

Push, twirl, land, push, twirl, land... *And all of that is from the incident on Dorfl Trust Habitat last year, right? We haven't turned up anything else that this guy might be wanted for?*

[Correct. Despite my prior and on-going mesh searches, I have not turned up any competing bounties or wanted posts, hence your current suspicion that Niles is another fake identity.]

*Alright. So, lets follow the supposition that we have a guy that has at least two layers of fake identities on top of his real one. What that says to me is the guy is probably in someone's black ops group. But whose? Add in those egocasts that we've tracked and he has friends and pull in a bunch of factions.*

[Agreed, but thus far we have gone down this logic train four times only to come to a dead end each time.]

*Don't go poking holes in my theories unless you have something better to replace them with,* Mariko mock-growled at her muse. She started adding a little spin to her twirl, just because she could, grateful that her implants kept from being nauseous.

[Alright then. We have a target that has managed to egocast no less than three times, with the trail having ended on Mars. We've found no record of him having egocast away, and inquiries with possible darknet egocasters have turned up no leads. That leaves two possibilities that I can see; either he's still down there on Mars or he's egocast away again.]

A thought suddenly hit Mariko.

A moment later, so did the wall.

"Oof!"

[Mariko?]

Wincing slightly, Mariko detangled herself.

*We've spent this entire time assuming that Mars was just another waypoint, a place for him to egocast to anywhere in the system from, or alternatively, a place for him to go to ground and hide among the Barsoomians until the heat died down. What if it wasn't? What if it was his destination? What if he really is a black ops man, in the employ of one of the hypercorps, and he came back and his superiors gave him another job to do?*

[A possibility, to be sure, but how does that change my base possibilities?]

*Because he wasn't running away; speed isn't of the essence anymore. He's already assumed to have lost any pursuit, and lets be fair -- he egocast three times getting here, using cutouts and darknet casters. We only managed to trace him with a fair amount of dumb luck and sheer stubbornness. He's got to think he got away clean. And an asset like that doesn't get to cool his heels forever. No, he's given another job as soon as they think of one.*

[Alright, so, then what?]

*It's time to start a new analysis on the data. Break out the relationship mapper, probability mapper and event reconstruction software. I want to look at outbound cargo transports. We've been disregarding them because if he was trying to get away, staying on a transport is good way for your enemies to track you, egocast ahead of you and be waiting when you get to your destination. Now we need to start with the assumption that he came here with the assumption that he had lost anyone tracking him, he came here, got a new assignment and got shipped out again.*

[Alright. And when this train of thought also fails to pan out like the last six?]

*Then I'll think of something else. Let's get to work.*

Sixty-five minutes, two cross-checks, two favors called in with her rep, one rather illegal hack and a judicious bribe later, she had her answer.

*"Chikushō! I was right!"*

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Arkady Maletski blinked blearily, dearly wishing that he could just *tell* his current patient to cease his infernal bleating for a few minutes.

Instead, he smiled and continued talking to the newly resleeved man floating in the compartment, helping him get past the various issues the man was currently experiencing -- and, to be fair, not that Arkady was in any mood to be, he *had* just experienced an extremely bad resleeve. From a backup, no less. Not only did the poor bastard have lack of continuity to deal with, he had woken up in a body that wasn't his own, missing nearly a month of his life, and having to deal with the shock of being nothing more than a copy of the original. It was, admittedly, more than enough to send just about anybody into mental shock, and his patient wasn't exactly a mental giant.

And to make matters worse, Arkady had heard that someone had already advised him to try resleeving again from backup and hope for a better integration, and the poor bastard had almost gone catatonic, his self-preservation having gone into overdrive, refusing to be wiped and let a better, less traumatized version of himself potentially exist.

It was enough to give someone murderous impulses. And then, at least, the question of giving him a choice as to whether or not to resleeve from backup would be moot.

Fortunately for Arkady, he had better options. Well, debatably better options. He called it his *domovoi*, after the stories his grandmother had told him and his brothers when they were young, the small little demon that lived under the stove and cursed or blessed the house depending on their mood. He reached out to the alien *thing* that the exsurgent virus had gifted him with, the quiet, vaguely malevolent *presence* that he now shared his mind with and made it shift his patient's emotions away from near hysteria to calmness.

Blinking away the headache the effort in directing his *domovoi* gave him, he spoke quickly, knowing the psi sleight would last only a few moments.

"Huang, listen to me. Listen to my voice and the words I am saying. I know right now you are feeling lost, disoriented, frustrated. You feel as if you're just an imitation, that the real Huang died and that you are just a cheap copy of him. That is alright. That is normal. But I

need you to realize that you *are* Huang, in every way that matters. You have his thoughts, his memories, his loves, his fears. Only the flesh has changed. And the flesh is just a shell. The flesh does not define you. You define it.”

An hour later, Huang having been returned to something resembling functionality, Arkady groaned. Even here, among the hedonistic anarchic scum aboard the Phelan’s Recourse swarm, there had to be somebody ready to put broken people back together. And Arkady, for his sins, was one of them.

Nuts.

And it wasn’t like he even liked people that much, His *domovoi* had completed the process that his cynicism had begun -- the process being the so-called specialness of humanity and human thought.

Right.

Maybe a particularly credulous five year old -- or perhaps one of the true believer anarchists, with their optimistic view on human nature, or some of the anti-uplift bioconservatives -- might believe that human thoughts and minds were somehow *special*. But Arkady had seen what people really thought, courtesy of his *domovoi*. And, nine times out of ten or more, it was all base animal instincts, courtesy of people’s monkey brains. *I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. I want that thing. I wanna screw. I want that guy. I want that girl. I’m tired. My arms hurt.* Deep, philosophical, it wasn’t, not hardly.

Hell, the only reason he admitted to supporting the transhuman race most days was due to his own membership.

Privately... well, that was another story.

But, for the moment, it was time to indulge his own animalistic instincts and do the one thing that human beings were really good at. Feeling pleasure. As far as Arkady was concerned, the best fringe benefit of his *domovoi*, in being what those in the know called an *async*, a psychic, granted mental powers from infection by the sole seemingly-benign variant of the mind- and body-twisting exsurgent virus unleashed by the TITANs upon transhumanity ten years ago during the Fall... was knowing which women were interested, what they wanted, and how to give it to them.

Arkady moved through the zero gravity corridors, searching out amenable female companionship with which to surrender to instinct, relinquish conscious thought and share the mutual gift of pleasure.

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Navin Surti smirked and laid back in the comfy chair with a smirk, his hands folded back behind his head, a picture of hedonistic self-satisfaction. Life was good. Here he was, a young man -- insofar as such things still had any meaning -- of considerable skills, a reputation built on those skills, and considerable demand for those skills which enabled him to turn his work into personal wealth and a great deal of personal satisfaction.

Of course, the fact that said skills were hacking, cryptography, steganography and various other areas of computer and data manipulation rather left him with a wide yet narrow field of possible employers that could make proper use of his skills -- none of whom he fully

trusted. He had solved that problem by offering said skills to the highest bidder, regardless of whoever that was. Of course, that solution had spawned its own problems and downsides as well.

Like why he was here in Thoroughgood, on Dione, around Saturn, instead of back in Shackle, on Luna. A few moments carelessness during a hack into a hypercorp system, an annoyingly over-attentive infomorph, and things had gone downhill rapidly from there. He'd had to burn favors fast to egocast away, leaving almost everything -- even his original body -- behind.

He shrugged at the thought. Eh. If not for that little mess, he might never have left Luna behind. He had been too comfortable there, had become complacent. To be honest, he had gotten *sloppy*. And in his profession, sloppy got one's ego tossed in dead storage or handed over to the psycho-surgeons for personality adjustment. A step up from the good old days, when they just shot you and threw the body in a ditch somewhere, he supposed, but still...

But here, in Thoroughgood, oh, no, it was a different story. Here there was the Long Array, and all of the people -- his kind of people -- that it attracted. Of course, he had to avoid the Lunar enclave here, which could occasionally be a pain, but he couldn't exactly risk them realizing who he was. There was, after all, that pesky bounty on his head, courtesy of the powers-that-be back home. And he had known some of the Loonies currently on assignment from back before, meaning that there was always the chance that one of them might notice something -- a mannerism, a tic, a turn-of-phrase -- that could give him away. He'd been sloppy once. Not again.

Not when he had the output of the Long Array to play with.

His face grew wistful at the thought of the Long Array. A hundred and fifty kilometers of antenna and dishes, built to send and, especially, *receive* everything from long-wave radio to t-rays and everything in between. And the argonauts and Titanians who had built it, bless their collectivist hearts, gave away all of the data it gathered for *free*! Radio signals that would normally be too weak for anyone more than a few thousand clicks or so away to even notice, much less receive, were collected by the zetabyte, and they published it all!

Sure, some people dug through the morass of data looking for emergency broadcasts, and Navin had to tip his hat to them. It was nice knowing that there was someone out there looking and listening for distress signals and pointing people in the direction of the rescuee. Of course, most of the time, there wouldn't be anyone close enough to rescue the rescuee before their biomorph shuffled off from lack of air -- otherwise the Long Array wouldn't have to get involved -- but even then, everybody likes it when somebody retrieved their stack and resleeved them. Navin wasn't involved with that group himself, but on occasion he'd sent them a few things that he'd noticed, and, in return, some of them had sent him things that he might be interested in. Ah, professional respect and courtesy. It was wonderful.

As for what he was interested in, well, the Long Array didn't pick up just interesting astronomical phenomena and distress calls. It also picked up just about every radio signal in the solar system -- including the fun stuff that people encrypted. Now, the really juicy stuff, that was harder to intercept, but there was still enough interesting data flying through space for everybody who was worth anything to have a group of spooks and spies keeping an eye on things here. Most of the hypercorps, the Titanians, the Extropians, the anarchists, the

argonauts, the Loonies... heck, even the Jovian Junta had an enclave here, although actually seeing one out in public was the stuff of joking legend. And everybody was watching everybody else watching the feed from the Long Array. And that feed needed to be decrypted. And then the good stuff needed to be re-encrypted for transmission elsewhere.

And that's where Navin came in. He was a freelancer, a hacker specializing in encryption -- breaking it and making it -- living it large in the center for crypto in the known universe.

And it was sweet, sweet living.

He had his own cornucopia machine, a small personal staff that he treated well, a couple of spare morphs on ice, a sinfully large personal space that was all his, an openminded argonaut girlfriend who found the discussion of advanced mathematics arousing, the sort of luxury that kings back on Earth could once have only dreamed of, and a distinct lack of moralizing, paranoid elders who feared any sort of change.

Sure, at about one fortieth of a standard g, the gravity on Dione was light even by Luna's standards, but that just made things more fun. Yeah, he couldn't strap on wings and fly here like he could back home -- and all of the EXperience Playback from the aerial football matches just ended up making him homesick -- but jetpacks were an acceptable substitute, and at least he had Saturn and its *gorgeous* rings as a backdrop...

...not dead, blacked, abandoned Earth.

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With a shout, Beatrice Norling, more generally known by her friends and allies as Bouncing Betty, attacked, moving inside the small man's reach for a grapple.

Then the small, bald man moved, so quickly that even Betty's augmented vision and reflexes had a hard time seeing everything he did. There was a brief blur, an impression of elbows locking, a scream of pain from her joints that she ignored, an all-too-familiar feeling of being utterly outclassed, and Betty found herself sailing into the nearby bulkhead of the dojo.

Again.

Micro-G martial arts masters *sucked*.

With a groan, she peeled herself away from the padded bulkhead and gave the small bald man a flat look, something of a glare without any wattage behind it.

The small man, her sensei, looked at her, mild bemusement on his face.

"Again, you overcommit your attack. You are too aggressive. This is not fighting under gravity, where friction is your friend in creating leverage."

"Yes, Sensei," she said, knowing that he was right.

"You have shown commendable commitment to your training," he said. The addition of *especially for an anarchist*, went unsaid, but not unheard. "However, at the moment, I believe that you are in danger of losing your composure. Take a breather for ten minutes, center yourself, and then return."

She nodded, unhappy at the instruction, but understanding the logic behind it.

With a nod at her acceptance, he twisted his body around, displaying an expert control of angular momentum, and turned back to the other students. As he began breaking down

exactly what he had been doing during his short bout with her, Betty straightened and pushed off towards the sidebar. Grabbing a towel, she cleaned the sweat off of her face and hair before it could start dripping free and creating annoying free-floating bubbles.

A moment later, there was an “Oof!”, followed a moment later by a thud as one of her classmates emulated her previous flight.

Smiling to herself, she pushed off from the wall and up and out of the way from the class.

On the one hand, she was highly grateful to have found Sensei Yoshida, much less that he was willing to teach her. After all, most Ultimates couldn’t be bothered to deal with the rest of transhumanity. Of course, his teaching style mostly involved proving that you were worthy of his contempt, but once you proved yourself worth his while, he was good people.

On the other hand, as a result of said teaching style, there had certainly been times where she had *really* wanted to strangle him.

Which was the point, of course.

But it was worth it. The training, the hours, the katas, the studied dislike of her fellow students, most of whom were either Ultimates themselves or paying Sensei Yoshida. She knew exactly in what coin most of them thought *she*, the anarchist, the non-capitalist, was paying him, perhaps not realizing the insult they were giving their teacher.

It was worth all of it.

Because it meant that Beatrice would never be unprepared again.

The flashback wormed its way back to the surface, unbidden, before she could grit her teeth and fight it back down.

*The darkened corridor, lights flickering in a fashion that made the shadows deeper and more threatening.*

*A noxious odor, thick, choking, cloying. It settled on the tongue, wormed its way up the nostrils, and even polluted her eyes.*

*The smell of rotting meat.*

*Human meat.*

*The chortling, sadistic laugh of the predatory exhuman, as he toyed with her, flickers of motion amidst the shadows.*

*She felt fear. She knew fear. Fear such that mankind had once thought conquered when they fought their way to being the top of the food chain.*

*Fear of being prey.*

*Of being eaten alive.*

*She was prey now.*

*And finally, screaming her defiance, she ran out of ammo.*

*And the exhuman moved in, taking the useless weapon from her hands with a swipe of its talons.*

*Then, having disarmed its prey, made it completely helpless, it played with its food, its screaming food, some more.*

*And then, when the food had ceased being entertaining, it began to feed.*

Beatrice came back to herself, feeling her muse dumping drugs into her system, pushing down the incipient panic attack. The exhuman was gone, dead and gone a year and more now. Her team had killed it, had retrieved her stack from her half-eaten body and resleeved her, a



traumatized ego in a new body, a new chance at life as she shook and sweated and panicked and cried at the memory of her death, of being *eaten alive* by something that had once been human.

And she had asked Firewall to find her a trainer in hand-to-hand combat, so that, when her magazines ran empty of bullets, her batteries empty of charges, her belt empty of grenades, she would not be helpless. *Again.* She. Would. Not.

Sensei knew of why she sought his instruction. He was Firewall too. He knew what drove her. And he approved. And thus he taught her. Taught her to fight, in all conditions, high gravity, no gravity, everything in between, with everything from a knife to a crowbar to a pipe to her bare hands.

Because he knew what was out there, unlike his other students. Because, like her, they protected transhumanity against that which threatened it. And because, he wanted that the next time something like that might happen, that the transhuman kicked the ex-human's ass.

Below her, insofar as such terms had meaning in zero gravity, Sensei motioned her back as he passed out padded clubs and practice knives. It was time for zero gravity weapons practice, always a tricky proposition -- afterall, half of the force you used on the other guy just ended up pushing you away from him.

She accepted the weighted weapons with a bow and then struck a ready stance.

A few minutes later, she again found herself sailing through the air at that damn bulkhead, neatly disarmed, her own momentum turned against her.

*Sigh.*

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Jessica Owens yawned and stretched as she emerged from her sleeping sack, as the call to morning services echoed through the corridors of the world.

As the Faithful gathered in their chapels, Jessica saw her friends and drifted over towards them. A few minutes later, down the twisted and meandering corridors, chatting and gossiping as various young men kept glancing in their direction, they entered the chapel of the Fundamentalist Temple Of God Anticipating. They sat in the pews, which Jessica always thought were sort of an oddity to have in zero gravity and a holdover from the Fallen World, which, according to doctrine, they had left behind to form a new godly nation, as laid down in the Writ of Saint Lewis.

She looked at the hand-made mosaic of Saint Lewis adorning one wall, and admired its beauty. Saint Lewis had been lost to them far too young, only a few years after the founding of the world, well before her own birth. The mosaic depicted Saint Lewis, beautiful, young, perfect and stern, in the act of instructing his chosen successor Father Gallagher in his duties to the Faithful.

Father Gallagher, their leader, their Saint-In-Life, the man blessed by Saint Lewis, passing along the blessing of God Himself, to lead and craft their small world into the mold of a godly image, who stood between the Faithful and the dangerous wretches out beyond the borders of the world.

At least, that was what Temple doctrine said. As for herself, Jessica sometimes wished

that she could have seen what sort of nameless perversions and twisted sins the outsiders got up to, so as to avoid the temptations herself, on her own judgement, rather than having to rely strictly on say-so of others.

It wasn't like that in the hydroponics lab where she worked; her superior, Matron Hilda, didn't just issue vague warnings and expect them to come running to her for answers to every problem with the plants that the entire world depended on for air and food. No, Matron Hilda gave them explicit instructions, and taught them how to apply their knowledge and experience to solve problems so she wouldn't have to be bothered with every little thing. She barely had the energy to keep up with the big things.

At times, Jessica wished that that the priests trusted her like Matron Hilda trusted her. Wished that they would entrusted her with the knowledge that she could use to stay faithful, so she could avoid making the sorts of mistakes that could cost lives or souls.

Also, deep down, at night, when the lights were out and she was having trouble sleeping, Jessica did have to admit, it wasn't just the fear of making a mistake that drove her desire to know. It was also her desire to *know*. She remembered her first days in the hydroponic lab, from just a few years ago, when the acolytes had begun assigning her creche to their first jobs. She had entered into the clean and fresh smelling cylindrical chamber, festooned with bright, clean lights and with the green of plants growing everywhere, the tang of growth filling the air.

It had all looked so simple at first, and in her youthful arrogance, she had assumed it to be so. She now looked back on those memories with amusement, and dismay. There had been so much to learn, and it had been like whole new worlds opening up, layer upon layer of intricacy and subtlety, with concepts such as soil pH, capillary action, lumens, light wavelength, and more, all waiting for her to understand them. And she was still learning, and she understood now how much more there was that she didn't know about plants.

But the learning about them, the unveiling of the secret world of plants, it had been glorious. She had drunk down the knowledge like a man dying of thirst being given a bottle of water, and it had awakened within her a desire to know, to learn, to understand.

And, scariest of all, she now understood how much she hadn't known, hadn't had the framework to know, when she had been uneducated about plants, and how easily her uneducated self could have made a catastrophic mistake that could have and had been easily corrected with a little learning. So, as her thoughts inevitably lead her to her usual conclusion, how much in danger of making a similar mistake in regards to her soul was she, given how little she knew about the dangers of what was outside the world?

But she didn't dare ask. She had been assigned to Life Support (Hydroponics), and by the doctrine of the Temple, her sole -- and soul -- concern were plants. She hadn't been assigned to either the priesthood or Doctrinal Hygiene... which was a terrifying thought. People taken away by the Doctrinal Hygiene Inquisitors never came back the same...

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## **Chapter 1: Signs and Portents**

**Date:** April 19, 10 AF (After Fall) 1445 AMT

**Location:** Mariko's apartment, Utopia Habitat, Martian Areosynchronous Orbit, near the Olympus Mons space elevator terminus.

Mariko grimaced, her brow furrowing in a fashion that would once have guaranteed a scolding from her mother about unsightly lines. But that had been a long time ago.

Now, the more she looked at this data, the more worried she got. She had sent the secure request for a meeting with a Firewall proxy earlier this morning, shortly after she had confirmed her suspicions after her third cross-check of the data. Ever since then, she had been analyzing the data more and more, with more and more pieces falling into place.

And the picture these pieces revealed was not encouraging. What could possibly be going on here?

[Mariko, the Firewall proxy has arrived. He has identified himself as a beta fork of one of our previous proxies, Peter Zhao.]

*Excellent. Connect him.*

Peter's fork materialized in Mariko's field of vision. She took a moment to mentally roll her eyes. Honestly, who would take *anyone* seriously when they went traipsing around the mesh looking like that?

[Hello again, Mariko-san. What seems to be the emergency?]

*Greetings, Peter-sama. Ridiculous simulmorph avatar or not, some etiquette training went right to the hindbrain and burrowed in there to stay. I have uncovered something that I believe would be of interest to Firewall for further investigation, and given the number of times I have assisted Firewall in uncovering and discovering the often grisly and disturbing fates of single operatives who continued their investigations on their own, I have decided that it would be best if I exercised some common sense, extrapolated from precedent, broke from said precedent, and asked for backup.*

The ridiculously exaggerated anime eyebrows adorning the simulmorph's forehead quirked for a moment, his kinesics indicating a moment of amusement and acknowledgement of her very pertinent point.

[I see. And what exactly have you uncovered appears to be so hazardous that a highly competent and independent operative such as yourself is willing to call in Firewall on it?]

*Well, Peter-sama, I've been on the trail of this one ego for several months, after the incident last year on the Dorfl Trust Habitat in the Belt...*

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**Date:** April 20, 10 AF, 0930 AMT

**Location:** An "A Whole New You!" Franchise Resleeving Clinic aboard Utopia Station, Martian Areosynchronous Orbit, near the Olympus Mons space elevator terminus.

Mariko laid down in the resleeving clinic's ego bridge and took a deep breath. She never liked this part. Egocasting long distances was never fun. The loss of some continuity, the shock of waking up in a foreign place halfway across the solar system, in a new body no less, not to

mention the sheer expense, it all added up to an experience to be endured, not savored. At least her current sleeve, expensively cloned and augmented with exalt modifications from her original birth body, would be safe at the body bank... and, if something grisly and disturbing *did* end up happening to her, well, at least she could be restored right back into that body from this backup.

She shuddered as the ego bridge's sensor array opened up like a flower's petals, with an enclosure and a neck rest exposed within.

*Here we go, Yuzuki. See you on the other side.*

[Indeed, Mariko. Estimated egocasting time required for transmission to Saturn, thirteen hours and twenty minutes.]

Mariko grimaced, and then tried to keep herself from twitching, as the petals and neck rest of the ego bridge used their combined sensors and specialized nanobots to scan her brain, copying her neural structure to a virtual brain -- and disconnecting and rerouting those connections as they went. Within an hour, this body would be a mindless sleeve, to be put in medical stasis awaiting her ego's return. Once moved from her physical brain to a virtual copy, her mind would then be transmitted to a similar facility in orbit around Saturn, almost a billion kilometers away, by quantum farcaster, so as to avoid errors that would turn a perfectly healthy mind into a vapor. There, the process would be reversed, downloading her mind from the virtual copy back into a new organic brain, in a new body.

It wasn't like she hadn't done this dozens of times before over the years. Hell, hundreds of millions of people had entrusted their existences to egocasting during the desperate evacuations during the Fall, transmitting their minds away from the dying Earth, becoming refugees, bodiless refugees, in the process. It was a mature, proven technology.

So why was she so bloody *nervous* each time she did this!?

In desperation, she called up a news feed and dove into accounts from the extrasolar colonies with a will.

Afterall, once one read about one of the mysterious Pandora Gates and the theories of how they worked -- and some of the first-hand accounts of the experiences of gatecrashers -- plain, old-fashioned egocasting didn't seem scary at all!

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**Date:** April 21, 10 AF, 0540 UT

**Location:** Exterior of Sophia Habitat, Middle Saturnian Orbit

Terry floated outside of the newborn Cole Bubble in a hardsuit. It was amusing, actually. Advanced nano-fabrication technology capable of building items from the atoms on up. Computer technology capable of emulating a human brainstate in a computer smaller than the original organic equipment. True artificial intelligence. The fruits of decades and centuries of advancement in robotics, computers, physics, and every other area of human knowledge... and still, sometimes, it was just easier and more efficient for a bunch of people to don spacesuits and assemble their homes by hand.

Of course, when said spacesuit was a hardsuit, which could accurately and without

hyperbole be called a human-shaped single-person spaceship, it got a little easier to understand.

But still, it could seem a little ridiculous on the surface of it.

However, this particular bit was easily the most ticklish part of assembling this habitat. The spaceport facilities had been constructed separately from the main habitat area, the eponymous bubble. Making the bubble had involved taking a rocky S-type asteroid diverted from the Saturnian Trojans, putting it in a polymer bubble of the right size, inflating it with carbon monoxide, and then heating the whole thing until the gas started reacting with the asteroid. Let cook for a few months, let the nanoparticle catalysts guide the deposition on the polymer and you ended up with with a hollow bubble made of silicates and metal. So, while the bubble had cooked, they had taken the time to prefabricate the spaceport facilities that would end up being attached to the end axes of the bubble, to take advantage of the zero-g when the whole thing was spun up to provide artificial gravity on the inner surface.

Now that the bubble was done cooking, it was time to attach the spaceport facilities, and finish their part of constructing this habitat. Once Terry and his people were done with that, they would hand the place over to its future residents and the team that they were bringing in from one of the Titanian micro-corps for the final infrastructure outfitting and stocking of the internal ecology.

He looked out over the tableau floating in space in front of him and let himself take a moment to feel a sense of awe and satisfaction at what he had helped build.

An off-white oblong shape floated nearby, Saturn and its rings providing a beautiful backdrop against the depths of space. At first glance its size was impossible to comprehend, until one's hindbrain realized that the little glowing ovoids drifting around it were people in spacesuits, freefloating synthmorphs and construction bots. Then one had a moment to feel very small in comparison to the four kilometer long lozenge-shaped object, gently drifting in orbit around the ringed, off-white giant, getting ready to join the host of other habitats that transhumanity had built out here. More than eighty million people lived in orbit here around Saturn, and Terry felt a moment of supreme satisfaction.

*But let's not get ahead of ourselves,* he thought. *Sera, is everyone ready to get started?*

[Nearly everyone is in position. We are currently in the process of doing our final check. Estimated time to completion, fifteen seconds,] his muse replied.

Terry nodded. That was good. Right on his projected schedule, and it wasn't like they were in any terrible hurry. This was going to be a delicate operation, no matter how they sliced it, and his innate engineer's conservatism readily approved of making sure all of the t's were crossed and i's dotted.

Over the next few moments, the last few checks were confirmed to be completed, with no surprises that might upset things.

Time to get things moving.

Literally.

[Alright people,] Terry messaged. [Begin stage one and start bringing up the thrusters on the clockwise and counter-clockwise docking assemblies. Bring them up to ten percent thrust for fifty seconds and then cut thrust.]

As his team followed his instructions, Terry watched his entopic displays for any

surprises as the large masses of the prebuilt spaceport facilities slowly began moving towards each end of the lozenge. There, they would dock with the guide pylons and ports that Terry and his people had already assembled on the surfaces of the two ends of the Cole Bubble and then Sophia Habitat would be one step closer to being ready for habitation.

Of course, they were also in the process of slowly pushing two large, semi-regular, multi-ton masses of metal, ceramics and carbon towards an elongated bubble composed of nickel-iron alloys and ceramics that they had spent the last few months cooking up out of a small asteroid. Every last bit of kinetic energy that they gave those spaceport facilities now had to be carefully countered during the last few meters of docking them with the bubble, or the bubble could easily crack like an egg.

Avoiding that outcome was highly preferable.

Fifty seconds in and they were up to full speed as the thrusters on both spaceport assemblies cut off and the assemblies began to coast. The motion was nearly imperceptible at this stage to even Terry's augmented vision, but his readouts told the story. Half a centimeter per second per second built up speed quickly on a human scale, and the spaceport assemblies only had to move a hundred meters. At their current speed, they had about five minutes until deceleration and contact.

Four minutes passed, as the assemblies slowly coasted closer to their new homes at a rate of a quarter meter a second. In a few seconds, the thrusters would begin firing in the opposite direction, slowing the assemblies down until they gently docked with their new homes.

Which is why, of course, the hacker struck then.

Terry's first warning was when his entopic monitor feed of the procedure locked up.

Then, an instant later, the thrusters went to full power, pushing the assemblies faster and faster towards the habitat bubble.

*Oh, shit!* Terry thought, and then the universe seemed to slow to a crawl as his training kicked in and he reflexively activated his mental speed nanoware.

*First things first.* Each moment that the assemblies had to accelerate was one moment less that they had to *decelerate* them before they hit the bubble and one more moment's worth of increased speed that they would have to decelerate from.

Second, they needed to find, lock down, and boot the hacker from the system before he could do something else that would make matters worse, such as rebooting or shutting down the system or send the thrusters to chaotic firing. While a reboot would get rid of the hacker's own access, it would also severely harm Terry's own ability to control and coordinate the thrusters -- and by the time the system finished rebooting, the assemblies would likely have already crashed into the habitat bubble.

And third and finally, they still needed to finish the damn docking maneuver! And with the feed from the thrusters and his control wrested from him by a extremely malicious, dedicated and apparently competent hacker, that was going to be *tricky*.

