



# **MIGHTY NOSTROMO**

By  
**Michel Poulin**

# **MIGHTY NOSTROMO**

**SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL**

**BY MICHEL POULIN**

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## **WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS**

**THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.**

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

This novel is a sequel to WAR AMONG THE STARS and is the fifth novel of my KOSTROMA Series. It continues the adventures in Space of Tina Forster and of her mighty giant cargo ship, the A.M.S. KOSTROMA,

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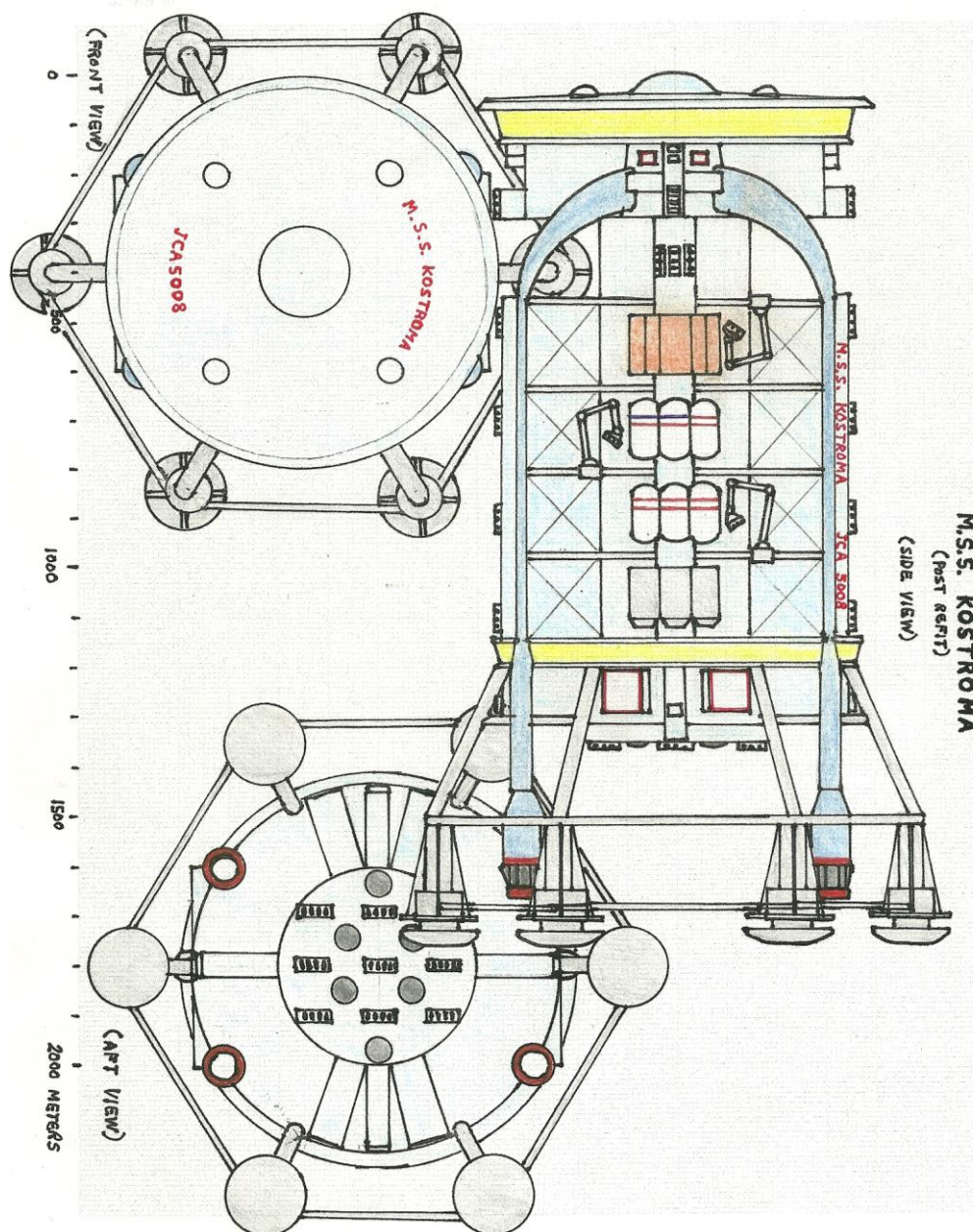
A MARS ODYSSEY

NAUCA – DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES

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## CHAPTER 1 – THE KOSTROMA



13:42 (Universal Time)

Tuesday, May 20, 2324 C.E.

Bridge of the Armed Merchant Ship KOSTROMA

On approach to the Las Americas orbital space station

Low Earth orbit, Solar System

Tina Forster, sitting in her command chair on the bridge of her ship, the armed merchant ship A.M.S. KOSTROMA, contemplated for a moment the image of the Las Americas orbital space station, visible ahead on the inner surface of the giant holographic projection sphere surrounding the bridge's concentric platforms. She then pressed the 'talk' button of her headset's microphone and spoke in a calm but firm voice.



"Las Americas Traffic Control, this is the A.M.S. KOSTROMA, requesting permission to dock at your cargo terminal." **Tina Forster**

The response from the traffic controller on the orbital space station followed a mere second later.

"KOSTROMA, you have permission to dock at our cargo terminal. Docking Station Bravo has been reserved for your arrival. Please engage your automated approach system and deploy your mooring clamps and we will guide your ship through the docking sequence."

"Thank you, Las Americas Control! Engaging our automated approach system and deploying our mooring clamps now."

Looking at her pilot, Frida Skarsgard, Tina nodded her head once to signify to her to follow the directives of the orbital station, to which the 36-year-old redhead replied with a nod of her own before punching a number of buttons on her work station.

"Automated approach system switched on and tuned to the Las Americas Control datalink. Mooring clamps deploying."

Looking down at one of the small display screens attached to the armrests of her command chair, Tina eyed the digital representation of her ship shown on it and saw that the massive telescopic arms supporting the equally massive mooring clamps of her cargo ship were effectively coming out of their wells and were also pivoting in order to fit in the mooring receptacles of the cargo terminal. With an overall length of close to 1,800 meters and a maximum loaded mass of 25 million metric tons, the KOSTROMA could only dock at space terminals reserved for super-heavy ships. As the sixth largest spaceship existing in the Solar System, the KOSTROMA certainly deserved the qualification of super-heavy ship. It also fully deserved the nickname of 'Mighty KOSTROMA' widely used to describe it. On top of being able to carry a stunning total of over twenty million metric tons of cargo, the KOSTROMA also happened to possess a very powerful armament, which it had used numerous times in actual space combat



during the past nine years. Its first combat had happened in 2315, when it had protected the planets and moons of the Spacers League against the tyrannical rule of the now-defunct Earth Federation, while its last combat had happened three years ago, against the Drazts of the Ross 128 System. With a peace treaty having been signed between the Spacers League and the Drazts, the KOSTROMA had then been free to return to its original purpose, which was the long-distance space hauling of heavy or outsized cargo.

While Tina had full confidence in the competence and skills of her pilot and of her other bridge crewmembers, Tina stayed in her command chair during the whole docking maneuver, watching carefully how it went. One false maneuver or an excessive approach speed could make her giant ship cause some serious damage to the Las Americas cargo terminal, something that had to be prevented at all cost, as the Las Americas orbital station was one of only four orbital stations around Earth capable of receiving super-heavy ships like the KOSTROMA. After some 23 minutes of careful maneuvering and slow approach, the ship's mooring clamps finally engaged and locked themselves to the cargo terminal's mooring receptacles, prompting a call from the cargo terminal traffic controller.

"KOSTROMA, this is the cargo terminal control: your mooring clamps show 'green' across the board. You may now start transferring your cargo pods to the terminal."

"Thank you, Terminal Control! We will start by transferring the eight extra-large bulk liquid tanks we filled with methane and acetylene in Hibernia, in the Trappist-1 System."

"Acknowledged, KOSTROMA! What is the actual tonnage of liquid hydrocarbons presently contained into those tanks?"

"Our bulk liquid tanks contain 1.01 million tons of methane and 1.2 million metric tons of acetylene."

"That should make the local representative of the Dows Chemicals Corporation happy and content...at least for a while." replied the traffic controller in a facetious tone that made Tina chuckle.

"Well, if he bought a gas-guzzler, that's his problem, not mine. Be advised that we are also going to unload a total of forty bulk ore silos containing a total of eleven million tons of chromium, vanadium and molybdenum processed metal pellets, loaded aboard while we were in the Klondike asteroid belt of Trappist-1."

“That should keep our terminal workers and robots busy for the rest of the day, KOSTROMA. Do you need to disembark passengers at this stage?”

“Not today, Terminal Control. We will wait until our cargo unloading is completed and the loading of our new cargo modules is done before moving to the passenger terminal tomorrow morning, where we are due to receive paying passengers heading to the Alpha Centauri System.”

“Understood, KOSTROMA. Have a nice day! Cargo Terminal Control, out!”

Satisfied, Tina finally got up from her command chair and started walking towards the elevator banks serving the bridge complex, all the while giving instructions to her bridge crew.

“Dana, you have the bridge! I am now going to fly out in my yacht to the Avalon Space Yards, to go have a chat there with Mister Shomberg. From there, I will go down on Earth to do some early shopping for my future ship.”

“Got it!” replied Dana ‘DD’ Durning, the navigator and unofficial first officer of the KOSTROMA. Knowing that her ship was in competent hands, Tina went into a waiting lift cabin and touched a tactile display screen to command the cabin to go down to Level 16, eight decks down from the bridge complex. The vertical trip took only seconds and she soon stepped out of the cabin and onto the Human Services Deck, which centralized the various crew services available on the ship, including the school departments and the kindergarten center. Walking across the central rotunda surrounding the central core column containing the lift shafts linking the various decks of the ship, Tina went to the kindergarten center, entering the parents’ reception lounge and smiling to the young female receptionist.

“Hi, Helena! I’m here to pick up my little Misha. Sorry if I am a bit early.”

“That’s alright, Tina.” Replied the receptionist, who called her by her first name, like most people aboard the KOSTROMA. “You may go get your sweet little boy at the center’s playground.”

“Thank you!”

Taking the long hallway linking the various sections and rooms of the kindergarten center, Tina went to the large playground, a 120 square meter room with foam mattresses covering the floor and containing a number of play modules designed

for toddlers. Tina felt a wave of joy rise in her when her son Misha, now four and a half years old, ran to her the moment he saw her.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

Catching her running son in her arms and then raising him up, Tina kissed him twice on his cheeks before smiling to him.

“So, how was your day up to now, Misha?”

“We had fun and I played a lot with my friends, Mommy. Are you here to pick me up?”

“Yes! I am a bit early today but I had to go visit someone in a space station, then go down to Earth and I thought that you would like to come with me.”

“YES! I want to go with you, Mommy.” replied at once her son in an enthusiastic tone of voice.

“Then, let’s go pick up your backpack first, then we will go down to the hangar deck, where we will take my yacht for our trip.”

Going first to the classroom used by her son’s group, Tina recuperated the small child’s backpack containing a set of spare clothes and shoes, then went back to the reception desk of the kindergarten center, where she called her husband, Michel Koniev, on her wrist communicator. Michel, who worked at the ship’s security section, answered her in seconds.

“Hello, Tina! What’s up?”

“Hi, Michel! I just picked up Misha at the kindergarten center and was going to bring him with me on a short business trip to the Avalon Space Yards, then down on Earth, where I intend to pay a visit to a tree nursery center near Vancouver. Would you be available to come with us?”

“Uh, just let me check with Ahmed on that. I won’t be long.”

As Michel paused the link for a moment to go speak with Ahmed Jibril, the head of security for the KOSTROMA, Tina waited patiently while playing with her son. Michel was back on line after less than a minute, sounding happy.

“Ahmed gave me the rest of the day off, Tina. Where do we meet?”

“At the Hangar Deck: I intend to use our personal yacht for our trip.”

“Good! I will be there in a few minutes.”

“The same here. See you at the Hangar Deck!” replied Tina before closing the link and smiling to little Misha.

“Come, Misha! We are going to take a space ride with Dad.”

“YAY!” shouted the boy while jumping up and down on his small legs.

Leaving the kindergarten center and going to the central elevators' column, Tina and her son took a cabin ride down to the Hangar Deck, on Level 7. As they were exiting the lift cabin, Tina smiled on seeing her very handsome husband come out of another lift cabin next to hers.



“Aah, perfect timing, Michel! Let's go to our yacht.”

Crossing the rotunda surrounding the core spine column, the small **Michel Koniev** family then walked through a large and high-ceiling space used for the movement of craft and large equipment before entering the Crafts Hangar Number Four, where Tina's yacht was parked. Tina was fond of her FRIENDSHIP, which she had bought second-hand in Vancouver a few years ago, despite it being a rather dated craft design. While not the most modern model available on the market, it still had very decent capabilities and had also been refitted by her with a Koomak Drive, giving it an interstellar capability. It was also a comfortable small ship and was easy to operate, being able to be programmed to fly itself from takeoff to landing. It also had a sentimental value for Tina, having been the craft she had used two years ago to go on a diplomatic mission to Ross 128 and conduct peace talks with the Drazts. The FRIENDSHIP had then sustained some serious damage when the Drazts had mounted a treacherous attack against the KOSTROMA but she later had decided to have it repaired and upgraded instead of simply scrapping it. Now, it was about as good as anything else available and it was just the right size for Tina's personal use, with seating and accommodations for up to six persons. Another reason for Tina to use it today was that there were sets of spare clothing and personal hygiene kits inside for her, Michel and Misha, thus saving her the need to go up to her family suite in order to pack bags for their trip.

Going to her yacht, parked beside a much larger cargo shuttle, Tina activated the left side ('port' side in naval parlance) access door, also called an 'airstair', making it pivot down and present its integrated stairs to her, Michel and Misha. Climbing quickly aboard, Tina then went straight to the small cockpit of the yacht, where she started activating the various systems of the FRIENDSHIP while Michel sat down and strapped in Misha in one of the four padded passenger seats located just behind the two crew

seats. The three of them were strapped in by the time that she contacted the hangar control station.

“KOSTROMA Traffic Control, this is the FRIENDSHIP, in Hangar Number Four. I request cycling through our southern airlock for departure.”

“FRIENDSHIP, you are authorized to enter the southern airlock now.”

“Thank you, Control!”

Grabbing the flight control stick of her seat, Tina made her yacht gently and silently from the hangar deck, using the gravity sails of her small craft to make it move inside the KOSTROMA. Gravity sails had been invented a good century ago but were still a very efficient propulsion mode, especially for small craft meant for short trips in space or inside a planet’s atmosphere. As its name entailed, flat surfaces acting like the sails of an ancient sailing ship produced thrust at right angle to them when hit by gravity waves. The system was totally silent, didn’t produce any heat and took little space inside a ship, being often integrated into main partition walls. Multiple layers of gravity sails and their gravity wave generators could also be superimposed to multiply the force transferred to the ship or craft. The only thing needed to make it work was electricity. Even the huge KOSTROMA used gravity sails integrated into its hull sides and partitions when maneuvering close to a space station or when landing on a planet or moon. The KOSTROMA could also make a short trip strictly on gravity sails, doing so with accelerations that could attain 2 Gs, a performance which many lesser ships could only envy. Hovering just above the deck and slowly going forward, Tina’s yacht soon entered the airlock connected to its hangar and landed on its rotating platform pad as the inner door of the airlock closed behind it. The air inside the airlock was then pumped out before the outer door opened, showing the vacuum of space beyond a short but wide tunnel.

“KOSTROMA Control, from FRIENDSHIP: I am now going to fly out to head to the Avalon Space Yards.”

“Understood, FRIENDSHIP. Have a good trip!”

“Thank you, KOSTROMA.” replied Tina, who believe in the virtues of politeness. Like every time she flew a craft or spaceship, Tina felt happiness while flying her yacht out of the KOSTROMA. She truly had been born to fly and had been the main pilot of the KOSTROMA before she had inherited it after the death of her uncle, who had been the owner of the giant cargo ship. Consulting her space chart display, she then veered

her yacht towards the orbit used by the Avalon Space Yards, her first destination, and engaged her autopilot before twisting her head to look at her son.

“Our first trip won’t be long, Misha: we are going to visit a space shipyard where I need to discuss with the head designer. Then, we will go down to Earth to go see trees.”

“But we have many trees already on our ship, Mommy.”

“True, but I want new trees for a future ship I am having built. I will explain that more to you once down in Vancouver.”

“We are going to have another ship, Mommy? But I like our KOSTROMA.”

“I love it too, Misha. Don’t worry: I have no plans to get rid of it. I just want to add another ship to my business. However, that new ship won’t be ready for another eight or ten years anyway, so you will have plenty of time to grow up on the KOSTROMA. I am going to select and buy more trees today so that they have time to grow a bit before they are transplanted in my future ship. Most fruit trees need to grow for many years before they can start producing fruits and I want the fruit trees in my future ship to start producing by the time that ship is launched into service.”

“How will you call that ship, Mommy?” asked the four-year-old boy after a moment of reflection. Tina smiled to herself then, imagining her new ship traveling through space.

“It will be called the NOSTROMO and it will be even bigger than our KOSTROMA, Misha.”

The rest of the short trip, which took no more than twenty minutes, was spent mostly in silence, as Tina and Michel let Misha admire the view of Earth from orbit through the cockpit’s windows. Then, a mass appeared ahead of the yacht, growing as the FRIENDSHIP approached it. Soon, it revealed itself to be an orbital installation of colossal dimensions.

“The Avalon Space Yards!” announced Tina for the benefit of her son. “The place where the KOSTROMA was built and where my NOSTROMO will also be born in a few years. We are going to visit its owner and chief designer, Mister Gustav Shomberg.”

“Mister Shomberg built this station? It is huge!”

“It is effectively huge, Misha, but Gustav Shomberg didn’t build it: he bought it after the original owner went bankrupt because of his poor managerial skills.

Apparently, the man was a better engineer than he was as a businessman. Mister Shomberg is a true genius, but he also is a very decent and principled man. He risked his life and everything else to help me to fight the tyranny of the Earth Federation in 2315, when he secretly added weapons to my KOSTROMA.”

