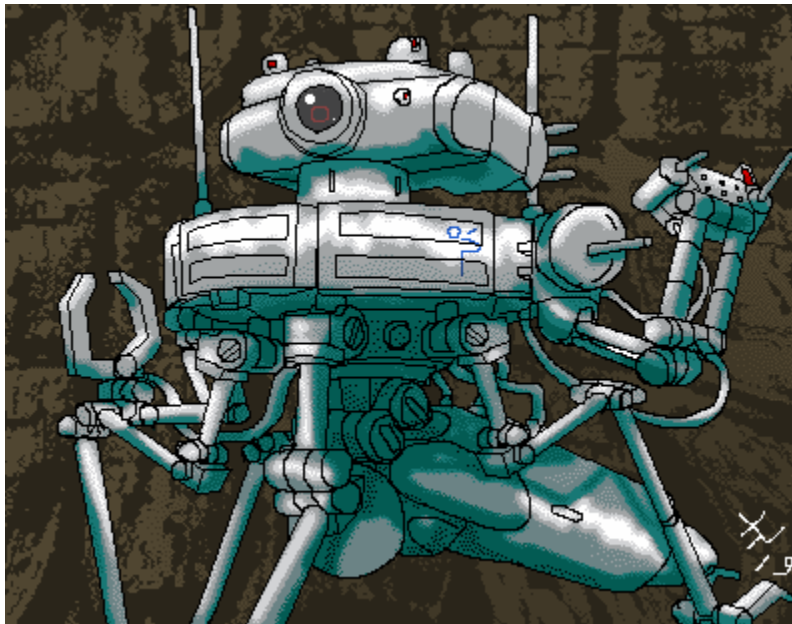


Chapter 1: The Henry Cluney

Caxia stood at the head of the table, facing the door of the Diplomatic area onboard the MAS Henry Cluney. Their now sleek, cylindrical mechanical body was held above the ground by thin metallic legs that looked like they came right off of a lunar-lander. The multitude of glowing red sensors on their head tracking about the room as this 'Diplomat' from the Magnetic Assembly awaited the arrival of the diplomats from the Soyuz.



The diplomatic space itself had displays all around the exterior along with soft white lighting and a tan hardwood floor with a lush red carpet covering the area just under the round table in the center and the access area from the door. Ample seating was provided at the table itself, and closer to the walls for any support staff. Though this area was designed with 'diplomacy' in mind, the round table specifically lacking a 'head' seat for someone to take... it seemed that Caxia was doing their best to ignore that common wisdom.

The diplomatic space itself was onboard the [MAS Henry Cluney](#), a ship that had traveled to the Yansy system using an rather excessive roundabout path with numerous refueling stops in extreme-deep space in order to bypass the American-Union dominated paths that joined the Human Sphere with the Hawking System: A demonstration of the technical and industrial capabilities of the Magnetic Assembly.

The ship was formerly the AUS Lord Palmerston... a Statesmen class starship that had been captured nearly fully intact during the battle of Reiss. Instead of the white paint of the Union, the

ship now had the Cryptic coded markings of the Assembly across its hull. Large, Bold, Six-cog lettering announcing the new ownership of the craft. The excessive crew space and other facilities of the ship having been converted to service the drones that were needed to run the ship without the help of flesh-and-blood crew.

Having accompanied Caxia on this diplomatic mission aboard the Cluney, Stein left his typical jumpsuit back in the service bay - trading it for a more sophisticated and formal suit from New Cambridge. Black and simple in design, the attire served more as a formality than necessity; the delegation was to be composed of two members of the Chekhovsk Institute of Sciences, two Ministers, three Foreign Affairs Diplomats and one Industrial Union representative.

With numerous important names aboard a shuttle which was already approaching to dock with MAS Henry Cluney, a security detail followed in the form of 5 defensive craft in formation. All of the vessels sported a somewhat foreign design; glossy, angular and sleek shapes of black - as if dark crystals manifested from space itself. Space planes - the wings of the military escort were all pivoted up above their primary fuselages, concealing their flying wing build to form pentagons. The Soyuz insignia was located on the underside of their wings for this very reason, revealing it after retraction. The passenger shuttle itself appeared to be different, with a broad surface area and wide body - designed to glide seamlessly through atmospheres; also with retractable wings. Three vessels docked, and three military craft scattered to passively patrol the area around the Statesmen class.

Stein corrected his cuffs as he stood with Caxia, waiting for the delegation to be guided to the conference room. "They will be expecting to shake hands with you.", the android broke silence. "Standard formality."