Terry quickly composed and sent out a message to his team. [\[Thruster overwatch teams, activate the manual overrides on all thrusters now! Shut them down, secure them from the local mesh and prepare the thruster arrays for direct control by me via VPN in the case of mesh shutdown or reboot. Mesh overwatch team, find that hacker and boot him from the system, fast. Assume his morph is close, if not physically present. Find it, jam his signal if](#)

feasible, and catch him. I want to know why he's sabotaging this project.]

Message sent, he began to grab the video and data feeds from every nearby source he could get his virtual mitts on -- ships, morphs, hardsuits, spimes, everything. With his command and control feed cut, he needed to know *exactly* how much thrust the thruster arrays were putting out and in what vectors, because every bit of that thrust needed to be canceled in the next minute, and it was highly likely that the hacker, his damage done, was just going to crash the local mesh and skedaddle.

It was what Terry would do, in his position.

So, Terry was going to need to compile a complete view of the thruster output and, without access to the thrusters and their controls and readouts, he was going to have to *improvise*.

*Urgh.*

Meanwhile, as he began to compile, correlate and assemble a complete picture of the forces the thrusters were putting out, Sera, bless her nanocircuit heart, was assembling the Virtual Private Network that he was going to need to get the assemblies dancing to his tune again.

An array of green and red lights appeared in his entopic displays, indicating which of the thrusters were under his control via his team's manual overrides and the VPN, and which were still being controlled by the subverted mesh.

Most of the lights were still red, and now with the assemblies up to a speed of just under half a meter per second, the remaining thrusters under mesh control went to random firing and then, a handful of seconds later, cut out as the local mesh shut down.

Literally thinking quickly, his mind accelerated to high speeds by nanobots in his brain, Terry rapidly input the estimated thrust values from the random firings into his ad hoc forces models for the two spaceport assemblies. Now it was time to correct the errors that this saboteur had tried to deal to his habitat.

He wasn't going to fail.

*He wasn't.*

Terry began programming thruster firings. He couldn't just send all of the thrusters to full power to counteract the extra thrust that the hacker had graciously gifted him. At that thrust, it would take ten seconds to completely decelerate the assemblies, half of the remaining time before impact. However, if he simply did that, then the random thruster firings would remain uncompensated for and would push the spaceports just enough off course to cause a collision with their docking pylons.

But he needed to be able to fire all of the thrusters at as close to full power as he could to decelerate in time before the assemblies collided with the habitat bubble. Afterall, the hacker had pushed the assemblies into the zones where they were supposed to already be decelerating for docking contact down from a quarter meter per second, not nearly twice that.

And to make matters worse, he still didn't have complete control of the entire thruster array, costing him a reasonably significant percentage of his total thrust budget, and the losses didn't even have the courtesy to be evenly distributed, costing him even more of his total thrust budget, because he couldn't dare fire them at full thrust, as that would be uneven thrust even and of itself.

At eleven seconds before impact, Terry uploaded his thruster firings to the VPN and braced himself for either success or failure.

The thrusters began to fire once more, coming to half thrust, with some thrusters increasing or decreasing from that value in order to compensate for the earlier random firings.

The assemblies began to slow, buying them precious more seconds in which to decelerate further.

Between six and eight seconds into the reverse thruster firing pattern, the random firing compensations ended, and the thrusters tied into the VPN went to as close to full power as they could and maintain balanced thrust.

Twenty two seconds after Terry had uploaded his thruster firing instructions to the VPN, the clockwise spaceport assembly touched the surface of the bubble, followed a scant second and a half later by the counter-clockwise assembly on the opposite end of the bubble.

Terry slumped in his hardsuit as the radio channels erupted into cheers.

He hadn't failed.

Not this time.

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**Date:** April 21, 10 AF, 0825 UT

**Location:** Sophia Habitat Tin Can Assembly Station, Middle Saturnian Orbit

A short while later, the thrusters had been brought back under the control of the rebooted mesh. They were currently beginning the slow work of accelerating the habitat's rotation, which would eventually provide centrifugal force that would create half a g's worth of artificial gravity along the central two thirds of the elongated bubble, but it would take a few weeks for the thrusters to accelerate the habitat's rotation to that speed.

Thus, with the thrusters back under control, and the spaceport assemblies now in the final stages of the process of being firmly mounted and attached to the surface and structure of the bubble, the aftermath of the hacker's attack was thankfully non-catastrophic. The worst side effect was that the local mesh was now being policed by a number of infomorphs who were on the verge of paranoia. However, much to everyone's relief, the hacker-saboteur been located and neutralized.

Thus, Terry reentered the airlock aboard the tin can habitat that he, his team, and the anarchists who would eventually be settling Sophia had been living aboard while working on the habitat. As the inner door opened into the main lounge and largest chamber in the habitat, he winced as the general applause washed over his ears. Wordlessly, Sera highlighted his @-rep score in his entopic displays, which was currently rising in a rather disquieting fashion as the story was apparently going viral in the local Saturnian mesh.

*Won-der-ful.*

He held up a hand and, after a few moments, the clapping died down.

"Thank you, everyone, but I would like to point out that you should all be clapping for yourselves, not for me. If the rest of you hadn't been on the ball and taken back control of the thrusters, I would have been utterly useless out there. This was a group triumph, not mine."



Someone in the crowd made a noise of disagreement and Terry sighed.

"I'm just one man. I did my part. You all did yours. And despite our opponent's best efforts, we succeeded, and they didn't."

"Yeah, and that was because of you!" Irvin Harrison, one of the future Sophians, said, floating along the side of the cylindrical chamber at an angle to Terry, passing him a drink bulb.

Terry accepted the bulb and took a sip, finding hot, flavorful coffee within as the others kept talking.

"*You're* the one who assessed the problem and sent out the instructions that enabled us to get things fixed so quickly. If *you* hadn't been on the ball..." said Verity Weber, one of his team members, ending with a shrug.

"Yeah, sorry boss, but you're going to have to take the credit for this one," another team member said with a smile.

Terry, putting the drink bulb aside to float in mid-air, gave the lot of them a level look and sighed. "Alright. Fine. Discussion closed. In other news, what can you tell me about our little saboteur? I was told that it was handled, but I was occupied at the time with attaching the assemblies."

One of the Sophians, Rachel Yarrow, grimaced, and an image popped up in Terry's entopic display of a small ovoid the size of a human head, with various limb protrusions and a red circle for an eye. According to the accompanying information, it was a Spare morph, a small, moderately cheap synthmorph that gatecrashers carried with them when scouting new connections via the Pandora Gates. Its intended purpose was to provide a way to resleeve fatalities in the field.

This Spare, however, had been modified as an infiltration vehicle -- complete with a dead switch on the cortical stack and a self-destruct.

He gave a disgusted look. "So, no evidence, no way to trace it back, and probably loaded with a conditioned beta fork anyway?"

"Yep. We found it and tried to communicate with it, get it to surrender. No beans." Yarrow grimaced. "I just want to know who dislikes us enough to send us a prezzie like that."

Terry thought for a moment, and then his face twisted into a similar grimace. "It might not have been your group in particular, but anarchists in general. Something like this, the hypercorpers over on Salah or one of the other hypercorp hubs could put together out of petty cash and launch it our way. They succeed, we're looking at months of repair work and delay on what's left of the hab before it could be inhabited and a resulting spike in anarchist paranoia as word spreads. They fail, and they're out a few thousand credits -- pocket change -- and maybe get that spike anyway. Win/maybe-win."

Yarrow gave him a respectful look. "Boy, you're a cheerful fellow. So upbeat and optimistic." She sighed. "Wonderful. But we can't exactly let down our guard, now can we?"

Terry quirked an eyebrow at Yarrow's lack of protest and provisional acceptance of his theory. That was good. He looked around the room as he took another drink from the coffee bulb as a delaying tactic.

The mood in the space had completely changed since Terry had entered, shifting from a celebratory atmosphere to an alert wariness.

*Good*, he thought. Something like this, it was a prank, a practical joke, compared to

some of the the threats he'd seen, that he'd fought against.

Attempting to sabotage a half-completed habitat ranked very low on the personal scale of a man who had fought -- and died -- on Earth during the Fall.

And in the ten years since, he'd had it hammered home exactly how fragile transhumanity was, the dangers that what was left of his species faced.

So, yeah, he saw this whole incident for what it was -- minor, a joke, nearly a farce. Not the great victory like the others were seeing it as.

On the one hand, it was good that they could still see it as such. It meant that Terry and his associates in Firewall were doing their jobs.

And on the other... well, he dearly wished he could give his team, the Sophians and the others currently bumping his @-rep up some real perspective on what was out there...

But on the third hand -- which was currently grasping one of the chamber's guide rails -- would they appreciate having the bliss of ignorance torn away from them? He certainly hadn't, now had he?

*Feh.* He finished drinking the coffee and tossed the empty bulb back to Irvin. Turning to Yarrow, he said, "No, no you can't. Every time we anarchists build something out here, or anywhere, we give the hypercorps another target for them to want to take over and suck dry, and throw another rebuttal in their face to their claims that we're dangerous, disorganized and doomed to fail. Greed and wounded pride... a dangerous combination."

Yarrow grimaced. "Yeah." Then she brightened. "But today, they didn't succeed, and that's thanks to you!"

On cue, the compartment cheered.

Terry sighed.

Then, a moment later, a message popped up in his entopic display, which Sera had flagged as *Urgent, Firewall*.

Keeping his kinesics as neutral as he could under the circumstances, Terry opened the message. On the surface, it was an invitation to travel to the Twelve Commons habitats and play a new simulspace VR strategy game being released tomorrow by one of the students at Titan Autonomous University, *The Starfarers And Settlers Of The Kosmos*. However, buried in the message was a signature code indicating that this invite, unlike the rest of the messages currently inundating his inbox, was from Firewall.

Alright. Well, that made things much easier for deciding what to do next.

He held out his hands -- all four of them -- and the crowd in the compartment quieted down over the next few moments.

"Regardless of who actually is responsible for the survival of Sophia Habitat, I do believe that Stage One of construction can officially be designated as complete as of half an hour ago -- two days and sixteen hours ahead of our predicted completion time, no less." There were grins, high fives and backslaps among his team at that, as well there should be. They had all done good work, despite occasional good-natured complaints as to his 'slave driving' scheduling. "Ms. Yarrow, I hope that you and your associates enjoy your new home, and that Stages Two and Three manage to be much less eventful than this morning." There were rueful nods at this. "As for myself and my team members, our part here is done."

"Have you got any more jobs lined up for us, Boss?" inquired Ree Harper, another of his

team, the nanotattoos on his face currently in a slowly shifting, whorled, colorful, and vaguely tribalistic pattern framing his eyes.

Terry gave him a level look. “Y’know, for a bunch of supposed anarchists, you all seem to be pretty happy to follow me around and take orders.” There was some snickering at that old comment.

“Eh, what can we say, Boss? You always seem to have fun jobs lined up, with a good rep boost to boot,” Verity said, the grin on her face setting off the striking cheekbones of her hazer morph into stark relief.

“Yeah,” said Fan Shu, another one of his team, one of the few people in the entire lounge sleeved in their birth body -- in her case, a heavily augmented bouncer with Asian phenotype features. “It’s worth the slave driving and working for someone with an addiction to terrible coffee and no sense of humor,” there was general chuckling at the well-worn line, “when he’s *competent* and willing to get his hands dirty.”

“Hey, the coffee’s a tradition,” Terry protested, following the script with an inner smile.

“What, it’s traditional to drink something that’s a second cousin to an industrial solvent?” shot back Ree Harper with a grin.

As the banter went back and forth, the Sophians in the lounge watched, bemused.

Terry, his face schooled in an expression of mock dismay at the follies of youth, replied, “Technically, unless you can actually *use* it as an industrial solvent, it can’t truly be considered to be *real* engineer’s coffee, but I can understand your confusion. It’s not like you kids have ever had the real deal.” At this, everyone chuckled. Then Terry shrugged. “However, no, I don’t have another job lined up, not since you all last asked -- or at least, I don’t have any *interesting* jobs lined up. If another one comes around, I’ll give you lot of merry reprobates and slackers a call, but even this slave driver knows when to give a furlough or risk an uprising. And I know some of you were planning on sticking around for Stages Two and Three anyway, so quit it with the puppy dog eyes.”

“And what are you planning on doing with your vacation, Boss? Do you even remember how to take one?”

Terry tried to keep a grimace off of his face, but knew that he hadn’t been completely successful. That had hit a little too close to home. *No, I’m actually planning to secretly meet with my handler in a secret trans-faction conspiracy, a conspiracy which I’ve overheard some of you dismiss as a hoax concocted by the tin-foil hat crowd, where I will probably be assigned to a new mission to investigate and destroy some nasty leftover kill-tech from the TITANs or some secret hyper-corp project or something else that is highly likely to get me killed -- again -- all in the name of protecting what’s left of transhumanity from extinction*, he thought sarcastically.

But what he said instead was, “I’m planning on heading to Twelve Commons, spend some time at the DIY Shipyards, maybe catch a show at Janus Commons. In fact,” he turned to Yarrow and the Sophians, “I was wondering if I could borrow one of the habitat’s skiffs to make the trip. I’ll send it right back after I’m done getting there; it should be back within fifty hours or so.”

That was something of a fairly big favor; the skiffs, otherwise known as Orbital Transfer Vehicles, of which the Sophians had two, were fusion rocket propelled, capable of one-twentieth of a g of sustained acceleration, and had room for carrying a fair number of passengers or cargo

in their current configurations. And even in a nearly post-scarcity society, they weren't easy to come by.

Yarrow and the other Sophians glanced at each other and exchanged mutual nods. Then Yarrow turned back to look at him. "Sure!" she beamed at the hero of the hour. "In fact, we have some people currently shopping for foodstocks on the Commons habitats. Hand it over to them when you get there and that'd be perfect. We'll just send Nigel along with you to pilot it -- so he doesn't pine for his baby, of course," she said with a smirk at the end.

Nigel Kerr was the sort of mechanic that Terry knew well from his time in the US Army -- mostly because he had been one himself. Seemed to care more for the equipment than the people, and may whatever god or gods you worshipped have mercy if you broke something of theirs, because they certainly wouldn't.

"Excellent. I guess I'll be on my way then. See you around, everyone."

He pushed off from the side of the chamber and, in the acrobatics of the veteran free faller, slide through the crowd without touching or brushing into anyone, his momentum sufficient to carry him all the way across. Catching himself on the guide railing with his lower hands, he redirected his inertia onto a new vector that carried him down the connecting tube that acted as the central transit spine of the tin can assembly and down towards where the skiff was docked.

"Hey, Boss, wait up!" "We're coming too!" a couple of voices called from the lounge that he had just left.

He twisted on himself, his bouncer morph's limber body giving him exquisite control of his angular momentum, and looked back the way he came.

About two thirds of his people were floating after him, and his heart sank when he saw who two of them were.

*So much for making a quick getaway*, he thought, and then said aloud, "Meet you at the skiff dock!"

[Marta has been fairly understanding about your refusals in the past,] Sera said.

*Yeah, but she's always had a bad case of hero worship, and I don't doubt that today's little incident has made things worse in that regard. And Sakura is even worse. Put her and Marta in the same room with the same intentions and I'm not sure what will happen.*

He reached the end of the central transit tube segment, catching himself gracefully with his prehensile feet on the grip bar next to the tube hatch, which irised open as he approached. He spent a moment giving serious consideration to running away and then another moment appreciating the humor in his situation.

*Here I am, a friggin engineer, not a sex symbol or a rock star or whatever, on the sunny side of sixty years old -- experientially, at least, I think this morph's somewhere in its biological twenties -- with a solid rep as a real hardass, and yet I'm seriously thinking about running away from a pair of girls that would be younger than my daughters and who have both repeatedly offered to sleep with me in the past.* His mental voice grew somewhat plaintive. *Why couldn't this have happened forty years ago, when I was younger and more able to enjoy the idea?*

[Well, my research seems to indicate that men have been compared to fine wine.]

*Oh? Getting better as they age?*

[That and requiring women to stomp the crap out of them until they turn into something acceptable to enjoy with dinner.]

Terry sputtered as he swung himself through the hatch with enough force to free fall through the length of the next transit tube segment in a single move. *Sera, I take it that that last upgrade patch had some humor algorithms?*

[Yes, actually.]

*I see. Remind me to message that programmer with some feedback.*

[Noted.]

The hatch to the skiff's docking port irised opened as he flew towards it, and as he passed through the circular opening, he reached up and grabbed at the grip bar next to it, bringing himself to a halt.

Over the next couple of minutes, Sakura, Marta, Lee, Verity, Xolani and Wangi flew through the hatch after him, at varying speeds and with equally varying degrees of control, some carrying bags of their personal belongings, others traveling light or with nothing other than what they could carry on them. Autonomists tended towards having little to no personal belongings anyway, and with nanofabrication, it was often easier to just make a new copy of whatever at your destination, unless it had sentimental value.

Marta, next up after him through the hatch and in the lead of the rest of the pack by at least fifteen seconds, had been traveling at the free fall equivalent of a flat-out dead run.

Before he could think twice -- or once, for that matter -- Terry instinctively reached out and grabbed at her hand, pulling her into an arc and braked her down from a speed that could have and would have injured her if she'd landed in any other manner other than perfectly.

She looked at him, hero worship and a distinct and worrisome lack of thought in her eyes and said quietly, "I knew you'd catch me."

*I'm doomed.*

Xolani landed much more lightly and looked over at Terry and Marta. She tried hiding it, but a smirk struggled to get out. "So, uh, Boss, we wanted to come along to the Twelve Commons. Y'know, since you were already going, why waste the cubage and delta-v?" She -- wisely -- did not say anything about Marta.

At that point, Nigel Kerr drifted through the hatch. Sleeved in a heavily modified slitheroid morph, the mechanic was the sort of "hands-on" tech geek that Terry considered to be his kind of people. The synthetic shell was basically a two meter long segmented metallic snake with a vaguely human-looking head. Normally, they also came with two retractable arms, but Nigel had added an additional two for a total of four arms. Add in a gas jet system, and Nigel was capable of some free fall maneuvers that had left Terry both impressed and somewhat envious.

There were certainly advantages to sleeving a synthmorph, and Terry had occasionally thought about it as a permanent thing, but on those occasions when his Firewall missions had led to him being temporarily sleeved in one, the experience had left him with mixed feelings. He'd never thought before that he would miss the smaller details of biological life, but after going through a few weeks of continual consciousness, never needing to sleep, eat, drink, breathe, or deal any of the other little bits of biological existence, it had left him extremely discomforted. He remembered realizing at one point that he hadn't slept or had a cup of coffee in over a week, which had, on top of everything else on that mission, nearly pushed him over the edge into a little breakdown. Even when he had gotten shot and had an arm torn off by a rampaging

exsurgent, the pain filter had felt... *wrong*, somehow. Ever since then, he had tried to stick to sleeving in biomorphs, preferably bouncers. He'd had this current body for a few years now, not counting the time he had been egocast off somewhere on a mission.

Nigel looked at Terry and his upper right hand extended in a thumbs up. "Terry, good to see you! Great job earlier!" He drifted towards the skiff's cockpit as the hatch closed behind him. "We'll be ready to go in a jiffy. I'm just having my muse check the spimes aboard, making sure that we don't have any unsecured cargo or stuff like that." Spimes, god's gift to the logistics of living in space, were the ubiquitous micro-sensors that were just about everywhere and built into just about everything. They broadcast their data to anyone who cared to listen to them, and they had a lot of data -- they were location-aware, environment-aware, self-logging, self-documenting, and typically loaded with just about every sensor imaginable.

"Estimated time to departure is about ten minutes, and I'm just going to declare a flight plan with the Traffic Control Gang over on Phelan's. Transit time to the Do-It-Yourself Shipyards and Janus Commons should be about sixteen hours and twenty-five minutes, unless the TCG tells me I need to divert course or something. Everyone ready?"

A chorus of affirmative replies came back.

"Alright, beginning prelaunch checklist."

As Nigel ran through the safety checklist, Terry began reflecting on how, exactly, he was going to try to avoid Marta's and Sakura's unwanted attentions, not only on this trip, but on the Twelve Commons habitats as well, without offending one or both of them to the point where they either refused to work with him again -- which would be a shame, as both were competent and well-trained -- or decided to take revenge in the classic woman scorned fashion. Terry knew enough about women to know that line about 'hell hath no fury', and, having met some fury morphs, he wanted to avoid that particular outcome.

This was going to be *tricky*.

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**Date:** April 21, 10 AF, 1710 UT

**Location:** Janus Commons, Twelve Commons, Low Saturnian Orbit

Betty was in the process of getting some breakfast from one of her favorite local eateries when the message arrived, and, dammit, she was *hungry*. So she shoveled strips of vat-grown bacon and something gelatinous that was supposed to be scrambled eggs, with hash browns on the side, smothered in ketchup and salt, with just a tiny dollop of mustard mixed in for the flavor, down her bottomless gullet as she looked over whatever it was that Firewall wanted her to do now. A mug of coffee, loaded with sugar, artificial creamer and hazelnut flavoring -- Betty had only once in her life tasted real hazelnuts, and they had tasted *nothing* like her favorite syrup flavoring -- washed it all down. A small stack of waffles and toast quickly shared their fate, the artificial syrup she drowned them generously with being delightfully sweet and sticky, just as they should be.

The man seated next to her at the counter seemed to be making a point of keeping his own meal -- and his fingers -- out of range, least they also ended up on her menu.

There were two messages from Firewall, actually. The first was to head to the habitat's

resleeving facility and meet with someone who was egocasting in from Mars, get her equipped and settled down from any resleeving problems. Then, later, there was apparently going to be a briefing in the Commons mesh, likely hidden in the simulspace game that she now had an invite to, with the rest of the team that Firewall was putting together for whatever mission the proxies had in mind for them.

Whoever it was egocasting in, they were apparently going to be on this mission, which made Betty curious. In her time with Firewall, sending sentinels across the solar system for missions wasn't unheard of, but neither was it common, and she wondered what the deal was this time.

She looked around the eatery as she chewed. It was built into the one of the many small chambers that composed the Janus Commons beehive habitat, in a small rotating carousel section within the bubble, which provided just enough gravity to keep food on plates, plates on tables and counters, drinks in cups and arses in seats, about one twentieth of a standard g. So the counter she was sitting at ran around the entire circumference of the carousel, and there were people eating lunch seated above her head.

Most disorienting was the transition line between the carousel and the rest of the bubble, which was still in zero g, and had the other half of the eatery. While the spinning wasn't extremely fast -- the carousel only spun about once every eighty seconds or so, and was fully twenty-five meters in diameter -- it still was traveling at about three and a half meters per second along that transition line, which was enough to induce nausea in some of those more prone to motion sickness as the two halves of the eatery's space moved in relation to each other. Kept out the riff-raff, in Betty's opinion. If you couldn't hold down your meal, you didn't belong in where she wanted to eat. Perhaps that was a trifle unfair, but it wasn't like the place didn't keep anti-nausea drugs on stock. It was your own damn fault if you were so macho that you didn't ask for them.

Betty finished her meal and got up from the counter. With a smile and a nod at the servers, who waved back at their 'black hole' regular customer, she pushed off into the freefall area. From there she flew into the caverns that composed the Commons.

The beehive habitat, as was typical of beehives, was a maze of tunnels carved through the rock of the small moon. There had been some preplanning for layout purposes, but for the most part, the place was a three-dimensional maze of sealed rocky tunnels and chambers. Due to the fact that Janus was mostly a giant pile of rubble instead of a cohesive block of rock, with an average density only about two-thirds that of water, the entire habitat had been easily carved out of the small moon's body. The initial settlers had taken advantage of how porous the rock was and burrowed their homes in.

Now, years later and having also made use of the occasional larger natural caves, Janus Commons was still expanding, with a population of just nine hundred thousand, making it the single largest habitat among the Twelve Commons, holding nearly a sixth of the population.

Betty gave a small twirl as she moved quickly through the crowds of floating pedestrians. For obvious reasons, the Commons was left in the moon's microgravity, with only a few of the smaller chambers and bubbles, like the one she had just left, having carousels for light gravity.

In one of the large chambers that she passed, a theater troupe was putting on a performance and was in the midst of a microgravity dance number. She paused for a moment

to watch the dancers twirl and move and felt a moment's desire to just jump in and join them.

At least some of the dancers were apparently from Red Emma's Dance, one of the other habitats in the Twelve Commons neighborhood. Betty had been able to attend one of their performances last year when they went on tour through the Saturnian anarchist stations. She had watched, entranced, a workman of physical motion appreciating the kinetic artistry of masters. Their morphs had all been custom designed, one-of-a-kind pieces, specifically designed for music, dance or both combined.

She watched, drinking in the motions of the dancers, and then noticed that two of the parallel bars were just hanging there in the middle of the chamber, without any apparent support that she could notice -- and she could see that a number of the other bars had thin but visible wires holding them in place. But those two bars were just hanging there, without apparent support -- indeed, as Betty watched, three dancers, moving in choreographed unity, twirled around the bars, moving through the air from bar to bar like demented ping-pong balls, in a display of acrobatics that left it abundantly clear to Betty's eyes that there was no way that those bars were being supported by normal means.

*Rada?*

[Yes, Betty?] her muse's motherly, caring voice entered her consciousness.

*Those two parallel poles? How are they being supported?*

There was a brief, barely perceptible pause and then Rada's voice returned. [The poles are being supported by alien artifacts found on the extrasolar planet Portal known as fixors. They were found in an overturned alien truck buried in the ice two hundred kilometers away from the gatecrashers' settlement around the Pandora Gate. The truck is estimated to be nine hundred thousand years old, but the fixors and their packing materials are estimated to be closer to seventeen million years old.]

*Jeeze. How do they work? I mean, they're just... floating there.*

[As to how they work, that's the primary question. Nobody knows. They seem to violate several physical laws and theories as to how they work or what powers them are still in the working stage. All we know at this point is that if you squeeze the end of the ovid, it doesn't move. Period. They'll support up to twenty-three hundred kilograms without budging a millimeter and do so indefinitely until the end is squeezed again.]

*Damn. And no clue how they work?*

[None. The argonauts are currently throwing theories at the wall and hoping one sticks.]

Betty looked at the two poles just floating there in mid-air as the dancers used them to build up considerable momentum, spinning around and around and around, faster and faster and faster, the poles staying as still as if they had been mounted in the ground somewhere, not floating in mid-air in the middle of a zero gravity beehive habitat.

She suddenly felt very small, insignificant, like when she looked out at the stars and tried to comprehend how far away they were, or when she touched a rock and found that it was billions of years old.

She turned and pushed away from the theater chamber, in the direction of one of the lift tubes that would take her to the resleeving clinic.

*Something* had made those fixors, back when transhumanity's ancestors were still living in trees and trying to avoid being eaten. Something, *someone* out there in the galaxy had had a



knowledge of science and physics and engineering that made the brightest minds of her species shrug and say, 'I have no fracking clue how it works.' And that someone was *gone*. A whole civilization, capable of making stuff that make transhumanity look like dumb apes, gone.

And if something capable of making those things, those fixors, had died out, what kind of hope did transhumanity have?

Betty grimaced as she took the paternoster tube to the resleeving clinic's space.

Well, that was why she was part of Firewall. Making sure transhumanity survived was their entire point.

A few minutes of brooding and freefall maneuvering later and she arrived at the clinic's chamber.

The place was nice, soft, with some quiet music playing in the background. The temperature was higher in here, as was the humidity, with a light scent of ozone and clean air. Betty looked around appreciatively. It looked nice and was certainly a step up from the cold, medicinal and sterile corporate facilities that she'd had occasion to end up resleeving in. In those places you felt like you were waking up on a slab in the morgue -- and the corp pukers that ran the places certainly treated you like that.

A message appeared in her entopic displays. Her future team member was going to be resleeved in a few minutes. If she wished, she was welcome to wait in the nearby lounge.

Betty did so, and while she was waiting, her interest piqued, she had Rada do another search on alien artifacts found by the gatecrashers and settlers.

She was in the midst of learning about the planet Morovac from the Exoplanet Wiki, which apparently had had an alien race living on it just a hundred and sixty thousand years ago before they all uploaded themselves as infomorphs to a planetwide computer network (at least, that was the current theory, as the computer network seemed to be abandoned), when her new teammate emerged into the lounge.

Betty looked up at whoever it was that Firewall considered worth egocasting all the way from Mars. She -- at least, Betty was pretty sure it was a she; the morph was female and the ego's kinesics looked pretty natural to it -- was sleeved in a Caucasian exalt morph with classical Mediterranean features. Fairly pretty, dark hair, dark eyes, straight black hair currently pulled into a fairly severe bun, olive skin complexion -- in other words, pretty normal for Janus Commons, where the most common languages were English, French and Spanish, and most of the local genestock to make the local morphs had similar origins. It looked like it had the fairly standard zero-g mods -- prehensile feet, grip pads on the hands, and Betty was willing to bet that there would be an oxygen reserve implant as well, and probably some other upgrades.