Little Misha listened to her in silence while staring at the ever-growing orbital installation. Soon, the yacht approached a wide opening on the surface of what now looked like a vertical wall of steel that made the craft appear like a small insect. Letting the automated approach controls of the station guide her yacht in, Tina watched on as they cycled through an airlock, then entered a cavernous garage in which dozens of other craft and minor ships were already moored at individual docking ports. The tractor beams equipping the garage then pulled the yacht towards a free docking port, where it docked smoothly after another minute, with mooring clamps taking hold of the FRIENDSHIP, which was still essentially floating in the internal space of the garage reserved for short term visitors. Tina knew that more long-term visitors would instead be accommodated inside individual ship hangars in another section of the space yard.

Powering down her yacht, Tina let Michel undo Misha’s harness before taking her son’s hand and guide him out of the craft and into a reception airlock, then into a small locker room cum reception lobby. There, they were met by a young and very beautiful Asian woman who had apparently been waiting for them and who presented herself to Tina.

“Welcome aboard the Avalon Space Yards, Commodore Forster. I am Miri Jintsu, one of the personal assistants of Mister Shomberg. When our local space traffic control section alerted Mister Shomberg about your approach, he sent me to welcome you and bring your family to him. I have a cart waiting just outside this compartment. If you will please follow me.”

“Mister Shomberg was too kind.” replied Tina, who then followed the woman out of the lobby, still holding Misha’s hand. The small family sat inside a waiting electric cart parked in a large hallway, next to the door of the lobby, while Miri Jintsu sat at the controls. The cart quickly started rolling down the apparently interminable hallway, the length of which prompted a question from little Misha.

“Gee! How long is this hallway? I can’t see its end.”

“This hallway is 11.5 kilometer-long and runs from one end of the space yards to the other, forming one of its main circulation arteries. Since the Avalon Space Yards

specializes in the building, refit and repair of large spaceships, it necessarily occupies a large volume of enclosed space, which is mainly taken by big, pressurized construction and repair docks.”

“And how many of those construction and repair docks do you have, Miss Jintsu?” asked Michel Koniev from his rear seat.

“We have four construction docks for super-heavy ships, all able to accommodate ships as big or bigger than your KOSTROMA, plus another ten construction docks for heavy ships and twenty smaller docks for medium and small ships. We also have an internal construction hall complex able to produce small craft in series quantities.”

“That’s quite impressive, miss. And how busy are the Avalon Space Yards presently?”

“Quite busy, sir. In fact, we are approaching our maximum production capacity right now. Business is really good, thanks to the present space colonization boom.”

Tina couldn’t help exchange a worried look with her husband on hearing that, something the personal aide apparently noticed.

“Mister Shomberg told me to reassure you about the construction work on your ship, Commodore Foster: while we are quite busy with other construction projects, that has not impinged on the construction of your NOSTROMO. Mister Shomberg will expand on that further once we will be at his office.”

Half reassured by that, Tina refrained from asking more questions afterwards and stayed quiet as they rolled along the long hallway.

After another two minutes and over one kilometer of rolling, the cart turned into a secondary hallway, then slowed down and stopped, parking next to other carts near a double door entrance. That entrance was in fact a full-fledged personnel airlock which was probably meant to act as a second level of security against accidents that could cause leaks and explosive decompressions, a major worry for any ship or space installation. Cycling through the entrance airlock, the small group then walked across a posh lounge and followed for about forty meters a wide corridor lined with administrative offices with transparent partitions. Jintsu finally stopped at a door along an opaque section of wall and touched with one hand the access pad next to the sliding door, making it open. Tina, Michel and Misha followed her inside a sort of anteroom where a young secretary got up from behind her desk when they entered and bowed to them.



“Commodore Forster, Mister Shomberg is waiting for you in his office. You may enter it right away.”

“Thank you, miss!”

Flanked by her husband and son, Tina went to an old-style door made of polished wood and knocked on it, waiting for a muffled ‘come in’ before opening it and entering a large office. That office, while comfortably furnished, also had a happy chaos look to it, with piles of papers and documents stacked on and around a large work desk and a shelving unit and with models of spaceships suspended from the ceiling or sitting on shelves. A big man in his fifties then came to her, his right hand extended for a shake and a big smile on his face. He was of pure Nordic blood, with blond hair, blue eyes and fairly pale skin color.

“Tina, it is truly nice to see you again. And you brought with you your cute son.” Shomberg shook Tina’s hand, then Michel’s hand before bending down to brush Misha’s hair.

“You are growing up quite fast, Misha. You should be able to attract plenty of girls in a few more years.”

While Misha reddened a bit in embarrassment at those words, Michel and Tina grinned in response, with Michel replying to the designer.

“Please don’t encourage him on that, Gustav: one kid is already a lot to watch.”

“Well, at least you have a boy.” Replied Shomberg. “A girl would mean a lot more watching, if you see what I mean.”

“Oh, I do see, Gustav.” said Tina before switching to a more serious subject. “We came to take news about my NOSTROMO and to discuss a few points about its construction.”

“Then, let’s go sit in those sofas in that corner. Would you like some drinks? Coffee, tea, juices, milk or water?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a cup of strong coffee.” answered Tina, imitated by Michel. Nodding his head, Shomberg excused himself for a moment and went to speak briefly with his secretary before returning to the corner where the small family was now sitting, sitting in an easy chair facing their sofa.

“So, what would you like to know, Tina?”

“First off, how is the construction of my NOSTROMO going? I heard that your space yards are quite busy these days.”

“They are, but I can assure you that this has not meant any delay in the building of your future ship. Thanks to the principles of modular construction, I was able to distribute around other space yards and Earth-bound shipyards sub-contracts for the ship modules needed for the other ships presently under construction here. Those modules are then brought to my yards, where they are assembled together in my respective secondary construction docks. That has allowed me in turn to keep here all the work involved with the building of my priority projects, one of which is your NOSTROMO. With over twenty of my sub-assembly construction halls busy building modular parts for your ship, construction of your NOSTROMO is actually advancing faster than first expected. Of course, the fact that most of my workforce is made up of specialized robots does help a lot: no pesky unions to deal with, no coffee or lunch breaks to delay the work and only a few highly trained and well-paid engineers and technicians to keep happy.”

“And who is taking care of maintaining and repairing your army of robots, Gustav?” asked Michel in a sneaky tone, making the ship designer grin.

“Another army of robots, who in turn do mutual maintenance and repair work on themselves, supervised by a handful of engineers. To return to your NOSTROMO, I can now predict with good assurance that it will be completed around September of 2329, in a bit over five years and a full two years earlier than first predicted.”

“But that’s great news!” exclaimed Tina, truly happy, before calming down a bit and bending forward towards Shomberg. “Then, the request I came to present to you will be even more pertinent. You remember about how I complained in the past about how long it took for the trees I had planted inside my KOSTROMA to grow and produce fruits?”

Shomberg rolled his eyes at those words.

“Oh yes, I do! However, I am a ship designer, not an agronomist or forestry expert. I built the structures meant to contain those trees inside your KOSTROMA, that’s all!”

“Well, I have decided to prevent this problem right from the start this time, Gustav. What I would like you to do is to build separately and in advance the modules meant to contain my future forests, or at least the sections of floors on which my trees will be planted. On my part, I am going to start buying today young trees growing in various tree nurseries around the planet and to have them continue growing there as long as possible, until the moment they will have to be transplanted into my new ship.

That way, I should be able to save a good three to four years of waiting for them to start producing fruits or to grow to a significant size. Then, they would be transported here in protected cells and transplanted into the forest and plantation habitats meant for my NOSTROMO. So, what do you say to that, Gustav?"

Shomberg was thoughtful for a moment before nodding his head.

"Your idea would definitely save quite a few years of waiting for those trees to become productive or attain a fair size. The only problem I see is the amount of space those tree growth sections would take aboard my space yards: we are talking about hundreds of hectares of growth surfaces after all."

"Then, how about building those growth modules here, then ship them down to Earth, where they could sit next to the nurseries growing my trees? My trees, once old enough, would then be transplanted into those waiting modules, where they would continue to grow until my KOSTROMA could come and pick them up to carry them up to your space yards, where they would then be integrated into my ship. Would that work for you?"

"It would, but we will need to coordinate closely the transplanting of your trees with the integration of those modules into your future ship. I will have to be able to contact your tree growers and get reports from them."

"That I can arrange, Gustav." replied Tina in a confident tone. "Well, with this said, could we go see what my future ship is looking like right now?"

"Certainly, but you risk being disappointed: there is little more right now than the start of a core spine structure. Aah, here is your coffee! Thanks, Kimi!"

Little Misha's eyes opened wide when he saw the chocolate biscuits brought by Shomberg's secretary alongside the requested pot of coffee. There was also a mug of hot chocolate on the service tray, which the boy quickly grabbed along with the plate of biscuits. Tina smiled in amusement on seeing him starting to eagerly eat his biscuits, then poured for herself and Michel cups of black coffee. With her own cup of coffee in hand, she got up from her sofa and went to examine from up close one of the ship's models on display around Shomberg's office.

"Gustav, is this a miniature model of the NOSTROMO?"

"It is!" answered the engineer, who then joined her, with Michel also following him. "This model was produced with a 3D printer, straight from the digital drawings of your future ship."

To Tina's surprise and confusion, Shomberg then repressed a chuckle while looking at the ship's model.

"What? What do you find funny about my future ship, Gustav?"

"It's not about your ship but rather about a comment from one of my production engineers, which he made when he saw this model for the first time. Basically, he said that the NOSTROMO looked a lot like a round trash can with a lid. I then told him never to say that in front of you, on pain of death."

"My future dream ship? A trash can? Ooh! I definitely would kill for that."

"I thought so! Well, once we will have finished our cups and once your cute boy will be done barfing down biscuits, I will drive you to Construction Dock 01, so you can have a peep at what will become your new ship."

Sipping their coffee while discussing a number of technical details about the design of the NOSTROMO, the trio of adults finally left the office after a few minutes, once Misha had finished raiding the plate of biscuits, and sat in one of the electric carts parked at the entrance of the administrative division. Going back to the main hallway, Shomberg drove for three kilometers and took a secondary hallway before stopping his cart next to a large observation window, then stepped out of the cart. He waited until Tina, Michel and Misha had joined him by the window before speaking.

"This is Construction Dock 01, my largest dock. It has an internal volume of eighteen cubic kilometers of pressurized space. What you see in the middle of the dock is part of the core spine section of the NOSTROMO housing its directed gravity generator. That generator, being the main propulsion system of the ship and also its critical heart, is the 500 meter-diameter ball you see embedded in the center of the core's cylinder. As you certainly know by now, the Drazts' technology of directed gravity you conveniently 'borrowed' in the Ross 128 System functions by generating a very special field that directs and enhance gravity forces in the direction requested by the crew of a ship. In turn, that field's maximum dimension dictates the maximum size of the ship using the system. Thus, with a field generator with a diameter of 500 meters, your ship's mass and structures had to be all within a maximum radius of 1,600 meters in order to stay within its directed gravity field. So, that accounts for the compact shape of the NOSTROMO, with its short cylindrical shape capped by its huge dome-like protective bow shield. At the stern, you will have the aft shield, covering an enclosed stern towing station able to contain prefabricated structures with a length or diameter of up to 1,000

meters and a height of up to 400 meters. After checking on that, I can tell you that no other existing ship will be able to carry modules or structures of that size, by a long shot. With the present mad dash to build large prefabricated structures in order to house and support the dozen colonies presently being developed and enlarged, that feature of the NOSTROMO will create a high demand for your ship's services. The huge dimensions of your four lateral cargo bays, which surround the core spine section, will only heighten the interest of customers needing to transport large prefabricated structures and modules to other star systems."

"I know! My KOSTROMA is already in high demand for that same exact reason and I am making some great business." commented Tina while eyeing the gigantic structure already built inside the construction dock. "After being cooped up inside under-ice cities around the moons of our outer planets for generations, the citizens of the Spacers' League are eager to move to systems where they will finally be able to live in the open air, with a sun directly over them. At the rate things are going, I predict that the outer moons, planets and asteroids of the Solar System will be mostly empty and depopulated within twenty years, with their populations having moved to other star systems. The Solar System will never be the same from then on."

"But it will be to the benefit of the Human race." added Michel Koniev on a sober tone. "With many of the inhabitants of Earth also moving out to the stars, our old and long-suffering home planet will finally have a chance to regenerate itself and get rid of the pollution strangling it."

"Yes, but that will come too late to save many species of animals, fish and plants that are already extinct thanks to Human greed and over-exploitation. My firm hope is that we will not repeat the same mistakes in our new space colonies. Thankfully, the High Council of the Spacers' League seems to have that well in hand."

"And as a member of that High Council, I am confident that you will not let it become slack in that respect, Tina." said Gustav Shomberg while looking at her. "Your exploits in the Ross 128 System made this new space colonization drive possible. Don't let them forget that and push them into doing what's right."

"I will, Gustav. That I promise you." replied Tina while contemplating what would become her future ship.

**11:09 (Pacific Coast Time) / 19:09  
(Universal Time)  
Enos Lake Log Cabins Resort,  
Vancouver Island  
West Coast of North America, Earth**



"Hi, Janet! We're here!"

"Hi, Cousin!" replied the middle-aged woman standing behind the reception counter of the resort's administrative building, built of round logs like the cabins it rented to its customers. Janet Forster then walked around her counter to come and give a warm hug to Tina, then doing the same with Michel and Misha, planting as well a kiss on the boy's forehead before looking back at Tina.

"So, how long will you be staying this time, Tina?"

"A couple of days, until my ship has to depart on another interstellar run to the Alpha Centauri System. I myself will be running around on a few errands in the meantime but both Michel and Misha will stay around Enos Lake to hike and enjoy the nature."

"You seem to be a busy girl these days, Tina."

"Don't I know!" replied Tina while rolling her eyes. "Space business is booming, so I can't really complain. Which cabin will we get this time?"

"Cabin Number Three: the one with your favorite view on the lake. Will you want to rent a canoe or some fishing equipment as well?"

"I will!" answered Michel, jumping in. "I intend to give a good taste of the local nature to our Misha. Our ship has an exceptional living environment for a starship, but nothing beats fresh open air and natural forests and lakes."

"Then, let me get two sets of cabin access cards for you." said Janet Forster, returning behind her counter. Searching for a moment in a key press, she unhooked two access cards and handed them to Tina and Michel before accepting Tina's credit card and registering her rental payment with it. With that done, Janet looked for a moment at the black and gold credit card.

"Hum, every time you come here, your credit limit keeps going up. I am envious!"

"Well, I do own a large moon world, on top of owning one of the largest existing spaceships existing, plus business is really good these days. However, I don't let that inflate my ego."

"I know, Cousin! So, what kind of errands do you need to do?"

"I came down on Earth to buy young trees, both fruit trees and forest trees, which I will need to transplant in a few years aboard a new ship presently being built."

"Dear God! You're not going to sell your mighty KOSTROMA?" said Janet, horror on her face.

"Hell no! I would never do that! I am simply planning to augment my fleet, in view of the way interstellar commerce is growing exponentially."

"Oof! You reassure me, Tina: I know how proud of the KOSTROMA you are. I hope that you will be able to have supper here tonight: we are going to have a communal outdoor BBQ with grilled fish and corn."

"Grilled fish and corn? Count on me to be here for supper, Janet."

"I thought so!" replied the resort owner and manager, a grin on her face.

## **CHAPTER 2 – LEAVING FOR A NEW LIFE**



The planet Providence, in the Alpha Centauri System, 4.36 light-years away from the Solar System.

**15:34 (Universal Time)**

**Wednesday, May 21, 2324**

**West Outer Access Rotunda, Level 9, A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Docked at the passenger terminal of the Las Americas orbital station**

**Low Earth orbit**

“Our passenger load for this trip is going to be pretty close to our maximum capacity, Serena.”

The registration booth attendant nodded her head to that remark from Natalia Vasilyeva, the tall blonde woman who was KOSTROMA’s head hostess: all ten registration booths of the West Outer Access Rotunda were manned and fully occupied, with hundreds of prospective passengers lined up at the booths and waiting to be registered in.

“Indeed! If all the passengers who took reservations show up, we will have just over 4,300 passengers for this trip. Thankfully, that would leave us with still 200 places available for late or unexpected passengers.”

“True!” replied Natalia, a 38-year-old native of Hygiea, one of the main asteroid worlds of the Solar System’s Main Asteroid Belt. “With our cargo bays also filled with prefabricated modules and cargo pods, this will be a very profitable trip for us.”



The registration booth attendant then had to concentrate her attention on a family of five that had just stepped forward. It was composed of a man and a woman in their early forties, two teenagers and a preteen boy. All five were obviously of Latino descent.

“Good afternoon and welcome on the KOSTROMA! May I see your reservations, please?”

“Here they are, miss. My name is Pedro Mendoza and I am traveling with my family to Providence, where I am going to take a new job there. The Providence Mining Corporation is supposed to have paid for our passage.”

The booth attendant took the reservation slips offered by the man and quickly scanned them on her computer station, then read the information that appeared on her screen before smiling to Pedro Mendoza.

“Your passage has effectively been paid in advance by the Providence Mining Corporation, sir. If you may take two steps to the right and position your back against this white screen, I will take a picture of you and then produce your embarkation card.”

“Oh, okay!” said Mendoza before moving to a position sandwiched between a white partition screen and a digital camera. The picture taking took only a couple of seconds, following which the attendant asked the man to put both hands down on a pair of glass screens, in order to register him via fingerprinting, a standard procedure concerning space travelers: with the faint but still real possibility of some kind of emergency happening in space, the central computer of the ship had to be able to account quickly for every occupant of the vessel. It also prevented some passengers from becoming stowaways, something that still happened, however infrequently. With both photo and fingerprints taken, the attendant was then able to give to Pedro Mendoza a plastic embarkation card bearing his name, photo, date and destination of trip and his assigned cabin number. The card also came with a long neck ribbon clipped to it.

“Here is your embarkation card, sir. Your family will occupy Cabin 926, on Level 16-D. Please wear your card from your neck when out of your cabin. I will now register your family members. Just wait next to that man behind my booth while I do that: he will guide your family to your cabin once you are all registered.”

“Thank you, miss.” replied Mendoza before walking a few steps to join up with the big, beefy and muscular man waiting behind the booth while sitting at the controls of a small electric cart. In view of the huge size of the ship he was going to travel in, Pedro Mendoza thought that going around in a small vehicle was probably a near-necessity rather than a luxury.