"I have many hands to shake with," Caxia replied, using a brand new tone that had been developed just for this meeting. It was slightly feminine, supportive, constructive, like a kindergarten teacher that was there to help and watch over you... though perhaps with just a bit too polished, indicating the voice wasn't entirely real. "This meeting shows that you have greater value than originally anticipated. "I should go without saying, if you have any personal needs you should come to us."

"Being assigned to the Deming certainly makes that a comforting offer. I will be sure to take you up on it from time to time.", he let slip a momentary smile.

The Henry Cluney had artificial gravity, pressurized docking bays, and all the amenities one might expect for a ship that was to house diplomatic guests. A soothing synthetic voice greeting each of the arriving guests by name, in their own language, and offering them refreshments, and displaying virtual graphics inside of the ship to show everyone to their private rooms and to the main diplomatic area where Caxia was waiting for them.

Within the next few moments, the door to the diplomatic space opened. Entering first was a tall caucasian man in military uniform; the woolly trench coat which adorned his torso was a carbon

grey, decorated with white and blue accents. Underneath, slim body armour with a shallow angular design; similar, but less eccentric than that worn by Stein to field ops. Legs were dressed in slim synthetic trousers which were tucked into high quality military boots, suitable for moderately cold weather. Atop his head was a classic flat officers cap in matching charcoal grey, all-in-all, typical attire for an interior-stationed Kitezhan senior officer. It would be apparent to Caxia's optics that the officer's arms were cybernetic, foregoing pseudo-skin judging by the steely noir finish of his humanoid hands, which peaked out of the duster's sleeves. He positioned himself to the right of the entrance, briefly exposing a faint glimmer of a leather handgun holster on his hip which wasn't empty.

Immediately after, a second officer who appeared to be identical in all aspects other than the face entered and positioned himself on the left side. Then came the Ministers - (A. Ulyanov) a Minister of Foreign Affairs and (O. Peregonsky) a Minister of Trade. Peregonsky was a younger man in his late 30s, Ulyanov being in his mid-50s with apparent cranial augmentation (judging by faint angular lines appearing along his greying hairline). The three diplomats followed, one male and two females of light hair and eyes, all in their late 20s. The rest entered together, a man in his early 70s with a cybernetic eye and leg, accompanied by a tall, fair-skinned Aos Si man who appeared to be carrying some kind of rectangular object encased in an ornate sleeve. Those two were from the Chekhovsk Institute, with the other individual being a female with her blond hair in a bun - a representative for the People's Technology Union on Kitezhan. All were dressed in black suits, aside from the military police.

"Здравствуйте" Caxia said, greeting the Soyuz diplomats personally once they entered the diplomatic room. Caxia speaking in a flawless synthetic-russian, (But typed here in english) "We have much to discuss. We would like to establish a path for civilian traffic to enter the Yansy system so that our people may have access to earth once again. We also are looking to increase research cooperation with a joint expedition to Azathoth. The Magnetic Assembly is ready to prove itself valuable to the Soyuz in exchange."

The Ministers and Diplomats all looked at each other with some degree of positive surprise. "They know our language! Excellent.", Ulyanov pronounced audibly to his colleagues, seemingly happy with the effort. The delegation was now at ease to carry out the meeting in their native tongue without worrying about mistranslations.

"Hello, welcome to Yasny.", the older Minister approached Caxia and shook the very hand that was prepared for the occasion. The others all seemed to line up in single file format - it was clear that Ulyanov was in charge of the delegation. "Of course, we will discuss all of our scheduled business here shortly. But first - you've come a long way to visit us here. As your hosts, we would like to offer you a gift.", said the Minister before motioning for the elven man to come forward.

The object was held in red fabric, the borders of the sleeve lined with glittering embroidery which matched the colour of the ambient lighting in the room - strand laced with Soroka chromium. Within was a silvery digital tablet, lined with ports for other devices and cybernetic

interface systems. "It is a digital record of history about the first of our pioneers in this system, both human and mechanical. Perhaps you would find it an interesting read, though naturally the device could be used to hold any data you wish as a physical copy.", the Aoi Si spoke in clear Russian as they offered the tablet to whichever hand Caxia would present. In the meantime, Ulyanov moved along to greet Stein.

"I am honored to receive this," Caxia replied, taking hold of the tablet with one of her arms and moving it off to their side near their main body so a cable could be connected. The tablet being hooked up to an isolated strategy engine so the data could be read in, sanitized, and added to the datasets used by Caxia's own software.