A glance at her public social network profile in Betty's entopic displays gave her a name, Tsukino Mariko, and confirmed that either she hadn't met this ego before or that she wasn't interested in broadcasting her real identity to the universe. Her displayed rep scores were interesting, though; decently high @-list, as high as her own, actually, but also equally high CivicNet rep, and, on a hidden secondary mesh ID that her own i-rep unlocked, much to Betty's surprise, rep with The Eye even higher than her own. *Significantly* higher.

*Damn, girl. What did you do to earn i-rep like that? And with that c-rep and @-rep, you've got to be an Extropian or one of the other anarcho-capitalists. You've been busy and with that kind of rep, you're the kind of person that keeps their word. I like that and I definitely*

*think I can work with that.*

Betty pushed off from the wall, pushed her discomfort at all of the dead alien races lying around in the universe to the back of her mind, and floated forward, holding out her hand. “Hi, I’m Betty!” she said cheerfully. “Our mutual associates suggested that I meet you and help you get acclimated after that egocast.”

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Mariko looked at her fellow Firewall sentinel, reached out and took the proffered hand, shaking it.

“Hello,” she said, much less enthusiastically than the other woman, which wasn’t hard, as she practically seemed to be vibrating with energy. “I’m Mariko.” A personal escort and greeter from Firewall? That was different, and therefore didn’t bode well; usually, the proxies left most of the work of assembling to their foot soldier sentinels.

*[Perhaps you’ve simply fallen into the clutches of a conscientious proxy,]* Yuzuki opined.

*Yeah, right. More likely is that the proxies are playing politics or something. Either that or there was something worse on that transport that they noticed and I didn’t and figured that I would need backup immediately on getting here, or something like that. I mean, look at that armory she’s carting around!*

Still looking at the other sentinel, Mariko assessed her. Beatrice “Bouncing Betty” Norling, according to her public profile. Decently high @-rep, as high as Mariko’s own, somewhat lower i-rep than her own, and even some small bits of EcoWave rep and RNA rep. Not much, but it was there. Also a link to an AR/simulspace image gallery, which could probably wait a bit.

Physically, she was sleeved in a reasonably attractive female morph, likely one of the autonomist-line fury combat morphs; she had the sleek, athletic look that Mariko usually associated with furies. Her morph was also obviously modified, though; for starters, her feet had been given the prehensile modification that her own current morph had and which Mariko had often considered getting for her own main exalt morph back in the inner system. Also she had apparently laced her hair follicles with some form of nanotech, because her hair was visibly and smoothly changing color from blue to a deep purple and then to a light green down the length of the strands as Mariko watched. She wondered if the color change was randomized or tied to Beatrice’s emotions.

Beyond her physical appearance, the heavy load of weapons she was carting around was another clue as to the morph’s likely identity as a fury. Mariko could see at least two pistols, a rifle, a couple of *grenades*, a freezer, a stunner, a couple of knives, and, *oyaoya*, was that a nanosembly sword? *Kya*, what else had those proxies found, that she apparently rated them calling in such a soldier?

“So, Betty...” Mariko said, letting herself visibly cast a look over the other woman’s array of weapons, “is it just acclimation, or is there another reason you’re packing this much firepower?”

Betty looked at her oddly for a moment and then glanced down quizzically. “What... oh! Oh, all of this?” She chuckled, but Mariko didn’t get the feeling that there was actually very

much humor behind it. "I've just gotten into the habit of always being prepared. Y'know. Just in case."

"I see." Mariko quirked an eyebrow. [Habit from a bad mission, I take it?] she messaged Betty.

Betty seemed to freeze up for a moment and then nodded convulsively. [Exhuman, predator, liked to play with its food. I needed a resleeve afterwards. It left me... kinda messed up in the head.]

Mariko winced. [I see. Sorry for bringing that up.]

[No worries. I've got a handle on it. And I learned that firepower isn't everything... but it helps alot.] Betty shrugged. [And the next exhuman that I bump heads with is going to regret the experience -- briefly.]

Mariko chuckled. "I see. Well, it's good to see that you're prepared. Now, as for that acclimation...?"

"Yes?"

"Well, there are a couple of augments I'd like to get added to this morph that I think I'll need soonish -- for business, so a good upgrade clinic is definitely on the list."

"Well, we're in one at the moment," Betty said, giving her a curious glance. "But why didn't you just have the upgrades done to the morph before you egocast over?"

"Some were, but not all of them, due to lack of time. Getting me out here was something of a priority item, you see."

Betty's eyes widened slightly, but otherwise gave no indication of her emotions. That was good. Mariko could definitely see herself working with her.

"However, there's at least one thing I need to have handled before I stick myself in a healing vat -- and I don't think that we'd have time for any serious upgrades before we have our little meeting later."

"And that thing is...?"

"Well, whoever had this morph last left me with a stack of cravings to deal with -- and the first one I want to take care of is *food*! I'm starving! Know anyplace around here that you'd recommend?"

Betty just gave her the oddest look in response. "Mariko, I can tell we're going to get along just fine. C'mon, I'll show you around, see how many of those cravings we can scratch off."

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**Date:** April 21, 10 AF, 2013 UT

**Location:** Navin Surti's Quarters, Thoroughgood, Dione, Saturnian Orbit

When the Firewall message had arrived in his inbox, Navin had been in bed, as had Kaitlyn, his girlfriend. The pair of them had been experimenting with a new pleasure enhancing drug that Navin had acquired from an associate on Phelan's Recourse. Whoo boy, it was good thing both of them had medicines, because having an aneurysm mid-coituous and needing to be resleeved would have been *embarrassing*.

As the pair of them laid there cuddling in the afterglow, Navin mused on the new drug. Whew, but those scum biohackers knew what they were about! The drug cocktail had obviously had some nanodrug elements, as well as some opiates -- an incredible high, supreme confidence, some sort of short range empathic channel between the two of them which had built up a feedback loop of shared pleasure and now, he was pretty sure, a tweak to the post-coital glow to increase pair bonding. Very nice. Well, the scum drug hacker he had gotten it from had advertised it as just the thing to reinforce and reward 'the hopelessly monogamous'. Damn it if he hadn't told the truth.

The scum were an imaginative lot, that was for sure, and Navin could certainly appreciate their single-minded focus on hedonism, but he had too much intellectual curiosity and that damnable work ethic inherited from his parents to go running off and join them.

*Eh. The scum keep saying 'do what makes you happy'...* He stroked Kaitlyn's red-gold curls absently, eliciting a purred moan of pleasure from the sleepy argonaut woman. *I think I'm following the spirit of their advice.*

Then the voice of Veda, his muse, intruded into his happy thoughts.

[Navin, you have a high priority message from Firewall.]

Navin picked up his head, closed his eyes, groaned, and put his head back down behind his girlfriend, inhaling her scent.

*Let me see it*, he thought, the happy, pleasurable fog around his thoughts swiftly evaporating, as he continued to pet Kaitlyn, not wanting her own afterglow as rudely shattered as his own had been.

He looked over the message quickly, noting the time for the meeting over on Twelve Commons. Getting over there physically wasn't really an option for him, but there were other ways for him to cross the gulf of a few light seconds and attend the meet -- just not physically.

Now came the real question: which did he send to the meeting, an alpha fork or beta fork?

He thought it over for a few moments. An alpha fork would be an exact copy of himself, and it wasn't unheard of for an alpha fork to make a break for it instead of returning to be reintegrated into the original ego. While he wasn't exactly worried about that sort of thing happening, and it hadn't in the past when he had forked himself for big hacking jobs. Heck, he kept a couple of spare sleeves around not just for resleeving in case of an accident, but to stick forks in if needed -- or wanted. He and Kaitlyn had had some fun experimenting with that on previous occasions. So having another alpha fork of himself wandering around wasn't exactly something that he objected to, unlike some people.

But there were other risks that he shouldn't casually dismiss either, such as his fork getting captured by some of his enemies and rivals. If they managed to capture his fork, they'd know everything about him soon enough once they got the fork into a simulspace and started taking it apart with psychosurgical torture. A couple of experiential days of that and Navin was pretty sure that he'd crack and spill the beans.

Also, then he'd also have to worry about his fork's ego getting handed back over to the Lunar Lagrange Alliance, where there was still a bounty on his head for that little mistake that had ended with him running clear out here. Wasn't *that* a cheerful thought? And, to top it off, there was also the fact that alpha forks made most people uncomfortable, and if Firewall had a

biocon on this team that they were putting together and they found out that they were dealing with an alpha fork, it could really sour the intra-team relations.

But a beta fork, on the other hand, made him uncomfortable. Taking a copy of his mind and chopping bits off and hobbling it so it wasn't really him any more? Urgh, gave him the willies. In the past when he'd made and reintegrated beta forks, it had been a semi-surreal experience, integrating the memories of a dumber, slower, well, to be blunt, *stupider* version of himself. There was one memory from a fork he had made last year where he had tried to remember his mother's name... and *couldn't*. That memory, the moment of panic from the fork, even knowing that it was a copy of him and that his primary ego still remembered, it occasionally showed up in his nightmares.

However, on the other, more pragmatic hand, removing most of the beta fork's memories also cut down most of the associated security risks. But if he just sent a beta fork to the meeting, that also could be seen as him being dismissive of them and Firewall, as if he didn't trust them enough to send them a full copy of his ego -- and it wasn't like Firewall didn't already have a copy of his backup in their secure storage, as was their policy.

Eh, if he was going to send a fork out, rather than just send his ego over, might as well go for broke.

*Veda, access my cyberbrain and instance an alpha fork, and message Wallace over at the argonaut comm center that I'm going to be egocasting over to Janus Commons as soon as possible, and I'd appreciate it if he could put me in the queue. Also, message the body bank and let them know to start defrosting one of my spare morphs; I've got a feeling I'm going to need it soon.*

[Yes, Navin.]

A moment later, a simulmorph -- *his* simulmorph -- appeared in his entopic display.

*Hello, Navin*, he thought, at the same time as [Hello, Navin] appeared in his message display.

*Good luck out there*, he told himself. *I'll keep the home fires lit and the girl happy for you to come back to.*

His fork smiled. [I know. You keep her happy and I'll keep her safe. Deal?]

*Deal.*

Navin smiled as the simulmorph disappeared from his virtual field of view. Yes, he was a criminal hacker, a crook, someone that invaded the privacy of others for a living. Yes, he was a self-centered hedonist that had too many uses for wealth to want to live in a system without it. Yes, he wanted to have his cake and eat it too.

Except... he *could* have his cake and eat it too. Much to his joy and dismay, he'd discovered love and something, *someone*, worth fighting for.

He leaned over, a finger tracing lightly down the line of her spine. "Kaitlyn?"

"Murr?" came the half-conscious bemused response.

"Have I told you lately that I love you?"

She rewarded him with a smile and rolled over. "At least four or five times in the last two hours... but that's no reason not to say it again."

"Love you." He kissed her and started working his way down her neck, prefacing each peck with a repeat as she giggled.

*Moments like this, Navin thought to himself, are what being human is all about.*

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Navin watched himself and Kaitlyn through the various cameras scattered about in his apartment -- drones, ectos, spimes. His infomorph -- his electronic mind -- was now living in one of those computers, his personal server bank. The local mesh was now his immediate world, and the physical world was now the one that he interacted through computer interfaces. On the plus side, freed of the concerns and constraints of flesh, he could act at the speed of thought... but, on the downside, he was now a ghost in the machine, unable to touch or interact with the real world except by using sensors and drones and remotely operated shells.

As much as he said that he lived and breathed computers and the mesh, he didn't necessarily mean that *literally*. He liked the physical world just fine, thank you very much. And, from his perspective, the Navin lying in the bed with Kaitlyn had been him, just a few moments ago. And now, there were two of him -- one that got to stay at home, in the safe little pleasure palace that he'd carved out for himself, and one that got to go out and fight monsters both human and inhuman.

It was almost enough to make one resentful... which made no sense and yet it did. He shook his head, as if clearing it of electronic cobwebs. Instancing as an infomorph was always disorienting, doubly so as a fork. It was time to change the personal narrative.

He was doing this because he cared; if he didn't, then he wouldn't have bothered with getting involved at all. Instead, he would have just laid back and let someone else do the job of protecting transhumanity from itself and all of the existential threats that a hostile and uncaring universe could provide. Doing it this way was truly the best of both worlds -- he could act as defender, yet not give up any of what and who he was fighting for and fighting to keep.

And, to tell the utter, ugly truth to himself, he wasn't just doing it for his own craven survival -- he was doing it for her, Kaitlyn, and for his family back on Luna and for every person he'd ever met, every friend he'd ever made -- even the ones that would gladly hand him back over to Shackle's police forces if they ever caught up with him.

Because, dammit, now he knew that the threats were out there. He'd seen them, he'd fought them, and, even if the option was offered to go back to a state of ignorant bliss -- and, with psychosurgery, that option was certainly there -- he wouldn't take it. He wouldn't make himself into an ignorant sheep, put the wool back over his eyes.

And yet, at the same time, it was good to know that there was a part of him that would be safe, that would continue living and enjoying life, regardless of what happened to this instance of him. Redundancy was a virtue, after all.

A message popped up, floating ahead of him in his virtual field of view. Wallace had an opening for an egocast to Janus Commons in twenty minutes.

That was good. He had time.

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**Date:** April 21, 10 AF, 2235 UT

**Location:** A Phelan's Recourse transfer shuttle en route to Janus Commons, Twelve Commons, Saturnian Orbit

Arkady 'sat' in the micro gravity environment of the shuttle, his legs folded in a yoga position that his highly limber and flexible bouncer morph could assume with ease. He had spent most of the short shuttle ride looking over some interesting new articles regarding memetics, psychology and psychosurgery, recently published by some of the argonauts. There were some interesting conclusions, although he disagreed with some of them, having a somewhat different perspective granted by his async abilities.

Now, some of the ideas regarding applied psychosurgery, they were interesting, although some of the possible implementations had disturbing implications -- but then again, what development *didn't* have disturbing implications these days?

The mass and frenzied uploads of the Fall evacuations had been hurried, with safety parameters pushed, flouted or just simply ignored. As a result, a great many people who had made it out only as an infomorph, egocast across the solar system, had some form of mental damage -- as Arkady damn well knew, given how much of the past ten years he had spent patching up many of those minds. But, as a side result, there had been *a lot* of data amassed over the past decade on mental disorders -- the current descendent of the old DSM weighed in at over a terabyte of data.

Thus, someone had had a questionably bright idea, in Arkady's view: since these disorders signified common damage states for the brain -- or, in other words, when damaged, the brain tended to fall into these states. That meant that these states were natural fail states for the human brain, which meant, and here was the foolish idea in Arkady's view, if one used psychosurgery to carefully *induce* that failure state in someone's brain with some tweaks, you could make mental pathologies work for you! The fellow had dubbed it 'Pathotronics', which made Arkady wince.

Now, he had to agree that the concept was sound, but the problem was, it was far too easy to induce... but he was betting that it was far harder to fix and return to a normal brainstate.

And, once the scum got their hands on pathotronics, he knew exactly who was going to be the one that was called in when some idiot got themselves stuck in induced monomania, or narcissism, or, worst of all, something like pronia or positive hypomania -- him, Arkady Maletski, the resident grouchy misanthropic psychosurgeon.

It wasn't like he didn't have enough on his plate, now the morons were going to be doing it to themselves! Gah!

It was almost enough to make someone induce extreme introversion and go live on a small little asteroid somewhere... far, far, *far* away from *people*!

An alert sounded for people to strap themselves in or otherwise brace themselves as they prepared for docking.

*Finally.*

Arkady moved to the nearby bulkhead and strapped himself to it as the shuttle began to decelerate.

He wondered what it was *this* time that Firewall was calling him in for. Someone smuggling TITAN nanoweapons again? A cancerous cell of hidden exsurgents? Or perhaps

someone in the inner system had finally noticed that Alexey had apparently disappeared and had resleeved their pet assassin. That one would be problematic for Arkady; estranged or not, tossing his own brother's ego into dead storage had been hard enough *once*, even if it had had to have been done. Perhaps he would instead be lucky and he'd have a nice, bioconservative Jovian infiltrator cell to play with instead. A man could hope, could he not?

The shuttle shuddered as it docked with Janus Commons, and Arkady unstrapped himself. Pushing off from the wall, he headed to the airlock, where his fellow passengers were currently queuing up to pass through the scanners and into the station proper.

While Janus Commons was an anarchist station and therefore didn't really both with customs offices and their tired old forms, they also tried to keep, oh, say, little things like fissile material, antimatter, and other weapons of mass destruction out of their home, not to mention keeping out contraband -- which, on an anarchist station, meant red markets, stuff that the *community* didn't approve of, not something some old farts in suits in a green velvet and wood paneled room banned because of any of the usual reasons. Sensible attitudes, and Arkady approved of them, but they apparently weren't being paranoid enough. Just last month, he had heard that one of the districts here had had a nanoswarm attack that had turned hundreds of people into statues, their bodies calcified in place. The locals all agreed that it had to have been the fault of the hypercorps, which, personally, Arkady agreed with.

Maybe that was why he was here? Maybe Firewall was launching an investigation of their own into the attack? Well, it wasn't like he could have gotten here any faster without egocasting, so it was certainly a thought.

He passed through the scanner without incident. All he had on him was his vacsuit, some clothing, a stunner, some odd bits of everyday gear, a few doses of some stimulants, and a brain modified to be psychic courtesy of a TITAN virus, which, of course, they could hardly have a scanner for, given that most people didn't even know asyncs existed.

He moved into the station proper and checked the time. He had a few hours before the meeting. Hmm... what to do...

His hindbrain and gonads conspired to cheerfully offer some suggestions.

He was giving serious consideration to the idea when a small form blew past him at high speed, moving quickly enough that Arkady actually managed to discern a small but noticeable Doppler effect in the shrieked, "AUNTIE ROSE!"

Arkady paused and tracked the small form, which his muse, Mishka, initially identified as a neonetic morph -- a body modified to stay at child size even into adulthood, ideal for living in space due to needing less space and resources. However, then his eyes widened slightly when he took a second look.

It wasn't a neonetic -- it was a child. An actual *child*. At a guess, probably about ten, maybe twelve. Arkady couldn't remember the last time he had seen an actual, living human child.

Scum, as a general rule, tended not to reproduce, being so focused on their own personal hedonism and pleasures, and, facing immortality, most other people were still in the mindset of old, overpopulated Earth and the general disapproval towards conspicuous reproduction. There had been the Lost Generation as an attempt to try to revive some of transhumanity's numbers, but that had been a dismal failure, and the few Lost that Arkady had



personally encountered were indeed poor Lost souls, as damaged as anyone could imagine. And asyns too, every last one of them. Poor bastards.

But here, right here in front of him, was a child, a little girl, shrieking at the top of her lungs as she tackled one of the other passengers stepping off of the shuttle.

*Mishka, start recording! And grab images from the last twenty seconds for the record.*

[понял, босс], his muse said brusquely.

Arkady took a look at the little girl's public profile. It was a good thing that there was no one around that knew him, or they would have suspected that he had been captured and a poorly trained infiltrator sleeved in his morph, for there were hints of a small smile dancing about his face.

The girl's name was Nikole Palevsky, and she was just about to turn twelve in the next few days. She was a third generation spacer, her parents, Patricia and Jacob, having been themselves been zero-one g'ers, a pair of habtechs who had themselves been born and raised in space. The woman she was currently grappling and spinning with was indeed her mother's sister, Rose Brown.

He took a deep breath and, after a glance around to make sure no one was watching him -- he had a reputation as a misanthrope to hold up, after all -- he smiled, briefly, and then, prepared to do something that he dearly hoped he wasn't going to regret.

He reached out through his *domovoi*, extending his psychic sense and touched the little girl's mind, ever so gently.

And then closed his eyes and smiled, not caring who saw him.

For he could feel her joy, her untainted, uncomplicated happiness.

And it was glorious and it was wonderful and it was beautiful and he wanted to weep at the pureness of it.

He opened his eyes, looking at the little bouncer girl clutching to her aunt with all four limbs and, regretfully, pulled his mind back from hers and turned to leave.

*End recording, Mishka.*

[Запись закончена. сохранение опыт воспроизведение в личных архивов.]

There were days when Arkady wanted to forget it all -- all the pain, all the terror, everything, to just say fuck it all and surrender, give up trying to make a better world for anybody but himself and lose himself in the over-stimulation embraced by so many of his fellow scum.

But this... this he was going to save. As a reminder for those moments when it got too bad, that transhumanity had hope.

He floated into a transit tunnel, found a conveyor of loops traveling steadily along and grabbed ahold. In an hour or two, he knew, his normal misanthrope tendencies would probably be back in full force -- bah, humbug, and all that -- but, for the moment, he was more than willing to bask in the memory of a child's uncomplicated joy.

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## Chapter 2

**Date:** April 22, 10 AF, 0225 UT

**Location:** Janus Commons, Twelve Commons, Low Saturnian Orbit and a Secure Firewall Simulspace conference space in the Janus Commons Mesh.

Terry flopped back in the entertainment cafe's private VR pod, belted himself in and tossed the ultrasonic trode net onto his head and then blinked as the trode net activated. The cafe's lurid lighting and the murmur of crowds of people trying to enjoy themselves with overly complicated and not terribly tasty drinks, surreal and oddball entertainment, and company that was attempting to do the same blessedly disappeared, replaced by the white room, the gateway into the VR mesh.

He'd managed to divert his team, including the amorously intended Marta and Sakura, for the duration of the trip to Janus Commons with an old multi-player 4X (X-plore, X-pand, X-plot, X-terminate!) real time strategy game from the halcyon and bygone days of his youth. His recommendation had been enough of a selling point for the others to be willing to give it a try, even if some of them had been extremely skeptical about the enjoyment potential of something that predated all of their births.

They had quickly found themselves sucked into the same black hole that had eaten up so many hours of his teenaged years. The moment he knew that he was safe from being taken into the back of the skiff and ravished was when Marta had discovered the joys of dragon-riding cavalry. *That* had certainly brought back some memories, and he had given her some tips, which she had gleefully put into use, roasting and chomping down on Xolani's pack of ogres.

The ambush ten minutes after the slaughter and ogre roast, in which Sakura demonstrated *exactly* why Terry and his fellow players had considered the warlock warlords to be an overpowered newbie faction all those decades ago, well, he *might* have seen it coming, but he certainly wasn't going to admit to that.

However, he had happily followed up on showing the others why the warlocks had been a *newbie* faction, and why an over reliance on a single unit type was a bad idea, although he had been careful not to obliterate Sakura's base and infrastructure, and actually spent a few minutes running discrete interference as she rebuilt. After all, he had *not* wanted her forced out of the game. That would have rather defeated the entire point of offering it up as a distraction to begin with.

After they had docked with the Commons and moved aboard, Terry had had a moment of *profound* clumsiness in his dwarven army deployments, leading to a series of setbacks that had rapidly resulted in him losing the game. Promising to catch up with them later, he'd left them in a lounge several kilometers away from his current position, the battle quickly turning even more cutthroat.

Sera was keeping him apprised of how the game was going, and it was honestly rather entertaining, watching how the ones that had doubted the quality of his forty-year-old video game were the ones that playing it the most intensely. At the moment, it was all a stalemate, thanks to Terry's manipulations. He had made sure that everyone had had a chance to build themselves up with proper defenses. This, of course, meant that no one had the strength to take out anyone else without uncovering their own bases. He figured it would probably take another hour, perhaps three, until a clear winner emerged.

More than enough time for his and Firewall's purposes.

Besides, he didn't doubt that some of them would immediately begin a rematch.

In the white room, he loaded his simulmorph avatar, which resembled himself, his original birth body at the age of twenty-five, in moderate need of a shave and a reasonably dark skin tone courtesy of his multi-racial heritage -- pure American mongrel, that had been him -- dressed in the overalls and hardhat of an old-school engineer, with a toolbelt and vest festooned with equipment, with a big wrench hanging from one hip, one end of the wrench head slightly dented and the paint chip as if it had been used to deliver percussive maintenance on a regular basis. He'd put a lot of work into rendering this old thing, way back when, and it had aged well, judging by the appreciation and approval he had received over the years.

Entering the game code with which he had been provided by Firewall, he quickly found himself in the VR game environment of *The Starfarers And Settlers Of The Kosmos*, a real time strategy game involving galactic settlement, trade, expansion and occasional bits of warfare against marauding pirates and invaders, come to take what the players had spent so much time building. Terry made a note to come back later, after the Firewall mission, and give the game a real try.

Swiftly navigating through the game levels, he followed the signposts that the Firewall hacker had implanted in the game -- his codename and other pre-shared code words, cryptic references to past Firewall missions and other such cloak-and-dagger hints -- eventually finding himself in a busy dirt-side spaceport, with fleets of cargo ships taking off and landing in true space opera fashion. Terry moved through the crowds of game sprites and over to the spaceport's central building -- which, normally, should have just been an empty shell, there primarily for the aesthetics -- and entered it.

Inside, he found a secure and separate simulspace environment, with another six simulmorphs already waiting. It didn't look as if they had been waiting too long, though, and this was the indicated time for the meeting.

"Hello," he said hesitantly, looking around the meeting space. It looked like a conference room, done in the twentieth century space opera aesthetics of the game. Already seated at the round table were the other simulmorphs, three of which he recognized. *Aw, hell...*

The Firewall proxy, MacKenzie, a Vector -- a Firewall hacker -- with whom Terry had interacted with before and was probably responsible for the space they were currently meeting in, looked up at him. "Ah, Sentinel Tarrant. Good, you're right on time. Please, sit," he said, indicating the last remaining seat at the table.

Terry walked to the table, looking around the room and people's simulmorphs.

MacKenzie, who Terry was fairly certain was actually a neo-raven -- a raven uplifted to human intelligence -- had a simulmorph of an anthropomorphic raven. It was a nicely detailed bit of work, obviously custom-made, not off the shelf, with the iridescence of feathers shifting realistically in the light as MacKenzie moved.

Going clockwise, on MacKenzie's left was a much more typical simulmorph, likely just modified from standard, that of an athletic and toned woman wearing a skin-tight spacesuit, with Asian features, bright green eyes and long, waist length black hair, so dark it had blue highlights. Terry was willing to bet that that was her original appearance and that the hair had once existed, but not anymore. Hair that long was, as a general rule, impractical in zero gravity. Her entopic tags identified her as Sentinel Mariko.

To her left was a simulmorph out of a cartoon; an anthropomorphic tigress wearing a skintight spacesuit, over which lay a bandolier festooned with pouches, the black and orange furred tail lashing back and forth in the space behind her chair. Thankfully she hadn't gone for a simulmorph with exaggerated breasts or similar excess or flaunting -- that sort of compensation always worried Terry and put doubts in his mind as to the person's maturity and, in this context, professionalism. Her entopic tags identified her as Sentinel Beatrice.

Continuing clockwise was a generic simulmorph of an androgenous human of average height, coloration, build and facial features, a simulmorph model which Terry recognized simply from sheer repetition. It was the avatar equivalent of driving a gray generic sedan back on Earth -- unnoticeable just from sheer blandness and repetition. Its entopic tags identified it unhelpfully as Router Sascha.

Next to Sascha was the source of Terry's unhappiness. Arkady Maletski, who, to be fair, didn't look any happier at seeing Terry. Then again, Arkady was *never* happy -- all that Russian pessimism. But that wasn't the problem -- or, at least, not the main problem. Maletski was an async, and one that wasn't shy about using his abilities, and Terry had some issues working with asyncs, due to both the source and the nature of their abilities.

As for his appearance, Maletski was still in the same simulmorph that he had used the last time his and Terry's paths had crossed. It was a copy of his physical morph, a heavily modified bouncer. Terry still wondered how many of the more egregious bits of body sculpting that the real morph possessed had made their way into the simulmorph as well. All of them, he suspected. Much to Terry's dismay, Maletski was decidedly *not* shy about anything, much less his body mods. Hopefully the two female sentinels would be professional enough to turn Maletski down when he inevitably propositioned them.

On Maletski's left was the other simulmorph that he recognized. Navin Surti's simulmorph was distinctive enough to identify even without the entopic tag. A human male, his skin a dark, dusky gray, with regular parallel lines of old integrated circuitry running along the skin as if tattooed, with the lines regularly luminescing with green and blue lights that, on closer inspection, appeared as binary code.

He'd worked with Navin before, and while Terry had some issues with Navin's priorities in life, he knew what drove the younger man to work with Firewall. He had actually met Kaitlyn during a prior mission and been impressed with the girl's mind; he could completely appreciate Navin's motivations in that regard.

Next to Navin was an empty chair, obviously intended for Terry. Next to that, the last person sat, appearing as a young woman with sandy blond hair, dressed in a tasteful suit that Terry tentatively identified as being of a fairly recent style from Titan. Her entopic tag indicated that she was 'Scanner Rebecca'.