Pedro's wife, Maria, was next to be registered, followed by her youngest son, 8-year-old Carlos, her 13-year-old son Rafael and finally her 16-year-old daughter Isabella. Dragging her two suitcases behind her, Isabella, a very beautiful Latina girl, couldn't help admire for a moment the powerfully-built and obviously fit man with bulging biceps sitting at the controls of the cart. The man in turn smiled to her and stepped out of his vehicle to help her load her suitcases in the rear compartment of the cart.

"Here you are, miss. If you will now take a seat, I will drive you and your family to your cabin."

"Uh, are you a security man, sir?" asked timidly Isabella. "You look so strong." The man smiled in response and shook his head.

"Not really, miss. I work as a doorman at one of the clubs established on the Promenade Deck of the KOSTROMA. With the KOSTROMA being such a huge ship, employees of those commercial establishments often help with passenger embarkation by guiding newcomers to their cabins. My name is Mark Cisco, at your service."

Isabella shook Sisco's hand while discretely admiring his physique.

"And at what club are you working in as a doorman, Mister Cisco?"



**Mark Cisco**

"The JUPITER Sex Club, miss." answered Cisco, who smiled again on seeing the teenage girl blush at that. "You may now take your seat."

Once the teenager had sat down with the rest of her family, Mark Cisco then switched on his cart and started rolling, with his previous parking spot immediately occupied by another cart ready to take away more passengers. However, instead of entering the long and large gallery heading towards the core of the ship, he drove his cart inside a nearby cargo elevator cabin, in which another cart had just entered. A third cart quickly joined them inside the cabin before the doors closed and it started going up. Cisco explained what was going as the cabin went up.

"In the past, we would have gone down the gallery leading to the ship's core section, then would take an elevator to Level 16, the Human Services Deck, and roll outward through it to get to the Outer Apartments Ring. Captain Forster finally decided that a more direct way for passengers to enter the ship and then get to their cabins was needed, so she had some modifications made to the outer access system two years

ago. A number of cargo and personnel lifts were added to each access point, with the lifts going directly to near the apartments ring, on Level 16. As a result of those modifications, our passengers can get to their cabins much quicker, while traffic through the Human Services Deck was greatly diminished. When our cabin will stop on Level 16, we will exit it inside one of our four forest habitats and enter the main circulation gallery linking the core section with the apartments ring.”

Cisco barely had time to finish his explanation before their cabin stopped and the double doors slid open. All three carts rolled out of the lift cabin and into a short gallery with transparent walls connecting at right angle with a much wider gallery. The Mendoza opened their eyes wide on seeing that the gallery was bordered on both sides by a temperate rain forest counting hundreds of large trees.

“Woah!” exclaimed 8-year-old Carlos. “Look at those trees! How did they manage to plant trees in a spaceship, Father?”

“Uh, I don’t know!” replied Pedro Mendoza, as surprised as his son. He then looked at Mark Cisco for an answer. “How is this possible, mister?”

“With planning, careful design, time...and lots of money. Adding those forest habitats to the KOSTROMA was neither cheap nor simple, but the final result was more than worth it in terms of the vastly improved living quality for both the crew and the passengers. Don’t forget as well that many of our people from the Spacers League who live in under-ice habitats on moons of the outer planets or on asteroids rarely had a chance to enjoy some time in a real forest and, prior to the building of those habitats on the KOSTROMA, basically had to travel to Earth in order to enjoy some time in true nature. As a result of building those forest habitats, the KOSTROMA has become very popular with space passengers, something that has further helped its level of profitability.”

“But building such a huge ship must have cost a fortune.” said Isabella Mendoza, making Cisco nod his head.

“When it was built some forty years ago, the KOSTROMA cost over six billion credits to build. Since then, another three billion credits were spent in two major refits along the years, in order to maintain and improve it. However, its unequalled capabilities in transporting large loads and prefabricated modules have made the KOSTROMA a ship in high demand, so business has been very good for many decades and still is so. From what I heard, it has fully amortized itself many years ago and is now operating on a pure profit basis.”

“Wow! I wish that my last employer could have said the same.” said Pedro Mendoza in an envious tone, prompting a question from Mark Cisco.

“And for what kind of company were you working for, mister?”

“I worked until two years ago for a vehicle parts plant near Veracruz, in Mexico. I am a sheet metal worker. Unfortunately, that company went down under and I ended up on unemployment. Thankfully, I saw a couple of weeks ago an employment add from the Providence Mining Corporation, which also operates a manufacturing plant on Providence, and I jumped at once on that occasion. I am hoping to rebuild a new and better life for my family in Providence. Have you ever been there, mister?”

“Yes, I did, a couple of times, and I can tell you that it is a truly beautiful world, with a pristine environment and with oceans that cover about half of its surface. You should love it.”

Pedro exchanged glances with his wife and children, encouraged by those words. However, they nearly at once had their attention attracted by something else as their cart was rolling through a sort of tunnel with transparent walls: they were now going through what looked like a giant aquarium! While continuing to cross the tunnel, Mark Cisco volunteered more information for the Mendoza family.

“We are now rolling across our salt water marine ecosystem, which is situated directly below our apartment levels. It forms a closed ring some 27 meter-wide and 38 meter-deep, with a circumference of over 2,000 meters. That marine ecosystem contains hundreds of various marine species, including shellfish and algae. We have a number of underwater observation lounges connected to our apartment complex, which you can visit to relax and pass the time while on board. I strongly suggest that you visit them.”

“We certainly will, mister. Decidedly, your ship is nothing short of fabulous.”

Cisco beamed with pride on hearing that: he, like all the crewmembers and commercial concessions’ personnel of the KOSTROMO, positively loved their ship. It may not be the prettiest or raciest-looking one, but no other ship could beat it in terms of quality of living while in deep space.

Turning left at the end of the transparent tunnel, Mark Cisco rolled for only a few more meters along a wide promenade before driving his cart into a large lift situated along the outer wall of the promenade, which had huge armored windows piercing the ship’s outer hull at intervals of ten meters. That lift raised the cart by four levels before

stopping and letting out the small vehicle on a platform forming a wide bridge over the promenade. Maria Mendoza couldn't help gulp on seeing how high they now were above the promenade floor. However, the bridge looked quite sturdy and Cisco crossed it before stopping and parking along a suspended circulation gallery, near the entrance to what looked like an apartment unit, complete with windows.

"Here we are! Cabin 926, Level 16-D! I will now help carry your bags inside and will give you a brief tour before letting you free to unpack."

The Mendoza stepped out of the vehicle as well and carried themselves most of their suitcases up a few steps to the door of their cabin, where Cisco made Pedro Mendoza use his registration card to unlock and open the door. Walking in eagerly, the family was led by Cisco past a study before stopping in front of the door of a bedroom containing two single beds.

"Your cabin has three bedrooms, a study, two bathrooms, a lounge and a kitchen corner, plus a balcony with view on the forest habitat. Two of the bedrooms each have two single beds, while the master bedroom has a large king-sized bed."

Pedro nodded his head in understanding, then pointed the nearest bedroom to his two sons.

"Rafael, Carlos, you take this bedroom. Isabella will take the other bedroom with two beds. Leave your bags on the beds for the moment, so that Mister Cisco can show all of us the rest of our cabin."

Pedro's three children obeyed him at once, returning into the hallway after a few seconds. Mark Cisco then made a few more steps to get to the master bedroom, where the parents left their own suitcases before following Mark into a large, comfortable lounge covering a 63 square meter surface. The view from the outer windows of the lounge immediately captivated the Mendoza, who went to them to admire the view they now had of the temperate rain forest habitat of the ship. Giving them a few seconds to look outside, Mark Cisco then showed them a transparent but solid and airtight door giving access to the large balcony of the cabin.

"This airtight door forms part of a safety airlock between your cabin and your balcony. It is designed to protect you in case a catastrophic collision would trigger an explosive decompression inside one of the forest habitats."

"Dios mio!" uttered Maria Mendoza. "How possible could such a collision be, mister?"

In response, Mark looked at her with utter seriousness.

“Madam, it would take a hit from a nuclear warhead or a collision with a major asteroid to get through the bow shield of the KOSTROMA. A collision with an asteroid still is a possibility, however distant, but the crew would have to literally be sleeping at their post to let this happen. Even then, the ship’s central computer, a machine with a high degree of artificial intelligence, would react by itself and maneuver the ship in order to avoid any collision. Don’t worry, madam: the KOSTROMA is about the safest ship you could be on in Space.”

“Come on, Maria! Stop worrying about everything and anything!” gently admonished her husband. Pedro then looked at Mark.

“Where can we go to have supper, mister?”

“If you choose to eat for free, you can then go to one of the ship’s cafeterias, situated on Level 10 of the core section, where you will only need to present your embarkation cards. There, you can either eat ‘à la carte’ or serve yourselves at the multiple self-serve buffet counters. Or, if you are ready to pay for more culinary variety, you can go to the Main Promenade, on Level 9 of the core section. The prices in those restaurants in the Promenade are quite reasonable, while the quality of the food is excellent. You also have on the Promenade a number of bars, pubs and clubs where you can have some good time in the evening. To have an idea of the various services and commercial concessions you can find on the KOSTROMA, you just need to use your video entertainment unit and switch it to Channel 1 and then consult its menu. By the way, you will be able to tune your video unit to the Spanish language, for your convenience. Do you have any more questions before I leave?”

“I have one, actually.” said Pedro Mendoza. “How long will be our trip to Providence?”

That question brought a big grin on Cisco’s face.

“The trip between the Solar System and Alpha Centauri will actually be nearly instantaneous, thanks to our Koomak Interstellar Drive. However, the maneuvering and approach phases in both the Solar System and the Alpha Centauri System will take a total of nearly a full day: you just can’t rush to dock a ship as big as the KOSTROMA to a space facility and the last few million kilometers will have to be made at fairly low speed, for reasons of space traffic safety. So, my advice would be to eat supper tonight at our ship’s cafeterias and then decide tomorrow if you wish to try one of our privately-owned restaurants. Oh, one last point: at our cafeterias, you will be allowed to take out some items from our buffet table and bring them to your cabin if you wish so, in order to have a

late meal or early breakfast in your cabin. However, I do not recommend doing that for such a short trip. Our cafeterias are anyway open around the clock.”

“Thank you, Mister Cisco!” said Pedro while shaking hands with him. “You were very helpful.”

“It was my pleasure, sir. I hope that your family has a nice trip.”

On that, Mark Cisco walked out, taking back his place in his cart and driving away to go help more passengers. With him gone, Pedro looked at his wife and kids and gave them directives.

“Alright! Since our trip will take only a day, unpack only the minimum needed out of your suitcases. Then, we will consult together that video channel listing the services available on this ship before going to eat at a cafeteria. After that, we will see how things go.”

## **18:06 (Universal Time)**

### **The ‘Marco Polo Cafeteria’**

#### **Level 10, Core Section of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

#### **In the process of undocking from the Las Americas orbital station**

#### **Low Earth orbit**

There were already some customers in line at the entrance of the Marco Polo Cafeteria, one of the three eating places on the ship which served both passengers and crewmembers for free, when the Mendoza family arrived there. However, those customers were being processed quickly and efficiently by four female hostesses and the Mendoza had to wait only a minute before arriving at the reception point, where a young woman smiled to Pedro, who was leading his family in.

“Good evening, sir! You need a table for five?”

“Yes, miss! Uh, this is our first time on a spaceship. What are the rules in your cafeteria, exactly? Is everything free?”

The hostess glanced quickly at the five members of the Mendoza family: from their clothes, she could guess that they were not affluent people. However, the KOSTROMA had been transporting thousands of poor people and refugees to new lives in other star systems during the last few years, with those people treated with as much respect and care as for affluent or powerful people. That was all part of a philosophy spread and encouraged by Tina Forster. In turn, that philosophy had endeared her even more to her

crewmembers, many of whom had come from modest social classes. The fact that Pedro Mendoza was asking about the cost of eating at the cafeteria proved to the hostess that this was a family hoping for better days away from Earth. She thus gave Pedro her best smile while answering him.

“All paying passengers traveling on the KOSTROMA can eat for free at this cafeteria and at our other economy-class cafeteria, the Globetrotter Cafeteria. All the food is free and you can eat all you want, but we encourage our customers not to waste any food by overserving themselves. Non-alcoholic drinks are also free, while you can have two alcoholic drinks per adult also for free, be it wine, beer or cocktails. Additional alcoholic drinks would however be charged, while our waiters have the right to refuse to serve extra alcohol to customers who would appear to become intoxicated. As for the choice of food, you can either order ‘à la carte’ or you can serve yourselves at the various buffet tables and grills. Does that answer your question, sir?”

“Yes, it does, miss!”

“Then follow me: I will lead you to a free table.”

The hostess then grabbed five menus before walking into the dining room proper, closely followed by the Mendoza family. As they were passing by an occupied table, the Mexican family couldn't help stare for a moment at the four occupants of that table: those were certainly not Humans! They appeared relatively short compared to average Humans and had an elongated head with long, pointy ears that made Isabella think of a deer, with those heads being at the end of a thin and long flexible neck. The creatures also had two arms with five-fingered hands and their skin was of a light beige color. She couldn't see clearly their legs but those were strangely shaped, with at least three joints in them forming a 'Z', a bit like the legs of chickens. Isabella waited until they were a few paces away past that table before asking a question in a low voice to the hostess.

“Excuse me, miss, but what were those four creatures we just passed by?”

“Those are Koorivars, beings originating from the Gliese 667 System. Over 60,000 Koorivars fled their home system just before a wandering brown dwarf entered it and caused havoc in it, with the Koorivars' home planet being utterly destroyed by that brown dwarf. However, that happened some 370 years ago and the surviving Koorivars were transported in a state of cryogenic sleep in three sub-luminic ships. One of those ships was headed for Earth but instead suffered some serious equipment failures and landed in automatic mode on the dwarf planet Eris, at the confines of our Solar System. It was then encased in ice for decades, until the KOSTROMA found it and freed that



Koorivar ship from its icy tomb. Those Koorivars now live on the northern end of Vancouver Island, on the western coast of North America, where they were given lands to build a colony for themselves. More Koorivars were subsequently rescued from their derelict ships by the KOSTROMA, which eventually found a new, suitable home planet for those survivors in the Wolf 1061 System. However, the Koorivar colony on Vancouver Island still exists. As for those four particular Koorivars, they are actually crewmembers of the KOSTROMA, which counts about a dozen of them as part of its crew. You never saw Koorivars before, miss?”

“No! In fact, we heard about but never saw such alien creatures before. Are they peaceful beings?”

“Very much so, miss. They also happen to be vegetarians and never eat meat or fish. Ah, here is your table.”

Letting first the Mendoza sit down at the round table she had led them to, the hostess then distributed five menus around them.

“A waiter will soon come to your table to ask for your choices of drinks and to fill glasses of water for you. A list of beverages, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic, is part of your menus. Again, you may order dishes from the menu list or go serve yourselves at the various buffet tables and grills around the cafeteria. Have a nice supper!”

“Thank you, miss!” replied Pedro. As the hostess was walking away, he opened his menu list and consulted it, imitated by the members of his family. Carlos, the youngest member at eight-years-old, then spoke up.

“Hey, they have Mexican dishes on their menu!”

“Please!” replied Isabella in a dismissive tone, “We have been eating next to nothing but tortillas, beans and corn for the last couple of years. I am hungry for something else than Mexican staple food.”

“Me too!” said thirteen-year-old Rafael. Both Pedro and Maria could only agree with him and Isabella: the last couple of years, while living on modest unemployment benefits, had been meager indeed and they had rarely eaten meat other than chicken during those years. While they had not been starving, their past diets had been heavy on low-cost carbohydrates. Turning the pages of his menu, Pedro got to the list of beverages and quickly read it.

“Hum, they have a fair selection of beers and wine, on top of non-alcoholic drinks like milk and fruit juices. The list says that the buffet tables include milk, water and juice

dispensers... That's curious! Some of the beer and wine selections have the mention 'KOSTROMA product' next to them."

"Some of the dishes listed in the menu also have that mention, Father." said Isabella. "Could this mean that they grow some types of foodstuff on this ship?"

"Maybe! I will have to ask that waiter approaching our table with a pitcher of cold water."

That waiter soon arrived at their table and started filling the family's glasses with water and ice cubes while addressing Pedro.

"Good evening, sir! Have you made your choice about your drinks?"

"Uh, we are still looking at your menu, mister. Some of the selections are marked as 'KOSTROMA product'. What does that mean exactly?"

Pedro's question brought a proud grin on the face of the waiter, a man in his thirties.

"That means that this particular beverage or foodstuff was grown or produced on this ship, using fruits, vegetables, fish or meat from our hydroponic cultures, fish ponds and farms. We actually produce enough on our ship to feed its occupants, plus having enough surplus to sell at the various destinations we go to. All our products are certified as purely organic, with no use of pesticides or herbicides. Concerning our in-house beverages, may I counsel to you our KOSTROMA brand of either blond or brown beers, plus our house red, white and rosé wine?"

Pedro looked again at his menu before answering the waiter.

"Then, I will try your KOSTROMA Blond beer."

"I will try your house red wine." added Maria, with Isabella, who was officially old enough to drink alcohol, asking to try the house white wine. As for the two younger boys, then went for fresh milk. With the waiter noting down their orders and then walking away, Pedro got up from his chair and rubbed together his hands, a smile on his face.

"Alright, let's go see what their buffet has to offer! I am hungry!"

Leaving their table, the Mendoza walked past other tables in the busy cafeteria, going towards one far corner of the cafeteria where two long rows of service counters, steam tables and grills lined parts of two walls. However, an appetizing smell of grilled meat made the family deviate towards a series of grill plates and BBQ grills where an assortment of steaks, cutlets, ribs, chicken parts and various sausages were being cooked. Pedro's mouth started watering at the sight of a large, thick T-Bone steak being cooked on a grill for another customer.

“Hell! No need to look further: I’m going for a steak!”

It didn’t take more than a few seconds for his wife and children to also decide to order some grilled meat for themselves, with all of them choosing pieces of beef or veal, except for Isabella, who took a large cut of lamb. Once they had meats on their plates, the Mendoza then went to the counters serving vegetables, rice dishes and salads, to complete their menus. When the family returned to their table, it was to find that their drinks had already been served. Sitting down with his plate, Pedro examined for a moment the cold beer bottle he had ordered, then filled his mug with blond beer and took a sip of it.

“Hmm! This beer is quite good! Now, let’s dive into that juicy steak.”

His first bite of his steak made Pedro close his eyes with ecstasy while he chewed on the meat.

“Por Dios! This is heavenly!”