"And you, old man - you may look young, but I can see right through you.", the Minister joked before shaking the android's hand with a small laugh. Stein responded with a frivolous grin. "It's good to see you're not forgetting about us on your adventures with the Magnetic Assembly. I hope they are treating you well.", Ulyanov said as he reached into a chest pocket on the inside of his suit. "I believe you forgot this before you left." A silvery metallic case was placed into Stein's palm by the Minister, bearing an embossed Soyuz insignia - designed to contain cigarettes. Along with it, a pack of 'Arktika', a Soyuz tobacco brand utilising Kitezhnan hydroponics to produce its goods. "We remember.", the older man smiled, before leaving to stand behind his seat at the conference table.

"Thank you, Minister Ulyanov.", Stein gave a small nod of gratitude before placing the received items into his available pockets. He was ready to receive the rest of the delegation with shorter handshakes, before waiting to move to the table once Caxia was ready to do the same. None would sit down before all were ready to do so.

Caxia would finish the handshakes, adding in, "Stein has proven popular with other Exemplars of The Magnetic Assembly. We hope to foster closer ties with him as well as yourself." Caxia would wait for the others to sit, while moving over to their seat at the table. Of course Caxia was suspended above the ground by metallic lander-style legs making it unnecessary to actually 'sit'. The High-Cyborg's multitude of electronic eyes positioned around their head would track each of their guests individually, and the software providing advice would carefully summarize what other more fleshy exemplars had learned in the realm of diplomacy. "We should address the most pressing concern, and one that will shape future agreements. This move will certainly bring condemnation from the American Union, and we would provide our assistance in mitigating any moves they make against you."

"They have been condemning us for four hundred years, we make it a point to survive no matter the obstacle. Your support, should events turn sour, would be greatly appreciated.", one of the female diplomats noted with a nod. "We are of like mind; the General Secretary has declared in our initial treaty that you would have our support when it comes to dealing with the American Union, in return for working together with us."

“With the presence of CCM citizens in Hawking and your own in Yasny, the Union may be dissuaded from attempting to reclaim your sphere of influence by force, for a time.”, Peregonsky speculated.

“Our drones will destroy any Union ships that attempt to violate our territory.” Caxia responded with that similarly well tailored ‘kindergarten teacher’ voice that tried to cover up the reality of killing people who mean to do harm, “Our former trade with the American Union was rather one directional, though our people will certainly miss out on their social connections and entertainment media. We consider this civilian channel to the Yansy system to be a critical component of our defense strategy while we work on ending the current hostilities with the American Union. A first step would be to form a joint commission between our two governments, an expert panel that can identify where our technological and industrial expertises can be best applied to help one another. While the American Union would not agree to technology transfer deals, I can assure you we have no such need to hide our abilities.”

“Agreed.”, nodded Ulyanov. “I have some old colleagues on Earth that I believe could be a good fit for being on such a panel, provided the respective unions can spare them.”, Stein added, his glance moving to the female Industry rep. The woman leaned forward close to the table, tapping a few details away at a datapad. “Please do forward your recommendations. We will have them contact Foreign Affairs when the call for a commission is made.”

Peregonsky also appeared to mark the minutes onto a datapad, as were all the diplomats - though the Minister cleared his throat. “I am afraid we don’t have access to American Union-affiliated entertainment and persons, nor can we provide it. While we are able to grant the Magnetic Assembly a bypass channel to Earth, the individuals wishing to make an AU connection must do so from outside of our national borders. We would like to request that your government provides us with a minor contingent of trained border security to be stationed at Yasny - to help regulate your citizens and root out any trafficking of illicit goods and information they may possess within our territory.”

Before Stein had finished speaking, Caxia’s list of candidates for the panel had already been forwarded to everyone in the room by the software that helped the high cyborg manage the conversation, “We only require passage through Yansy, arrival here and then discreet transport aboard conventional civilian lines is more than enough. We will also make available to you our outputs on security and tracking for the purpose of law enforcement. I would recommend we also form a panel for legal-related matters.” As Caxia spoke this, her software was already parsing through lists of personnel that worked for the New Cambridge Police Department, selecting those who were of the proper rank and with sufficient legal background for the suggested task, “Agreements between us from before will no longer apply as we are no longer a part of the American Union. The ones we wish to keep will need to be re-linked.”

There was one further request, one that was a bit more serious of a request than the others, “There is also the matter of diplomacy with the other nations. It will take time and access for us

to accomplish our goals there. Sponsoring us in having a diplomatic space on Olympus Mons would be of great help.” Caxia said.

The Industrial rep was swiftly working on her device, receiving Caxia’s candidates and sifting through Institute and union registries to find approximate equivalents. Stein’s recommendations provided a good foundation for the search.