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Betty looked at the last sentinel, trying to keep her surprise to herself and wondering how well she was succeeding in that. The man's i-rep was *scary*. She knew that her own i-rep was middling, and Mariko's was higher, but this man's rep was even higher than Mariko's by a substantial margin, higher even than some of the proxies in the room -- which was actually

rather terrifying, when one thought about it. He was a sentinel, a field agent, who had a higher status in Firewall than some inner circle members. He also had a damn *high* @-rep score, as well as some points in the ecologist network EcoWave or e-rep, and a fair score in the scientists' network, RNA or r-rep. Pretty much the only ones he seemed to be missing were the inner system networks CivicNet and Fame, or c-rep and f-rep.

Hang on... hadn't there been something in the newsfeed earlier about an engineer named Tarrant earlier? She resolved to ask about it after they were done.

Judging by the looks that were going around the table, this Tarrant guy obviously knew the other two sentinels other than Mariko.

Once Terrance sat down, Sascha began speaking. Betty had worked with the router before; routers were Firewall's mission coordinators and Sascha was usually the one that called her in on Firewall missions.

"Greetings, everyone and thank you all for coming," it began; Betty wondered how crazy trying to determine Sascha's gender was driving the other sentinels; it had certainly been distracting enough to her when she had first met the neuter Firewall proxy.

"We have a potential mission here in the Saturnian system, courtesy of a lead with disturbing implications discovered by Sentinel Mariko. Sentinel Mariko, would you care to lay out your findings?"

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Mariko nodded at the annoyingly generic router. "I certainly can."

With a thought, she activated the conferencing software, beginning by projecting an image into the center of the conference table.

The image was a schematic of a beehive habitat burrowed into a moderately sized asteroid of a few kilometers in radius, with some construction projecting above the surface of the irregular rock, one of the projections in particular reaching up to a small torus and tin-can cluster.

"This is the Dorfl Trust Habitat, a mutualist and utilitarian Extropian habitat in the Belt. It was founded eight years ago, in After Fall Two, by Quentin Saint James and the other members of the Dorfl Trust. Last year there was a serious incident aboard the habitat, but, first, a little background on the Dorfl Trust."

The image changed, to that of a large, vaguely humanoid figure, but too large, too exaggerated and poorly formed to be any practical morph, with red, glowing eyes in a lumpen face. "This is Dorfl, a character from the Discworld, a twentieth century novel series, and the namesake and inspiration for the Dorfl Trust." Several heads around the table nodded, obviously recognizing the reference. "In the novels, Dorfl was a golem -- a sort of magical artificial man made of clay -- and put to work doing the messy jobs that others weren't willing to do. He was property, until one of the other characters purchased him from his owner and set him free by giving him his own receipt. He was then, after some adventures, hired by the City Watch. Now Constable Dorfl, not requiring the necessities of life that most people needed to spend their earnings on, saved up his income and purchased another golem, which he then freed in the

same manner. These two golems then saved up their joint earnings to purchase and free a third golem, and so forth. In a later book, another character referred to the entire situation as 'the most polite and socially responsible revolution in history'."

The image changed to that of a picture of a group of people in well-tailored suits, smiling in the approved and official manner mandated for a group photo. "The Dorfl Trust was founded in response to the massive number of infugee indentures and egos in dead storage left after the Fall, and their resulting exploitation by the hypercorps."

The image shifted to a densely worded contract, with a long list of signatories. "They work in a manner inspired by and similar to the Golem Trust, buying up indenture contracts and egos in dead storage, freeing them, training them and then finding them work, with the stipulation that some of their wages are given back to the Trust until they pay back the cost of the purchase of their contract, training and placement. These monies are then used to continue the cycle, and many alumni of the Trust often continue to donate a portion of their earnings back to the Trust even after their obligations are met."

She looked around the room. About half of the table, including those two sentinels Arkady and Terrance and the androgenous Sascha, had varying degrees of skepticism in their kinesics, although Navin and Betty were looking intrigued and the Vector, MacKenzie, was unreadable.

"There has been some problems with corruption over the last eight years, mostly involving attempts at skimming from the Trust's accounts and attempts by some less than bright members attempting to set up their own personal empires of influence over the indentures, but, overall, the system has been working fairly well, with there being approximately one million alumni and members of the Dorfl Trust at present, mostly concentrated in the Belt and associated with Extropian factions. The habitat, being structured along Extropian principles, also ended up becoming a base of operations for other organizations with similar goals, including an office for the Underground Railroad and at least one ego liberator service, who once managed to scam the Nine Lives syndicate out of a considerable number of egos, which they then sold to the Dorfl Trust."

"Eight months ago, there was an incident at the Dorfl Trust Habitat." The image shifted to a scene out of hell, a battle stalemated in a zero gravity corridor, two groups, both dressed in similar clothing, with little to differentiate the two sides, both shooting at each other. After a few moments of the video, Mariko watched the kinesics of those around her, taking note of how quickly each of her fellow sentinels noticed the anomaly.

Arkady was first, she noticed, as his eyebrows quirked. He then looked up at her with a questioning expression. At her slight nod, he returned his attention to the video.

Betty then noticed. "That group..." she began hesitantly, and then plowed on ahead, obviously figuring that since she had already spoken up, she might as well keep going. "Both sides are obviously using tacnets to coordinate, but that group, the ones with the heavier weapons, they're even more coordinated than even tacnets should be giving them. I've only seen that kind of crazy move-as-one coordination in the middle of a fight among neo-synergists or massed forks."

"Exactly right," Mariko confirmed. "What happened is someone attempted a hostile Trojan takeover of the Dorfl Trust habitat and only failed due to bad luck."

The image changed again, away from the scene of battle to an graphic display consisting of a flowchart that highlighted as she spoke. "What apparently happened is someone first began infiltrating the habitat and its subcontractor services at least a year previously, selling the Trust compromised egos, apparently using some form of psychosurgery to implant a hidden secondary personality underneath the primary ego. This secondary personality would only have been detectable during a fairly deep psychosurgical or psychiatric analysis, which was not part of the standard Dorfl Trust mental health assessment for incoming egos at the time. It is also suspected that one or more of the Dorfl Trust contracted psychiatrists was either unknowingly compromised with a Manchurian sub-personality or an infiltrator themselves."

The image shifted to an org chart, which began to highlight key areas in red as she spoke. "These compromised egos became success stories for the Dorfl Trust, with many excelling and joining the Trust itself as full members and not former indentures. In retrospect, this should have been a warning sign, but at the time it was seen as an indicator of the Trust's excellent, and, regardless, the infiltrators made up only a small percentage of the total population. Regardless, as the plot reached fruition, many personnel in key areas and subcontractors, having been members of the Trust and then hired on as workers and contractors, were compromised."

The image shifted once more, now displaying an ego identity sheet for one Anton Kawalski, with a secondary sheet next to it labeled Howard Niles, and a third sheet with the name Jasper Maynard. "As the plot reached critical mass, the triggerman, Anton Kawalski, a.k.a. Howard Niles, a.k.a. Jasper Maynard, suspected hypercorp black ops operative, arrived aboard a personal transport. Once aboard and entrenched aboard the habitat, having brought in weapons, ammunition, rare elements to make more of the same and a desktop cornucopia machine, he transmitted an activation code through the local mesh. This then activated the Manchurian programming in the infiltrators, paralyzing or destroying the dominant egos and giving the infiltrator egos full control of their respective sleeves and began an uprising with the aim of gaining control of the habitat."

"The fighting was intensive; the first targets for the subverted sleeves were the long range comm arrays, resulting in the habitat being unable to call for help."

"Fortunately, due to circumstances beyond his immediate control and, as I've learned, the actions of a team of Firewall sentinels, the takeover was foiled at a considerable cost of materials and lives, some of which have still not been resleeved, due to worries about contamination with infiltrator egos which have so far been undetected in those egos, but are still known to have been suborned during the uprising."

"As the takeover was put down, 'Anton' managed to escape by informing the habitat as to the presence of a nuclear device aboard his transport, currently docked aboard the habitat." The image of the habitat returned, with a light blinking against the body of the asteroid indicating a location. "He threatened to detonate the device if his demands were not met. During the time that a response to determine the veracity of his threats, he used this to delay to escape, using a suborned farcaster facility to egocast away. Subsequently, the transport was eventually boarded and, while no purpose built nuclear device was discovered, a program was found in the control software for the fusion drive which could have resulted in the detonation of the transport with a yield of approximately twelve to fifteen megatons. During this investigation, an activation

signal was received by the transport, and before the onboard fusion reactor could bring itself to a critical state, the reactor was shut down and the bomb effectively disarmed.”

Mariko looked around the room. Everyone’s faces were grim and set. Well, there was more where that came from. Hell, this was just the background!

“After this point, the infiltrators either suicided or fought to the point of forcing the habitat defenders to kill them, doing considerable damage to the habitat as a result.” On the display, a sadly large number of tags highlighted damage to various locations across the habitat, causing Tarrant to visibly wince in dismay. “At this point, eight months later, repairs are still on-going.”

“Total damage done to the habitat and its residents totaled in the tens of millions of credits, with over seven hundred killed and in need of resleeve -- and for one hundred and fifty-seven of that total, resleeve progressed slowly, as their backups needed to have any secondary infiltrator egos found and, when possible, removed. Fourteen have been classified as potentially incurable, with their detected infiltrator egos being deemed impossible to remove from the primary host ego without risk of severe damage.” At this, everyone in the room had an ugly look on their faces. It didn’t matter the faction or the background, psychosurgery on that scale was no more and no less than mental rape of someone’s mind, and everyone was outraged at that sort of thing.

Which brought her to her next point...

“Questioning of the infiltrator egos has yielded few clues. All are identical forks of the same ego, but have been so massively pared down as to have no useful information. All were heavily conditioned to be completely loyal and obedient to their activator, and all attempted suicide upon capture or activation as an infomorph in a secure simulspace.”

“Meanwhile, the Dorfl Trust’s indenture and training programs had taken a massive hit, both to their momentum and their current activity. Rebuilding the destroyed facilities and infrastructure reduces the number of egos that can be trained or even kept active at once, and the funds required for the rebuilding are directly competing with the funds for the acquisition of new indenture contracts and egos in dead storage. Compared to a month before the incident, the immediate aftermath saw eighty-three percent of the retraining and other habitat infrastructure destroyed, significantly damaged or disabled, and at present, the habitat is running at only seventy-two percent capacity as compared to nine months ago. For the Dorfl Trust, this was nearly a deadly blow that could have easily destroyed the habitat and the Trust as an indenture-freeing institution, and would have if not for the generous contributions by their former clients, the indentures they freed and the egos they rescued from dead storage. Regardless, it was still a major setback.”

“Despite the cost of rebuilding, a separate fund was set up by the Dorfl Trust to place a bounty on the ego of the triggerman, who had managed to make a clean escape in the aftermath. This is where I come in. I am a professional ego hunter, and I have spent most of the last eight months tracking this man, through three subsequent egocasts via darknets after he escaped from the Dorfl Trust habitat and from there to Mars.”

Navin whistled at that, and Betty, Tarrant and Arkady all looked impressed.

“However, on Mars, his trail went cold -- or colder, I should amend. I wasted most of a month running down fruitless leads. Three days ago, I found his trail again, buried in a mass of shipping and logistic data I acquired from ComEx -- data which had been borked with to be as



useless as possible, while still generally correct in its records, although I could not trace the money trail back any further out of my own resources.”

“It was at this point I contacted Firewall for backup, for apparently four months ago, he and eight other people identified as ‘negotiation specialists’ boarded a transport bound for Saturn. And, after considerable effort, I managed to identify a partial manifest for the transport, which included one hundred cortical stacks, a desktop cornucopia machine, a large stockpile of rare earth elements and metals, including nearly a ton of fissile material suitable for a reactor -- or a bomb. However, there was still considerable mass on that transport that I had not yet identified when I egocast from Mars to here.”

Mariko turned back to Sascha and said formally, “I yield the floor back to you, Router Sascha.”

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Navin sat back in the chair, feeling like someone had punched him. This was *nuts*. Who did shit like this? And, when it had failed once, why did it sound like they were gearing up for round two? Whoever ‘they’ were. With a base on Mars, almost certainly one of the hypercorps... but which one or ones? Heck, with the fortunes they’d amassed, one of the old oligarchs that he’d once worked for could have done this out of petty cash all by themselves. And, having worked for some of the prima donna megalomaniacs with massive bank accounts once upon a time, Navin could easily imagine a couple of his old clients dreaming something like this up. Yeah, an immoral and deniable method to take over or take *out* a perceived competitor or unionizer that they saw as a threat to their control over their docile work force... uh huh, that would be completely in character for some of them.

As he ruminated, Sascha turned to Rebecca, who Navin was reasonably certain was a fellow Thoroughgooder from her kinesics. After spending so much time in the extremely spook-heavy and paranoid habitat, one tended to pick up certain body language tics, regardless of how much one tried to avoid them.

“Scanner Rebecca, please, present your findings,” Sascha said in that annoying androgenous tone. Navin found those people who adopted the neuter or hermaphrodite genders to be somewhat annoying, not the least due to pronoun troubles, which some of them seemed to enjoy provoking among the members of the more traditional genders.

“Beyond the partial manifest uncovered by Sentinel Mariko, we don’t have much, although we currently have some assets on Mars attempting to backtrack the money trail. But additional information in that direction is not currently available, unfortunately.”

The image over the conference changed to a schematic of the Saturnian moon system. “However, locally, we have had more success. Using historical data, we managed to track the transport from Mars to the Saturnian region. Unfortunately, the transport is no longer at large in Saturnian space.”

The hologram schematic began playing back, starting two weeks prior, highlighting the transport and underlying it with schematic data regarding vector, thrust and other such details. The playback, moving at high speed, showed the transport slowing down as if to dock or land, way out in the furthest of the Saturnian moons, far, far away from the inner moons where nearly

all of Saturn's transhuman population lived. Very, very far away, actually -- on the order of nearly twenty-two *million* kilometers, or about one and quarter light-minutes. Then the transport disappeared as it came into contact with one of the tiny little moons, a little heap of rock on a nearly four year long orbit around Saturn.

"As of three hours ago, we have had confirmation from three different sensor arrays, including the Long Array. Only six days ago, on April sixteenth, at a local time of sixteen hundred universal time, the transport docked with or landed on the surface of Saturn XLV, also known as the moon Kari. What to make of this development is unknown, due to the fact that Kari was been settled by a Brinker cult, the Fundamentalist Church Of God Anticipating, which emphatically does not encourage visitors and has demonstrated their willingness to back up that lack of encouragement with weapons fire from defensive batteries."

"Have there been any indications that the transport was shot down?" Arkady asked.

"None, and the Long Array would almost certainly have detected any such event or its aftermath."

At this, Sascha stood and looked at the five sentinels. "As a Firewall Router, I am your mission control and coordination. Looking at this issue, I feel that it is necessary to investigate as soon and as quietly as possible, insofar as such an action may be possible. I know that all of you were wondering why I had apparently broken with standard policy regarding need-to-know for sentinels. Well, we don't know much, aside from the fact that there is no possible way that this can turn out to be good."

The five of them nodded.

"Thus, I have the following mission for the five of you -- to investigate what is going on on that habitat and, if possible, extract the ego of 'Anton Kawalsky' for interrogation and investigation into his backers, as well as potentially removing such an ego from circulation. For transportation to Kari, Firewall currently have a small stealth ship in the general vicinity of the inner Saturnian moons and which is currently en route to Janus Commons. What information we have on Kari will be provided -- en route if necessary."

Instantly, Terry, scary, scary man that he was, said, "I'm in."

Mariko, who Navin had just met but already had some serious respect for, nodded. "I've seen it this far and I *don't* give up easily."

*Of that, I have no doubt, ma'am*, Navin thought to himself.

The girl in the tigress simulmorph nodded, her eyes flinty. "I'm in too. I'd love to add his expression to my collection when he realizes that he's screwed."

As for Navin himself, it wasn't even a question; this was what he was *here* for, not back in bed with Kaitlyn in his well-appointed apartment, pretending the problems of the universe didn't exist and letting some other idiot take care of it. And he didn't want someone like this 'Anton' anywhere within a billion kilometers of her. "I'm in. I'll just need to egocast back to Dione and pick up my sleeve, get my intrusion gear."

He turned to look at their last member, the guy with the Drifter-Russian accent, Arkady. So did everyone else.

Arkady quirked an eyebrow. "Ah, you're all so eager, heedlessly rushing in where angels fear to tread. Bah. I am in. You will need someone to watch your backs and caution you all away from heedless antics."

"Excellent," the Router said. "The stealth ship should arrive in approximately five and a half hours. Get any equipment you may need together; the stealth ship is small; there is enough room for the five of you, packed in shock gel, and about forty kilos of gear per. Transit time from the Commons-slash-Dione to Kari with gravity assist via Saturn and appropriate moons will be approximately four days. Sentinel Navin, I suggest you egocast home as soon as possible, get your equipment and begin accelerating your sleeve away from Dione on the appropriate vector for pickup."

Navin nodded and stood up from the table. "Right. I'll get going then. Coordinate with me in the usual fashion."

As he walked out of the simulspace, he turned and looked at the other sentinels -- his new team, and made a saluting motion. "See you all out there."

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Arkady pulled off the trode net and rubbed his temples. *Terry Smitts. Wonderful.*

Part of him -- a large part -- was sorely tempted to pull Terry aside and letting him have it with both verbal barrels. Hopefully he'd recognize that Arkady was an expert in psychology and social manipulation and actually *listen*.

Unfortunately, that same expertise made him also aware that if he tried any such attempt at talk therapy with Terry, the source -- himself, Arkady -- would poison it and cause Terry to reject it, and would probably cause more harm than good if it managed to induce a feeling of uncertainty in Terry's psyche.

*Damned if you do, damned if you don't.* He chuckled blackly. *It is a good thing I am Russian. We are used to hopeless situations.*

Pulling out a box of cigarettes, he lit up and inhaled, feeling the smoke and nicotine flood his system. With medicines cleaning up the tar and carcinogens, smoking was nearly guilt-free.

Blowing the smoke into the air, where the air recirculators quickly dissipated it, he thought for a moment.

He had worked with Terry before. Terry was good people, the kind of man that Arkady was proud to know -- although he would never admit it. He had a reputation as a general misanthrope and believer of the worst in transhumanity to uphold, after all.

But Terry had a problem. Worse, he didn't *realize* that he had a problem. And any attempts to inform him as to his problem... well, that could make the problem worse. Arkady growled and took another long drag on his smoke.

*Bah. You can't fix everyone. In your own way, you're just as bad as he is,* Arkady scolded himself, exhaling the smoke through his nostrils. *And it's also the puzzle that interests you, admit it. You don't care about him as much as you do about being able to prove yourself as being the smart guy who could solve the problem and put that intricate broken puzzle of the guy's brain back together.*

He took another long pull on the cigarette and floated there.

*Yeah, I admit it. And it is an interesting puzzle: how do you help a man that's suspicious of psychiatry with psychiatry, and how do you help that same man with an perfect memory let go*

*and move on when he doesn't want to?*

He took one last drag on the cigarette, tossed the butt into a disposal container nearby, and stretched.

*Well, regardless of my team mate's neuroses, it looks like I have two things I need to get done before I go flying across the entire Saturnian system into the den of a group of brinker fanatics that are apparently either dealing with or taken over by a hypercorp black ops man. First, I need to get myself backed up, just in case. And second, I need to get laid.*

With a snort, he pushed off, querying as to the location of the nearest resleeving clinic and, from there, the locations of any bars or nightclubs.

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**Date:** April 22, 10 AF, 0312 UT

**Location:** Navin Surti's Quarters, Thoroughgood, Dione, Saturnian Orbit

Navin was in the process of analyzing a particularly obtuse bit of encrypted data that an associate in the Planetary Consortium enclave had asked him to take a look at, in exchange for a suitable fee, of course, when his alpha fork returned.

[Navin, I'm back and you're not going to like this. Get set up for merging now; we're on a time limit.]

He paused. *That bad?*

[Stop talking, start merging.]

*Initiating merge.*

A few seconds passed, and then Navin slumped in his chair as the last six and a half hours of his fork's independent existence fused with his own, his cybernetic brain nearly seamlessly fusing the two together. Two complete but separate histories, both parallel and both him, now welded back together. He remembered the meeting, the threat of an utterly amoral hypercorp black ops man, and the mission to go investigate Kari. But he also remembered making love to Kaitlyn, a few hours of sleep, a wakeup to a sinfully delicious breakfast, his girlfriend leaving to head to her lab, and a call from a professional associate with an interesting puzzle for him to look at.

He took a deep breath, his fork's analysis of what to do next running through their... his... *my!* mind.

Time was indeed of the essence, and it was a good thing he had invested in cyberbrains for his biomorphs. It made the procedures of backing up, forking and merging much easier and much faster. He could also resleeve one of his egos in seconds, without need for a resleeving clinic, its ego bridge, or the ten minutes it would take for an organic brain. Also, the perfect recall that came with a cyberbrain was *very* nice.

Working quickly, he made a new alpha fork of himself and sleeved him in one of his spare cyberbrained biomorphs -- the one that he kept specifically for these occasions. It was normally kept in a body storage pod at the local body bank, in a state of medically induced hibernation, but he'd had it brought here, laying it out on the bed, just in case.

Until now, there had been nobody home.

A few moments later, the eyes began blinking and a moan emitted from the morph's throat. Navin sympathized with himself. Waking up in a new body was never fun and it would take a few minutes for him to finish integrating.

As his fork went through the disorienting integration process, he started issuing orders and requests to his various allies, starting with the souped up rocket pack needed to get his fork launched in the right direction for the Firewall ship to pick up on the way. A servitor bot came in a few moments later in response to one of his other orders, carrying a tray laden with some foods and a glass of orange juice, while other robots got to work packing equipment that his fork was going to need.

A few moments later, his fork tried sitting up, obviously too soon, as he instantly flopped back onto the bed in disarray.

Navin winced and straightened his limbs so at least he'd be comfortable while he finished integrating. Normally, it took about ten minutes or so, and they were only three minutes in.

At five minutes, his fork was sitting up with assistance, gratefully drinking the juice and eating the snacks, still a little on the clumsy side, as was normal. Well, he had the entire trip out to Kari to acclimate. And it was a bit of a change, Navin had to admit, from his current sleeve.

His current primary body was an Exalt-line biomorph, a genetically enhanced human, designed to be smarter and faster than the baseline transhuman norm. He'd acquired it a few months after he'd arrived at Thoroughgood as a bodiless infomorph and done some jobs for various parties around the settlement. It had originally had a light skinned Caucasian appearance, which had felt odd to look at in the mirror, so he'd had it biosculpted to be more in line with Navin's original Indian phenotype, although he knew that the light-skinned genotype was still there.

His fork's new sleeve, however, was a different story. *It* was a Ghost biomorph, a stealthy body specifically designed as an infiltrator and black ops combatant. He'd acquired it under rather unusual circumstances two years ago, to say the least. A group of infiltrators had been attempting some shenanigans over on Pandora, and Firewall had caught wind of it. At the end of that little fracas, which they had managed to keep completely under wraps, Navin had claimed the biomorph sleeve as booty, much to the bemusement of his router.

However, he'd had the last laugh. The innocuous and generic looking neuter sleeve, which had a skin tone and facial structure seemingly capable of being 'average' and thus overlooked in nearly any human phenotype clade, had turned out to be packed to the figurative gills with various augments. When Navin had added up the total value of his prize, he'd had a moment when he had suddenly comprehended the old cliché of 'sticker shock.' A full suite of enhanced senses and filters for the same, an impressive array of biological, cybernetic and nanotech physical augmentations. Enhanced speed. Endocrine control. A suite of disguise nanoware, including skinflex and an ID flux.

He didn't use it often or even as his primary morph because he didn't want to advertise that he had such resources available. Besides, it was a neuter morph, genderless, and that wasn't something that he wanted to deal with on a daily basis.

Since he'd gotten his hands on it, he'd added a few augmentations to the sleeve himself, mostly making it a mobile hacker platform with a few ghost rider modules. Most of the time, the

sleeve stayed in the body bank, listed as a spare splicer morph. He normally took it out for serious hacker missions and Firewall missions.

Such as this one.

His robots had finished gathering the gear he'd need for this mission, filling a utility harness fairly thoroughly. Smart clothing and a smart vacsuit completed the ensemble.

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### Chapter 3:

**Date:** April 22, 10 AF, 1000 UT

**Location:** Internal Simulspace, Firewall Stealth-ship Ship, En Route to Kari, Saturnian Orbit

> Transiting to Kari

> Exposition on the habitat

"Alright people, here's what Firewall has got on Kari and its residents," Terry said to his fellow simulmorphs aboard Ship. "Unfortunately, it's apparently *everything* they've got on Kari and its residents. Given how much sheer information there is here -- it looks like they must have sent up the raw data from whatever infiltrator or infiltrators they managed to get in there, as well as any analyst digests they might have had, so there's a metric shit-ton of dross to sift through."

Navin looked at the mass of data and went, "Yeuch. Why don't we split it up by rough category," his simulmorph's hands moved, separating the giant mass of information into sub-sections, "and each of us take a bit that's more in line for our specialty to look over and present to the others in a more concise fashion, rather than everyone trying to drink from this firehose of raw data? With simulspace time acceleration, we can have anywhere from an hour and a half to eight months, experientially speaking, before we arrive, so we might as well get our homework done and then speed up the remainder of the trip."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Mariko said, and the others nodded assent to the plan.

"Alright then..." Navin began looking over the morass of sheer information. "Terry, you're an engineer. Here, this is some stuff on the habitat's construction, engineering, systems and gross physical characteristics, as near as I can tell."

"Alright," Terry said and then stepped forward to help Navin sort through the slog of information.

After a few experiential minutes, Navin waved Betty over. "Alright, Betty, Terry and I think that this looks like information on their defenses in particular, although I'm betting a good chunk of the habitat exterior defensive batteries and other such systems was also in Terry's copy of the data. You're our combat specialist; look it over."

She accepted the mass of data, the metaphor of the file that Terry and Navin had picked making it appear as a thick stack of manila filing folders, circa 20th century. On the front of the folder was a stamp in red reading "Top Secret," over the block letter words "Fundamentalist

Church Of God Anticipating, Military”, all bound together with thick twine and rubber bands.

“I got it.” She hefted the stack and peered owlshly at it. “Eesh, it looks like three parts speculation to one part hard data.”

“Wow, you got that good a ratio?” Terry sniped humorous from where he was compiling the next folder with Navin. “Trade you.”

“Uhhh... no thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Totally, completely sure?”

Betty gave Terry a wry look. “Hint taken. I’ll stop whining.”

“Alrighty then.”

Navin was giving Terry an incredulous look. “What are you, twelve?”

“Heh, I wish. But I look at it this way -- morale is important. We’re all volunteers here, most of us are totally new with each other, and we’re all still getting to smooth down each others rough edges. There’s no formal command structure here, like there was back when I was in the Army, no chain of command. But we’re all going into what is highly likely to be a very nasty and distinctly unfriendly little corner of the solar system and we’re all going to depend on each other.” He continued to collate the data into more usable packets. “ So if it’s a choice between slapping someone down for being unprofessional or by cracking wise, hopefully reducing some of the tension, and making people more at ease, I’ll go with the latter option.”

“I think I see your point.”

“Alright then, here’s another way of looking at it, kid.”

“I’m not a kid!” Navin protested.

“Kid, to me, you are. You’re, what, twenty-nine, thirty?”

“Chronologically, just under thirty. Experientially, it’s a little...”

“Wonky, yeah, I know the feeling, get in line. Chronologically, I’m in my mid-sixties, and experientially, I’m probably somewhere in my seventies. And *that* is why I get to call you ‘kid’.”

Navin was silent for a moment. “I see. So... you were saying...?”

“Oh, yes. Look at it this way, kid. Who would you rather work with right now, in these circumstances? Some guy that’s acting all rigid and inflexible, like he was some kind of parody of an old-school United States Army drill sergeant, getting up in your face and screaming at you, or a guy that’s a little more chill, that’s cracking jokes and trying to dismiss the tension instead of making it worse, and is acting nonchalant and unstressed, despite the fact that we don’t know pretty much *anything* about what we’re about to walk in on? Which of those two would you choose to be dealing with right now? Because if the jokester isn’t helping, I’ll *gladly* switch over to Drill Sergeant McNasty.”

“Point taken,” Navin said.

“Thanks. Give me some credit, kid, I’ve been around the block before -- at least once with you, as I recall -- and I’ve dealt with enough small group dynamics to know when to push and when to deflate the tension.”

At this point, the next file was collated. “Oy, Arkady, I’ve got something for you!”

Arkady sauntered over. “And that is?”

Terry tossed him the file, which looked, to Navin, like a thin square wafer, made of

texturized and shiny plastic. It had some of the corners cut off, was about ten centimeters on a side with a metal button in the center on one face. There was a metal rectangle on one edge, covering both faces, and a handwritten paper label on the opposite face from the metal button reading "Fundamentalist Church Of God Anticipating, Society And Culture."

Arkady looked at the small object, which Veda identified for Navin as a floppy disk after a few moments, quirked his eyebrows and looked back up at Terry, who was visibly smirking. "Oh, how very droll. What's next, a phrenology chart?"

"Perhaps. I could probably dig one up if I tried."