The whole family was soon busy eating and drinking, truly enjoying their meal. Maria was the only one not to return for seconds, always having had a moderate appetite. Pieces of cakes or pies helped conclude the meal, with cups of strong coffee or specialty coffee with liquors capping their supper.

The Mendoza left the cafeteria a bit over one hour after entering it, both full and content. As they had decided collectively in their cabin before going to have supper, the family took again an elevator ride, this time going down one level to the Main Promenade Deck, with the idea of going around it to see what kind of commercial concessions they would find there. Being still poor and having on them only the hiring premium given to them by the Providence Mining Corporation, which had also paid for their passage to Providence, the Mendoza quickly regretted not having more money on them, as they found close to sixty various boutiques, clubs, restaurants and stores along the wide, circular Main Promenade, which was lined with small trees and bushes. Flashy neon signs and advertising boards made the Mendoza feel like they were back in a commercial artery of a big city in Mexico, with Maria and Isabella Mendoza stopping for a long moment to examine the front of a women’s clothing store and admire the female clothes on display. Continuing their exploration after a couple of minutes, it was soon the turn of Pedro and his sons to stop and admire the advertising signs and video displays of another concession. However, Maria and Isabella were less than pleased to see that they had stopped in front of a place named ‘Jupiter Sex Club’.

"Pedro, did you really have to stop in front of this club?" admonished Maria.  
"Carlos is only eight-years-old!"

"So? He will have to learn about girls eventually." replied rather lamely Pedro, attracting a slap on his right arm from his wife.

"He is still only eight-years-old, Pedro! Let's move on!"

Pedro reluctantly obeyed her and continued leading his family along the Main Promenade, then veered right at the next intersection in order to check out what kind of boutiques and establishments lined up the central rotunda sides. Nearly immediately, he and Maria slowed down in mutual interest at the sight of a club's neon sign advertising a bar-lounge.

"Hmm, the Aperosimo Bar-Lounge... This looks tempting. What do you say, Maria?"

"A quiet drink or two would effectively be nice. But what about the kids?"

In response, Pedro pointed at the sign of the next establishment.

"There is a dance club next door. They could go dance while we have a drink or two."

"Hum! Let me check out that dance club first." Replied Maria before walking quickly to the entrance of the 'Moonlight Dance Club', where she read the advertising poster near the double doors. What she saw pleased her.

"They actually have a section reserved for teenagers, where they serve only non-alcoholic drinks. This place should do for the kids."

Next, she turned to face Isabella, who appeared more than ready to go into the dance club.

"Isabella, you will keep an eye on Carlos and Rafael while you will be in this club. I want you three to be back at our cabin at no later than nine."

"NINE?! But, Mom, I want to dance, not play babysitter for my brothers!"

"It's either that or you three go back to our cabin now, Isabella." pronounced Maria, a stern expression on her face. Isabella thus had to give up, hiding her discouragement.

"Alright, Mother: I will watch over Rafael and Carlos."

"Good! Remember: be back at the cabin for no later than nine."

Her parents then went inside the bar-lounge, leaving a frustrated Isabella alone with her two younger brothers. Before entering the dance club, she pointed a stern index at her brothers.

"You two better behave and follow my instructions, or I will kill you!"

"Don't worry, Sis: we will behave." replied Rafael, who knew from experience that Isabella could be quite fierce when she chose to. With that settled, the trio entered the club and paid the modest entry fee of three credits before walking into a big room with a high ceiling and filled with dozens of couples dancing and with more customers sitting at side tables and sipping drinks while chatting together. Contrary to many discos and dance clubs she had visited in the past, the volume of the music was not excessive and allowed her to be easily heard by her brothers.

"There is a sign to our left marking the entrance to the teenagers' section. Rafael, you will lead Carlos there. On my part, I am staying in the adults' section. Now, go and have fun!"

Rafael and Carlos didn't need to be told twice and nearly ran to the entrance to the teenagers' section. Now alone and free to concentrate on herself, Isabella suddenly caught on the fact that the song presently playing in her section was one she had never heard before and actually sounded old-fashioned. Intrigued, she approached the bar serving the section and asked a question to the barmaid, a young Asian woman.

"Excuse me, miss, but I never heard the song presently playing. Who is the singer?"

To Isabella's surprise, her question brought an amused smile on the face of the barmaid.

"The song is actually from a group which existed in the past some 350 years ago. That group was named 'ABBA' and it was at the time one of the most popular groups on Earth."

"A group from 350 years ago? How did your club manage to find such ancient music?"

"Actually, our DJ, Lester Barnaby, found a footlocker full of old records in the basement of a New York building containing an old bomb shelter. We have since been playing those old records, which have been digitalized, frequently and they have proved very popular. The present song is titled 'Dancing Queen'. Do you like it?"

Isabella listened for a moment to the music blaring on the speakers before smiling to the barmaid.

"I do! The instruments may not sound as varied as today's instruments but the singers' voices are really nice."

"I am glad that you like it, miss. Would you like a drink?"

Having a very limited amount of money on her, Isabella reviewed quickly the list of drinks and their prices on display behind the counter, then nodded her head.

“I will have a rum punch, please.”

“One rum punch coming up right away!”

Less than two minutes later, Isabella sat at an empty table next to the dance floor and started sipping her drink while watching the couples dancing and listening to the music. A new song was now playing and it sounded as old-fashioned as the previous one but was an equally fine song. She then noticed that the giant video displays of the club, which would normally play video recordings that went with the music being played, instead showed a collection of still pictures, including one that appeared to be the cover of an old-fashioned vinyl record.

“The Bee Gees? They really had funny names for their groups in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.”

However old it was, the music was still quite entertaining to her and she soon was looking for a possible dance partner, discretely eyeing young men sitting alone at their tables. She quickly focused on a teenage boy of maybe eighteen or nineteen who in turn smiled to her on seeing that she was looking at him. A nod from Isabella then convinced the boy to get up and walk to her table, where he sat opposite her.

“Hello! My name is Tony Angelo.”

“And I am Isabella Mendoza.”

“I suppose that you are a passenger, Isabella?”

“Correct! And you?”

“My father is part of the crew of the KOSTROMA. I am presently studying here aboard the ship towards a degree in engineering.”

“You can study at university level on this ship?” asked Isabella, not a little surprised, making Tony Angelo nod his head and smile.

“The KOSTROMA can provide education from kindergarten to university degrees, including masters’ studies, in most scientific and technical expertise. This ship is quite unique in that and in many other respects and we are all very proud of it. Our captain often refers to her ship as being ‘a village in Space’. The KOSTROMA also distinguished itself in combat repeatedly, notably during the Civil War of 2315 and against the Drazts of Ross 128.”

“Wow! Life must be quite interesting on this ship then, no?”

"It can be. However, things are rather quiet these days, with the KOSTROMA engaged in ferrying new colonists, construction materiel and prefabricated modules around our new colonies. And where are you headed yourself, Isabella?"

"Providence! My father got a job there and our family is moving to Providence in the hope of finding a new and better life there."

"Then, you won't be disappointed, Isabella: Providence is a truly nice place, with a nice weather and ideal living conditions. But let's concentrate of the present moment: would you like to have the next dance with me?"

"With pleasure, Tony!" answered at once Isabella, making Tony smile with anticipated pleasure: Isabella was a very pretty and sexy girl indeed. As soon as the present song ended, Tony took a last sip of his drink, then got up and presented his hand to her, which she took while getting up from her chair. They were walking on the dance floor when yet another old song started to play, with the still pictures on the viewing screens changing to a new set showing a group named 'R.E.O. Speedwagon'.

"Those old musical groups sure had some strange names, don't you think, Tony?"

"They did, but they also produced some great songs and music despite using primitive digital sound technology. Lester Barnaby's find in New York was a great piece of luck for the history of music."

Isabella soon forgot about the ancient origins of the music, concentrated on enjoying a slow dance with Tony while hugging him quite closely.

In the nearby bar-lounge Aperossimo, Pedro and Maria were equally enjoying themselves, dancing a slow to an old song after sipping together glasses of Vermouth. Pedro particularly liked the last words of the slow song they were dancing to, singing them himself.

"...I did it my way... That sounds perfect to me, Maria."

"It was a truly nice song, Pedro. This Frank Sinatra had a really great voice. Let's have another dance together: this reminds me of my younger years."

Pedro obliged her, his present happiness enhanced by the dreams he had about their new future life on Providence.

**08:09 (Universal Time)**

**Thursday, May 22, 2324**

**Marco Polo Cafeteria, Level 10**

**Core section of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Approaching Alpha Centauri Bd (Providence)**

The Mendoza family was halfway through their breakfast when an announcement on the overhead speakers of the cafeteria made them stop eating temporarily.

“Attention to all crew and passengers: this is your Captain speaking. We are now about to enter orbit around Providence. However, there will be a slight change in the incoming debarkation process for the passengers going off the ship in this system, this due to the need to unload in the most economical and expeditive manner the prefabricated modules we presently carry and which are destined for Providence. Instead of unloading our passengers at the Providence High Orbital Station and then make them use shuttles to bring them down to their various destinations on the surface, we will instead perform what is called an ‘atmospheric vertical descent’, or AVD. Normally, a cargo ship like the KOSTROMA, which was not built for atmospheric flight, does not enter a planet’s or moon’s atmosphere, in order to avoid damages from heat caused by friction with the atmosphere. However, there is a way for us to safely enter an atmosphere and avoid heat damage, by performing an AVD. This implies that the KOSTROMA synchronizes its orbital speed with that of the planet’s or moon’s rotation speed before starting a controlled vertical descent. Using our gravity sails propulsion to slowly dive into the atmosphere, we will thus experience little to no friction heating on our hull and will be able to land and put down on the ground our prefabricated modules directly at their designated spots. This maneuver will also give you the chance to watch our descent and admire Providence from the outer observation galleries of our habitat ring, where your cabins are situated. Once landed, our shuttles will then start to fly out to take our passengers to their various final destinations on Providence. Our descent will start in about thirty minutes and I encourage you all to observe it from the outer observation galleries. On this, I hope that you have enjoyed your trip aboard the KOSTROMA.”

As soon as Tina Forster stopped speaking, young Carlos spoke out in an enthusiastic tone.

“I want to watch that, Father!”



“We will, Carlos, but let’s finish our breakfast first: we still have time before this ship starts its descent.”

The members of his family took the hint from Pedro and hurried to finish their plates of food, getting up from their table some fifteen minutes later. They then left the cafeteria and went down one level in order to use the transparent tube linking the core section with the outer ring section. They arrived in the outer observation gallery, at the level of the giant ring aquarium ecosystem, in time to see from up close the blue orb of Providence as the KOSTROMA was preparing for its atmospheric descent. Isabella couldn’t help speak softly to herself as she admired the planet’s surface, which was half water and half land.

“What a beautiful planet! It should be a great place for us to live on.”

“It certainly looks better than our old, polluted Veracruz.” agreed her mother, who was also fascinated by the planet’s sight. The whole family then fell silent as they watched the blue orb of Providence’s atmosphere getting closer and closer. The KOSTROMA soon pivoted to the vertical, its stern down, before slowly descending through the upper layers of the atmosphere. The only effects of that were some wind noises reverberating through the thick steel hull and slight vibrations, but nothing that felt threatening to the family. The descent took a good half hour, during which time the Mendoza were able to eye the apparently pristine waters surrounding a vast continent situated just south of the planet’s equator. Once at an altitude of only a few kilometers, the KOSTROMA stopped descending and then took some horizontal speed, heading towards the continent visible from the outer gallery’s armored windows, but didn’t exceed the speed of sound, probably in order to avoid damage to the various cargo pods and modules hooked to the sides of the open cargo bays situated along the flanks of the central ship’s section. As the continent’s coasts became closer, a new overhead announcement made the Mendoza raise their heads.

“Attention to the passengers due to disembark on Providence! We are about to overfly the coast of the continent of Morea. Our shuttles will start to fly out in one hour, with the first ones to leave heading for the city of New Dawn, the capital of Providence. Please make sure that your bags are packed and be ready to proceed to the Hangar Deck, on Level 7, when your destination will be announced.”

As soon as the announcement was over, Maria gave a questioning look to her husband.

“What is our final destination on Providence, Pedro?”

“Uh, let me check that email we got in Veracruz from the Providence Mining Corporation’s Earth office.”

Taking out his electronic notepad, an old and rather cheap model, Pedro searched for a few seconds through its data files before answering his wife, speaking loud enough for all three of his children to understand him as well.

“We are due to go to a mining and industrial center called ‘Kenora’, where an apartment is supposed to be waiting for us. Understood, kids? We will have to take a shuttle to Kenora. Now, let’s go to our cabin and make sure that we packed back everything.”

Isabella gave a last look at the external view she had of the sea and approaching continent before following the rest of her family: this world held the promise of a better life for her and her family, away from the poverty, pollution, government corruption and crime they had experienced in Veracruz. She fervently hoped that she was not going to be disappointed as she headed back to the family’s cabin.

### **10:14 (Universal Time)**

#### **Hangar Deck, Level 7, A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

#### **Now landed near the western shore of the continent of Morea**

#### **Providence, Alpha Centauri B System**

Called in via both overhead speakers and text messaging, the passengers due to fly to Kenora, including the Mendoza, started gathering in the passengers’ lounge of Hangar Number Four, arriving by the bank of elevators which rode along the whole length of the ship’s core section. There, a smiling hostess invited them to take seats in the lounge prior to embarking aboard one of the passenger shuttles which had arrived from Kenora only minutes before. Soon, close to 500 persons were sitting in the lounge with the Mendoza family. One of the hostesses then spoke through a P.A. system.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. In order to verify that all the passengers registered to go to Kenora are present for the debarkation, I will ask you to grab the data pad connected to the left armrest of your chair and punch in your name, place of origin and the name of your employer on Providence. If you are traveling as a family, then one of the parents can enter the names of your children and of your spouse. If you came to Providence for business or as a tourist, then state so on your data pad. Once you will have filled the questionnaire on the data pad, then press one of your thumbs on the

identification screen of the pad, so that you can be formally registered as leaving the ship. You may now use your chair's data pad."

The hostess then repeated herself three times, using Spanish, Chinese and French to supplement her initial message in English. Pedro Mendoza took care of registering out his family on top of himself and put the data pad back in its receptacle once he got an 'acknowledged' from the pad. However, for some reason, the three hostesses present in the lounge seemed to grow restless, until one of them spoke on the P.A. system.

"Your attention, please! Is a Charles Meredith present in this lounge?"

She repeated her question four times, using English, Spanish and French, but got no answer or reaction from the crowd of passengers sitting in the lounge. A second hostess then repeated the same question, this time using two more languages, still without a response. The hostesses were in the process of discussing between themselves in low voices when a rather obese man in his fifties arrived in the lounge, dragging two suitcases with him. One hostess went at once to him and had a short conversation with the man, after which the newcomer was asked to take a seat, prompting Pedro in shaking his head.

"Another idiot who can't follow instructions and be on time. Coño<sup>1</sup>!"

A few minutes later, the time for embarkation was announced and the Mendoza rose from their seats with the other passengers and walked towards the airlock doors connecting the lounge with the hangar proper. A digital notice board placed next to each of the shuttles' access ramps told to the Mendoza which shuttle to board and they were soon walking inside a large passenger cabin with 150 seats in it. First storing their larger suitcases in a luggage locker near the access ramp, the Mendoza were then free to choose their seats, as the places were not assigned to anyone in particular. Maria took a deep breath after sitting down in one seat, sandwiched between Carlos and Isabella.

"At last! We are going to step foot on our new world. Santa Maria, please make this new life of ours a happy and successful one."

Isabella didn't say anything about that but thought for herself that such invocations were useless. However, her mother was one of the few people she knew who still practiced religion, contrary to the vast majority of the inhabitants of Earth in this century. As for Spacers, religion was already a long-vanished thing on their Space worlds. A few

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<sup>1</sup> Coño : Asshole in Spanish. A common insult in Latin America. Can also be an expression of frustration.

minutes more and their shuttle gently lifted off the deck of the hangar and floated towards the nearest craft airlock, entering it and then lining up with the airlock's exit door. That door opened only after the inner door of the airlock had closed and after the air had been pumped out. Isabella's heart jumped from the emotion when her shuttle flew out via a short but wide tunnel and emerged into the open air and bright orange sunlight of Alpha Centauri B, allowing her to watch the ground below her via a window and a small video display screen hooked to the back of the seat in front of her. She couldn't recognize the trees and bushes she could now see, but the local vegetation was both green and dense, signs of a luxuriant local ecosystem.

The flight to Kenora was a short one, lasting only a few minutes before the shuttle slowed down and started descending. It soon landed softly on a large concrete landing pad next to a steel and glass structure that had to be some sort of air terminal.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have now landed at the Kenora airport. You may now undo your seat belts and start going out through the rear access ramp."

A concert of applause and cheers greeted that announcement, with the Mendoza doing their part in that. Retrieving their suitcases from the rear luggage compartment, they then walked out of the shuttle, finding out that a mobile articulated corridor had extended itself from the terminal and was now connecting itself to the shuttle. As excited as she had ever been, Isabella followed her parents while dragging her two suitcases behind her on their integrated small wheels. The whole family then found itself inside a fairly large hall where a number of service counters and wickets were visible at one end. Each of the counters and wickets had an electronic display board above it, with various messages visible on them. Pedro smiled and pointed at one of the counters, whose display board said 'Welcome to employees of the Providence Mining Corporation'.

"There! That's our counter! Follow me!"

More than a few other passengers also went to that same counter, where a man in his thirties wearing a good quality suit greeted them with a big smile.

"Welcome to Providence and Kenora, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Gerald Ziegler and I was sent by the Providence Mining Corporation to greet you in Kenora. I will now proceed with a quick roster check and information blurb, then you will be able to board the buses which will drive you to your new residences. We will proceed in alphabetic order. Mister Alban..."

With each passenger who answered his call, Ziegler handed him or her an envelope taken from a large box and bearing the name of that passenger before calling the next name. Pedro Mendoza's name was called three minutes later and he then got an envelope bearing his name from the company representative, who spoke briefly to him.

"This envelope contains the information and access cards to your new residence, along with a set of instructions on when and where you will have to present yourself for a preliminary briefing. Another company representative will be waiting at your residential building and will help your family and other families assigned to that building to establish themselves in Kenora."