“Our Ministries will convene on the topic of a legal commission - dealing with a foreign government is outside of standard Soyuz operations. Compliance with our interior policies and governmental cooperation schemes will be made a primary field for our panel members.”, Ulyanov stepped in on the matter, before continuing. “As for Olympus... I will have to discuss that with the General Secretary. I can tell you that we jointly believe that the American Union’s grievances with your people are a severe political issue. To that end, I have the authority to invite you personally as a speaker for the Magnetic Assembly and honored guest of the Soyuz delegation. If you do seek to bring a full delegation of your own, I should have a response within the next two days.”

“I am empowered to make decisions on behalf of The Magnetic Assembly, I will be the only member of the delegation needed there.” Caxia explained.

“Very well, Exemplar Caxia. In that case, you will be meeting our colleagues in Moscow prior to departure for Olympus Mons.”, Ulyanov concluded, satisfied with the ease of logistics concerning that matter.

The younger, male diplomat looked up from his datapad across the large table. “There are a few details I would like to clarify, following your discussion with Minister Peregonsky about civilian traffic through Yasny. For what purpose do your citizens require access to Earth; and where would they be going?”

“Not everyone was informed of the decision to depart the Union prior to it occurring. Although we enjoy solid support among the people of New Cambridge and the Hawking System, there are many with friends and peers among other nations. With our only connection to the Human Sphere being through the American Union controlled Atlantica system, our people have had to go without their inter-galactic social connections. While a connection through Yansy will be costly, it is preferable to having no connection at all.” Caxia explained.

The diplomat listened intently, giving a small nod of acknowledgement. “I am sure the support of your people for both your regime and our prospective inter-system cooperation will only increase if we help reunite families.”, he stated. Ulyanov’s eyes panned the room as he himself acknowledged the point. “We’ve been given very little reason to trust others across history, you see. The point my colleagues are expressing is cautionary - we will expect to be receiving some civilians that are not fully sympathetic to your cause; perhaps even those who, despite all that has transpired, remain loyal to the American Union. The border security you have agreed to provide will no doubt help in this instance, but we take the opportunity to warn the Magnetic

Assembly that our nation is not agreeable towards those who would relay what they have seen within our borders, with the goal of causing detriment.”

“Then it would be best to set this up as a pass-through. Allow traffic from Hawking to Sol via Yansy without letting the individuals passing through entry into Soyez installations. This removes the need to trust the individuals involved.” Caxia replied.

“Reasonable.”, Peregonsky gave a nod. “That should suffice as an arrangement.” The Industrial rep slowly nodded in acknowledgement as she already typed the details in. “We will calibrate our SLE with the Hawking system in order to allow free passage.”

“That leaves research cooperation.” The elder scientist spoke up, shuffling his shoulders as if his back was stiff. “Please talk us through the current situation with Azathoth. Is it safe?”

“No. There are still Grawla and Daqin on Azathoth, and both have done extensive damage to some areas of the structure, however we are mitigating the problem as best we can. We do not think the Aliyums themselves pose a threat at this point, and our drones can provide a reasonable level of security for those operating on Azathoth.” Caxia stated, “Going to the surface does entail some risk.”

“Aliyums’...?” The researcher inquired, his hand rubbing some grey stubble on his chin. “We may have to wait until the conflict has subsided to avoid exposing our unarmed staff to Daqin saboteurs. In any event, we will requisition additional officers to support our scientific group with the complimentary drone security. We will need to set up an off-site laboratory to serve as both living quarters and an experimental station - are you willing to provide such a space in New Cambridge?”

“As much as you like, ample space can be provided locally on New Cambridge for the duration of this endeavor.” Caxia responded, deciding that the nomenclature for the Aliyums needed some explaining. “The species that build Azathoth has been to the Hawking System before. The Native species call them ‘Aliyums’ now. It is a word they have appropriated from us.”

“Ah yes, the... Grawla, was it?”, the scientist looked to Stein, who gave a small nod. “Comically, distrust of humans is something they have in common with us.”, the android joked. “But that fact would ironically not bring us any closer to an understanding. The Magnetic Assembly is making an active effort to even out relations with them and is appearing to be successful.”

“That is good to hear. We, as members of the Institute would love to get a look at one of them.”, the old man leaned back into the chair and like clockwork, his elven colleague leaned forward. “We are very grateful for your willingness to be our host. I anticipate our research team will be ready to depart for Hawking after the meeting at Olympus Mons.”

“I do believe that concludes the items we wished to discuss. Is there anything else you wanted to cover with us, Exemplar Caxia?”, Ulyanov seemed to wipe his sleeve across the table in front of him, erasing any fingerprints he may have left on the probably expensive material.

The fleshy residue of decaying skin, and the awkward social cues of moving ones eye to observe something were not concerns for Caxia. Their matte-steel body remaining motionless from the landing-legs to the optical sensors around the head. For them, even the saccade of the eye was not needed. “That should be all.”