"Maybe later. I apparently have a considerable amount of reading to do."

Mariko strode over. "Give Navin the materials on their computer infrastructure and stuff of that ilk. I'll take everything that's left. I've gotten more experience than I care to think about slogging through masses of general data. Certainly I have more experience in that sort of thing than anyone else in this team."

"I'll agree to that," Terry said, finishing separating down the last of the data into two piles and collating them into their own separate metaphors. A moment later, he handed Navin a scroll of blue paper covered with white lines, the legend reading "Fundamentalist Church Of God Anticipating, Computer Infrastructure," and handed Mariko a large, bulky plastic bag, filled with what looked like strips of shredded paper.

She cocked her head at Terry. "I see you have a sense of humor and a sense of the appropriate."

He shrugged. "I've been thinking about getting them surgically removed," his body language jesting the now very-real possibility of psycho-surgery and personality modification, "but they've kept me from getting shot a few times, so I keep them around. Besides, I'm an anarchist."

"And...?" she said, obediently providing him with the setup for his punchline.

"Well, anarchists are against government, and what says government more than a Senses Taker?"

Behind him, Navin groaned at the horrible pun. Mariko just closed her eyes and smiled painfully, apparently savoring the humor.

"And on that note," Terry said, hefting his own collated files, now appearing as a small scale model of the habitat, "let's get to work. The simulspace is already set for the maximum temporal dilation, so, everyone, let's meet back up in three hours real time and discuss what we've found; that should give us a little over an experiential week to go over this mess. Sound good?"

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**Date:** April 22, 10 AF, 1300 UT

**Location:** Internal Simulspace, Firewall Stealth-ship Ship, En Route to Kari, Saturnian Orbit

"Alright, Arkady, lets start with what we already have at least some solid information on.



You were going to look over the culture and society notes that we were sent, so, what have we got on this Church Of God Anticipating?”

“It’s the *Fundamentalist* Church Of God Anticipating, and what I’ve got is bad,” Arkady said testily. “The bottom line is, we have a society here that’s a friggin’ mess.” He took a deep breath, sat down on his Russian cynicism and his psychologist’s outrage and smothered them, and continued.

“Alright. I will start at the beginning.”

“Good place to start. Very traditional,” Terry said.

Arkady shot him a warning look and Terry sobered and motioned for him to begin with his findings.

Arkady motioned, and a collage of images, ranging from still pictures to video to raw data.

“What we have here is group of absolute religious nutjobs who live in a culture that can best be described as a highly oppressive fascist theocracy, in which the state and the church are a single organism and the people themselves are complicit in their own oppression. This state of affairs has its roots back on Earth before the Fall.”

He indicated several images in the collage, depicting large crowds apparently in the midst of some sort of religious function as a single man at the pulpit at the end of the room verbally whipped them into an emotional frenzy. “The Fundamentalist Church Of God Anticipating was a splinter group off of an existing group of fanatics back on Earth about thirty-five years Before Fall. They were a radical branch of a church that worshipped an avenging god, which was a typical social response to the rampaging social, economic and environmental instability wracking the Earth at the time.”

Terry grimaced. “Yeah, I remember those days. Fun times.”

“There were a large number of similar groups at the time, in various flavors -- apocalypse cults, Angry Mother Gaia cults, various Christian Rapture cults as a subset of the first type, but numerous enough to be worthy of mention on their own, various survivalist cults, my personal favorite, the ‘let’s touch off the Fall early’ cults, which tried to get their hands on weapons of mass destruction and set them off, which would begin a chain reaction of fire and death that would purge the Earth of the unworthy, which was usually a set that excluded them, but not always.”

Most of the faces looked a little green at this last. Arkady continued onward.

“In the Fundamentalist Church of God Anticipating’s case, though, they were ‘blessed’ by having an unusually intelligent, pragmatic, charismatic and farsighted leader lead the splintering from their parent organization, a ‘Father Horatio Lewis.’ Our records are incomplete in indicating whether or not he was actually formally ordained by any organized religion, but he managed to cleave off a fairly large flock for himself from the Church Of God Anticipating, which was primarily based in America’s western reaches at the time, and was of the ‘survivalist’ cult clade.”

“So how’d they end up out here?” Mariko asked.

“Yeah, Utah and Nevada aren’t exactly a stroll down the block,” Terry added.

Arkady projected an image of some old news footage, dated from two and a half decades before the Fall. “Lewis, ordained or not, was no idiot -- or maybe he was, but of the

sort of blessed idiot watched over by bored angels. Either way, he managed to increase his personal congregation from an initial group of approximately two or three thousand followers to close to eighteen thousand over the course of the next ten years, absorbing the remnants of other groups as they ran afoul of the law or self-destructed. Lewis, being extremely charismatic, also had enough long-term planning ability and organizational skill to get his congregation primed and aimed at a single goal -- space colonists."

Terry had an expression suggesting that he'd eaten something sour. "Geeze, why couldn't some of my friends have fallen in with this guy, instead of the raving loonies they ended up with?"

Arkady looked at Terry. "It wouldn't have helped, long term. Lewis managed to get most of his flock off-world over the course of those next ten years, claiming Kari and settling it in waves between BF Twenty-Six and BF Twenty-Two. However, he had managed to remold his church into a fascist cult of personality, where his word was the Word Of God, and questioning his judgement was not only a crime, but heresy."

Everyone winced at that.

"In his defense," Arkady said, looking not at all interested in giving the man a fair trial, "that was how he managed to get a bunch of religious fundies from middle America not only all pointed in the same direction, but trained enough in the proper skills needed for settling a space colony. According to my research, it appears that most of said training was empirical, even possibly superficial, almost certainly mostly by rote, with no training in the theories and science behind the tools and machines -- the data and records I have access to regularly emphasizes 'practical' training, as opposed to the 'ivory tower in the sky' science of the argonauts."

The wincing had since transformed into looks of pain.

"At this point, the records ceased until our Firewall infiltrators managed to gain access to the habitat approximately five years ago. While I have no doubt that some of the hypercorps inherited some records of the intervening years between the initial settlement and the Fall from some of the national intelligence agencies that they absorbed after the Fall, it is also likely fragmented between different databases and incomplete."

Arkady brought up a new series of images, including a number of point-of-view shots.

"As I'm sure most of us have realized by this point, but for completeness sake and to avoid assuming anything, five years ago, Firewall managed to infiltrate a single sentinel team of three into the habitat, using a swarmoid morph, an arachnoid morph and an infomorph. They were only able to stay aboard the habitat for barely a month before their presence was discovered and the mission aborted. Due to the distance and Firewall's limited resources, it seems that a follow up mission to further investigate the habitat has been planned ever since, only to be pushed back repeatedly due to resources being reallocated for more pressing concerns."

Wry nods around the table greeted this.

"What the sentinels found was troubling. According to my analysis, it appears that a coup happened at some point, in which 'Father Lewis' was killed or deliberately assassinated, and one of his inner circle members managed to seize control and step into his place as church Father. Alternatively, there is another possible scenario in which Lewis met with an actual fatal accident without the possibility of resleeving and this 'Father Jacob Gallagher' managed to step

into place as the church's new leader, but I believe that this scenario has a lower possible likelihood."

"Regardless of the actual sequence of events, it appears that the church's culture, at this point, has stratified into a strict caste system, based on position and function within the habitat. At the top is Gallagher and his inner cadre; it was attempting to penetrate their security to get a closer look which exposed the team five years ago. Below them is the priesthood, which have sub-sections for control and management. These subsections are divided into areas of medical, environmental, law, security and warfare, child-rearing, education, and, finally, doctrinal purity as a subset of that last area -- their secret police and political officers, in one neat package. Underneath them are the laity, the non-ordained members of the church, who make up the majority of the population and who appear to be universally zeroes."

The others looked grim at this; 'zeroes' was the slang term for those without mesh access. Without access to the mesh, one was denied access to all of the collected areas of human knowledge, access or perceive the wealth of AR information present in nearly all modern societies, and, most importantly from the perspective of a tyrant or all-controlling state, the ability to communicate, coordinate or organize with others at ranges beyond the range of their voice or at any speed beyond the strictly baseline human. This, of course, made them significantly easier to control by those that *did* possess such technology. Needless to say, the Planetary Consortium of hypercorps and the Jovian Junta were both fond of having zeroes in their populations.

"From the infiltrator team's records, it seems that a degree of speciation is occurring among the various areas, using augmentations and possible resleeving technology to differentiate the population into various specialized sub-types, as according to their working assignment. Transhuman biomorphs are the universal rule within the habitat, insofar as they could tell from their surveillance, with bouncer types or those possessing bouncer-class modifications being especially common."

"Beyond that, not much has changed from Lewis' era. Excepting the fact that he is now apparently venerated as a dead saint instead of a living leader and Gallagher has smoothly slipped into his shoes, the culture is still very much the same, with a fascist, fundamentalist theocracy, where disagreeing with the saint in charge and his priesthood is not just treason -- it's heresy, and it looks like they use invasive psychosurgical techniques for 'correcting' such behavior."

"Any more good news?" Navin asked weakly.

"Not really. Their doctrine is a mess, despite the more recent copy that the infiltrators managed to get their hands on -- and I do mean that literally, they print them up in hardcopy form for the zeroes to read -- being a far more coherent testament than the raving, rambling mess that they initially had as a part of the original Church of God Anticipating. They had a creation/destruction narrative prophecy from the original text, which, from their point of view, the Fall fulfilled handily." Arkady scowled and then continued speaking in a blunt, precise and otherwise uninflected voice, his face now a mask of control. "However, the universe was supposed to be wiped clean of the non-believers by a cosmic flood of fire, leaving only the faithful to repopulate the cleansed Earth." Betty looked like she was going to vomit at that, and Navin actually gagged a little. "So the survival of transhumans aside from themselves was

something of a thorny pickle for Gallagher, it seems. He solved it in the usual fashion -- declared that there was still cleansing to be done, and that we, as outsiders, are automatically 'wicked sinners', who will not be saved when the cosmic fires return for their second pass, and coming into contact with us or our wicked ways will cost the faithful their souls."

The control fell from his face, revealing an expression of deep disgust. "All in all, a cute little system for auto-tyranny. I don't suppose while we're here, we can add to our objectives upsetting Gallagher's little house of cards, if at all feasible?"

"I don't have a problem with that," Mariko said. "If it comes to it, we can point the Dorfl Trust in this direction."

"Or the Titanians; I wonder why they haven't bothered to upset this neat little arrangement before now?" Navin said.

"Probably because they were busy dealing with settling Titan, then resleeving everyone after the Fall, and then fending off the Planetary Consortium. Kari and this church, no matter how repugnant it is, is still small potatoes to them and they've got bigger things to worry about," Betty commented, her eyes flinty.

Terry looked at the display Arkady had of the mosaic of Gallagher being anointed as Lewis' successor. "And what about Gallagher himself? What do we know?"

"Very little hard data, but I've made some inferences based on similar setups elsewhere. I imagine that he leads a life that would have most of the inner system oligarchs feeling right at home, and for much the same reasons."

Betty muttered, "Right. He needs to die. Permanently. Screaming in pain as he's torn apart by his victims would be a plus."

Navin looked at her with some degree of surprise, stemming partly from his own agreement and partly from the bloodthirstiness of her imagery.

"Well, we can hope," Arkady said. "However, that's what I've got for the moment, unless more data arrives from Firewall."

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Terry scowled and looked around the table, seeing similar expressions on everyone's faces. He rapped on the table, causing heads to turn.

"Alright. Arkady, thank you for that information -- it's good to know what we might be facing when we arrive, regardless of how personally upsetting and disquieting it may have been." He held up a hand, index finger extended. "However, it appears to me that all of us are currently feeling extremely upset on this, so why don't we all just take a break for fifteen minutes of real time or so? That'll give us fifteen hours of experiential time, and I think that if we basically take a day to digest this and get ourselves back under control, it'll be a good idea."

There were nods.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Betty said. "Going into a fight angry and off-balance is just a good way to hand the other guy a weapon for him to take your head off with."

"Alright then," Mariko said. "So, we'll reconvene at 1317?"

More nods.

"Alright then. Anyone care to join me at the gym? Simulspace or not, I feel the need to

hit something,” Mariko said, clenching a fist.

Betty chuckled darkly. “Sure. And after that, how about a stop at the firing range? Never underestimate the relaxation you can get with massive explosions.”

Arkady gave Betty a bemused look. “Therapeutic demolitions? Interesting concept.”

“You’re welcome to join us,” she said back.

He seemed to consider it for a moment, and then shook his head. “Sorry, no. I have other methods of relaxation. However, if you’d like to join me...” he said, leaving the invitation open, while his kinesics made it fairly clear what his intentions were.

At this Terry spoke up. “You never do give up, do you, Maletski?”

Arkady looked at Terry with a challenging smile. “Never.”

Betty just gave Arkady a flat look. “I don’t think that’s such a great idea, going into this kind of situation. Too much risk of emotional entanglements.”

“I’m not offering a relationship. Merely some delightful and mutually pleasurable physical activity, no strings attached.”

Betty visibly assessed Arkady’s similmorph and then shook herself. “I don’t think so. Not when I’m this wound up, not going into a mission. Maybe after. Maybe. But things are going to be complicated enough as it is in there without adding more factors to the mix.” She turned and nodded to Mariko. “Gym, then shooting range?”

Mariko nodded. “Right.”

“Ah, but Miss Tsukino, the invitation was to both of you. Miss Norling may have turned me down, but you have not.”

“I think not. Thank you, though,” the Japanese woman said to the Russian man in a polite and neutral tone.

Arkady shrugged. “So be it. See you later.” He settled down and looked around the room.

As his gaze approached Navin, he leapt up and went for the door. “Sorry, but I’ve got a girlfriend, and we’re apparently ‘hopelessly monogamous.’ I’ll see you both later.” He hurried out.

Arkady just let his gaze languorously drift over to Terry.

Terry let out a snort. “Yeah, right. You know the answer to that one already.”

“I think it would be good for you.”

“Right,” Terry said, and stood up from his seat.

“Denying that you’re still alive won’t help them,” Arkady shot.

Terry froze in mid-step, his body instantly tensing. *You bastard.*

He turned and looked at Arkady, who was still sitting there, his kinesics presenting an attitude of supreme indifference.

“I’m going to say this once, and only once. You stay out of my head, out of my thoughts, out of my brain and out of my personal life. Or you will regret it.”

And he turned around once more and strode out at that.

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Back inside the room, Arkady looked at the door and made a mental note.

After a fairly lengthy analysis written in High Psychology, he concluded, *Sentinel Tarrant Smitts has apparently grown even more unstable and defensive on that subject since we last met. It cannot be much longer before he reaches a crisis point and either has a mental breakdown or catharsis. I should endeavour to be present when this happens, so as to guide him through the process and back to emotional and mental equilibrium.*

He considered sending the message back to Router Sascha, but, after a few moments of thought, rejected the idea. With two tech experts on board, and them supposed to be running silent, there was too much chance of his message attracting attention, either from within or without.

He then made a further note, appending it to the end of his prior one. *Should Sentinel Smitts require restoration from backup or resleeving from a cortical stack in the near future, it is my official recommendation that he first be required to undergo psychiatric treatment for his psychological issues before he is allowed to continue undergoing missions for Firewall. The removal of his emotional crutch in that manner may be what finally gets through his refusal of treatment.*

Arkady mused the message over for a moment, and then thought to his muse, *Mishka, attach that to my personal file on Smitts and add the usual encryption.*

[понял, босс]

*Good. Now, now that that's finished, start up a private simulspace pocket and load, oh, I don't know, the Fairie Rings."*

[которых] Which one?

*I don't know which one. Pick one at random. Surprise me.*

A moment later, from Arkady's point of view, the meeting room faded out of existence, to be replaced by a woodland thicket at dusk. There was soft moss underfoot and the bubbling of a cheerful brook nearby, as well as the sounds of soft feminine laughter.

He followed the sound, a few moments later emerging into a small glade, in which a trio of inhumanly gorgeous women lay lounging about, their heads turning towards him as he entered their domain.

*Ah, nymphs.* Arkady smiled. *The classics never get old.*

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Terry marched down the path, his kinesics loudly announcing his mood to everyone, his hand unknowingly tapping against his thigh, keeping time in approved military march intervals.

After a decent distance down the pathway, he finally began to calm down.

*Fracking shrink, thinks he has a right to the thoughts in my head. Bloody fracking async, who's too damn used to being able to just reach in and poke at someone's brain. I should just get a cyberbrain; asyncs can't access those, right? That's what the last heard about asyncs from Firewall. Except if I get a cyberbrain, then I open myself up to getting it hacked by baddies, and there's more hackers than there are asyncs. What was the worst case scenario estimate? One tenth of one percent of the population? So that's, what, half a million asyncs? In the entire solar system? Worst case?* He slowed his angry marching pace down to something that would have been more reasonable for an organic body. *Yeah, not worth the risk*

increase.

*Probably.*

Terry sighed in frustration and kept walking.

*There's no real good solution, is there?* Then he answered his own question. *No, not really. That's how you know that this is real life -- there aren't any good answers.*

He kept walking for another several minutes, then paused and looked around.

*Well, this is absurd. I'm walking around in a virtual reality in which I have control over. My walking serves no purpose. I can literally teleport from place to place in here at my leisure.*

He shook his head.

*Sera?*

[Yes, Terry? Are you feeling better?]

*A bit. Listen, load up the puzzle box program. I feel the need for to tackle something cerebral that requires some focus.*

~~~~~

Navin walked up cautiously behind Terry, as the older man worked on something that looked... *complicated*. He paused, scrutinizing the... the... *object* that was the focus of Terry's attention.

Perhaps half a meter high, it was a rough cube, composed of stripes of metal, what looked like lacquered wood and thick wire. Terry was currently manipulating it in some fashion as it floated a meter or so off of the ground.

Whatever sort of function this device had, it was beyond Navin's understanding. He was a hacker, not an engineer; software and computing devices were his specialty, not machinery.

After a few moments, Terry looked up and said, "Yes, Navin? What is it?" He continued poking at the mechanism, whatever it was, but at a slower pace.

Navin hesitated, but shook it off. If he hadn't wanted to interrupt, it would have been easy enough to stay away.

"I'm in need of some advice."

"What kind of advice?"

Navin frowned. "I'm feeling guilt. About Kari and this church."

Terry nodded. "Yup. No surprise there. Go on."

Navin looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean, 'no surprise there'?"

Terry paused, reached under the mechanism, thumped a specific bar of brass, rotated the cube ninety degrees, and Navin heard something inside go *thunk, dink*. Then Terry pulled a piece of metal off of the opposite face from the brass bar, which came free at a light tug.

At Navin's curious look, he held up the dull gray metal, which had divots and notches cut into it, and said, "Puzzle program. I've had it for years; my... a friend bought it for me. This puzzle is fairly straightforward; I just have to figure out how to take it apart." He set the metal piece aside. "As for the surprise and lack thereof, well..." He shrugged. "Kid, you're a reasonably decent person, near as I can tell. And most decent people, when they find out that they've been ignoring other people getting victimized and taken advantage of right in their backyard, they feel guilty. It's like survivor's guilt, in a way."

He started tapping at the metal cube again, listening carefully as he went. "You've worked hard for your current setup, and if you're a little too attached to currency for this dyed-in-the-wool anarchist, that's your own issue to work through. But you've managed to be independent, and I know you treat the people that work for you well -- alot better than they'd get working for any of the hypercorps, that's for sure. Excepting for the fact that you do cryptography, decryption, the odd hack and other computer-related tricks that most legal codes sternly disapprove of, you'd be more in line with the Extropians than most of the hard core crooks out there."

Navin nodded and sat down on the grass. "Alright. We can agree to disagree on the currency thing."

"We have before," Terry said, now tapping at a piece of wood, and, in response to some cue that Navin couldn't see, he reached around to a completely different face of the cube and yanked at a piece of wire that was jutting from the surface. The next moment, there was a clanking sound and a piece of wood slid out of the bottom face. Terry looked up, a satisfied look on his face.

"So, here we are," he continued as he rotated the cube around again to the previous bottom face, "on our way to a society that is about as opposite to our ideals as either of us could possibly imagine, even worse than the Jovian Junta, practically next door to where we both hang our hats. Trust me, when you get 'out of sight, out of mind' rammed in your face like this, feeling a little survivor's guilt at our own luck at not having ended up there is completely natural." This time he reached around to opposite faces of the cube and pulled on two separate projections at the same time, manhandling them both as Navin heard several more clunks and clicks coming from inside the cube with each motion. With one final grunt of effort, he slide them both home and three more wooden planks were quickly pulled free in succession.

As Terry yanked the planks free of the cube, whose internal workings were becoming more and more apparent as pieces were removed, Navin spoke up. "Alright then, old man. Thanks for the advice."

Terry looked up at him. "Heh. Alright, you got me there. Fair's fair."

Navin looked at the puzzle. "Mind if I have a try?"

Terry snorted. "Why, because I'm nearly done and I've gotten all of the hard parts out of the way?"

Navin shrugged. "Not with this one. You said that there were more puzzles. Give me one to try."

Terry gave him a sidelong look, assessing him for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Ah, why the hell not. Sure, kid. Sera, set the kid up with the Terrible Triple Torturer puzzle." He grinned nastily. "That ought to keep you busy and out of trouble for a bit."

Navin, with some degree of trepidation at the name, watched the puzzle materialize in front of him. It consisted of a number of narrow gates, through which ran a thick cable, strung with spheres, whose diameter, he noticed, was just slightly wider than the width of the gates. In his field of view, words appeared.

[Your objective is to remove the cable from the gates. Good luck!]

Fiddling with his cube, Terry chuckled evilly.



~~~~~

After the break time was up, the group reconvened in the meeting space.

Mariko looked around at her teammates.

Arkady was looking relaxed and pleased -- from what release, she was fairly certain that she didn't want to know, given the body modifications she had discovered that his morph possessed -- while Navin had an odd mix of frustration, satisfaction and stubbornness on his face, while Terry was looking bemused at Navin. Meanwhile, Betty had spent much of the last few experiential hours throwing, shooting, exploding and reducing to free atoms various incarnations of various enemies, many of which had had Gallagher's facial features applied.

"Alright, so, who wants to go next?" she asked. "I should probably go last, as I took the leftover data."

"I'll go next," Terry said, coming to his feet.

"Alright," Mariko nodded. "Is everyone alright with that?"

There were nods of acceptance.

Without further ado, Terry moved forward and projected an image of Kari and its habitat.

"What we have here is a fairly classic Pre-Fall beehive habitat, buried into the asteroidal moon. The moon, a C-type rocky asteroid, is on the smaller side, only about seven kilometers in diameter on the longest axis. Most but not all of the tunnels were mapped by the initial infiltration team five years ago, but that means that our data here is sadly out of date. Judging by the extent of the tunnel network known to us, the locals likely do not have the capability to have massively shifted and rearranged the network in the last five years, but, due to the paranoia not doubt induced by their discovery, this possibility should not be discounted. Additionally, even if they have not restructured their tunnels, they have almost certainly extended them." The image began blinking through various permutations of possible tunnel arrangements. "Either way, this is a serious problem for infiltrators. As you can no doubt see, we have here what can politely be referred to as a rat's nest or ball of worms. At least a third of the asteroid was honeycombed with tunnels, likely more like half, and our lack of familiarity with the network will instantly mark us as outsiders, and with most of the populace being zeroes, I doubt that there is any sort of entopic aids in place for navigation purposes. Landing on the exterior and sending in probes to map out at least some of the network would be highly advisable before we attempt entry."

Navin and Betty, both long-term residents of beehive habitats, both nodded with pained expressions on their faces.

"As for the exterior," Terry continued, as the tunnel network ceased being highlighted and a number of surface details and structures glowed as he mentioned them, "we have several serious issues here as well. A fair amount of the exterior surface on the 'north' end of asteroid has been built up with a variety of structures, including domes and tin cans that apparently date from the founding of the colony, as well as a variety of new structures no doubt constructed with materials mined from the asteroid, including primarily domes constructed of carbon nanotubes and diamond." The display highlighted the domes, which numbered nearly two dozen, with the smallest being less than a hundred meters across, and the largest covered nearly a kilometer across at the asteroid's north 'pole' of rotation.

“There are no exterior communications arrays, aside from this single rig, which has apparently been partially demolished after the Fall.”

“Other exterior features include defensive batteries, for which I will leave up to Betty to describe, and *this* lovely kludge.” A dome nearly half a kilometer in width stretched across the south pole of the asteroidal moon. “This is their reactor, a fission model. It’s possible that that load of fissile materials that our target was shipping out here is intended to restock this reactor, but that’s just my own speculation. It’s a crappy, obsolete design, significantly less efficient than anything built in the last fifteen years, and, as near as I can tell, was designed that way specifically because it can explode violently if so desired. There were other reactor designs that were significantly safer and more efficient available to the colonists when they left Earth, so I can only come to the conclusion that someone specifically *choose* this design with the intent of having a doomsday option available, just in case.” Terry’s disgust at the thought was palpable.

Arkady looked unsurprised -- disappointed, but unsurprised -- and Navin and Betty looked even more murderous than they had earlier. As for herself, Mariko found herself hoping that she would be able to get the bastard or bastards responsible for this lovely little setup in her crosshairs.

“The reactor is not the sole power supply available to them; they’ve also been constructing a free-floating mirror array for solar power; it’s apparently tethered to the habitat. Judging by the approximate mass of the mirror and their other construction, it’s likely that they must have left Kari at one point and captured a small passing asteroid composed of at least some metals or have been engaged in some form of trade.”

“Internally, there are some systems which seem to support the illicit trade hypothesis, as some of the habitat sections surveyed by the infiltration group from five years ago found signs of advanced life support systems, some of which had been developed after the colony had left Earth. Unfortunately, the infiltrators, apparently not realizing exactly what they were seeing, did not investigate further or in any more detail, meaning that my information in this area is limited to a few direct confirmations from the XP feeds and inferences derived from reports on performance.” It was clear that Terry disapproved of the infiltrators’ sloppiness, which Mariko found amusing. “Some of these systems included various smart animals, mostly rats and cats, possibly mesh linked, to use as pest control and cleanup, as well as undoubtedly to act as spies on the populace. Additionally, the habitat is filled with plants; their internal ecosystem, at least as of five years ago, appeared to be highly robust. Assuming that what was mapped is typical, I estimate that this habitat could likely support between thirty and fifty thousand standard biomorphs in terms of oxygen, water and food semi-indefinitely, assuming proper recycling procedures.”

Eyebrows raised at this all around.

“And, finally, some signs of advanced nanofabrication were also found, but before they could investigate further, the team was detected and forced to abort.”

“Any questions?”

There were general headshakes. Terry shrugged.

“Drat. And here I was hoping I could get to tell that I know nothing.”

Arkady, sitting in his chair, sniped, “Would that make you the wisest of all the Greeks?”

At that, Navin and Betty looked puzzled for a moment before their muses informed them

as to the source of the reference, while Mariko arched an eyebrow at Arkady.

"Quit baiting him, Maletski. And Smitts, that goes for you too!" she said in a voice of iron.

Both men blinked and looked at her. "Yes, ma'am," said Terry, while Arkady said, "Understood."

"I get that you two don't work well together," she said, not letting them get off that easy, "but for everyone's sakes, please, whatever personal issues you two have, table them until we're done. Then we'll hand the two of you over to Betty's Sensei and let you hash it out in his dojo. Alright?"

Both nodded.

"Good. Betty, Navin, which of you wants to go next?"

Navin stood. "I'll go."

"Alright. What do you have for us on the mesh in this benighted place?"

"Not much, unfortunately. It looks like these guys took some hints from the same playbook as the Jovians use; centralized, hardwired and under transhuman control, with very few fully automated systems." It was now Navin's turn to appal the others. "Most of those systems that *are* mesh enabled are also monitored intensively for anything that might stink of 'outsider contamination'. Unfortunately, since the guys who are writing the filters to pick up on 'outsider' memes don't really know much about what's out here and are extremely paranoid and compulsive, they get alot of false positives, which usually results in some poor schmuck getting a visit from their thought police, these Doctrinal Hygiene types."

In the display, a video played of a pleading man with a black bag over his head being dragged away by a group of men dressed in the uniform of the Doctrinal Hygiene priesthood, the other people in the corridor pointedly not looking in the group's direction, many trying to hide expressions of pity, fear and disgust with varying degrees of success.

"So, short version: I get to one of the hubs, I can wreak absolute havoc. I don't have access to a hub, things are much harder in my neck of the woods. I'll be able to keep us in communication unless they start jamming us, and since most of their stuff is hardwired, they'll be able to do that with fewer repercussions than a normal, mesh controlled habitat would have to deal with."

"Any questions?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Alright. Betty, looks like you're up."

"Well, I don't have much. Five years ago, they had a fairly basic habitat defensive system, more designed to deal with warships coming in than a stealth ship, although the Titanian fleet could deal with them pretty easily if they felt so inclined, and we know very little about the internal security measures beyond what the infiltration team discovered, primarily at the very end when they accidentally tripped them."