"Thank you, Mister Ziegler!" replied Pedro while eagerly taking the envelope presented to him. He then stepped back to let other passengers answer the roster call and joined back with his wife and children before opening a bit nervously the envelope and extract its content. First, he distributed around the five building access cards contained in the envelope, clipping his own card to his shirt, then made a quick inventory of the rest. There were copies of a small, simplified map of Kenora, with key locations highlighted on it, plus small general information booklets about the city and surrounding area. However, the most important item proved to be a letter to his name and signed by a manager from the Providence Mining Corporation. Pedro read twice that letter before looking at his wife.

"We have the rest of the day to ourselves in order to get installed in our assigned apartment. We are encouraged to all watch tonight a video documentary on Providence and the industrial complex operated by the company, video which we will be able to view on the entertainment unit of our lounge. Then, tomorrow morning a bus will take me and the other new workers to the corporate headquarters of the company, where we will be administratively processed. Also tomorrow morning, a team of local administrators will visit our building and talk with us about school inscriptions, the medical services available and our inscriptions as new residents of Providence."

"What about where we will eat? Does that letter say anything about that?" asked Maria, always the practical type. Pedro nodded his head at that.

"I was coming to that, Maria. This says that our residential building has its own cafeteria and that we can eat for free there. If we wish to cook our own meals, then our apartment has its own kitchen and the building has a small groceries store, along with a few other stores. They supposedly will give me an immigration bonus tomorrow, to help support us until I can touch my first pay."

“Dios Mio!” exclaimed Maria, tears coming to her eyes. “We will be able at last to live decently.”

“Well, I guess that the next big thing will be to see in what kind of place we will be living.”

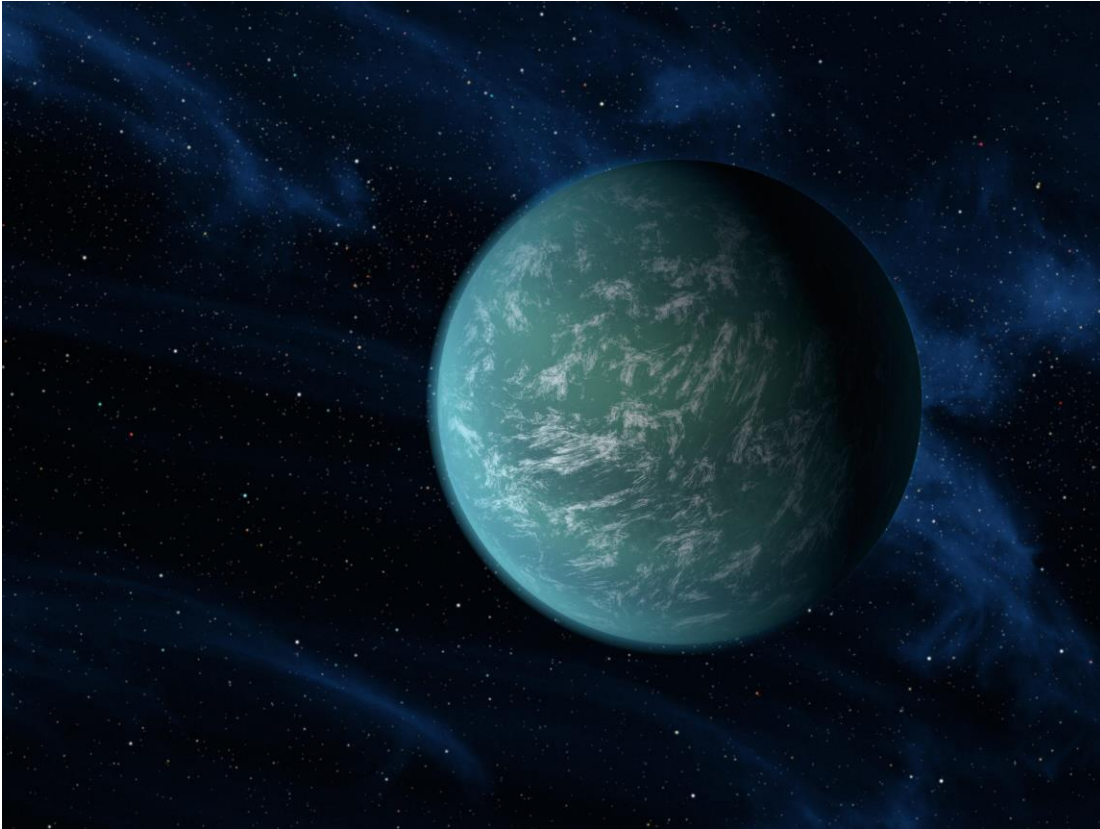
“About anything will be better than what we had in Veracruz, Father.” replied Isabella.

The Mendoza had their answer to their expectations some thirty minutes later, when the young woman who had greeted them in the lobby of the twenty-story-high modern and brand-new apartment complex in which they were going to live escorted them inside the apartment assigned to the family. While not what you would call luxurious, the place was comfortably furnished and counted four bedrooms, two complete bathrooms, a small kitchen and a large living room with a small dining table in one corner. After a quick tour of the apartment, Pedro and his family went out on their fourth-floor balcony to admire the view they had of the small city and of the surrounding vegetation, while also taking deep breaths of the pure air. There were few clouds in the sky and the temperature was a very reasonable 21° Celsius, with a moderate degree of humidity. Overtaken by emotion, Maria tightly hugged her husband while choking tears of joy.

“This is all so nice! I still can’t believe our luck, Pedro.”

“We earned our luck, Maria, the hard way.” replied softly her husband while patting her back.

## **CHAPTER 3 – ATLANTIS**



**19:41 (Universal Time)**

**Friday, June 20, 2324**

**Outer observation gallery of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Arriving in low orbit of 16 Cygni Ac (Atlantis)**

**70 light-years from Earth, in the constellation of Cygnus**

The mature couple looking at the planet 16 Cygni Ac, also known as 'Atlantis', was not the only one standing next to the thick armored windows of the Outer Apartments Ring's circular promenade: pretty much every passenger and many crew family members were doing so as well. Since its discovery a bit over two years ago, few people, apart from the explorer crews and seeding specialists which had worked on Atlantis, had visited the planet. While the celestial body itself possessed a breathable atmosphere, vast oceans and near perfect climate, it was also a world still mostly devoid of life that needed an extensive program of vegetal replanting and ocean seeding before it would be suitable for large scale colonization. It once had been full of life, animal,

marine and vegetal, until the intelligent race living on it had snuffed all life on the planet by triggering a catastrophic nuclear holocaust some sixteen million years ago. When a Spacers League's explorer crew had discovered it, all traces of the radiations which had sterilized the planet had faded away, but Atlantis was now a nearly empty world, with only sparse, primitive vegetation covering its two large continents and thousands of islands and with oceans apparently empty of life. As for the race that had inhabited it before destroying life on it, everything that they had built had basically turned into dust, eroded by the winds and the sea.

Doctor Peter Schiller, standing shoulder to shoulder with his wife Romi, slowly shook his head while looking at the blue-green orb of Atlantis.

"Such a beautiful planet, emptied of life because of sheer stupidity and irresponsibility. The worst part is that we ourselves very nearly did the same to Earth in the Twentieth Century."

"But at least we learned our lesson, Peter. Those Cygnians didn't! Now, we are replanting life on Atlantis and, in a few years, we will be able to open the planet to large scale colonization, once it will be able to sustain any sizable population."

"You are right, Romi, and we will be able to help that happen. Our job will be truly crucial for that goal. I can't wait to be able to start sailing our boat on those oceans below us."

"A lonely boat sailing vast but mostly empty seas... I wish that we could have been able to study the local marine life before it vanished."

"Me too, but there are only fossils left from all that past life. Now, we have to make sure that the right kind of balance between the newly imported forms of marine life is established and maintained. It will take us years of work, maybe decades, to accomplish that job."

Romi, a marine biologist like her husband, nodded her head in response.

"And they will be years well spent, Peter. Do you know if the Spacers League is planning to send deep-diving submarines to explore the abyssal depths of Atlantis?"

"They will, Romi. Apart from our own yacht and other small boats, the KOSTROMA is carrying two deep-diving manned submarines which will explore the bottom of those oceans. Doctor Yamatsuta promised me that she will save two seats for us when she will do her first exploration dive."



Romi, a 54-year-old woman of medium stature and with brown hair, smiled to her thin but taller, 56-year-old husband.

“Yes! That should be an epic dive.”

“Indeed! Right now, we still know next to nothing about the remaining lifeforms at the bottom of Atlantis’ oceans. That deep-dive expedition should prove both exciting and most interesting.”

Peter then looked at his wristwatch-cum-communicator.

“Nearly eight o’clock. Maybe we should return to our cabin and prepare for the night: tomorrow will be a busy day.”

“Right!” replied Romi, who then took one of Peter’s hands and started walking back with him to their cabin, situated three levels up from the promenade.

**09:06 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, June 21, 2324**

**Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Hovering 250 meters above the sea**

**Western Sea, near the western coast of the continent of Tera**

**Atlantis, third planet of the 16 Cygni A System**

“We are now in hover mode at an altitude of 250 meters above the water, Tina.”

“Thanks, Frida!” replied Tina before giving a string of orders.

“Open our stern towing station! Prepare to gently lower our stern load down onto the sea. Tell the initial activation team to take their posts.”

Tina then intensely watched as her bridge crew obeyed her and as the giant sliding doors covering the stern towing station of her cargo ship opened up. In this case, her ‘stern load’ was a huge structure measuring a maximum diameter of 420 meters and a height from top to bottom of 180 meters. Looking like a giant round cheese with twelve short, fat legs under it, that ‘stern load’ was a full-fledged floating city able to comfortably accommodate up to 14,000 persons. Due to its shape, it had been called ‘Medusa City’, a name that fit well with its intended use. As one of the first large habitat centers to be established on the planet Atlantis, Medusa City had been designed and built as a mobile floating structure, able to either navigate the seas with the help of its gravity sails propulsion system or to temporarily settle over a coastal spot of interest by extending

down its telescopic seafloor anchoring legs to depths as deep as 200 meters. As such, Medusa City was going to be the prime oceanographic and marine biology studies facility on Atlantis, a planet still mostly devoid of life thanks to a genocidal nuclear war triggered some sixteen million years ago by the now extinct Cygnians. During the last two years, Spacers' League scientific teams had first studied the planet, then had started to seed new life on it, planting vegetal seeds on its two continents and thousands of islands and seeding its oceans, first with marine algae and then with plankton, in order to turn the oceans of Atlantis into places which could sustain Earth-imported fish in the near future. If all went well, Atlantis would be transformed from an eminently habitable but empty world to a nice new home for millions of Humans from the Solar System. Many of those were going to be Spacers' League citizens who had up to now lived mostly in cities located under the surface ice of moons in the Solar System and who would at last be able to enjoy lives in the open air and Sun.

Some forty minutes later, the big mass of Medusa City was slowly and cautiously lowered out of its covered stern towing station by dozens of tractor beam generators, to finally touch the surface of the sea, where it sank down to the lower edge of its main cylindrical section. The initial activation team inside the floating city then checked that no unintended leaks had sprung into the six billion credits-worth structure. Once that was done, they commanded the separation of the ten big floating dock sections temporarily attached to the belly of Medusa City. Those floating dock sections, each measuring a hundred meters in length, 25 meters in width and thirty meters in height, were extended out on their attachment rails and, in the case of seven of them, slowly moved on the surface of the water in order to take their planned positions, attaching themselves to other docks to form two open-air harbors, one meant for yachts and small boats and the other meant for fishing vessels. Another floating module attached to a side of the main section was then lowered down into the water and hooked itself to the two floating docks sections forming the sides of the open-air yachting harbor. Tina smiled on watching that on one of her video display screens.

"And voilà! An instant beach area in the middle of the ocean. The future citizens of Medusa City are going to be a truly spoiled bunch."

"After living most of their lives in under-ice cities?" replied her pilot, Frida Skarsgard. "They sure earned the right to be spoiled, Tina."

"I know, Frida. We are part of those people, remember? We are simply lucky in living aboard a ship like the KOSTROMA, with its forests and giant aquarium. Still, Atlantis will be a near paradise...once we will have grown fully forests on it and filled its oceans with fish. The marine biologists who will be the first occupants of Medusa City will be crucial in making that last part a reality. So, is Medusa City now ready to welcome its first inhabitants, Dana?"

"One moment, please!" said her navigator and second-in-command, Dana Durning. "I am going to ask the head of the activation team about that."

A minute later, Dana twisted her head to smile to Tina.

"We have the 'go' from the activation team to start transferring our passengers to Medusa City, Tina."

"Excellent!" replied Tina before switching her microphone to 'ship-wide' mode.

"Attention, all passengers, this is the Captain speaking! Medusa City is now ready to receive its designated occupants. All Medusan heads are to pack up their things and go down to the Hangar Deck, on Level 7, where they will board shuttles to go down to their new home."

There were a few giggles around the bridge at the use of the term 'Medusan heads' by Tina to describe the future citizens of the floating city. That term had in fact quickly become a standard joke, albeit a gentle one, as a nickname for those citizens.

Out in the Outer Apartments Ring Section, Peter and Romi Schiller simply smiled on hearing Tina's announcement and sat in the anti-gravity sled already loaded with their suitcases, which had been parked in front of the door to their cabin. Imitated by some 600 other people, the Schillers let their robotic sled drive itself all the way to the level of the ship's Hangar Deck, until it stopped just outside of the Passengers Arrival and Departure Lounge Number One, where the couple stepped off the sled and unloaded their suitcases. Once empty, the robotic sled then departed, in order to return to its assigned waiting position at the Outer Apartments Ring Section. Romi, carrying a suitcase and a travel bag, showed clear excitement as the couple walked into the passenger lounge, which was filling rapidly.

"I can't wait for us to be in our new home, Peter. To be able to live in the middle of an ocean while studying it is like a dream come true."

"Well, we did live next to the sea while in Malta, but the pollution and fish stocks depletion in the Mediterranean were becoming more severe every year. In comparison,

I was told that the waters on this world are pristine, albeit devoid of life, thanks to a sixteen million years reprieve which allowed the oceans of Atlantis to recuperate from any pollution caused in the past by the now-extinct Cygnians. The radiation contamination caused by their genocidal nuclear war is also said to have completely disappeared with the passage of time. We should indeed be able to soon navigate around pristine waters in our yacht. Hopefully, our beloved VEGA will not have suffered damage during the transport aboard the KOSTROMA.”

“Oh, I am not worried about that, Peter: those people on the KOSTROMA obviously know their jobs well and are true professional.”

Peter could only nod his head at that: up to now, they had enjoyed only courteous and professional service during their short stay aboard the KOSTROMA.

Sitting down on two of the still unoccupied seats in the vast waiting lounge, the couple had only to wait for less than fifteen minutes before the start of passenger boarding was announced. Still carrying or dragging their suitcases and bags, the couple joined a long line of passengers which had formed after the public announcement and walked out of the lounge and into a vast hangar, where ten big passenger shuttles, each of them 28 meter-long and able to carry up to 150 passengers, were parked. Boarding one of the shuttles via its lowered aft ramp, the couple first stowed away their luggage, then took their seats and buckled their seat belts for the departure. Another twenty minutes and their shuttle levitated silently off the steel deck of the hangar and floated towards a big craft airlock, entering it and then pivoting on the spot to face the exit door of the airlock. After the inner airlock door closed and the outer door opened, allowing the passenger shuttle to fly out via a wide tunnel. While the KOSTROMA had been on Earth Universal Time and it was theoretically early morning, this longitude on Atlantis was actually on its last hour of daylight. As their shuttle performed a wide, slow turn in order to head towards the 400-meter-wide landing platform crowning Medusa City, it allowed the Schillers to admire the floating city, which had all its lights on.

“God, it is truly beautiful!” said softly Romi to herself, to which Peter could only nod in agreement.

“It sure is, Romi. We should be happy here.”

After its very short flight, their shuttle then landed smoothly on top of the landing platform, imitated by the other three shuttles carrying the rest of the contingent of first

occupants for the city. An announcement from their pilot then made the Schillers look up and forward in their seats.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have now landed at Medusa City. Since this shuttle is not scheduled to stay here more than a few minutes, we will not proceed to one of the craft elevators on this platform and will not go down to the shuttle hangars’ level. Guides and lights will instead direct you to one of the platform perimeter’s access points, where you will be able to take lifts to go down to the city’s hotel reception area, where the local administrative staff will welcome you and guide you to your respective apartments. For those of you who had storage crates or other voluminous possessions aboard the KOSTROMA, those will soon be unloaded in the hour to follow and will be temporarily stored in the city’s main warehouse, where you will be able to access them tomorrow morning. For your information, the local hour is now 20:07. However, you have no need to change yourself the hour on your wrist communicators: a time signal generated from the city administrative center has already synchronized them with the correct local time. You may now leave your seats and recuperate your luggage before leaving via the aft access ramp.”

The Schillers eagerly followed those instructions, like the other 141 passengers of their shuttle, and were soon walking out into the open air, stepping on the vast landing surface. Peter took with delight a deep breath of the ocean’s breeze, which was light, fresh and saline.

“Aah! I haven’t breathed this pure a sea breeze in a very long time. I am already in love with this world. Sailing on its seas should be pure bliss.” Romi also took a few deep breaths while eyeing the panoramic view they now had of the sea surrounding the floating city.

“Look at those colors, Peter: this ocean’s waters are crystal-clear. Hopefully, we will not repeat here the same mistakes Humanity did on Earth during the past centuries.”

“We won’t, if I have anything to say about that.” replied firmly her husband. “Well, let’s go down to that hotel reception area. I see a guide with light batons next to that access point ahead of us.”

Walking for less than thirty meters, the couple arrived at an access hut covering a pair of wide escalators leading down into the city’s structure, where a smiling young woman gave them short instructions.

“The hotel’s reception lobby is situated on Level 24. Please take an elevator cabin down to the reception lobby, where you will be assigned an apartment and given access cards and keys to them, along with written guide pamphlets to Medusa City.”

“Thank you, miss!”

Going down to the hotel’s reception lobby, the Schillers did not have long to wait before being formally registered in and receiving their access cards and keys. All the new occupants of the floating city had been registered weeks ago in the Solar System and had been expected this evening, allowing the local staff to be fully ready for their arrival. With a robotic sledge carrying them and their luggage to their assigned apartment, Peter and Romi were soon at the door of their new home: Apartment 2342, on Level 23 of Medusa City. Feeling anticipation as he unlocked the door to their apartment, Peter then signaled his wife to enter first.

“Go in first, dear: I will start bringing in our suitcases.”

Romi held her breath as she walked in: their last home on Earth had been a rather old, cramped and way overpriced rented apartment in Valetta, a hopelessly overcrowded city surrounded by a polluted sea and equally polluted air. What she saw then made her grin with joy: the single bedroom apartment was quite vast and comfortably furnished and had a total surface of 91 square meters, with the wide window of the four-meter-wide lounge giving a great view of the surrounding sea. Slowly walking around the apartment, Romi found in succession a walk-in closet next to the entrance door, a large private study, a laundry and storage room, a complete bathroom with a big bath and shower unit, a well-equipped kitchen corner next to an open area dining corner adjacent to the lounge and, finally, a five by three-meter bedroom with a huge bed. That bedroom also had a large window giving a nice view of the sea outside. Going out of the lounge via an outer door, Romi walked onto the large exterior balcony, where she was able to breathe in the fresh marine breeze. Peter joined her there after himself touring their new apartment and wrapped one arm around Romi’s shoulders, contemplating with her the coupled yellow sun and red dwarf star visible low on the horizon. The third star of the 16 Cygni System, a distant yellow star, was not visible, being well below the horizon at this hour.

“We should have a happy life here, Romi. Tomorrow, we will go check out on our yacht and, if we have enough time for it, will do our first sailing trip around, to learn

about its currents and conditions. For now, let's go unpack our bags before we go explore the city a bit."

"Give me a moment more here, Peter: I am truly enjoying this moment."

"Anything you say, dear."

They both stayed on the balcony for long minutes, enjoying both the scenery and the fresh, saline breeze. The couple finally went back inside to unpack their bags, something that took them less than half an hour. At the end of that task, they consulted their printed guide booklet, only to realize how vast and extensive the city facilities were.

"Damn, it would take us a good two days simply to tour all the corners of this floating city," said Peter while studying the folding map included in the booklet. "The city, not counting the floating docks attached to it, covers over 340 hectares of surface distributed between thirty main levels, twelve sub-levels and twelve tower-like pillars."

"Yes, but all that surface also provides plenty of space for all kinds of facilities, Peter. They have a kindergarten and schools for primary, secondary, college and university grades, plus a center for professional studies. I also see extensive sports and entertainment facilities, plus commercial shops and restaurants. And the city also has over 230 hectares of agricultural cultivation areas and animal farms, plus fish ponds. Compared to the average living conditions on Earth, this is like a near paradise. I think that we should delay a bit our first boat trip and take the time to explore in depth our new city."

"I concur!" replied Peter after a short hesitation, as Romi was right: they could do that first boat trip whenever they wanted, while getting accustomed to their new home was the true present priority. "What about starting our exploration with the top levels in the services section? They contain most of the communal facilities we will end up using while living here."

"A good idea. Let's go! And don't forget to bring that pamphlet with you."

"Of course, dear!"

Walking slowly and taking their time to look around them, the couple then left their apartment and went up to Level 24, the lowest level of the hangars and services section, where they used the seven-meter-wide promenade forming a closed loop around the outer part of the 420-meter-diameter section. It took them a good two hours to complete the circuit around the promenade, by which time the couple was both quite tired and hungry. They thus decided to return to the section containing the restaurants

and public cafeteria of the city. Unfortunately, the various restaurants established in that section were not yet in operation, their working staff and supplies still having to arrive. The Schillers thus had to fall back on the public cafeteria, which was open and operating but with only a basic menu, due to the newness of the place. Still, however limited the buffet might have appeared to some critical customers, it had enough quality and choice to satisfy the couple, which had never been social snobs or picky people. Romi and Peter thus dined on plates of fresh salads and sushi, washed down with some white wine, before resuming their exploration of the city. Of a common accord, they decided to go visit the enclosed inner port section of the city, situated at the base of the main structural section, and which was linked to the open sea by two sea channels and to the open port areas of the floating city, formed by a total of ten floating dock sections linked together.

As an experienced boatman and sailor, Peter was favorably impressed by the inner port, with its donought-shaped harbor and its boat quays, distributed around both an outer and an inner docks ring and with a thirty-meter-wide boat circulation channel around it.

“Excellent! This will be an ideal place to shelter the VEGA during rough storms. There are also two boat maintenance and repair drydocks around the port. Let’s go visit the open-air ports now.”

Going up by six levels and using a long and wide passageway linking the inner and open-air ports, Peter and Romi ended up on the so-called ‘beach module’, a big rectangular, box-like floating structure with a gently-sloping deck dipping down into the protected waters of the yachting port, itself formed by seven floating dock sections linked together to form two opposite ‘T’, with a twenty-meter-wide entrance to let small boats in or out to the open sea. The sides of the floating dock sections actually sheltered mooring positions for boats, which provided both maintenance and servicing to those boats, something that pleased Peter.

“Decidedly, whoever designed Medusa City knew quite a lot about the sea and boating. They have here everything that our VEGA will need while in port.”

“And they also have this large, nice beach surface with sloping floor going down into the water.” added Romi. “There are as well a line of safety buoys and nets to



protect the swimmers. We will be able to enjoy some swimming around, even in the middle of the ocean. I love it!”

The last part of the city they visited that day was one of the twelve underwater pillars located under the main city section, around its external circumference. Each of those pillars, which supported huge telescopic seafloor anchoring legs, measured sixty meters in diameter and sixty meters in height and housed either apartments, fruit trees plantations, fish ponds or machinery space. For that last part of their tour, the Schillers chose to go down to one of the panoramic underwater observation lounges of the pillars. While the view they got there was truly beautiful, the total absence of visible marine life saddened the marine biologist couple.

“Such a beautiful and pristine ocean...totally devoid of life. What a sad sight.”

“It is definitely a sad sight, Romi, but don’t forget that we have been seeding both algae and plankton around the oceans of Atlantis for two years now. As fast as we and the other marine biologists of our team can go out and find out how well or not those seeded algae and plankton have established themselves in these waters, the faster we will be able to trigger the next phase of the colonization of this planet, meaning the seeding of various types of fish and seashells imported from Earth.”

“You are right again, Peter. Well, lets go back to our apartment now: my legs are getting quite tired and I also want to start studying the marine charts and meteorological reports made to date about Atlantis.”

**08:30 (Local Atlantis Time)**

**Monday, June 23, 2324**

**Yacht VEGA , leaving the open yachting harbor of Medusa City**

Peter Schiller was at the helm station of his eleven-meter-long, Bermuda-rigged trimaran sloop yacht, as his boat was leaving the open yachting harbor of Medusa City, using its gravity sail secondary propulsion system in order to navigate precisely through the relatively narrow opening of the protected harbor. As for Romi, she sat on one of the chairs fixed to the open deck of their trimaran, admiring the seascape and breathing the fresh, salty air. In order to also enjoy the refreshing breeze, Peter had left the transparent canopy of his tiny, low-profile wheelhouse opened, his head emerging in the open and with only a frontal windshield protecting his face from sea spray. As soon as

his boat was safely clear from the harbor's floating docks, Peter then cut his gravity sail propulsion system and switched to full wind-sailing mode, selecting the 'auto sails trimming' operating mode before veering his boat towards the North. Peter was a very experienced sailor who, contrary to many so-called 'sailors' in this century, fully mastered the use and operation of a pure sailing boat. His reason not to go to pure manual sails trimming mode at this time was simple: he knew next to nothing of the winds, currents and meteorological conditions on this planet and wanted to concentrate on his job as a marine biologist tasked to monitor the progress of the ocean seeding program initiated two years ago. Once he was going to be in his designated zone of study and would know more about the local conditions, then he would be ready to switch to pure manual mode. Right now, he would let the small computer of the boat operate the sails of his beloved VEGA, using the data inputs from the sensors equipping his yacht, which included a wind speed and direction indicator, a global positioning system receiver, a gyro-compass and a nautical loch indicating his true speed in the water. The VEGA was also equipped with an extensive battery of sensors, including a small remotely-piloted submersible vehicle, meant to provide data and images of the ocean's depths, conditions and seafloor topography. Finally, a radar and a small satellite communications antenna completed the electronic equipment of the yacht, which Peter had fitted to turn it into an independent, mobile ocean survey and marine studies station. Sure, there were much bigger ships equipped for that same job, but they required a significantly bigger crew and also cost a lot more than his yacht. With its automated systems, Peter could easily operate his yacht by himself, with Romi serving as his relief at the wheel when he needed to either work in their marine laboratory, installed inside the central deckhouse of their trimaran boat, or when he needed to rest or sleep.

Once both his mainsail and staysail were trimmed properly for both the heading he had set and the prevailing wind, Peter decided to deploy as well his large, baggy spinnaker sail, judging that he had enough adequate wind for it. One push of a button then made small electric motors pull the large sail out of its storage and protection sock at the bow of the yacht, deploying it into the wind presently blowing from the stern and making it fill with air. From its initial speed of nine knots, the VEGA then jumped forward and accelerated to the respectable speed of fifteen knots. Thankfully, the sea was fairly calm at this time and the trimaran hull of the yacht made it quite stable despite of the

huge surface of sails it now deployed. A happy grin came to Peter's face as he piloted his boat, feeling the relative wind from its speed on his face.

"Now, that's what I call real life!" he exclaimed, getting an approving nod and a smile from his wife, who now had to hold on to her wide-brimmed straw hat.

Continuing on his northerly course and staying some ten kilometers from the western coast of the continent of Tera, one of the two continents present on Atlantis, Peter and Romi soon started dipping at intervals of twenty kilometers water sample bottles, collecting samples from various depths in order to examine them for the presence of algae or plankton which had been seeded around in the last two years. At the same time, the yacht's bottom mapping and sidescan sonars were working continuously, imaging and recording the topography and depth of the portions of seafloor the yacht was passing over. Apart from documenting the extent of spread of the algae and plankton previously seeded in the oceans of Atlantis, another goal of the Schillers was to map the portions of oceans they were going to sail through. For that purpose, they also lowered in the water at intervals a number of preprogrammed small drones designed to study the underwater currents, water temperature and salinity of Atlantis' oceans. Those drones, trailing a thin floating antenna wire, then dove to their preprogrammed depth before drifting freely in the ocean currents while recording and reporting their movements and data about the surrounding water via radio. Such oceanic drones had been used on Atlantis for a number of months already but, due to the vastness of the planet's oceans, only a small portion of those oceans had been yet surveyed. The Schillers were now going to explore and survey one portion that had not been studied to date: the large strait separating the continent of Tera from the other planet's continent, Ionia. Little was known yet about that maritime strait, which had been baptized as the 'Minoan Strait'. Thus, the Schillers' boat trip was expected to result in the collection of data of significant importance for the development and colonization of the planet.

With Peter and Romi periodically switching roles between piloting their yacht and studying in the small but well-equipped marine laboratory located in the boat's deckhouse the samples of water they had collected, the VEGA steadily made its way towards the Minoan Strait, some 900 kilometers away. At an average speed of some thirteen knots, that meant a trip of close to two Earth days for the couple. Thankfully,

Atlantis was nearly the same size as Earth and rotated on its axis at close to the same speed, thus its days measured 25.2 Earth hours, something that facilitated greatly the adaptation of the colonists to their new home world. However, the presence of 16 Cygni C, a red dwarf star that was coupled with 16 Cygni A, a yellow star very similar to the Sun, made the illumination vary on Atlantis, but not in a major way. As for 16 Cygni B, another yellow star similar to the Sun, it turned too far from the 16 Cygni A/C couple to truly affect much the luminosity cycle at the surface of Atlantis. With their third night on Atlantis falling, Peter told Romi to go to sleep first and stayed at the wheel of their yacht, putting it in autopilot mode when he needed to dip water sample bottles or to analyze their content. Their first day at sea showed that, while their spread had been a bit slower than expected, the Earth-imported algae and plankton seemed to have adapted fairly easily to the ocean conditions on Atlantis. However, contrary to their rate of spread, their rate of growth and multiplication was way above those typical on Earth, something Peter and Romi put on the purity of the local waters, which contrasted greatly with the heavily polluted waters they had sailed on Earth. Hoping to find more algae and plankton in the Minoan Strait, the couple went on their second day of sailing on Atlantis.

**11:21 (Local Atlantis Time)**

**Wednesday, June 25, 2324 (Earth Calendar)**

**Yacht VEGA, in the middle of the Minoan Strait**

**Atlantis**

“PETER, YOU BETTER COME AND LOOK AT THIS!”

A bit alarmed by the tone of voice of his wife, Peter switched on the autopilot of his yacht, then went down quickly to their marine laboratory, situated inside the centerline hull of the VEGA. There, he found Romi peering through their microscope and evidently studying their latest sample of the local waters.

“What do you have, Romi?”

“I don’t know, and that’s a definite problem. Come and look at that sample.”

Taking the place of his wife at the microscope station, Peter looked through the lenses of the instrument and saw a number of moving multi-cellular organisms swimming in the water of the sample. His heart jumped in his chest then: he had never seen that kind of organisms, or anything resembling them, in his 33 years as a marine biologist. For one, their basic shape, which looked like a multitude of three-pointed stars stuck together,

was like nothing that existed on Earth. Also, each 'star' was covered with dozens of what looked like short hair, which waved around and apparently allowed the organisms to move around. Peter's voice was nearly hollow when he spoke to Romi after long seconds.

"Romi, I believe that those organisms are native from Atlantis and were not imported from Earth."

"Native from Atlantis? But all life was supposedly erased from this planet some sixteen million years ago."

"Yes but, when the first exploration team came down on the surface, they found some sparse, primitive forms of vegetation. If emerged lands could still foster some lifeforms after those eons, then why not the oceans? Maybe some of the local marine species managed to survive the radioactive fallouts by living in the depths of the oceans. This is big!"

"Indeed, Peter! We should alert Medusa City about this."

"Not yet! I believe that we should do some more sampling around and see if we find more of those organisms. Once we will have multiple positive samples, then it will be time to alert our colleagues in Medusa City. At what depth did you collect this particular sample?"

"At our deepest depth allowed by our lines: 400 meters."

"Okay, let's see how deep is the seafloor in this region."

The couple went to the display screen showing the shape and depth of the bottom under their boat and saw that the seafloor was sloping down sharply ahead of their boat.

"It looks like we are approaching a possible abyssal trench." said Peter while staring at the video screen. "The depth under our boat is already a good 3,000 meters and increasing steadily. I..."

Peter's attention was then captured by a small red dot that had just appeared on the screen.

"Our bottom thermal imager just picked up a very hot spot at the bottom, at a depth of 4,200 meters. It could possibly be an abyssal thermal vent."

"There's another one! And another one!" nearly shouted Romi, getting excited. "This trench could be marking the location of an underwater tectonic fissure line, which would explain those multiple thermal vents at the bottom."

"If that's the case, then it could explain how some of the local marine life survived that old nuclear holocaust. By spewing boiling-hot water, those thermal vents create a

rising layer of hot water, which would at first be trapped between the cliffs of that abyssal canyon. In turn, that rising layer of hot water would have mostly prevented the radioactive fallout particles sinking from the surface of the oceans from reaching the bottom of that abyssal canyon. We really need to take more deep samples from this zone. We will cut the distance between our sample drops from twenty to one kilometer. I will keep the boat on autopilot in order to help you with that task.”

Feeling jubilation and excitement from their discovery, the couple then went hard at work to collect more deep-water samples. Peter then managed to lengthen their sample bottle lines to 1,600 meters, by tying end-to-end four separate lines. Soon, their efforts were rewarded, with lots more Cygnian marine organisms collected. Peter shook his head in disappointment when he realized that the small remotely-piloted drone carried aboard their yacht would not be able to reach the local seafloor depth.

“Damn! Only a deep submergence vehicle, like the ones brought in by the KOSTROMA, would be able to reach the bottom of that abyssal trench. I believe that it is time for us to alert Doctor Yamatsuta about this.”

“Agreed! Don’t forget to tell her as well that we have by now located no less than 22 thermal vents at the bottom, all lined up along the long axis of this trench. You remember the shock that ancient oceanographers and marine biologists felt centuries ago, when they discovered that abyssal trenches sheltered life, particularly around bottom thermal vents? Maybe we will also be in for a shock.”

“Possibly! Then I certainly want seats for us in that DSV when it will dive down that trench.”

**08:59 (Local Atlantis Time)**

**Thursday, June 26, 2324**

**Marine research vessel OCTOPUS**

**Minoan Strait, Atlantis**

As soon as the marine research vessel OCTOPUS had landed in the water next to his yacht after flying in from Medusa City with the help of its gravity sails propulsion, Peter Schiller accosted the 42-meter-long catamaran ship and tied his VEGA alongside it, then climbed aboard with Romi. They were greeted on the top deck by their team

leader, Doctor Yoko Yamatsuta. The small, 59-year-old Asian marine biologist warmly shook hands at once with the couple.

“Peter, Romi, you did a great job here. Your discovery has created excitement all over Medusa City.”

“Maybe, but something tells me that this excitement will be nothing compared to what will happen once we see what is awaiting us below.”

“Indeed! We will launch the DEEP QUEST in about one hour and you and Romi will man two of the observers’ seats in it. Since there are already plenty of hand-held camera equipment and sensors aboard, there won’t be a need for you to bring your own equipment.”

“And how long will be the dive, Yoko?” asked Romi.

“In theory, the DEEP QUEST has an operating autonomy of over six days in terms of oxygen, food and supplies, but today we will limit ourselves to a maximum of eight hours at the bottom, in order not to exhaust ourselves and stay alert. If we need to collect samples at the bottom, then the DEEP QUEST has a remotely-piloted drone equipped with grappling arms, scoops and buckets.”

“How deep can it go?” asked in turn Peter, making the Japanese marine biologist smile.

“It can operate at depths of 12,000 meters, enough to go down the deepest abyssal trenches on Earth, where in fact it has already gone in the recent past. It is presently the best that technology can offer in terms of deep-diving submersibles. Since the maximum depth that your sonar read was around 8,000 meters, we won’t have to worry about that.”

“Excellent! I expect that this dive will be most educational for us all. The organisms we found in our deep samples were like nothing we saw before.”

“The same for me.” replied Yamatsuta, an air of seriousness replacing her smile. “We are talking about lifeforms which have survived a nuclear holocaust and have been evolving independently for sixteen million years. We can expect about anything down there. However, we won’t know about them by chatting on this ship’s deck. Follow me: I will give you a brief tour of the DEEP QUEST.”