There were nods acknowledging these limitations, so she forged ahead.

"What we do know is that they have a heavily designed -- really, overdesigned, according to Terry when I asked him about it earlier -- system of internal bulkheads and internal doors to seal off air loss -- or corral captives. Most of the domes appear to have internal partitions and a degree of armoring exists beneath them that separates them from the main beehive areas. As for their internal peacekeeping forces, I, again, know very little. It appears

that they do have some form of constabulary separate from their secret police, which appears to be armed with non-lethal weapons, mostly truncheons, tasers and stunners.”

“As for anything heavier, I have no idea, and if our target is supplying them with weapons, the best thing to do is assume that they’ll be armed to the teeth, potentially as bad as any corporate security squad in the Planetary Consortium.”

“That’s all I got. Questions?”

More headshakes.

“Alright. Mariko. You’re last.”

Mariko stepped forward and nodded.

“I found a few interesting bits and pieces in my odds and ends files. The first and primary point that I found is that apparently this hab, for all of its claims to being isolationist, has done at least some degree of trade with the PC or the Jovians on at least three occasions over the last ten years, although the precise nature of these incidents of trade remains unclear and deliberately opaque. But there are channels of communication open between the habitat and at least two other political entities in the solar system. My primary speculation in this regard is that the habitat, due to its remoteness and isolationism, represents a decent low first tier or second tier bolthole for hypercorp oligarches to egocast to in the case of emergencies. As the habitat has little of economic potential other than services for the hypercorps, and that sort of service is one of the few options that would be at all attractive to some of the oligarchs and hyperelite, that’s my primary guess as to what is going on here.”

“With that in mind, the presence of ‘Anton’ becomes increasingly worrisome. If he is here to attempt to secure or take over the habitat as a bolthole, there is little possibility that we would be able to detect such an attempted takeover from the exterior of the habitat unless things went critically wrong inside. And if such a takeover happened without any exterior giveaways...” she shrugged.

Arkady finished the thought that everyone was thinking, “And if such a takeover happens without them giving it away, the moon becomes a perfect bolthole for some inner system oligarchs, or, worse, a secret staging ground and resupply base for a hypercorp attack or conquest of the Autonomist Alliance-dominated Saturnian system.”

Mariko nodded.

“Great,” Terry said dryly. “Anything else, Mariko?”

“Not much,” she admitted. “Most of the rest was covered by the rest of you. All I have in addition to that is a rough population estimate from five years ago. It looks like about thirty-five thousand or so. Given the demographics of the initial colonists, and assuming no to minimal resleeving among the general populace, and other such factors, that’s an average of one and one-thirds children per individual.”

Arkady quirked an eyebrow. “And they practiced -- or at least accepted with a wink and a nudge -- polygamy. Out of the eighteen thousand initial colonists, close to sixty percent of them were female.”

“Joy,” Terry said flatly. “Where have I heard this before? Oh, yeah, the same Bible-thumping nutjobs who refused to consider anything even vaguely resembling sane population growth limitations.” He scowled. “Yeah, we were fruitful! We multiplied! And we god-damn well covered the Earth! *Idiots.*” He took a deep breath, his face set. “Sorry for the

outburst. Old, tender nerve.”

The others nodded.

“Right. So...” Betty looked back at the diagram of the asteroidal moon and its attendant structures. “How are we going to get in? The last infiltrator team were all sleeved in synthmorphs and drifted their way in slowly over the course of real-time weeks. We don’t have that option, thanks to Mr. Habitats-Overthrown-While-U-Wait.”

Navin snickered nastily at the jib. “Well, Ship has pretty good stealth capabilities. What we could do is slow down significantly, reconfigure the outer hull to look like a piece of ambient temperature space junk, set the orbit to miss their hab by a few hundred kilometers, and eject from Ship in stealth suits at the time of closest approach.”

“Except if we miss, we all get to experience the wonders of falling through space waiting for our air to run out. It’s a fairly high-risk, roll-the-dice approach.”

>Further discussion of methods of attempting to infiltrate the habitat.

“Alright then, so we’re agreed on a plan?”

Heads nodded.

“Alright. Let’s crank the time dilation to the other end; instead of seven and a half months of relative time before we arrive, we’ve instead got about an hour and a half.”

There was no physical or mental sensation to the change, but their real-time clocks suddenly shifted from moving like gummed up oil to quicksilver as they went from experiencing each second of real time as a minute and each minute of real time as an hour to experiencing each minute of real time as a second and each hour of real time as a minute.

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**Date:** April 25, 10 AF, 0412 UT

**Location:** Internal Simulspace, Firewall Stealth-ship *Ship*, En Route to Kari, 20,000,000 kilometers in altitude from Saturn.

It had been a little over an hour, from the internal perspectives of her team, since they had agreed to a plan of action and had split up to their own devices in Ship’s simulspace.

Betty was watching the sensor feed from Ship’s less-than-impressive sensor array, trying to plot the exact status of their defensive systems so as to plot an optimal direction of approach when suddenly there was a power spike from the habitat itself. Not a big spike, but still a spike nevertheless.

[Oy, Terry, take a look at the sensor readings!] she messaged him.

[What’s going on?] she received back from him.

“Well, there’s somethi--” she cut off in mid-word as the reactor, that poorly designed deathtrap of a bomb of a reactor, launched itself away from the habitat.

And then, a moment later from their accelerated perspective, it exploded.

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#### Chapter 4: All Alone In The Night

**Date:** April 25, 10 AF, 0743 UT

**Location:** A Maintenance Tunnel, The Ark Of The Fundamental Church Of God  
Anticipating, Colony Habitat Of The Moon Of Kari (Saturn XLV), High Upper Saturnian Orbit

Jessica huddled her knees to her chest. She was secreted in a small divot in one of the maintenance tunnel runs, and she'd been there for at least two hours. Those two hours had passed in what was simultaneously a single instant and an agonizing eternity.

She had fled here when the wrath of God Himself had shaken the world several hours ago, his anger at the chaos his sole remaining children had brought down upon themselves apparent as the world had shuddered around her and the lights went dim or went out. Rumors of the Flood, or the Cleansing Fire, of God washing his hands of the unfaithful remains of his once proud human race and turning his back on them for eternity, and worse, all had spread like fire.

Jessica wasn't sure what she thought about what was happening, but it had occurred to her, as she had huddled there in the dark of the tunnel, that if God were truly upset with the faithful to the point where he would smite them, wouldn't he have been a little more efficient about it? She knew her world, knew how delicate it was and how it was already possibly wrecked beyond their ability to repair it. And yet, according to Father Gallagher, the wicked of the Earth had taken nearly a year for God to finish smiting them when the Cleansing Fire had purged the Fallen homeworld.

The question that had occurred to her, but she had never dared voice was, simply put, why would it take God, the Almighty, a year to smite the wicked and cleanse the home world for the Faithful to reclaim? And how could God, the All Knowing, fail to complete his ordained cleansing and smiting of the wicked and corrupt? Wouldn't he immediately know everything about how to defeat and smite them? Because, according to the priests, he had failed to finish the smiting, hence the wicked that still threatened her world with corruption and fire and delayed their reclaiming of God's world, forcing them to stay here, aboard the Ark of the Faithful, the entirety of her world since her birth.

It had all begun a few days ago, or at least that was when she had first noticed that her home, her world, was descending into chaos and death.

She had wondered if it had felt like this to the wicked, when their time had come. She had been a little girl, only about nine years old, still in the creche with the other children, when the priests had announced to the assembled Faithful that God's purge of the wicked had begun. She had cheered at the time, caught up in the moment, but, as the year wore on and whispers and rumors of what was happening on Earth had reached her ears. Millions of deaths, the world despoiled. She had narrowly avoided being taken by the Doctrinal Hygienists, and they *had* dragged away the ranting man who had started screaming in public about some place called Chicago.

The next time she had seen him, he had obviously undergone the Ritual Of Purification, in which the Doctrinal Hygienists cleaned his mind of wicked thoughts and set him back on the right path. He had been friendly, but there was something in his eyes that had haunted Jessica later, in her dreams.

Rumors were flying everywhere, seeming to grow and proliferate on their own, like watching algae multiply under a microscope in the hydroponics lab.

The outsiders had invaded the world.

One of the priests had attempted to overthrow Father Gallagher.

The priests were possessed by demons.

God's holy warriors had arrived to purge the Faithful for being faithless.

A group of outsiders had seduced Father Gallagher with their unclean knowledge and temptations.

Half of the Faithful had gone mad and were now hunting down anyone they could find.

One of the priests had fallen into spasms, speaking in tongues and had denounced Father Gallagher.

Father Gallagher had invited the outsiders into her home.

And more and more and more, spiraling out of control into absurdity and insanity, until one didn't know what to believe.

Jessica certainly didn't know what to believe. She had seen, from her hiding place in an air vent, two groups of people that she recognized open fire on each other, resulting in a gun battle that had killed at least two of them as she watched, horrified. There had been other groups which had been focusing on rounding up members of the laity that they ran across -- laity like Jessica -- and dragging them away, in two different directions. And some of her fellow laity had gone quietly, while others had gone screaming, screaming and fighting and pleading and begging, for mercy, for absolution.

Thus, whenever she saw people heading her way, she hid, in whichever nook or cranny or tunnel or storage locker was handy.

She had grown up here. This little rock, measuring just a few kilometers from one end to the other, was her entire world. She had played hide and seek in the vents, gone exploring in the maintenance tunnels, and had once had the very memorable experience of having had to chase a smart monkey through the zero gravity maze of the robot service ducts, which the monkey had enjoyed a great deal more than she had at the time. But the end result was that this was *her* home, *her* world, and her inquisitive mind knew most of it in great detail.

Now she used that detail, that knowledge, to keep herself hidden, away from her fellows who seemed more than willing to kill other members of the Faithful, for what possible reason, she did not know.

It was like hide and seek.

Very scary hide and seek.

The worst part was that she didn't know anything. For all she knew, she was hiding from friends that wanted to spirit her away from whatever danger it was that was threatening, and some had claimed that, but how could she know for certain? How *could* she know that they weren't just waiting for her to show herself so they could shoot her?

As much as it frustrated her to be stuck like this, not knowing what to do, afraid to do

anything for fear of a misstep, all because she didn't know anything about what was going on, Jessica was pretty sure that getting shot for being stupid would be even more frustrating -- briefly.

And the rumors didn't help, either.

They were *everywhere*. The loudspeakers were broadcasting, pumping out contradictory statements every five minutes. People that she eavesdropped on didn't seem to know anything more than she did, despite her fervent wishes to the contrary, and often just repeated different versions of the rumors she had already heard from the *loudspeakers!*

How was she supposed to make a good decision when she had no good information to base it on!?

Although, on further reflection in the darkened tunnel, she supposed that that was rather the point. Whoever had broadcast all of those rumors on the loudspeakers had almost certainly done it with this result in mind, of driving the laity into confusion and hiding, paralyzing them all with indecision and uncertainty. Over the last few days, Jessica had crossed paths with other refugees in the maintenance ducts, usually resulting in both of them exchanging shouted rumors and unsubstantiated information with a decent length of tunnel between them.

*Paranoia was contagious*, Jessica concluded. *We all give it to each other.*

Her stomach growled and she winced as her aching, empty belly, not caring about contradictory rumors or the wrath of God Himself, demanded that something fill it.

She huddled her arms and legs around herself, sternly informing her stomach that now was not a good time.

When had she last eaten, anyway? Two days ago? Three? It had been an apple and two grain bars, she remembered that much. The apple had been so juicy...

With a shake of her head, she tried dismissing the memory of the juicy, sweet... *stop it!*

Her stomach growled in harmony with her memories.

Resolutely, she tried to focus on other things. Her responsibility was to the life support systems, specifically hydroponics, but also seconded to most of life support in general. So she began taking stock of what she could do. There were the air reproprocessors, for one; electrolytic oxygen converters that broke down carbon dioxide back into oxygen. She could go check in on those and make sure that they were still working. Or there were the wastewater recyclers; if any of those failed in cleaning their water, it could very easily begin a runaway cycle of cascading failure that ultimately destroyed the world. Or the power for the lights on the plants; if the total output of lumens dropped too low, the plants would also start dying, which was another possible cascade of failures. Or she could go to hydroponics, check to make sure that the fruit had been harvested on schedule, and if it hadn't been, she could grab some...

With a wrench, she pushed her thoughts back towards her duties, not her poor, aching, hollow, *hungry* stomach.

Air reclaimators. The air plant was closest to where she currently was and while she was somewhat trained in maintaining the reactor, the power systems were hardly her specialty.

Jessica started pulling herself through the zero gravity environment of the maintenance tunnels, only her lifetime of experience and her own sense of direction leading her on to her goal, a place where she could fulfill her duty -- and ignore her aching stomach.



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Jessica emerged from the air ducts near the amine swing-beds that formed the bulk of the air reclamation system. More technically, she emerged from a physical access point to the ducts in the amine system; she had had to switch over to her internal oxygen implant system for the last few hundred meters, when the carbon dioxide reached a concentration in the system sufficient to make her dizzy. The beds absorbed the carbon dioxide, and were then vented to the vacuum, and the carbon, water and oxygen were then reclaimed and returned to circulation. They had several sets of alternating beds absorbing the carbon dioxide from the air, and Jessica thought of the beds as a giant pair of lungs, working in reverse.

She checked the system readouts. Something had reduced the amine beds' efficiency to seventy-four percent, with one of the beds reading as offline and requiring maintenance. She wondered if it was just regular wear and tear or damage from the fighting.

Probably some combination of the two, she decided after looking at the readouts. Then she smiled. *Finally*, something was going her way. Whoever had been here last had failed to log out from the computer system, and deftly she quickly used their authorization to approve several procedures that had backed up in the queue for human approval. Over the next few moments, she heard the humming of the machinery around her increase closer to its usual intensity and watched the system efficiency climb back up to seventy-nine percent. Not perfect, but five percent efficiency was the difference between life and slow gasping death for hundreds.

She moved quickly back across the chamber and reentered the duct system, this time entering the outgoing airflow ductwork.

Drifting along in the airflow, she debated whether it was worth the risk to try to reach some of the communal bathing facilities so she could wash up. At this point, she could start smelling herself after three? four? days, and hiding in the ductwork wasn't going to work so well if someone could simply and literally *sniff* her out.

She inhaled deeply, enjoying the clean smell of the reclaimed air from the air plant. And then there was a smell of...

Her stomach grumbled as she smelled ripening fruit, the scent carried in the air. Plums... oranges... *apples*...

Without being consciously aware of what she was doing, Jessica shifted course, instinctively heading towards the smell of *food*.

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Jessica reached the darkened orchard through one of the outgoing vents, working her way up along the smooth and small tunnel against the airflow coming from the orchard. The orchard was part of the air reclamation system, and the outgoing air was oxygen-rich and smelled of water, soil hummus, wet bark and ripening fruit. She could hear the leaves rustling in the airflow as the world's atmosphere was pumped through its corridors on a constant basis, not allowing any pockets of dangerous gases to accumulate, but forcing them to constantly mix.

She reached the vent cover. In the orchard, it was darker than it should be, but still enough light for her to see by, and she pulled her multitool out of her pocket. Prying the vent

cover loose, she pushed it aside and laid it next to the vent aperture. In the absence of greater sources of momentum, the round cover would stay there, held in place next to its typical resting place by the pressure of the air flow going past it and into the ducts. She pushed off from the wall and towards the trees standing in the darkened room. Landing lightly in an apple tree, she looked around and found that it was half-harvested, the fruit swaying on the thin branches from the energy, however light, of her impact.

Grabbing at an apple, nearly faint with hunger, she bit into it, and moaned as the juice fairly exploded on her tongue. It was a tad overripe, and it didn't matter -- it was the best apple she'd ever tasted in her entire twenty years of life, strong and sweet and tart and *juicy*.

She quickly devoured the entire fruit, core and all, and then grabbed at a second.

Pushing off from the branch, she ate this apple with a little less speed and a little more savor than she had its predecessor. By the time she had finished the second apple, she had found a storage and equipment bin. Feeling a moment's guilt, she rummaged through the drawers, finding a small drawstring bag used for holding harvested fruit and someone's cache of granola bars, one of which she immediately ate.

Still constantly looking around and remaining crouched whenever possible, she made her way over to the collection bins, where the fresh fruit was collected after harvesting. It was fairly obvious that whatever had happened, it had interrupted the day's harvest of fruit at least three or four days ago, because the bins were mostly empty and pulled open. Obviously she had not been the only person here looking for something to eat.

She pushed away from the bins, which were almost certainly going to act as a magnet for anyone else entering the orchard -- they'd drawn her in, after all, and anyone who had ever helped on orchard duty was going to remember where they were if and when they came here in search of food.

The orchard was a massive chamber, the second largest single space in the entire world, after the central chapel where all of the Faithful would gather each morning and excepting the surface domes as they hadn't been carved out with the labor of the Faithful from the body of the world. Jutting up between five and fifteen meters away from the wall of the orchard's chamber were the small bushy forms of the trees, while the lights, currently very dim, wound their way through the center of the chamber. The nests of the gardener wasps lay quiescent, the low lighting apparently having convinced the large insects -- the size of Jessica's thumb! -- that it was the night cycle and time to sleep. A number of bulkheads subdivided the orchard, in case of a loss of pressure, but their ports were currently open and it was through these that Jessica floated.

Over the next five minutes, working as quickly and silently as she could, she filled the first drawstring harvesting bag and a second one that she had found in another set of bins with apples, oranges, nectarines, peaches and plums, as well as a few other snacks she had found in the second set of drawers. She'd also found something else of potential use in the drawers and had pocketed the small object carefully, just in case.

Bags laden, she was making her way back through the darkened orchard back towards the air duct that she'd come in through when she saw three forms standing over by the collection bins. She froze. They were between her and her way out.

For a few moments, she stood there, holding tight to the bole of the apple tree upon

which she had landed, staring at the three figures who were apparently working to empty the bins of their remaining fruit in an efficient manner.

There were other vents, but it would take her a few moments to open those, and the shriek of metal on stone was always a risk when dealing with opening one of the air vents, especially when one was in a tearing *hurry*.

She was running the layout of the orchard through her mind, watching the three figures with an intensity borne of fear and uncertainty, not knowing if these three were her enemy or her salvation, when she made her mistake.

One of the figures turned in a way that the dim lighting highlighted his face so that she could see it clearly.

She felt a wave of relief.

"Robert! Bobby!" she called to her creche-mate.

Then she felt fear again as all three figures turned towards her in eerie unison, their gazes seeking her out before she had finished speaking.

She saw Bobby's face... *and it wasn't Bobby looking back at her!*

It was someone else, someone else other than Bobby, *in Bobby's...* in *Robert's* body, wearing his flesh like a suit, and its gaze was duplicated on the faces of the other two, a man and a woman, both people... *bodies* that she vaguely recognized, but their expressions the same between all three. Then, without a word, without a sideways glance or any hint of prior coordination, all three released their burdens at the same moment and pushed off of the wall, flying towards her.

She screamed, a scream of pure, primal fear and did the same, pushing off from the apple branch upon which she stood, but the springiness of the branch and the mass of her burden of fruit conspired to steal the full force of momentum from her flight.

She flew at the wall and landed roughly, terror giving wings of adrenaline to her flight, and kept moving, literally running along the walls, the grip pads on her bare prehensile feet enabling her to run away from her pursuers in the eerie half-darkness of the orchard.

Then Bobbie's... *Robert's* body landed a bare three meters in front of her, and she screamed and tried to both backpedal and to push off against the wall to launch herself airborne and instead achieved neither, instead accomplishing a mid-air corkscrew. As she spun, she saw the other two nearby, one landing in a tree that would have been right in her path had she achieved going airborne, and the other on the surface of the wall back behind her. If she had managed to avoid Robert, she would have ended up running right into one of the two of them.

Her panic faded, leaving a clear fear behind. Fear at their obvious competence and their eerie coordination. They had flushed her out as easily and as competently as a group of smart monkeys hunting a smart rat.

Robert strode forward, his own grip pads enabling the entity currently inhabiting, *possessing*, his physical body to walk normally, although it was obviously *not* her friend. The stride made that abundantly clear. *Bobby* walked and moved with an economical motion, a saunter that echoed and broadcast his confidence to everyone within line of sight, with a smile that beamed the same message even more loudly to everyone in its path. Whatever it was that possessed Bobby's body, it didn't move in nearly the same way, its stride harsh and rigid, with a motion that reminded her of nothing as much as of the Doctrinal Hygienists, arrogant, strong,

daring anyone to stand in their way.

He plucked her from the air with a casualness towards physical contact that killed any final, lingering hope that there might be some bit of Bobby left in the body before her.

She heard the other two push off from where they were standing.

"Ma'am," he said, the first sounds she had heard from him. It was Bobby's voice, and yet it *wasn't*. The inflections were all wrong. Bobby drawled, and this *thing's* voice was clipped and precise, with an accent she had never heard before. "You're going to have to come with us. You'll be safe with us."

"What, like Bobby was safe with you?" she half-sobbed, half-snarled at him, her fear suddenly transmuting into pure rage and her hand plunged into her pocket, pulling out the small object she had grabbed back at the other storage area on the off chance that she might need it. In a single heave of motion, she sprayed him in the face with the aerosol container, kicked free of his grip and threw one of her bags of fruit at him. He yowled in pain, which nearly instantly became a coughing fit as the concentrated pheromones hit him in the eyes, went up his nose and down his throat, her foot hit him in the shoulder and the bag flew into his gut.

Throwing the bag had given her a burst of movement in the opposite direction and she utilized it ruthlessly, leaving Bobby's body coughing its lungs out behind her.

She didn't want to be nearby when the pheromones currently spreading on the air currents flowing through the orchard reached their intended recipients.

She reached an apple bole and, bending it, launched herself flying towards the bulkhead separating the apple trees from the plum trees.

This was her home. If they wanted her, they could damn well try and catch her on her own home turf.

She heard the two other figures launch themselves once more, and risked a look back during her next landing and launching towards the bulkhead port.

Both were coming after her, abandoning Robert's coughing form. She wondered if they knew what she had sprayed him with and were afraid of trying to help him, or if they were just simply abandoning their comrade. She also wondered how they were coordinating themselves so perfectly without any sound. She had played enough zero gravity sports to know how complicated things could get in the heat of the moment, but these three moved as one, as if they had one mind, one unifying thought.

*Well fine, she thought. So do I. And that thought is to get the hell away from the three of you!*

The pair were closing in on her and were pulling what looked like shock batons from their belts when suddenly the orchard began to abandon its quietude, an angry buzzing filling the air.

Jessica's stomach suddenly rebelled when she realized what was about to happen to what was left of Robert.

Not daring to look back, she fled onward into the plum trees as Robert's body began to scream, first in fear and then in pain, audible over the buzzing of the hundreds of angry gardener wasps, each five to six centimeters long with a half-centimeter long stinger.

Landing on a branch, she turned back towards her pursuers and brandished the aerosol. Trying to put on a brave face, she shouted over the screaming, "There's enough left in here for both of you. You can leave me alone or -- whoa!"

She pushed off from her branch as the woman flung herself at Jessica. Whirling in mid-air, Jessica sprayed the woman as she passed her by, her enemy's path committed in her attempt to tackle Jessica. The pair would have passed by mere centimeters, except Jessica continued her whirl until her feet contacted the woman's back. Pushing off as hard as she could, she gave herself a considerable boost of additional acceleration, likewise imparting the same to the woman.

Jessica was pretty certain that, whoever it was in there, *what* ever it was, it hadn't been expecting her to meet her enemy nearly head on instead of running for it again. She wouldn't get that chance twice.

But, hopefully, she wouldn't need to.

She heard a crunching noise and yelps of pain behind her as the woman went flying face first into the plum tree's close-knit and very *thorny* branches.

*Ha! Bet you weren't expecting that!*

She looked behind her. The remaining man had moved to intercept her if she had run away from them again and was in completely the wrong place. With a jauntiness she didn't feel, she waved the aerosol bottle at him and pointed at his comrade.

"Hey! I sprayed her! You might want to see about getting her out of that tree before the wasps find her too!" she shouted over the hoarse screams from Robert's body, which was now running and flailing about, either in panic or looking for something to clean the pheromones off of it before the wasps killed it, she had no idea. "And before you get any bright ideas about coming after me, I've still got enough in this bottle to get you, too!"

And, with that and her remaining bag of fruit, she launched herself back into the apple section of the orchard.

She tried very hard not to look at the form that had formerly been one of her friends, so covered in angry, buzzing wasps that it wasn't distinguishable as an individual person, being instead a screaming human figure covered in angry, buzzing black and yellow forms.

She failed.

She gagged, tasting half-digested fruit, and, resolutely, calling on years of social conditioning regarding vomiting in free fall, fought it down.

Moving through the trees, using the close growing branches to hide, she moved as quickly and silently as she could across the wall back towards her entry vent.

The screaming had just redoubled itself, with the woman's voicing joining Robert's weakening cries, when she reached the vent and dove in. She caught herself on the interior of the vent and then pulled the vent cover back over. Hopefully that would buy her some time before they could find where she went, and would also hopefully keep the wasps from following her and any lingering pheromones that she may have caught the backspray of.

Clutching her precious and hideously expensive bag of fruit, she flew down the ductwork, letting the airflow push her along as she frantically tried to add as much distance she could from the orchard and the nightmares she had left there.

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**Date:** April 25, 10 AF, 0900 UT

**Location:** Internal Simulspace, Firewall Stealth-ship *Ship*, En Route to Kari, 21,000,000 kilometers in altitude from Saturn.

"Alright, so, what do we have here?" Mariko asked, a few hours after the reactor's explosive end.

"Well, the entire fracking Saturnian system is buzzing about it. Quiet little isolated brinker hab that ninety-five percent of them have never even *heard* of suddenly ejects their reactor just a few minutes before it goes critical and explodes with a multi-megaton yield? Yeah, people noticed," Navin said.

"Titan's getting ready to put together a humanitarian relief effort, with a naval expedition providing cover. Momo von Satan over on Monster Raging Goblin Cock News Network has already weighed in, with some..." he thought for a moment for the best descriptor for the popular, comedic and vaguely surreal Titanian news program, "*interesting* commentary. So has The Cock, for that matter, although it's insisting that this is an insult to brinker cultists everywhere. Apparently, they don't even know how to commit mass suicide effectively," he finished, voice heavy with sarcasm.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, they had speed their simulspace time dilation back up to normal speed and past it, settling on a times two multiplier, giving them two seconds to think for every second that passed outside.

"The Titanian mesh is currently going nuts with debate on what to do; the Prime Minister and his cabinet are currently acting on their own initiative in putting together this relief force, which should be getting here in about five days; probably by then the Plurality will have decided on what Titan's official response is going to be," Betty said with a grimace.

"Also, Twelve Commons is currently putting together their own relief force, and Salah is doing the same."

"Shit," Terry said conversationally. "I'd hoped that the hypercorpers on Salah would stick to their big, expensive Hamilton Cylinder and leave this to the Autonomist Alliance."

"Except that Kari isn't a signatory in the Autonomist Alliance," Mariko reminded him. "They, unfortunately, have every bit as much of a right to send a ship to Kari as the anarchists and the Titanians do. And they're going to do it. Never mind that this is almost certainly their fault. Thirty years of residence by the Fundamentalist Church of God Anticipating? No problems. A little over a week after a likely hypercorp black ops squad arrives, things start exploding. No, no way this isn't related."

"Well that's for certain," Arkady said from his perch; he had turned off gravity for his simulmorph and was now floating up near the ceiling of their meeting space. "The odds of it being anything else are so unlikely as to be absurd in their unlikeliness." He pushed off against the wall and floated slowly along the ceiling. "The question is, more precisely, *what happened?*"

"Well, let's first start with the base assumption that what happened to the reactor was not an accident," Mariko said. "That means that the chain of events that lead to the reactor being set to detonate and then shortly thereafter to ejection can be traced back to our target's presence."

"Do we have any further information on what happened aboard the habitat? Broadcasts, mayday signals, threats to destroy the place if anyone gets too close, hell, I'll take a man in a

vacsuit on the exterior waving two semaphore flags,” Terry said.

“Whole lotta nuthin,” Navin confirmed. “Not a peep. I can tell you that I’ve picked up the occasional faint whiff of what might be jamming, but really localized and only for short bursts.”

“That’s information right there on what’s going on inside,” Mariko said. “They must be fighting inside, otherwise why jam signals? You said that the entire habitat’s control system was wired, not wireless, if I recall correctly.”

Navin nodded.

Betty spoke up. “Alright, so the last time this guy tried to take over a habitat, he went with a Trojan Horse option. Maybe he did the same here.”

“Yes, but the last time, aboard the Dorfl Trust habitat, he had had the advantage of being able to send in compromised egos to prepare the ground ahead of him,” Mariko said, plugging in her event reconstruction software. A timeline appeared above the table, with a schematic of the habitat below it.

“April the sixteenth, at sixteen hundred local, his transport docks. Eight and half days later, something happens that requires that they eject the reactor before it explodes. What happened between those points?”