The trio of marine biologists, led by Yamatsuta, crossed one of the two hulls of the research vessel and looked down at a twenty-meter-long submersible carried in a cradle held between the two hulls of the OCTOPUS.

“Here is the DEEP QUEST, my friends. It can comfortably accommodate up to sixteen persons and there is a small biology lab aboard, so we will be able to study samples without delay. You may say that it looks quite ugly, with bulges, bumps and pods stuck all around its hull but, as the old scientific saying goes, form follows function. We will now go down on top of its weather deck, where we will enter via the submersible’s top access hatch.”

Walking down a narrow gangway, the trio stepped on the top of the DEEP QUEST, then went to a sort of vertical steel tube crowned with a transparent acrylic dome and with a steel hatch on one side. When Yamatsuta unlocked and opened the hatch, Peter opened wide his eyes on seeing how thick the hatch and the walls of the vertical tube were.

“Wow! This must be over twenty-centimeter-thick!”

“Make it 28 centimeter-thick, Peter. As I said, the DEEP QUEST was built to go down in the deepest abyssal trenches known. Let’s enter and go down to the upper deck.”

Entering through the narrow hatch and then climbing down a steel ladder, the trio soon stepped on a steel deck and in a compartment with a head clearance just sufficient for Peter to stand upright, with only centimeters to spare. Looking around him, he saw that the short and narrow compartment was crammed with various pieces of machinery, which Yoko Yamatsuta proceeded to describe to the Schillers.

“We are now in the power compartment, which houses fuel cell generators and high-capacity batteries. The fuel cells produce electricity for the instruments and gravity sail plates of the submersible by burning together oxygen and hydrogen, a process that gives water as a final product. That water is then separated again into oxygen and hydrogen, using the power coming from sixteen radio-isotopic generator pods situated outside of the pressure hull and inside their own pressure-proof shells. A standard fusion reactor unit could have been put aboard but, as you can see, the internal space is strictly limited and a fusion reactor would have required a much larger hull, with a corresponding big jump in final mass. So, the designers of the DEEP QUEST went for the ecological solution, which also has the benefit to be much simpler to operate and maintain. Below us, on the lower deck, you will find the various reserves of water, air, liquid oxygen, liquid hydrogen and food, plus a number of pumps. We will now go forward to visit the mid-section observation decks, the laboratory and workshop, the



crew facilities and, finally the forward observation and piloting sphere. Just aft of this compartment, there is another observation sphere similar to the forward one.”

Going through a thick steel hatch, the trio entered what looked like a big, thick acrylic sphere with a maximum diameter of about six meters connecting two steel hull sections. Comfortable chairs faced outward and gave a fantastic view of the outside through its transparent sphere. An arm attached to each chair supported what looked like cameras and scopes.

“Each observer’s chair on the DEEP QUEST is equipped with a viewing sensors pack which includes a thermal camera, a low-level-light scope and a laser rangefinder. Those sensors packs also have external steerable floodlights slaved to where they are pointed. That’s on top of more floodlights in fixed pods along the hull. So, we will have plenty of illumination to make our observations.”

“What if we see something interesting and want to get a sample of it, Yoko?” asked Romi. The head biologist smiled and pointed at a control stick and instrument panel attached to the right armrest of one of the chairs.

“Then, you would use those controls to pilot a remotely-operated mini-vehicle to what interests you. That mini-ROV will then use a manipulator arm to grab a sample before returning to the DEEP QUEST, where that sample will be put into a special sample airlock outside of the pressure hull. An inner hatch to that sample airlock would then allow the crew to get to that sample for studies aboard the submersible or for storage.”

“Decidedly, this submersible was very well designed, Yoko. We should be able to do some great work down below.”

“I am counting on that, Peter.” Replied Yoko before walking into the next compartment.

“This is the laboratory and workshop deck. Under us is the living area deck, with a small kitchenette, a toilet stall and six bunk beds. Then, just past this hatch, is the forward observation sphere, a six-meter-diameter, thick acrylic sphere. When underwater, that sphere will give us a perfect view of the outside.”

“What if we collide with something, like a bottom rock or a cliff. Would that acrylic sphere be able to survive the shock without cracking?”

“Yes! First, that sphere is incredibly resistant to both shocks and pressure. Second, an external anti-collision steel tube framing system protects the submarine from violent contacts and collisions. We will be plenty safe aboard the DEEP QUEST, Romi.

Well, I see that the rest of the crew is starting to take their posts inside the submersible. Feel free to occupy two of the three observer seats situated on the deck below this one.”

Using a steel ladder linking the upper and lower forward decks, Peter and Romi then sat in two of the swiveling chairs on the lower deck and admired the wide, unobstructed view that the acrylic sphere gave them. Another person, an oceanographer whom they had met during the trip aboard the KOSTROMA, joined them a minute later and took the last seat available on the lower deck after exchanging handshakes with Peter and Romi.

“So, ready to study the mysteries of Atlantis’ depths?” asked in a playful tone 47-year-old Bret Carver.

“We sure are!” replied Romi. “If they are as strange as the micro-organisms we found in our water samples, then it should be a fascinating dive.”

“Well, we will be able to see by ourselves in a few hours, aren’t we?”

“We certainly will, if we base ourselves on all the strange creatures which were found in the Earth’s abyssal depths during the past centuries.”

They then exchanged a few pleasantries and scientific small talk for a few minutes, until Yoko Yamatsuta announced via an intercom system that the DEEP QUEST was about to be lowered into the water. Romi felt excitement grow in her as the submersible’s forward sphere progressively dove under water, to be finally fully submerged, along with the rest of the submersible. The support arms of the cradle then opened up, allowing the DEEP QUEST to sink below the level of the OCTOPUS’ double hulls. Since the water was crystal-clear and since it was daylight, they did not need at first to switch on the external floodlights of the submersible. Again, Peter could not help notice how devoid of marine life those clear waters were.

“I really hope that we will find some substantial lifeforms at the bottom, rather than only micro-organisms. To see such a pristine, yet empty ocean, is depressing to me.”

“Time will tell, Peter.” replied Bret Carver.

The next two hours or so mostly passed in silence as the submersible gradually went down at a controlled and cautious rate and as the waters around them became progressively darker. Once past a depth of 300 meters, all the external floodlights of the DEEP QUEST were switched on, brightly illuminating the waters around it. Still they

didn't see any form of marine life. After some three hours of going down, the bottom finally became visible at a depth of 5,700 meters. Bret Carver then noticed something on one of the instrument panels on the lower deck.

"Hey, we just went through a strong and distinct thermal layer! It seems to cover the whole of this abyssal trench, apparently insulating it from the rest of the ocean. This may prove the presence of volcanic thermal vents at the bottom."

"If it does, then the chances for us to find life at the bottom just went way up." replied Romi. Such abyssal thermal vents on Earth were found to be like local oasis for abyssal fauna and flora. I... Hey! Something is moving, to our ten o'clock below." Three pairs of eyes then stared in that direction, trying to distinguish something in the dark waters. Romi was about to think that she had seen some kind of illusion when a sudden apparition made her jump and squeal in her chair.

"EEEEK! WHAT'S THAT?"

Peter and Bret could now see, like Romi, the nightmarish creature presently trying frantically to bite through the thick acrylic of their observation sphere. It was some two-meter-long, had a long, slender and semi-transparent body with three pairs of fins and had a long snout armed with redoubtable-looking teeth. It also had a sort of stick attached to its head and supporting a luminescent dot.

"My God! An abyssal predator! Let's take pictures of it, quickly!"

Thankfully for the scientists, the apparition tried obstinately for a good fifteen seconds to bite through the acrylic sphere, giving them plenty of time to film and photograph it. The creature finally gave up and swam away towards the bottom. With Peter keeping one of the external floodlights pointed at the fish, they saw it move towards what looked like dozens of small balls lying on the silt bottom. Then, something baffling happened: the predator fish attacked one of the balls, which had a diameter of about thirty centimeters and was covered with short spikes. Its reasons to do so became evident when the other 'balls' started to hurriedly move away, using short legs that had popped out through a hole located under each of the balls. Romi's mouth opened wide on seeing that.

"My God! Those 'balls' are in reality some kind of shellfish."

"Yes!" said Bret Carver while pointing in another direction. "And I can see a telluric thermal chimney over there, with what looks like plants or algae around it. This place is full of life, life possibly dating in origin from over sixteen million years."

"But, how could it had survived that old nuclear holocaust? The rest of this ocean seemed to be devoid of life."

“Probably because of those bottom thermal vents, Romi. By constantly spewing very hot water which then gradually cooled down as it rose, they formed a large thermal layer above this abyssal trench. With a deep current apparently pushing that layer along the trench, it probably deflected and prevented radiation fallouts from getting to the bottom of the trench, thus protecting the life that already existed there. Guys, we now have a snapshot of marine abyssal life as it was some sixteen million years. This is big!”

“You bet it is!” agreed Peter. “We will now have plenty to keep us busy during the next hours and days. Yoko, did you hear this from above our heads?”

“Yes, I did! We indeed have plenty to study here, but let’s do it in a methodical way. We will follow this trench while gliding only a few meters over the bottom floor and will film all the kinds of lifeforms we will see. Once at the other extremity of this trench, we will then turn around and follow our first track in parallel, some one hundred meters to the side of it. We will repeat that process a number of times, in order to map and film in detail this trench and the lifeforms inside it. We will also try to collect samples and specimens as much as possible. So, let’s get to work, people!”

Mapping and studying the whole length of the abyssal trench, which measured a good 900 kilometers in length and had an average width of seven kilometers, ended up taking the scientists in the DEEP QUEST no less than five days, with the men and women taking only minimal hours of sleep in relays during those days and filming and observing every lifeform they encountered. The variety and number of those lifeforms actually surprised the scientists, who managed to collect samples of the smaller lifeforms and algae with the help of their mini-R.O.V. Peter and Romi, like the rest of the crew of the submersible, were ecstatic about their finds when the DEEP QUEST finally started its ascent towards the surface. As the submersible was still at a depth of some 6,000 meters, Yoko Yamatsuta joined the couple at the tiny table in the crew facilities section, a cup of fresh coffee in one hand. Contrary to most of the other members and the Schillers, who were in high spirits, the head marine biologist looked preoccupied, prompting a question from Romi.

“Something’s wrong, Yoko?”

“I don’t know. In fact, I am not sure about what impact our discovery will do to our colonization of this planet.”

Peter, who had already thought a bit about that same subject, shook his head in response.

"I don't think that it will have much of an impact, if any, on our colonization program for Atlantis, Yoko. First, these lifeforms we saw at the bottom have been trapped in that ecological niche for millions of years and are still quite primitive. That hot thermal layer covering the trench basically insulated them from the rest of the planet and probably will continue to do so for millions of years more. If anybody pretends that their existence would be enough to cancel our colonization of this planet, then I would say 'bunk' to them. The Cygnians basically erased life from their planet through their sheer stupidity and are now things of the past. Now, we are in the process of seeding new life on this planet. Let's not allow some misplaced philosophical regrets to perpetuate Atlantis as a dead world. Life is meant to nurture and grow around the Universe."

Romi, like the two other scientists present in the crew section, could only nod in agreement at her husband's forceful declaration.

## **CHAPTER 4 – A BOOMING BUSINESS**



**19:55 (Universal Time)**

**Tuesday, September 15, 2325**

**Food court, Main Promenade Deck, A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Docked at the cargo terminal of the Las Americas orbital station**

**Earth low orbit**

Tina Forster was sitting at a table and eating supper with her husband Michel and her six-year-old son Misha when Winnie Zambela, the ship's commercial officer and purser, approached them and stopped next to their table. Tina looked up from the smoked meat sandwich she was eating and smiled to the 38-year-old black woman.

"You got something for me, Winnie?"

"Uh, yes, but I hope that this won't interrupt your family meal."

"I won't mind, as long as you have good news for me. But please, sit down."

Zambela took her invitation and sat on the one chair around the table that was still free, then produced an electronic notepad before starting to speak.

"I can tell you right away that it is all good news, Tina. However, I came to see you now rather than wait tomorrow morning because I need to confirm with you your acceptance of a few shipping contracts which I need to respond quickly to if we don't want to possibly lose those contracts to some of our competitors."

"Then, you did well to come and see me now, Winnie. What are those shipping contract offers?"

"Well, as you know already, we are due tomorrow to take delivery of the various elements of an orbital station, built in orbit at the Avalon Space Yards and meant to be transported by us to the Tau Boötis System, where we are going to assemble it in orbit over the planet El Dorado for the benefit of the Pallas Mining Industries. At the same time, we will be carrying some three million tons of supplies destined for the mining center already established on the surface of El Dorado, plus a first batch of 4,256 employees and family members of the Pallas Mining Industries who are moving permanently to El Dorado. The expected profit from that transportation contract is 284 million credits, a nice sum by itself but a very reasonable one in view of the total value of our cargo. By the way, the owners of the only two other ships able to carry anything approaching our cargo capacity are said to be steaming about having lost the competition on that contract offer."

"Too bad for them!" replied Tina after taking another bite of her sandwich. "The KOSTROMA is still the king of oversized cargo module carrying and I intend it to stay so...until my future NOSTROMO enters service in four years. If the owners of the ATLAS and of the GILGAMESH really want to beat my KOSTROMA at this game, then they will need to put their money where their mouth is and pay for the building of bigger ships. Right now, the Spacers' League's merchant fleet could use many more ultra-heavy carriers like us, as building complete ready-to-drop-in-place cities is now very popular."

"You are certainly right about that, Tina. In particular, the design of 'Medusa City' has proved to be a hugely popular one since it was put in place by us on Atlantis. Many of our new Human colonies now want similar floating cities in order to accelerate the settlement on their planets and have ordered more copies of Medusa City to be built for them. The good news is that, as of today, we are still the only ship capable of safely and efficiently carrying whole in one shot a 'Medusa City'-Class floating structure. Thus, we were able to secure the transportation contracts for all of those floating cities, plus the carrying of thousands of passengers on every trip. I can thus tell you that our transportation schedule is nearly at full capacity for the whole two years to come."

Tina, like her husband Michel, grinned on hearing that.

"Hell, that is great news, Winnie! Can you give me some details about those future cargo loads?"

"I certainly can, Tina. Here is a flash drive containing copies of the contract offers we have to answer. Remember that I must answer those offers in the next 22 hours. If we don't, we will then risk seeing those contracts being given to our competitors."

"Then, list those offers to me verbally right now, so that I can give my go for them right away and thus avoid any delays in our response. Those contracts will represent our livelihood for all of our crew and the source of financing for further development of New Haven."

Winnie nodded her head in understanding at that: New Haven was the largest moon of New Shouria, in the Wolf 1061 System, and belonged to the corporation set up by Tina to develop and administer it as a resettlement, agrarian and ecologically-friendly world which offered new, safe homes to ex-refugees and homeless people from various corners of Earth. It was also the designated retirement world for any ex-crewmember of the KOSTROMA who wished to retire to a planet-side home.

"First off, immediately following the delivery of that orbital station complex to El Dorado, the Vesta Consortium wishes to have a modular land city complex transported to the planet Vinland, in the Gliese 832 System. That modular city was completed very recently in the Vesta asteroid and is now ready for transportation. Mister Langemann made it clear to me that he is hoping that we will accept that contract. I told him that we would be happy to do so at the value he is offering for the job, which is 320 million credits, for a net contract profit for us of 230 million credits. By the way, it cost him 4.6 billion credits to build this city complex, but he is placing big hopes for that city to boost his assets on Vinland."

Tina did a quick mental calculation before answering Winnie.

"Hum, that's roughly a seven percent shipping cost compared to the value of the cargo. The usual shipping cost for such ultra-heavy loads is close to ten percent but I will accept his offer. Karl Langemann has been a good friend and ally of us for over ten years now. You can tell him yes, Winnie."

"Excellent! One clause of that contract offer from him is that we stay in orbit over Vinland for a few days, to allow the city to be safely set on its foundations before we transfer its intended inhabitants from their quarters on the KOSTROMA. We are talking here about 6,800 people, which will push our passenger capacity to its limits and will need us to use our old passenger quarters in the core section to supplement our Outer Apartments Ring."



“But that will also mean plenty of onboard customers for many days for our ship’s commercial concessions and shops. Overall, an excellent deal for everybody and one that will affirm the good reputation of our ship. We will have to warn our commercial concession owners in advance, so that they could stock up in advance on their merchandise and supplies. Next!”

“Next, to be ready for transport in about three weeks, is a modular resort center destined for New Venice, in the Tau Ceti System. It is being built for the Sverdlovsk Group and will house among other things the Zero-G Nirvana space bordello, which wants to reestablish itself on firm ground. We would thus transport at that time all the personnel of that bordello, including its large troupe of sex workers.”

Tina couldn’t help bury her face in her hands while shaking her head in amusement.

“Hell, my ship is going to be transformed into a space whorehouse for a few days? And how much is the Sverdlovsk Group offering us for that job?”

“The usual ten percent of cargo value fee, plus the regular fee per passenger per day, which comes to a total trip profit for us of 310 million credits. This may sound pricey, but that resort complex is a luxury one and thus cost a fortune to build.”

“Wow!” exclaimed a grinning Michel Koniev. “Who said that sex doesn’t sell?”

“Nobody!” replied at once Tina. “Sex has been one of the three constant motivations of Humanity through its whole history, the two others being money and power.”

“And you can say that those three are intimately connected,” added a smiling Winnie. “With money, you can buy both power and sex, while power will get you money and, frequently, sex as well. As for sex, you certainly can get money and political favors in exchange.”

Both Tina and Michel giggled at that, watched by a confused Misha.

“Mom, does that mean that this sex stuff is a good thing?”

Tina sucked air in, not knowing at first how to answer that. Michel then saved the day by patting their young son’s back and speaking softly to him.

“I will explain that to you tonight, Son.”

“It is a ‘yes’ as well for that contract, Winnie. What do you have next?” Tina hurried to ask in order to change the subject.

“Our next offer is from an alliance of the Ceres Corporation and of the Japanese government and is for the transportation of two ‘Medusa City’-Class floating cities to Jurassika, in the Upsilon Andromeda System. The first city will be ready to be

transported in late October of this year, while the second city will be completed and ready by December. The combined profit we expect will be 415 million credits. We also got an optional offer for a third floating city, to be transported in about eleven months and under the same conditions and prices.”

“We’ll take that!” said at once Tina. “Anything else?”