There was silence for a moment. Then Betty spoke up. “Eight days is a really long time to have a habitat that small in chaos. Essential systems get smashed or damaged; either things end up in a stalemate, neither side willing to move to uncover their rear areas and essential systems that they’re sitting on, or one side wins within a few days, but they’re just not enough room aboard a hab that small to maneuver and actually stretch things out that long, unless both sides hunker down into a complete and total stalemate -- which is damn near impossible for it to actually happen and stabilize long term.”

Terry nodded in agreement. “She’s right. An uprising, instigated or popular, in an environment that small tends to be dynamically unstable, as neither side wants to risk damaging the place -- usually, although given who we’re talking about here, I’m not taking that as a given, as on one side we’ve got religious fanatics and on the other we’ve got a corporate black ops squad that is probably currently in do or die mode; they have to succeed, or risk being thrown to the wolves and their mission disavowed.”

“Perhaps,” Mariko said. “Yet, given his past behavior at the Dorfl Trust, it would not be out of character for him to threaten to destroy the habitat in order to buy himself time to escape once his mission is blown.”

“Or, if he’s the only one transmitting, he might try to bluff,” Betty said. “If he claims to be this Father Gallagher, who’s to say otherwise? Especially if he managed to get his hands on Gallagher’s morph and sleeved himself in it. ‘Oh, sorry, we had a horrible accident, but everything’s under control here. Thanks for asking, have a nice day.’ Maybe things get a little tense for a while, but eventually, without any proof of things going wrong -- especially since they don’t have any reason to suspect someone like our target is aboard in the first place -- the Titanians go home, and our target takes the time to really dig in.” She paced angrily.

“And who knows what he’ll do to the locals, the poor dupes, when he’s in charge? They’re probably fighting in there right now. Otherwise, why eject the reactor? And he couldn’t have brought in an army of combat capable morphs, bio or synth, with him on that transport, so that leaves one resource for him to be fighting with: resleeving the locals.”

There were grimaces all around.

"I wish I could disagree with your analysis," Terry said, "but I can't."

"And once he starts resleeving the locals with forks, they're fucked," Betty said. "It'd be like the Dorfl Trust all over again, only worse. Because, unlike the people on the Trust, most of them won't know what the hell they're fighting; they'll see friends, people they know."

"But..." Navin began and then fell silent.

"But what?" Arkady said. "But they have to know about the possibility of resleeving and forking?" Navin nodded.

Arkady grimaced and continued, "Remember, these people left Earth and cut off most of their communications, which were no doubt tightly controlled to the point of making a Jovian Junta security officer weep in envy, well before backups, infomorphs and other related techs were discovered. They probably have heard *rumors* of what we can do with an ego, but they'll all be filtered through their religious preconceptions. I'd be willing to bet that they're couched as possession and similar evil magics to the laity."

"Yeah. And so they'll think that their friends are possessed, or something along those lines, and they'll hesitate for just that moment to shoot. The forks in their friends' morphs, however, will not. Also, we don't know what kind of weapons the locals will have access to, but we all know what kind of weapons the invaders will have: the nastiest and best to ever come out of a cornucopia machine. Probably non-lethal, so they can capture more of the locals to use as sleeves." She shrugged helplessly. "It's what I'd do in his place."

Terry rubbed at the bridge of his nose with a tired expression. "And that's going to be the biggest limiting factor on how fast the invasion can grow. It takes over an hour to upload and resleeve a biomorph with an organic brain, and five hours to make your average ego bridge. Assuming they started with one desktop cornucopia machine when they arrived, and had all of the necessary blueprints, and have been running the thing no-stop making more cornucopia machines, ego bridges, weapons, armor, restraints..." he tapped his chin. "I bet that's what's going on in there."

Mariko nodded. "My thoughts were tracking in the same direction."

Terry quirked his head to one side. "Alright, three projections here, two really dumb, one fairly smart, but since we don't know what exactly we're facing, it has to lie somewhere between the two extreme dumb options." On the timeline, a large desk-sized cube of a desktop cornucopia machine appeared at docking time.

"This is all assuming that they don't have shortages of necessary trace elements and other materials, of course. So, at time zero, they get access to raw materials again, and immediately start feeding the CM. Five to six hours later, they can have a new CM. So projection one is to assume that all of their fabber time is dialed in towards making new CMs, without any time being diverted to other items and gear. The CMs start growing exponentially; at five hours, we have two CMs, at ten hours, we have four. It is now been two hundred and ten hours since they landed, meaning that there have been a potential of forty-one fabber cycles, each doubling the number of CMs on the habitat, but producing nothing else. This results in a number of CMs equal to more than the mass of the habitat, and results in no offensive capabilities, so I feel we can safely discard that option. I present it only to emphasize that we do not know how much or how fast our target's capabilities are growing, or at what stage of growth



they are at.” On the timeline display, the exponential growth curve displayed, finally showing a number of cornucopia machines at their present time best shown in scientific notation.

“The other potential dumb scenario means that they didn’t use their first CM to make another CM, and they’re just using that one to produce everything they need. This is foolish, as it also limits their logistical pipeline. In this scenario, they have some combination of at most forty to eighty really complex items, like ego bridges and plasma rifles, and maybe a few hundred guns at most. Nasty, but ultimately bottlenecked through a single CM.” On the timeline display this time, the single cornucopia machine’s output was broken down into tic marks and then into various bar graphs showing how much of any given type of item the single machine could have produced.

“The smart scenario, however, is much more scary,” Terry said. “This is the standard doctrine for this sort of thing, but most people don’t bother themselves with these sorts of details.”

The others nodded, motioning for him to continue.

“The smart scenario is to have the first cornucopia machine immediately be used to build another CM or a more limited fabber that is only capable of producing a single type of item, but is much easier and faster to build. In this scenario, there is always one or two cornucopia machines dedicated to increasing infrastructure, while that infrastructure is then dedicated to producing weapons and other war-fighting material.”

The timeline showed the production output increasing on a steady line, not an exponential curve, but a mere straight line as every three to five hours another miniature factory came online. Each of the nanofabrication units would be capable of producing weapons, armor, ammunition, synthmorphs, food from any organic waste, and more if they had the blueprints for that item, all in a matter of hours. Two hours for a pistol or a hundred rounds of most basic forms of ammunition. Three for a submachine gun. Four for an automatic rifle. Five for a machine gun emplacement or an ego bridge. And so long as their supplies of raw materials held out, they could *keep* producing items at that rate.

“In the scenario, determining the volume of their production of any given item really depends on their priorities in producing it, so I really can’t tell you more aside from possibilities. Also, based on Kari’s composition, they’re probably running into shortages of necessary trace elements needed, so that’ll slow down some of their production, and they also need to set up a logistics chain to deliver the raw materials to the fabbers. However...” He pointed to the display.

The bar graphs this time contained large probability and error bars, showing the possible ranges of production for each given class of item. Regardless of which, it was still depressingly high.

“So, bottom line is, if the locals don’t get rid of their unwanted corporate visitors, they’ll be overwhelmed, probably soon.”

“Essentially.”

Betty was looking at the projected levels of weapons possibly produced by the invading hypercorpers and winced. “It looks to me as if their biggest bottleneck isn’t weapons, but bodies to wield them with.

Terry nodded. “Making most combat-capable synthmorphs takes hours and a good chunk of metals, but biomorphs take at least an hour and a quarter, assuming zero turn around

time. So assume that they're they're resleeving about one new biomorph sleeve every hour and a half or so per ego bridge on average. At this point, they could have anywhere from five to five hundred ego bridges, depending on where in the priority chain they were placed." He grimaced. "I wonder what they're doing with the egos?"

"Best not to think about that," Mariko said, an equal grimace on her own face.

Arkady thumped down onto the table. "Alright, that's enough. All of this is just supposition. And your theories have some pretty big holes in them."

"Such as?"

"Such as the early hours; why didn't the locals simply get rid of the 'outsiders' before they could become an entrenched threat? Why was the transport allowed to dock in the first place, given how xenophobic this culture is? For all we know, the habitat is in the middle of a three way war: two religious factions thanks to their Father Gallagher getting assassinated and having two faction heads both vying for control and then the corpers come in ostensibly to support one and start their own beachhead." His eyes stalked their way around the room. "Bottom line is, we don't know what's going on in there, and we all know that we're going to have to think fast when we get in there -- *if* we manage to get in there in the first place -- and pretty much the most dangerous thing we can do to ourselves is to commit the fatal analyst's error of getting locked into a given interpretation of events. We do that and we're fucked, because we'll start ignoring evidence that disagrees and interpreting everything we see through that filter, and that will get us all killed."

"Well, regardless of what happened, I can tell you this much," Navin said, bringing up a schematic of the Saturnian system. He highlighted them, aboard the stealth ship *Ship*.

"We're here, about twelve hours out from our intercept with Kari."

Another moon glowed in the schematic, the large moon Titan, home to three out of every four people living around Saturn and the solar system's largest parliamentary direct cyberdemocracy, the Commonwealth of Titan.

"The Plurality is currently voting on what exactly to do in regards to Kari, but their military is currently putting together an expeditionary force with the intent of investigating what happened, while the civilians are already pulling together a relief force. Their ETA is approximately one hundred and sixteen hours, one hundred of that in transit, assuming no delays from their current estimate. If the military force leaves ahead of the civilian force, which seems likely, although they haven't made any announcements to that effect, and then they use those anti-matter rocket drives that their destroyers have to get out here fast, instead of relying on fusion rockets, they'll be able to get here within about sixty hours after departure."

Another station highlighted, a massive Hamilton Cylinder, floating above the planetary rings. Recently completed, its nominally independent allegiance was currently wavering as wealthy, inner system hypercorpors -- oligarchs, interested only in their own economic dominance -- emigrated en masse to the station. And they were trying to put themselves in charge by force of population and make the station into an extension of the inner system Planetary Consortium.

"The hypercorpors on Salah are either great actors or they didn't know this was coming, because this caught them with their pants down. They're busy putting together their own force to come investigate. ETA, ninety-five hours after they launch, so currently one hundred and

twelve hours.”

A cluster of stations in orbit near the Hamilton Cylinder highlighted. “Twelve Commons, specifically the DIY Shipyards and Janus Commons, is also putting together a relief effort. ETA, two hundred hours plus.”

He looked up and around at his teammates. “So, bottom line is, we have between forty-five and eighty-five hours to infiltrate past the defenses, land, get inside, figure out what in all of the hells is going on in there, find our target, prevent him from trying to run again, prevent him from trying to blow up the habitat -- again -- extract him, and get away from the moon, all before anyone else manages to get out here or gets close enough to track our drive heat.”

“Yeah, this mission just got alot more difficult, didn’t it?” Terry said wryly. “Hard to believe they pay us, too.”

Arkady snorted a wry laugh while Terry got a bunch of odd looks from the others. He shook his head. “Old and traditional Army joke. One of a series about complaints about the pay.”

By this point, the others had dawning looks on their faces as their muses filled them in on the references. Mariko laughed lightly, while Betty just looked moderately confused, and Navin shrugged.

“Regardless, we might want to give serious consideration to scrubbing the mission,” Navin said, pressing on as devil’s advocate, saying it because it needed to be said, not because he agreed with it. “I don’t like it either, but once the Titanians get here, our target is toast.”

“Is he?” Betty said. “If he’s not in charge, maybe, but when they get here, what if he’s the only one transmitting when they arrive? Then we go back to my earlier scenario, where he bluffs his way out of any trouble and has even more time to settle in before anyone else manages to get.”

“And if we scrub, as attractive as it might appear to us, then those people in there have no hope whatsoever.” Terry made a slight adjustment to the timeline, adding on an additional sixty to one hundred hours worth of estimated production.

“Even if we assume that they’re only half efficient due to difficulties in capturing people and finding resources to feed the fabbers with, we’re looking at a majority of the habitat’s estimated population resleeved by the earliest time the Titanian fleet can get here. By the time anyone else could get here, there would be nobody left aside from some mopping up to do. At which point...” He shrugged. “So I can’t countenance turning away. We go on and go in.” He looked around the room at everyone. “Are we all in agreement? Do we do this? Aye or nay?”

“Aye!” everyone said in unison.

Betty slapped the table.

“Right then!” she said. “Well, I’ve been looking at their defenses, and I’ve come up with a number of possible intrusion routes...”

> Outside reactions to the explosion

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## Chapter 5: A Race Through Dark Places

**Date:** April 25, 10 AF, 2112 UT

**Location:** Internal Compartment, Firewall Stealth-ship *Ship*, Approximately 100 Kilometers From Kari, High Saturnian Orbit.

[Alright then, this is it, everyone,] Betty messaged. Has everyone completed their final equipment checks?

[Locked and stocked and ready to rumble,] Terry messaged.

[Ready,] Mariko messaged.

[I think I may have forgotten something. Can we go back for it?] Arkady messaged.

Everyone turned to look at him.

He shrugged, his kinesics apparent through the vacsuit as humorous. [Cancel that, I've got it.]

Betty shook her head. [Not funny, Arkady. Are you ready to go or not?]

[Da, let's do this.]

[I'm fully kitted out, and I've got everyone tied into our tactical mesh and tacnet software,] Navin messaged. [I've also got a fork instanced in a ghostrider module; he'll be handling mesh security and overwatch.]

[Hello everyone, this is Navin Deuce, and I'll be your ghostly voice watching out for you for the evening,] the fork messaged.

[And I'm set as well,] Betty messaged. [Ship, take us the rest of the way in. Use Route Beta; it looks like our best bet at the moment.]

[Are we gambling with something that we are betting?] Ship replied.

[Yes, our lives, including yours,] Navin said testily.

[Ah. Might I suggest a game of Russian Roulette instead?]

Betty shook her head. She didn't know what to make of Ship, the rather odd Artificial General Intelligence that ran the stealth ship. It seemed naive and literal-minded -- to the point of calling itself *Ship* -- but over the course of the trip, her infrequent conversations with the AGI had left her with the feeling that it was far smarter and insightful than it let on.

There was a slight feeling of weight as Ship continued to decelerate, killing their speed gradually as they approached the little rocky moon, which was now close enough to see with the naked eye, assuming that any of them would be stupid enough to step outside right now.

Betty's infiltration plan hinged on two facts and a bunch of suppositions from those facts.

The first was that Ship was a stealth ship, with a programmable exterior that currently made it look like nothing more than a rock tumbling through the void upon visual inspection, and had a full suite of stealth technologies, including a heat sink for their considerable heat emissions.

The second fact was that the reactor detonation had been a blessing in disguise for her team. The blast damage wasn't much, but between the blast and, more importantly, the electromagnetic pulse, a reasonable percentage of the habitat's defenses had been damaged or destroyed, and they hadn't been able to detect any replacements being manufactured and

placed. So the coverage of sensors and other defenses set out to detect incoming hostiles had been dealt a blow, meaning that there were gaps in the coverage.

Hopefully.

But the second fact argued that the habitat residents had bigger issues on their plates inside than dealing with potential visitors. And since Navin's research indicated that their mesh infrastructure was ridiculously centralized and Terry's research indicated that they had just lost between half and two thirds of their power output, it was completely possible that the exterior defenses were being neglected in favor of higher priorities. And, as Betty had pointed out, their defenses were completely organized around naval threats, not a stealth ship of Ship's caliber.

Now it was time to put those theories to the test.

And it was all up to Ship. She had done her best, but her fate was now in the hands and thrusters of another.

She felt helpless as they slowly moved towards the captured rocky asteroid.

*The darkened corridor, lights flickering in a fashion that made the shadows deeper and more threatening...*

She shook her head. No. Now was not the time to have *that* intrude on her consciousness.

Time passed.

The little rocky moon slowly expanded, the schematic they had all studied obsessively came to life. Domes, mirror array, slowly spinning, the largest chunk of matter within several million kilometers.

The sensor arrays, heavy beam weapon emplacements and attack drone depots slowly drifted past as they moved steadily inward, past their sensor and attack envelopes. Many were apparently off-line.

Betty exhaled slowly when she read that status update. She had been right. When the habitat's power supplies had suddenly dwindled so dramatically, those in charge had been forced to make the unpalatable decisions on which systems to cut power from and which to keep powered.

And the exterior defenses hadn't made the cut. Probably what had happened was as soon as the highly centralized control had lost power, the defenses that were tied to that control had shut themselves down so as to avoid being subverted or brought under local control. It was a dumb way of setting up one's system, but having a centralized command and control loop for something like habitat defense was a dumb way of setting it up in the first place. And the cult leaders had had 'control freak' practically stamped on their DNA; if they didn't control it, they probably wouldn't want anyone else to have the chance to do so either.

It hadn't been an essential part of her plan, or even necessarily a part that anything depended on, but seeing that her prediction had been right was heartening. It meant that she was probably on track to be right about more than just that.

40 kilometers.

Twenty.

Ten.

Finally, after what felt like hours, they touched down on the surface of Kari, near the south pole.

The five Firewall operatives exited slowly out of Ship's internal space, where they had spent the last four days packed in like *lutefisk* in a tin, shock jelly cushioning their bodies as their minds had occupied themselves in Ship's internal simulspace.

[Alright Ship, good job. Head over the Rendezvous Point and camouflage yourself. If we die horribly in there, alert Firewall and get out of here. Otherwise, wait for us.]

[If you do not die horribly soon enough, should I ensure that you do?]

[Ha. Ha. Get going.]

[Understood. I am to wait until the Titanian fleet is fifteen hours out and then comm for instructions, correct?]

[Yes. And if we don't check in at least once every ten hours, evac and let Firewall know what happened here.]

[Will do.]

~~~~~

They moved away from Ship's landing place and started moving in the slow, exaggerated motions of spacewalkers trying to be covert and use as little of their thruster packs as possible. Each motion was controlled and considered.

However, they had to balance their desire for stealth versus their need for haste. The chameleon coating armor mod was routing what heat emissions it could to a heat sink, rendering them hard to see in infrared, but it only had a rating for an hour. After that hour was up, it would need to vent or risk cooking the wearer, and *that* little display would be nigh impossible for any thermal camera in the area to miss. It would be like literally sending up a flare.

Grip shoes on the exteriors of their suits let them walk or crawl along to some extent, but this area of Kari hadn't yet felt the modifying touch of man to any extent; regolith dust rendered grip pads useless, and movement in those areas slowed literally to a crawl.

Slowly, ever so slowly, they inched their way across the southern reaches of the little moonlet, at a speed that didn't even average above two kilometers an hour. They had been forced to come down in an area whose sensors and human construction artifacts were light, to avoid the chance of detection, yet close enough that they actually would have a chance to reach their targeted infiltration point within an hour.

The path they had mapped out was torturous and twisted, including crevasses, small rifts and other surface features that could help hide them from detection.

Thirty-two minutes in to their agonizing slow movement, a small scout drone had appeared on the horizon; they had all frozen, as Navin prepared to hack it and Betty prepared to shoot it.

After a tense two minutes, it had moved out of sight, without transmitting any warning that they could detect.

They pressed on. Betty unslung one of her heavier weapons, just in case the drone returned with friends.

Finally, they reached the site of the former reactor and its support structures, at the south pole of rotation for the tiny moon.

~~~~~

The place was, not to put too fine a point on it, a mess.

The reactor site itself was a large bowl-shaped structure, the hollow void at the center having been where the reactor vessel itself had once sat. All around it were the structures that had gone into power generation, reactor control, and other such infrastructure that the reactor would have required. Now they were standing cold, open to space. Some of it was probably salvageable, but not much. It would take a great deal more than just fabricating another reactor module and plugging it into the space where the old one had once sat, that was for certain.

The dome tent that had once covered the reactor site had torn open during the fighting and then had been given a solid dose of radiation and blast damage. There were bodies everywhere, at least three dozen, drifting slightly in the negligible gravity of the moon or tangled in among the structures that would have once stood under an inflated dome nearly a hundred meters across, and were now exposed to hard vacuum.

All wore variants on the same design of clothing, a combination of flexible knit pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt that reached the wrists, so far as they could tell, many were bloodstained, or coated with grime and other soiling factors, and many had been cooked or burned by the explosion of the reactor.

Terry's sensors detected appreciable levels of radiation; while not at the "you're dead and don't know it" stage, staying out here for an extended period of time would kill anyone, medichines or not.

Over the whisker lasers that were networking the team together, he sent an update of the clothing design so their smart clothes could duplicate them inside. Hopefully the clothes these people all seemed to be wearing were sufficiently generic as to not be noticeable. They seemed to be color coded, and Terry wished he knew what colors designated what. Pure white was the motif for the Doctrinal Hygiene people, they knew that. Or at least it *had* been, five years ago.

These poor bastards -- nearly all men, Terry now noticed -- had instead been dressed in a mix of other primary colors, mostly blues, reds, greens and oranges.

None had worn vacsuits.

Maybe that was just a selection bias, that the ones that *had* worn vacsuits had survived, gone back inside and abandoned their dead comrades.

Maybe.

He hoped.

Because otherwise, things had just gotten significantly nastier.

[Anyone else notice that none of these fellows are wearing vacsuits?] he messaged the others.

[Da.] Arkady messaged back. [I thought it was odd and worrisome.]

[I'm finding a great deal of signs that point to small arms fire -- pistols, submachine guns, some light beam weapons like stunners and laser pulsers,] Mariko messaged. [However, I have not found any weapons themselves yet.]

[Why, do you think?]

[If I had to guess, I'd say that the defenders are terribly short on equipment. It's possible that they simply looted the bodies of any material that might be useful in prosecuting their battle and left them here for later cleanup.]

[Guys, I've found our way in,] Navin messaged.

They hurried over to meet him, leaving the dead behind.

Navin was crouched at an airlock door set in the 'floor', its telltale readouts either dead or glowing red.

[I checked; there are four airlocks leading from this dome site back inside from here. One got slagged or welded shut. If we tried opening it, we'd need cutting equipment or smart corrosives to get in, and the heat from that would be like sending up a flare. The other two still have power and sensors. This one looks like it had direct line of sight to the reactor detonation, which cooked most of the sensors and whatnot, but left the mechanisms intact.]

[Excellent,] Terry messaged. [So we can use the mechanical overrides on this one and cycle it manually.]

[Exactly, and I've got some microsensors currently mapping out the internal systems, making sure that they're *actually* toast, just to be sure. While we're waiting, I just need to also check over this physical exterior access and control panel, but that's not my specialty. It is yours.]

[On it, kid.]

Terry looked over the physical access panel set into the airlock. It was slightly damaged, but not welded or otherwise bonded to the surface. With a flurry of mental commands, he had his smart vacsuit open a slit around each wrist and then had the nanobot tool-bands mounted to his wrists extend their flexible arms through the slits. With a few moments work and a grunt of effort, he had the cover off of the access panel.

Underneath, he found the analog gauges that he'd been hoping to find, as well as the manual overrides for the airlock.

*Ahhhh... he thought to himself, pleased. Conservative engineering, how I love thee. Build in backups and safeties for any conceivable situation. And then backups for the safeties, and then the safeties for the backups, just in case.*

According to the gauges, the airlock was currently evacuated of air. *Well, that makes things easier.* He flipped out the lever for the manual override and began cranking. The doors slid open smoothly and fairly quickly.

When doors reached half-way open, Navin looked in and then recoiled.

[What's wrong?] Betty asked, moving into view. [Oh.]

Terry leaned over and looked through the half-open doors.

Against the inner doors were two still forms, their bodies frozen in paroxysms of agony and pain, obviously having been pounding and grasping at the door for the air just a few centimeters away.

Arkady also peeked in. [I hope that the inner manual controls are still functional.]

[That was a little cold, Maletski.]

[Well, it is too late for them, but if this airlock is non-functional, then things get much worse.]

[Point. Cold blooded, but valid point.]



Terry got back to cranking the lever, and a few moments of effort later, the doors stood open.

[Help me?] Betty said.

[Certainly]

Betty and Mariko carefully moved into the airlock and, with equal care, gently moved the bodies out. Terry moved in and found the interior access panel. Removing it, he found that the manual controls in here were apparently intact. He glanced at the two still forms that the women were looking over.

They must have just forgotten that this had been here, in their panic.

Poor bastards.

Still, it was best to do a thorough check before committing to this particular port.

~~~~~

[It looks intact and functional. They probably just forgot about it in their panic, if they had even been trained about it in the first place. Given how education works on this hab, I wouldn't be willing to place odds.]

Betty looked over the body that she had helped move out of the airlock.

[Damn. Poor SOB.]

[Pretty much.]

[Well, at least we can resleeve them later.]

She pulled out a knife and started digging for the cortical stack, the grape-sized artificial diamond storage device that backed up a person's mind in case of death. They were placed just under the base of the skull, where the brain and spinal cord met and designed to be surgically removed, or, when in the field, with a knife, a procedure called 'popping the stack'. She'd had to do it a number of times by now, usually on teammates that had managed to get themselves fragged. While getting restored from the stack was traumatic, as Betty had personal knowledge to know, as one remembered their own death, getting restored from another backup could be even worse, because then the person had to deal with the potentially soul crushing knowledge that they were just a copy of another person.

She made the incision and put the pressure on the corpse's neck.

Nothing.

A sudden, horrified dread filled her, and she grabbed for the other body that Mariko had moved out.

Slit.

Push.

No stack.

She felt her stomach rising.

[No stacks! They don't have any stacks! They're all dead!]

She felt her stomach rebelling as she realized that she was surrounded by corpses, people that were going to be permanently *dead*, with no chance of resleeve.

Her throat burned, and pure acid filled her throat.

A moment later, she vomited.

Into her spacesuit.

Acid burned at her eyes and she inhaled stomach acid into her nose and throat.

~~~~~

Mariko looked at the younger woman in horror. [Terry, alert!]

[Get her in here! MOVE!] the engineer barked, working the airlock controls at top speed.

She helped the coughing and gagging young woman back to the airlock as quickly as possible. Arkady and Navin moved out of the way.

Terry was working the manual overrides as quickly as possible. The outer doors slide shut quickly behind them, and then the air valves opened, repressurizing the airlock.

[Quick, get her helmet off!]

Mariko reached up and helped Betty yank off the helmet. Thus released, the globules of stomach acid started floating around and breaking up into small droplets, scattered by the air currents of the air lock.

Betty gasped, and curled up into a fetal position, wracked by coughing. Mariko started pushing and wiping the globules away from her eyes and nose, which were currently red.

[You alright?] she asked.

Betty coughed, a deep, wet, ragged sound. [I'll be alright. Medicines are working at clearing the damage. I'll just sound like a heavy smoker for a couple of days. Oww.]

[That wasn't what I asked.]

[Oh. It's just --] Betty shrugged helplessly. [It's just that that that was the first time I was around so many bodies without backups. And then I realized that that means that *nobody* in this whole damn rock will have any backups, except for maybe Gallagher and his inner circle. And that means,] she motioned at the arsenal strapped to her body, [anyone I shoot will be dead permanently. And I could have killed people permanently without realizing it.]

Mariko and Terry shared a look and then looked back at Betty.

[At least you realized that before you personally killed any of them.]

[And you do have non-lethal weapons, right?]

She groaned raspily. [Yeah.]

Terry went back to the manual controls. A few more moments of effort and the inner doors opened.

[Go, get in there, so I can cycle the lock and get Navin and Maletski in here.]

[Alright.]

Betty uncurled herself carefully, gingerly and with a wince, she reclaimed her helmet, locking it back into place. Her eyes were red and her nose running, which was an uncomfortable state of affairs in zero gravity. With a nod, she pushed off from the wall and stopped at the inner doors. She looked around carefully, checking for hostiles.

[It's clear.]

Mariko moved in after her and into the corridor. It had the sterile, plain look of industrial service corridors everywhere, a plain, off-white, and severe stretch, obviously made by a tunnel borer bot and then covered in sealant. The lights were dim and red, obviously on emergency

standby. A few bullet holes and bloodstains were the sole decorations, which, Mariko supposed, did add a certain ambiance to the space.

The doors slid shut behind them. Next to her, Betty shuddered.

[You alright?]

[I'll be fine. Just bringing back some bad memories.]

[The exhuman?]

[Yeah.]

Betty began moving down the length of the corridor down towards a t-junction, her rifle leading, her feet gripping the floor lightly. Moving smoothly, she swapped out the magazine.

[Zap rounds,] Betty messaged, referring to the non-lethal rubber or gel bullets that were electrified upon impact in a piezoelectric fashion, hitting the target with both the blunt impact and the electrical shock.

[Good idea.]

[Next corridor's clear for at least one hundred meters. Deploying speck bots.]

[Acknowledged.]

The sensor feeds from the small insectoid spy drones joined the tactical feed as they flew down the corridor. Two millimeters wide and two and a half millimeters long, they were the size of the ubiquitous fruit flies that transhumanity was still waging war against.

Mariko watched as the fog of war lifted and the local map filled in with a wireframe schematic of the local tunnels as they flew on.

The airlock cycled once more, disgorging Navin and Arkady.

[No one within a few hundred meters. Place looks abandoned.]

[Understood.]

The two men moved forward as Terry cycled the airlock manually one last time, bringing in their EVA sled laden with supplies.

[Everyone, I think now's the time to switch your vacsuits to clothing mode.]

There were nods and, over the next minute, their clothes all shifted from light vacsuits to the knit fabric they had seen on the bodies outside, or as close a simulacrum as they could achieve.

They began moving deeper into the moon, their EVA sled, its own more regular surface also treated with a chameleon coating and not having to worry as much about the heat produced by metabolism, quietly drifting along behind them, only the occasional quiet hiss or puff of propellant announcing its presence. It was loaded with a cut-down cornucopia machine, small, barely half a meter on a side, but capable of producing anything they had blueprints for.

And between Terry and Navin, they had *lots* of blueprints.

At the moment, it messaged them that it had finished with its current production run. Terry turned back, opened up the small hatch, which had been camouflaged so well that it appeared that he was opening a door in mid-air, and pulled out a small drink bulb.

[Drink this, it'll help heal up your throat,] he messaged Betty, tossing her the bulb, which Mariko's entopics labeled as an antacid and throat soothing formula.

[Thanks.]

[The specks have finished scouting to the edge of their communications range,] Arkady messaged. [No living biomorphs, a few bodies, signs of battle, no weapons, no gear, few active

systems. Place looks abandoned.]

[Not surprising. The bulk of the habitation was on the other end of the asteroid, as far from the reactor as they could put it. No reactor, no need to have anyone down here.]

[Local mesh is non-existent. Literally. There's no mesh down here; nothing transmitting, nothing pinging. The lights are on, but that's only the emergency lights. Life support for this section seems to be off as well; there's no active airflow in here at the moment. We'll need to watch out for gas pockets. If there were any fires burning here when they were fighting yesterday, they could have made entire rooms anoxic by now.]

[What about finding one of those hardwired computer hubs that you were talking about, Navin?]

[We could look around, but I doubt that it's still operational, if there even is one in the area. Otherwise, we would be seeing activity from the forces holding it.]

[Point.]

[Alright, let's see what's down here.]

~~~~~

Within about ten minutes, they had finished scouting the reactor complex. Within, there was a network of tunnels, a variety of chambers for support staff such as dorms and a mess hall and a small auxiliary life support system which Terry had looked at and deemed overengineered, resource intensive and poorly constructed. And that was about it. There was an elevator tram station, currently locked down and inactive, but otherwise, they were locked down in here.

[It seems that our ideal entry point has a slight flaw to it,] Navin messaged.

[There's still the tram tunnel,] Betty pointed out.

[Except that there's a good chance they might send it down here packed full of soldiers to investigate our presence here, if they've at all noticed us. And we don't know how big that tram is or how well it fits in that tunnel. And I *don't* enjoy the thought of reenacting that famous method of Earth pest control of bugs on a windshield -- especially when *I'm* the bug!] Terry messaged grumpily.

Then he perked up. [Wait a sec, got an idea.] He took control of the specks and had them fly deeper in the habitat. [Aha! Alright, I found our entryway.] There was a pause and then... [I suddenly realize that there might be a slight complication here if any of you are claustrophobic.]

The feed from two of the specks showed cabling, the casing and insulation clearly labeled as Danger, High Voltage, disappearing down a cable run leading deeper into the moon. The cable run had *just* enough room for a person to squeeze through and not worry about getting stuck.

[You're not serious.]

[Course I am. It's this or the tram tunnel.]

[Yeah, and they have opposite problems! The tram tunnel is too wide open and we don't know what might fill it. This is too narrow and we damn well hope that there isn't any current in there now, or we might just get fried from induction!]

[Except the reactor is offline, so there's no current available to even trickle through the system, much less flow, and if there are any bulkheads in there, we can almost certainly bypass them with Navin's Covert Operations Tool. Whereas the tram tunnel, if their tram is designed at all sensibly, the first warning we might get is headlights.]

[You are insane. This idea is insane. I get to hold the light.]

[So you're in?]

[Apparently / am, likewise, insane.]

[What about the EVA sled? It's not going to be able to make it through there easily,]

Betty asked.

[We'll bring it along. We've lugged it this far, and we'll need the logistical support the thing gives us. Worst comes to worst, if it gets hung up on some projection, we cut off the projection and feed it to the disassembler for later use.]

[Alright.]

Terry squatted next to the cable run and, with an audible grunt, heaved the hatch cover off of the cable run.

[It was my bright idea, so I'll go first.] With that, he scurried into the cable run, his limber and flexible bouncer morph easily able to fit inside.

Everyone else looked at each other.

[I guess I'll go next,] Betty said. [If he runs into trouble, he'll need backup, and I'm the resident tank.] She crouched and scurried in, her fury morph not quite as flexible as the engineer's bouncer, but still able to shimmy inside without too much difficulty.

Navin went next without a word, and then Mariko. Before she went down the cramped tunnel, with a wordless look she warned Arkady that he had best keep his mind on business, regardless of the view!

Arkady shrugged, his body language an air of innocence and a 'Who? Me?' attitude.

He smirked as soon as she was out of sight. Oh, he loved women that had minds of their own. They made for such delightful pursuits.

Hopefully he'd have the chance to socialize with her before she egocast back to Mars. After this mission, they would undoubtedly all need a solid chance to unwind.

~~~~~

Terry pulled himself along through the tunnel of the cable run. Next to him ran a fairly thick cable of carbon nanotubes. Extremely thick, actually. He estimated that, at peak power output from the reactor, the bundle of cables next to him would be able to carry at least five times that amount of current, perhaps as many as twenty, depending on how efficiently the actual superconducting filaments were arranged in their insulation. Either way, massively over-engineered. On the one hand, he approved, but on the other hand, past a certain point, over-engineering an object was simply wasteful. And he had to wonder how much of this habitat had been over-engineered in a similar fashion.

After about fifty meters, they came to the first bulkhead, recessed into the wall of the cable run. He wondered if this cable run was supposed to supplement or was tied into the air circulatory system; it would make sense, if it were.

Ahead of him, the specks flew on, scouting on ahead for surprises, dangers and hazards. He watched on his entopic displays as the tunnel extended onwards, at least another sixty meters ahead of his current position.

Behind him, he could hear the others pulling themselves along, with the occasional grunt of effort or the muffled expletive.

A message from Betty appeared in his entopics. [Great idea. Next time, it's my turn to come up with the great idea. Fair?]

He chuckled. [Fair.]

On the entopic map, fifty meters ahead of his current position as he crawled through the tunnel was a three way junction, with the cable splitting off into three smaller cables. The tunnels remained the same size, however, which would help with the cramped conditions.

The specks began scouting down each of the tunnels leading off of the junction as the transhumans behind them gamely crawled along in the zero gravity confines of the tube, slowly catching up.

Behind him, it sounded like Betty was having the worst time of it. Even with all of her weapons in compacted carry mode, she was carrying *a lot* of them, and they had reached the point of actually hindering her in the cramped space.

[Betty?]

[Hmm?]

[When we get to the junction up ahead, let's spread some of those weapons out between the rest of us. They're slowing you down in here, and, even with prehensile feet, you're only going to be able to use four of them at a time anyway.]

There was a sudden silence behind him and he suddenly had the feeling of having stepped in it unknowingly.

He kept moving.

Just in case.

He reached the junction; the specks had scouted nearly seventy-five meters down each of the three passages and hadn't found much yet, beyond more tunnel.

About ten meters behind him, Betty pulled herself along the tunnel's confines, obviously hampered by the sheer amount of her personal arsenal.

She caught up with a few moments later.

[Alright. Here.] She reached and handed him a knife, a stun baton, two pistols and a number of magazines, loaded with zap, plastic and armor piercing, and hollow point ammunition. [The rest of you need to be able to protect yourselves too, and I don't think that any of you brought nearly enough firepower. Not for these circumstances.]

Terry gamely didn't point out that the situation that they found themselves in was such that, if they did end up needing to fire a significant number of rounds, they had screwed up and were likely going to die.

[Thank you, Betty. I promise I'll put them to good use,] he messaged back, strapping the weapons around his waist and thighs.

[Good. I'd have hated to have lugged them all the way here for nothing.]

[So, which way do we go? The specks haven't found anything down any of the three tunnels aside from more tunnel.]

[Well, according to the map, there's three options,] Mariko messaged. [One that continues on the same line as our present tunnel, one that goes deeper into the habitat, and one that heads for the surface.]

[Yup. I'm betting that the one that heads to the surface is the power feed for their surface beam weapon emplacements.]

[Sounds reasonable. Which means that we shouldn't take that route. I'd suggest that we continue down the tunnel that leads towards the inhabited areas. Concur?]

[Concur,] Arkady messaged.

[Agreed,] messaged Betty.

[We're trying to find people. That says to me that we should go where the people are,] Navin messaged.

[Alright. Onwards we go,] Terry said, grasping the tunnel sides with both hands and pushing off. He drifted up the tunnel, which was much more roomy now that two thirds of that horribly over-done cable was gone. Behind him, the others were moving much more quickly now that Betty had handed off about half of her personal armory to the Terry and the others to carry, and they all followed his example, pushing off from the tunnel walls and flying down its length in the zero gravity. The biggest concern was air resistance, and that was easily solvable by the simple expedient of additional pushes whenever one's speed dipped too much.

~~~~~

More than a kilometer further up the shaft and past several more bulkheads, two of which had deployed and required that they bypass them, they came to another junction. This junction was a six pointed one, the intersection of three tubes all meeting at ninety-degree angles. A few more minutes of scouting with the specks revealed a corridor nearby that one of the tubes paralleled, with a small connecting tube running between the pair, covered by a panel of plastic.

Five minutes later, the team had emerged into the corridor proper, having sent their specks and a lens spotter on ahead of them to map out not only the corridor and where it might lead, but also to detect any cameras within that could spot them.

And they had found *alot* of cameras.

After considerable discussion, they had agreed that blinding the local cameras would alert the locals or the invaders as to their presence here, but hopefully either one would blame the effect on the other. So they'd sent three lens crazers on ahead to put out the eyes of their enemies. The lens crazers were small spinning balls; they used the same sensor systems as the lens spotters did to detect cameras and other optical sensors, but rather than just map out where the cameras were, the crazers were armed with lasers and shot them, blinding the cameras until they were repaired.

Now the team stood in the hallway, its cameras being methodically blinded going down both directions at once. All around them were plants, rustling quietly in the light breeze of the air circulation, sitting in planters along the walls of the cylindrical tunnel. The planters were placed along in a strip every ninety degrees around the perimeter of the corridor, with the lighting strips placed at the half-way point between them. The lighting strips were obviously on



a power-saving mode. The corridor was extremely dim, almost to the point of offering so little illumination as to be useless for normal vision, but too much to bring active night vision into play.

Terry checked his atmospheric sensor readouts. Air pressure was nine hundred millibars -- a tad light, like being on top of a low mountain back on Earth, but perfectly acceptable for day-to-day living. Sixty-eight percent nitrogen; a little low, but not terribly surprising. He wondered where they had gotten the nitrogen from; Titan, probably, back in the early days, before the Fall. Twenty percent oxygen; just about right, although a little light from optimum. Nearly half a percent carbon dioxide -- that wasn't good. He wondered if it was deliberate, to help the plants grow, or a symptom of how bad the habitat's life support systems had gotten to be in their current state. Atmospheric humidity was a little low, at at bare forty percent of relative humidity. Temperature was just about right as well, hovering right at twenty-nine degrees Celsius.

He examined the planters; they were filled with tough vines, obviously some variety of ivy, which kinked up and looped, forming natural hand-holds for zero-g pedestrians to use. Very nice. Good setup, he'd have to remember that one.

*Sera, grab a sample of the DNA from some of these plants.*

[No problem.] His wrist-mounted tools extended themselves and touched a leaf of one of the vines. [Sample taken].

Further up the corridor, Navin was crouched against the opposite wall from Terry, examining one of the camera arrays.

[And the verdict is?]

[One-way inputs only; no way to hack into the system from here. Sorry.]

[Pity, that.]

[Would have made our lives alot easier, yeah, but until and unless I get more ideas of how their system is formatted, anything I send down along the camera inputs is going to be shooting in the dark. Subverting the system isn't going to be possible from here.]

[Attention, the specks have found people, and they're in the midst of combat, approximately four hundred meters away,] Navin Duece messaged everyone.

[Feed?]

[On your entopics.]

Terry looked at the incoming feed. It looked like there was a group of locals holding a barricade against an encroaching force of resleeved forks, judging by the high degree of coordination visible even in the few seconds they had thus far.

Also, the forks had modern weapons, body armor and tech, which the locals decidedly did not. He started an analysis of the equipment that the forks were wearing and carrying.

[Looks like the only reason the locals haven't been overrun yet is because of that defensive position they're in, but their attackers have significant force multipliers,] Betty messaged. [I'd give them maybe another twenty minutes to an hour before they're forced to fall back or otherwise give up their position. Depends on how many casualties the attackers are willing to take and inflict. But they're going to lose, no question.]

[Do we intervene?]

[Why should we?] Arkady messaged. [Our objective is to find the hypercorper black ops squad and their leader that are responsible for this. If we intervene, we're announcing our



presence to both parties and will get sucked into their little war. We'll become a known quantity, instead of a wild card.]

[Arkady has a point,] Mariko messaged. [We intervene here and we announce our existence to the entire habitat.]

[But we need intel,] Betty argued. [These people know what's going on!]

[But would they be willing to tell us? The locals are conditioned to see all outsiders are unclean and corrupt, and the forks in those sleeves aren't going to know anything of use, not if their originators are at all competent.]

At that moment, the feed from the speck cut out. Then their remaining limited mesh access dissolved into static.

[Someone's throwing up some pretty serious radio jamming,] Mariko observed.

[Good thing we're using comm lasers.]

[Yeah, as long as we all stay within line of sight. But now we're blind past our immediate area.]

[Betting it's the locals; they don't have any mesh architecture really worth speaking of, except for that hardwired mess, and that won't be affected by jamming. The hypercorpers, on the other hand, are going to need it for coordination and all of that fun stuff.]

[Indeed. They're going to have the same problems we will.]

Betty pushed off of her wall and drifted down the length of the corridor. [C'mon. Let's go check out what's going on with that firefight. If they're being jammed, or doing the jamming, we may have a window of opportunity to gather information.]

Arkady glanced at Terry, who shrugged. [She has a point.]

~~~~~

A few moments later, Betty looked upon the ongoing firefight from a concealed position in the nearby corridor. Her teammates were currently slightly scattered around her, with Arkady, and Mariko having taken up flanking positions nearby, while in a nearby maintenance tube, Terry lurked, fiddling with a environmental control junction box he had found and was attempting to subvert it as Navin set up some communications gear -- micro-mirrors, optical tubes and such.

The firefight was currently stalled, with both sides currently having lost momentum and were regrouping in their redoubts. Bullet holes riddled the walls, and there was a strong scent of gunsmoke, cordite and other chemical propellants. The plants lining the walls had been torn up and burned, and the lighting was patchy along that segment of tunnel, with both sides having rigged up large lamps that harshly illuminated the area, eliminating all shadows and making it very hard for anyone with a stealth cloak to sneak past.

From her covert observation point, she could see that the resleeved invaders were currently dealing with the jamming as best they could, but had lost a noticeable portion of their combat efficiency. Their coordination was down and some of their gear, including a few drones, seemed to have been manufactured without laser communications.

In the tube, Terry was currently cursing at the recalcitrant piece of hardware in High Engineer; from the sound of it, the device was tough, robust and emphatically designed not to

be accessed.

[Seriously? *Seriously?* This is a minor subnode of a secondary environmental system -- what's with the triple redundancy?]

[What, I thought engineers loved multiple redundancies.]

[Yes, but there's a point of diminishing returns. This is *past* that. And this is part of the main habitat system; the reactor area was essentially its own sub-habitat attached to the same body, so it made sense to have its environmental system massively redundant and over-engineered. But if this kludge is typical of how the rest of the habitat's life support systems are built...]

[If...?]

[Well, looking at this, this is so massively redundant for its tech level that you could probably destroy half of the life support systems on this rock and still have enough capacity to keep the entire population alive without further stressing the system.]

[Why would they do that?]

[Plans for population expansion. Paranoia and fear of a runaway breakdown of the habitat's ecology. Any one of a half-dozen other reasons.]

>First encounter with the heavily armed locals

>Team detects an ongoing battle, where the locals are being swarmed and overrun by a group of locals fighting a valiant rearguard action

>Team intervenes and takes prisoners to interrogate

> Team gets split up

[Get going! I'll lead them off and meet up with you later!]

> Terry meets up with Jessica by rescuing her from a squad of forks that were dragging her off to the docking bay area.

~~~~~

## Chapter 6: The Long, Twilight Struggle

> Split up, the team struggles to survive and make sense of what has happened here.

Chat color reference:

Mariko

Yuzuki

Terry

Sera

Arkady

Mishka

Navin

Veda

Betty

Rada

Jessica

Notes: (visitors, don't read below if you don't want to be spoiled!)

Characters:

The Team:

Tsukino Mariko

Firewall ego hunter

investigation/infiltration

Fall Evacuee Extropian, exalt morph. Very good at her job, originally had a splicer body,

was able to have her original body cloned and upgraded with exalt modifications; still has her original body and a couple of clones on ice.

Simulmorph: Mariko selected her usual simulmorph avatar, which resembled her normal physical appearance, that of an athletic and toned woman with Asian features and bright green eyes. Her one concession to virtual vanity on her simulmorph avatar was the long, waist-length black hair she had once possessed, but had since shorn away in the name of zero gravity practicality.

Muse, Yuzuki

Tarrant "Terry" Smitts

The Engineer/Fabber

Reinstated Anarchist, Bouncer morph, specializes in habitat systems, nano-fabrication and EVA. Has PTSD from the Fall and reinstatement, expressing as insomnia and flashbacks, but is aware of his condition and is generally much more mentally healthy now than he was immediately after the Fall, when he was a psychological wreck at having watched all of his family and friends die, including his ex-wife and their two daughters and knowing that he is just a copy of a man that died on Earth. Has become a True Believing Anarchist. Dislikes and fears asyncs, hates hypercorps. A very lonely and wounded man, afraid of reaching out to someone for emotional intimacy for fear of losing them again. Treatment problem: how do you help a man with an Eidetic Memory forget? Extremely competent Firewall operative, with an i-rep in the 70s.

Muse, Sera.

Navin Surti

Mesh Specialist/Infiltrator

Lunar Criminal, Cyberbrained biomorphs, On The Run from the LLA,

Muse, Veda

Has a girlfriend, Kaitlyn, who is sleeved in an exalt morph; she is an argonaut.

Arkady Maletski

The Face/Networker

Drifter Scum, Bouncer morph, specializes in social networking, favors, scavenging, psychology, psychosurgery. Highly cynical hedonist, believes the worst of everyone due to his async abilities, but believes that the conglomerate group of *humanity* is special and worth preserving. Dislikes uplifts and AGIs, because they infringe on human specialness. Is a social

and psychological specialist, with skills in async abilities.

Muse, Mishka

Beatrice "Bouncing Betty" Norling  
The Soldier/Demo-Specialist  
Original Space Colonist Anarchist, Fury morph.

Muse, Rada

Jessica Owens  
Brinker Isolate, bouncer morph. Spunky and intelligent lower class girl aboard the habitat;

Antagonist: Simon Curtis

Hypercorp Black Ops Specialist  
Reinstated

What happened aboard the habitat:

The Plan: There comes a point where lack of knowledge can turn an intelligent and paranoid person into a credulous idiot because their lack of knowledge denies them the framework and background required to conceive of a given threat. Thus, the cultists of the FCGA, most of whom are not trained in science or engineering or anything beyond a basic knowledge of how to operate a given device or manage a given operation, are primed to be taken advantage of, especially since those that *do* have training in these areas are ten, twenty or even thirty years out of date, which has left them far behind the tech development curve and far behind the ability to visualize modern threats.

As a result, the church lacks anyone with the ability and training to design blueprints or 'jailbreak' the CM machine, or really manipulate it in any significant fashion. As far as the workers who were assigned to use it, it's a magic box and a gift from god that magically produces needed items; as they do not know how it functions beyond that level. To them, its name is completely appropriate. Healing pods are viewed the same way, and those came in on the last resupply mission from the PC several years ago. Unfortunately for the locals, the healing pods were all subverted when they were manufactured back in the PC; any morph placed in one of the subverted healing pod for a sufficient length of time required for major implants (i.e. most of the priesthood) is also implanted with a puppet sock implant, hidden in the existing implant.

April 16: PC transport arrives in extreme secrecy at Kari. The black ops man meets with Father G. and delivers to him, with full ceremony, the equipment he is purchasing.

Some of the items are a number of subverted desktop CMs, which are then sold to the church as the next 'taste' of advanced nanotech. These CM are subverted in a similar fashion to the healing vats given earlier, and are given over the priest-technicians for testing and use. By the next day, after some cursory examination, these machines will be put to use manufacturing items needed by the colony, and into each item made a hidden mesh device will be included, enough to act as mesh repeaters that will hopefully be able to extend through the entire asteroid's volume when the time comes.

April 17: The hidden mesh network is increasing in size, slowly; there is difficulty in knowing exactly how far it extends due to risk of detecting during any sort of testing. Meanwhile, priests that are in range of the puppet socks are pinged unknowingly for the presence of the implant. Meanwhile, negotiations for additional blueprints are in progress. The PC negotiator is deliberately stretching out the process, both because he has instructions to and because he's enjoying being able to dictate terms and negotiate from a position of extreme superiority.

April 18: The network is growing, and it is estimated that it will take at least several more days, preferably at least two weeks, even with the CMs running continuously, to manufacture enough items that they can be certain that even a tenuous mesh will be present throughout the colony. Also determined is that approximately 2/3 of the priesthood possess the puppet sock implant; a message is sent home requesting go or no go. the go code is received. The transport crew begins manufacturing essential gear that they will need, such as ego bridges, some synthmorphs, and other such equipment

April 22: After several days of frustrating negotiations with the PC representative, Father G brings in his secret weapon: one of his secret asyns, one of the few that he has. Father G got his asyns quite by accident, an accident that made him truly believe that he had god on his side, and has been attempting to cultivate members of his mental hygiene police as asyns. He has the asyn do a thought scan on the negotiator; the asyn learns of plot to take over his home and the negotiator learns that a group of crazy brinkers have asyns. Cue brick crapping on both sides.

The black ops guy gets the immediate go code, while the church mobilizes and fighting breaks out.

In the first few minutes, chaos reigns; aboard the shuttle's servers, infomorphs are being forked as quickly as possible, and then put to work at "assuming direct control" of priests and other residents with puppet socks within range. Unfortunately for the takeover, less than half of their puppet socked priests are within range of their anemic and fragile mesh and while they cause considerable confusion and losses in those first few minutes, the paranoia they spark by suddenly "possessing" priests turns out to be their greatest ally, causing considerable disruption of the enemy chain of command, as well as starting witchhunts

April 23: the fighting has become widespread throughout the habitat; at least a thousand people are dead by this point, some at the hands of frightened mobs or trigger-happy locals, but the majority of the casualties come from a human wave storming the docking bay where the invaders are docked; they meet with automatic weapons fire and die en masse. The survivors are rounded up and placed in holding cells.

Father G has learned that his asyns can detect whether a priest is puppet-socked or not at the moment, but he doesn't have more than ten asyns, all forks of the same individual, and they can only do so much scanning before hurting themselves. also, his computer people have realized that there must be a mesh operating, and begin jamming whenever it appears that a priest has fallen under the control of the infiltrators, as well as attempting to hunt down and destroy the subverted gear that is producing the mesh nodes. The CMs recently acquired are smashed. The healing vats, on the other hand, are not.

Meanwhile, the infiltrators are locking down their beachhead; locals in the area are captured and then resleeved with a fork of the infiltrator leader; a few priests are used as judas goats to bring crowds of potential sleeves. However, a new ego bridge takes five hours to make, so new capacity for resleeving is brought online slowly. However, the crowds of locals also function extremely well as hostages, making the locals under father g's control hesitant on attacking them directly. The infiltrators keep father g's people occupied and off-balance with occasional raids, aiming to directly undermine confidence in what they know by allowing something to be established and then subverting it, thereby decreasing morale. Also, aiming probing attacks at essential stations and service points in the process, forcing the church forces to remain on the defensive

April 24: by this point, a clearer picture has emerged on father g's side, despite the best efforts by the infiltrators to confuse things and buy themselves more time. Fortunately for the invaders, the church's command structure has been absolutely ravaged, with over half of the priesthood dead, subverted or missing.

unfortunately, by this point, both sides are significantly more entrenched; the invaders are capturing any locals they can to deny the defenders human capital, gain additional sleeves, and to give themselves human shields; as the locals are not backed up and lack cortical stacks, they will have a more human response to that tactic, as opposed to the transhuman response, which would be to attack and then resleeve any casualties with apologies. By this point, the invaders have over a dozen ego bridges operating at full capacity, and are adding additional forces from local bodies as quickly as possible, with each ego bridge processing and sleeving a fork in a new biomorph every 75 minutes, four biomorphs every five hours, sixteen every 20 hours.

However, on the defender side, they still control about two thirds of the asteroid's living space and most of the essential hardware, although a good chunk of that has been damaged or will require maintenance by this point; and the human beings that are supposed to be running the place are mostly otherwise occupied. Essential life support systems are being strained, but not yet to the breaking point; the habitat is sufficiently overengineered due to Father G's paranoias that, at this point, it could still support its remaining population, but most of the excess

capacity has been destroyed, wasted or damaged. Also on the defenders side, hunting down and destroying unauthorized mesh transmissions becomes a standard procedure by the end of the day, limiting the access and reach of the invader's mesh, meaning that they can no longer rely on puppet socks in the areas immediately outside of their control, forcing them to resleeve the bodies that have been puppet socked if they are to be of any use outside of that zone or escort them with a large, mesh-enabled force that is carrying infomorphs in ghostrider modules or ectos.

For the laity aboard the habitat, things are currently chaotic as hell. They do not know what is going on, and rumors are flying thickly, with the invaders specifically using infomorphs to engage in memetic warfare in attempting to confuse the issues further. This is aided by the fact that both sides are attempting to catch as many of the laity as possible -- the locals to get them out of the firing lines and back into church controlled territory and the invaders to capture them. At least a quarter of the habitat's population is terminally confused and hiding in various areas throughout the habitat, which suits the invaders just fine; while not as good as them being kept in holding cells available for resleeve or as human shields outside their stronghold, having them loose throughout the habitat will still make the defenders leery of using too much firepower, especially in their home, and also denies the defenders critical manpower, both in the hiders and those attempting to find and extract them to safety.

April 25

also unfortunately for the defenders, thanks to the memetic war being waged by the invader infomorphs, one of the priests has found out what is happening and gathers together disaffected members of the habitat, as well as personally ambitious members whose ambitions exceed their morals and see a good chance at moving up in the world. Many of these members, feeling oppressed by Father G's regime and finding now that he is a hypocrite, defect to the priest's banner, giving him a solid initial faction of about four hundred people; this quickly results in a small civil war in which many from both sides are killed, and gives the invaders an opening, which they promptly take.

0510, During a long running three-way battle over the reactor that supplies the colony with most of its power, the fighting damages the reactor, which, due to its design, promptly begins building towards critical. As a result, the reactor is ejected and subsequently detonates, announcing the existence of the fighting to the entire Saturnian system, followed by the entire solar system.

The church's advantages and disadvantages

Advantages:

- home turf
- a large population conditioned for automatic and unthinking obedience
- a clear chain of command



- an insufficiently entrenched enemy
- complete fanaticism in a culture that has been indoctrinated that outsiders are evil and out to corrupt their souls.
- a habitat massively over-engineered for maximum survivability

#### Disadvantages:

- massive tech imbalance
- a large number of their officers, the priests, have been subverted by the enemy without knowing it.
- an enemy that can grow at exponential rates and is capable of removing their people from their bodies and using them as infiltrators or soldiers
- a lack of understanding of the enemy, leading to considerable friendly fire

#### The black ops advantages and disadvantages

##### Advantages

- significant technological edge
- the ability to directly control enemy soldiers within range of their mesh signals assuming said soldier possess a puppet sock
- the ability to capture locals and forcibly resleeve them with forks of the black ops operative
- utter lack of concern for minor damage to the habitat
- do or die mentality, when dying simply means being restored from backup

##### Disadvantages

- insufficient reach of mesh network means that their control over enemy soldiers has limited range
- limited numbers
- forced to move ahead of schedule, when groundwork was less than half completed
- a blown op that has exposed their presence to the local populace, making it hard to draw resources from the locals and forcing them to kill many when they attack in human wave attacks on the hanger; there is no longer any real chance of the original plan of subverting the leadership, disposing of father g and using him as a puppet and then using this moon as a jumping off point with the full support of the locals.

#### The coup's advantages and disadvantages

##### advantages:

- the truth! Father G has been bringing in corrupt outsiders and their technologies!
- considerable personal charisma and fanaticism
- a personal knowledge of Father G's lifestyle and a desire to enjoy a similar life himself
- a pair of enemies already locked into a stalemate

##### disadvantages:

- small size
- more enthusiasm than sense or skill
- poor intelligence and target acquisition