“Yes: an offer which you will be unable to refuse. The Koorivars were very impressed by the design of Medusa City and want a copy of it for New Shouria, with a possible second copy to follow. The first city is however still in the early phase of its construction at the Daewoo Corporation’s shipyards in Korea and will not be completed before another nine months from now. If the Koorivars order a second floating city, then it will not be ready before around July of 3227.”

Tina then pointed an index at Winnie, her expression now most serious.

“Tell Governor Sheraz that we will be most happy to transport those floating cities for his people. Tell him as well that I will want to do that at cost, with no profit expected by us on those contracts. They are our friends and we will treat them like friends.”

Winnie stared for a moment at Tina before nodding her head and annotating her data pad.

“Tina, I truly like your attitude.”

Winnie then got up and walked away, letting the small family finish their meal. Tina was however pensive, reviewing mentally the contract offers announced by Winnie.

“These contracts are going to bring us a total in profits of over 1.2 billion credits between now and the end of this year. And those do not include the myriad of much smaller contracts for supply runs and passenger transportation we have already scheduled. Not bad at all! At this rate, I will be able to pay back the whole loan I took for the building of the NOSTROMO before it is even completed.”

“Well, getting that loan from the Koorivar Vancouver Investment Bank, which offered it to you at record low interests, was an inspired move on your part, Tina. You were thus right to take those transportation contracts for the Koorivars at cost.” said Michel, making Tina nod her head.

“What are friends for, but to help each other?”

**08:14 (Universal Time)**

**Wednesday, September 16, 2325**

**Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

Tina had arrived on the bridge of her ship barely twenty minutes earlier when she got a call from the Hangar Deck Approach Control.

"Captain, this is Approach Control: a shuttle coming from New Haven is on final approach and will do a quick come-and-go in order to drop one passenger."

"One passenger only?" said Tina in her intercom, surprised by that detail. "Do you have the name of that passenger?"

"Not yet, Captain."

"Very well, give that shuttle permission to fly in."

"Understood, Captain. It will be using Airlock Number Two."

Switching off her intercom link, Tina then looked at Reena Shapour, her second navigator, while getting up from her command chair.

"Reena, I'm going down to the Hangar Deck to go see who is coming from New Haven. You have the bridge for the moment."

"Understood, Tina."

Riding down in an elevator cabin directly from the bridge complex, Tina was at the access to Airlock Number Two in no more than five minutes and then waited there. Normally, an arriving shuttle would cycle from an airlock and into one of the four craft hangars of the KOSTROMA before disgorging its passengers but, in this case, that arriving shuttle would not need to do that just to drop off one passenger. Tina thus waited with mounting curiosity as the arriving shuttle entered the airlock and landed softly on its rotating pad. As the pad turned around to point the shuttle towards the entrance door of the airlock, which was now closed, air started to fill the airlock, creating some temporary condensation fog. Then, as soon as the airlock was fully pressurized, the aft access ramp of the small craft lowered open and one woman stepped out, carrying two suitcases. Tina's blood rushed to her head at once on recognizing that young woman.

"EVE! SHE'S BACK!"

The voice of Spirit, the ship's central computer and artificial intelligence being, then came up on the overhead speaker of the access point.

“Yes, Tina, it is my daughter Eve. She tells me that she is returning for good aboard the KOSTROMA after resigning her position on New Haven as deputy chief administrator.”

“She resigned her position? But why?”

“Because she wanted to return to the KOSTROMA, Tina. Eve will be better at explaining herself to you, so I won’t go further.”

“Very well, Spirit.” said Tina, who then forced herself to be patient while Eve Silisca approached the personnel airlock of the access point at a calm pace. Tina could now see that a smile was printed on the face of the android, whom she considered as a good friend and as a past valuable crew member. A tall person for a woman, Eve still looked as young and supremely beautiful as she had been after being built by Spirit in the robotics workshops of the KOSTROMA some five years ago, something not surprising when considering her nature as a humanoid android. However, Tina knew that Eve was a lot more than just some cold robot and that she was able to show some surprisingly warm human-like behavior and emotions, on top of having a very powerful intellect. Spirit had designed Eve to be the image of perfect female beauty and her body and personality could fool any man about her true nature. The moment that Eve had cycled through the airlock and had entered the access point with her suitcases, Tina went to her to hug her warmly, a hug that Eve returned in kind.

“Eve, it is truly nice to see you again.”

“And I am most happy to see you and be back on the KOSTROMA. Before you ask, be reassured: I did not leave my position on New Haven because someone ousted me. In fact, Piotr was devastated by my decision to return to the KOSTROMA. However, Wei Zang was able to quickly replace me as deputy chief administrator. I took the decision to leave because I felt that I could be more useful on the KOSTROMA than on New Haven: while I can manage well relations with Humans, the special nature of the population of New Haven, which is a mix of refugees and displaced persons from many places on Earth, means that a true human person was a better choice to serve all those souls.”

Tina could only nod slowly her head in comprehension at that explanation.

“Eve, I understand and agree with your decision. Wei Zang is a caring and competent woman and I am sure that she will continue to do a great job on New Haven. So, what post would you like to fill on the KOSTROMA?”

"I would like to be again one of your hostesses and work under Natalia Vasilyeva, if that is possible."

"That is most possible, my friend. Welcome aboard the KOSTROMA." replied Tina before hugging Eve again. "Follow me: I will make sure that you get a nice cabin for yourself."

"Oh, you know that my tastes are very simple indeed, Tina. I don't need to powder myself or apply makeup, like real women do."

"Still, I'll be damned if I give you a simple closet with an electric outlet, Eve. You will get our best bachelor's cabin on the Outer Apartments Ring."

## **CHAPTER 5 – BORDELLO ON THE MOVE**



The Zero-G Nirvana asteroid

**13:22 (Universal Time)**

**Saturday, October 3, 2325**

**East Outer Gallery and Access Point, Main Promenade Deck**

**A.M.S. KOSTROMA, docked to the Zero-G Nirvana asteroid**

**Main Asteroid Belt, Solar System**

Leaving the bridge of her ship after it had docked at one of the docking towers of the Zero-G Nirvana asteroid, Tina arrived at the West Access Point, on the Main Promenade Deck, in time to greet the first persons coming from the asteroid's installations. She smiled at the small, graying and a bit overweight man leading the first group of fourteen people coming in on an electric minibus: John Gacey Gerhard was not what someone would call a handsome man, but he was the owner and chief manager of the Zero-G Nirvana, the most popular space brothel in the Solar System, and was a very astute and intelligent businessman. He also had the virtue of being an honest man in a trade too often ruled by criminals. In turn, Gerhard's first move after stepping out of the minibus was to come to her and warmly shake her hand.

"Captain Forster, or should I say 'Commodore Forster', it is a pleasure to meet you again, especially in such a momentous occasion."

"And it is a pleasure as well for me to see you again, Mister Gerhard. Your people must be anxious to see their new home awaiting them on New Venice?"

"Quite! I myself can't wait to be there and reopen my establishment in the Tau Ceti System. I had plenty of success here but living on an asteroid eventually becomes a bit of a strain, no matter how luxurious and comprehensive the facilities are on it. To be able to live and work in the open air, next to a nice beach, will be like a dream come true for me and my people. Have you seen the site chosen for my establishment?"

"Yes, I did, Mister Gerhard. My ship was the one which carried the site construction crew to New Venice some three weeks ago. The foundations and underground plumbing and wiring systems are now completed and ready to receive the structures of your new brothel. Those structures, built on Hygiea, are presently carried by my ship, so we will be able to leave for New Venice as soon as all your materiel and personnel here will be aboard. Once in orbit of New Venice, your people will have to wait a few more days on the KOSTROMA, to give us time to put down the structures of your establishment and connect them to their foundations. There will then be a general inspection and testing phase, to make sure that there are no glitches with the buildings. If all goes well, you and your people will be able to occupy your new complex in at most two weeks."

"Excellent! For that period of time my people will be aboard your ship, I have a few ideas and proposals about it that I would like to discuss with you, once my people will all be in."

"Then, we shall discuss that over supper tonight, in our business-class restaurant. But let's take care of your people first. My hosting personnel will now start to assign cabins to you and your employees. They will occupy part of the top floor of my Outer Apartments Ring Complex, so you will all be close to each other. Please don't think that this is meant to ostracize your people, Mister Gerhard. Since we have families with young children living in the Outer Apartments Ring Complex, I wanted to avoid having children wander around the cabins you will occupy."

Gerhard nodded his head once at those words, his expression sober.

"And your decision was a judicious one, Captain Forster. I may be in the sexual entertainment business but I have no wish to expose children to close contacts with my entertainment specialists, most of whom normally wear rather skimpy outfits. As you may know, pedophilia and child abuse are severely looked upon in my establishment."

"I know and I admire the way you conduct your business. In turn, know that the commercial establishments on this Main Promenade fully stocked up on products prior to coming here, so your people will be able to fully enjoy their stay on the KOSTROMA."

Gerhard was obviously pleased to hear that and turn around to signal to his employees to come out of their minibus.

“OKAY, PEOPLE! COME OUT AND GO TO THE RECEPTION DESKS TO GET REGISTERED AND GET A CABIN.”

As some 300 men and women disembarked from the fleet of minibuses which had brought them in, Tina pointed at the vehicles now lined up along the access tunnel.

“Those minibuses, do you intend to bring them to New Venice, along with the rest of your materiel?”

“Yes, I do!” replied the brothel manager. “They will be useful there to carry my customers around the new site of my bordello.”

“Then, I will have a couple of my cargo handlers guide them to our vehicle garage, which is on another deck, via our cargo lifts.”

Tina took a minute to call her cargo master, Denise Lonsdale, and ask her to send a few of her people to the reception point. She then returned to the side of John Gacey Gerhard, who had just finished getting registered aboard and who now had his cabin key card. Tina’s eyes then hooked on a man of impressive stature who was about to arrive at one of the registration desks. The man was tall, blond and athletic, with an impressive set of muscles. However, what had caught Tina’s eyes was his dress, a body-hugging coverall made with a stretching fabric that left little to the imagination of onlookers.

“Holy... This guy either has an incredible set of tools or he padded his groin area with a rolled towel.”

Gerhard grinned, amused by her remark.

“Oh, I can certify that he didn’t pad his groin with some rolled up towel, Captain: he didn’t need to. This is one of my star entertainment specialists: John ‘Dick’ Richards. Some would call him a freak of nature but I can assure you that my female customers are crazy about him.”

“Hum... The way that my own female receptionists are now looking at him, I would tend to believe you about that. Madam Lee, the owner and manager of the sex club established on this Main Promenade, may well attempt to hire him during his stay aboard.”

“If it is only for the duration of our stay on your ship, then I have no qualms about some of my employees working in your sex club, Captain. My people won’t be adverse



about being able to make some extra money by working while on your ship. All of my entertainment specialists do their work because they like it, not because necessity pushed them into the sex business. I bet that your single and unattached crewmembers will also appreciate our presence during our stay, like that fantastic-looking young blonde manning one of the reception desks.”

Looking at the woman pointed at by Gerhard, Tina giggled with amusement before replying to the brothel owner.

“Eve Silisca is indeed fantastic-looking but I doubt that she will show any special interest into your ‘Dick’ Richards.”

“Oh, how so? Is she frigid or does she simply prefer other women?”

“Neither of those reasons. I will tell you a secret about her, but only if you swear not to repeat it to anybody else.”

Intrigued by that, Gerhard nonetheless nodded his head once.

“Alright, I swear to keep to myself your secret, whatever it will be.”

Tina then bent down to whisper in Gerhard’s ear. The man’s face showed utter surprise and disbelief but, to his credit, he didn’t repeat out loud what he had just heard, instead looking at Eve Silisca with bulging eyes.

“Holy shit! I am a great connoisseur of women but your Eve had me completely fooled. I would have gladly hired her in a second, just by looking at her.”

“And I can tell you that you were far from the only one to be fooled by her looks, Mister Gerhard. The funny thing is that Eve is fully able to perform various sex acts and please partners if she wished so. However, her reactions would then be faked, while she has no real interest in or need for sex.”

“Still, as a hostess, she is perfect for the job: beautiful, intelligent and with a perfect memory.”

“That she is! Well, if you will follow me, I will personally guide you to your cabin.”

When John ‘Dick’ Richards came to the reception desk manned by Eve Silisca, he was not a little surprised to see that she stayed completely professional in his presence and registered him with what was simple, pure politeness and courtesy. However, the same could not be said about the two young women manning the desks adjacent to her desk. One of the women, who was single, took a moment to approach Eve and speak in a low voice to her.

“Which cabin did you give to your last customer, Eve?”

Eve, in response, painted a 'mildly amused' look on her face and answered her in an equally low volume of voice.

"Cabin F026. His name is John 'Dick' Richards."

"Thanks! I will try to visit him as soon as I can, before half of the women on our ship starts lining up at his door."

The receptionist then returned to her own desk in order to serve her next customers, leaving Eve free to record this latest example of the significance of sex in the lives of Humans...or of about any other living species.

### **18:08 (Universal Time)**

#### **'The 3-Star Table' business-class restaurant**

#### **Restaurants and cafeterias deck, Level 10, A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

#### **On approach to New Venice, Tau Ceti System**

John Gacey Gerhard, guided by the Maître D', found one graying oriental woman already sitting at the table reserved by Tina Forster. The latter was however still not there. The oriental woman got up from her chair on seeing Gerhard approach and shook hands with him while smiling to him.

"Good evening, Mister Gerhard! My name is 'Madam Lee' and I am the owner and manager of the Jupiter Sex Club, established on the Main Promenade Deck. Captain Forster was a bit delayed by some ship business and will be here in a few minutes."

"Pleased to meet you, madam."

Gerhard sat down next to Madam Lee as a waitress filled glasses of cold water and put menus and a wine card on the table before walking away, leaving Gerhard alone with Madam Lee, who then spoke again.

"Have you had a chance to visit the Jupiter Sex Club yet, Mister Gerhard?"

"Not yet, but I intend to do so soon. How large is your establishment in terms of employees?"

"Oh, it is nothing in comparison with your own business. I have a total of 27 employees, of which eight women and four men are actual entertainment specialists. However, business has been both good and constant, thanks to the busy space transportation schedule of the KOSTROMA. The passengers traveling on the KOSTROMA generally stay aboard for only two to three days, to be then replaced with a

new batch of passengers heading for the next destination. There is thus a constant roll of passengers and, as a result, they don't have time to grow blasé about my limited roster of entertainment specialists. The same cannot be said about the single members of the ship's crew, who tend to go planet-side at every stop in order to find new excitement. Tina invited me to have supper with you and her in order to discuss that aspect of ship life."

"I see! So, if I understand you well, Captain Forster would like me to provide some of my entertainment specialists in order to spice up the shows in your club while we are in Space, correct?"

"Correct! By the way, this kind of temporary arrangement is quite usual aboard the KOSTROMA. Entertainers of all kinds who travel aboard this ship are routinely invited to perform while in Space, in order to break the usual ship routine."

"And what are the usual financial arrangements for those temporary entertainers, Madam Lee?" asked Gerhard, seeing a definite value in the proposal.

"Basically, if we talk about my club, the passing entertainment specialists who perform in it during their stay get to keep the tips they receive from the customers, plus get an hourly pay of fifty credits if they only dance, or two-thirds of what they would earn via private sex acts while using one of the privacy booths of my club."

"That sounds quite generous to me, Madam Lee. I am sure that many of my entertainment specialists will be most interested by those financial terms. Of course, the fact that they were going to spend many days in Space while my new resort is being completed, resulting in them not making their usual revenues in tips, will be a big factor in deciding them to perform in your club. I will thus have a collective talk with them tomorrow morning about this. Maybe you could attend that meeting as well, so that you could answer any questions my people would have about your club."

"That sounds like a good idea, Mister Gerhard. I will be there at the time and place of your choice."

"How about your own club, at nine in the morning? I doubt that you would have many customers at such an early hour."

"Indeed! In fact, our normal daily opening time is at eleven in the morning, Universal Time. We will thus have plenty of time to discuss as a group before the first customers walk in. By the way, I heard about one particular entertainment specialist of yours whom I would definitely like to employ during his stay aboard the ship."

Gerhard grinned in amusement on hearing that.

"Let me guess: the women on this ship are already blabbing about John 'Dick' Richards, right?"

"The one exactly! He is said to be a true phenomenon."

"He is, Madam Lee. On top of being incredibly well equipped, if I may say so, he also knows how to use his personal tool in a masterful way and knows about everything possible about women's pleasure points. My female customers at the Zero-G Nirvana asteroid were positively crazy about him."

"Gee! Any chance that I could hire him on a permanent basis?"

"Not a chance!" replied at once Gerhard while smiling. "He is too good to let go. However, I will be glad to lend his services to you for the duration of our stay aboard."

"Excellent! In case you didn't notice, at least half of the crew of the KOSTROMA is female and quite young. As a result, my poor male dancers are heavily solicited and could certainly use some help."

Gerhard's smile then turned into a grin.

"Then, your female crewmembers better hold on to their panties for the next couple of weeks, Madam Lee."

Just then, Gerhard spotted Tina Forster, who was approaching at a fast walk.

"Aah...here comes our intrepid ship's captain!"

Playing the perfect gentleman, the brothel owner got up from his chair and pulled a chair for Tina, then pushed it gently back towards the table once Tina sat down, getting a 'thank you' in exchange. Sitting back in his chair, Gerhard smiled to Tina.

"I hope that you were not retained by a serious problem, my dear."

"Oh, it was nothing to be worried about, John: it was a simple false alarm about an outer airlock door showing 'open' when it was in fact closed and locked. A team of electricians dealt with it quickly enough."

"Still, an outer airlock door showing itself to be supposedly open is not something to neglect. I would have done the same as you if that had happened on my asteroid and would have personally made sure that it was checked out."

"Talking of your asteroid, you haven't told me yet what will happen to it, now that you left it with all your furnishing and supplies. Will it stay empty from now on?"

"Oh no!" replied at once the brothel owner. "Such a Space installation is too precious and valuable to be simply abandoned. I actually made a very profitable deal with those suckers from the European Union, who bought my asteroid and the fixed installations still inside it so that it could become the new base station for a Space mining

company recently created and financed by the European Union, or EU in short. The EU also bought a number of Space facilities from the Sverdlovsk Group, which has been lately moving gradually its population and assets out of the Main Asteroid Belt and reestablishing them in the Tau Ceti System, mainly on New Venice. You will understand that all the Spacers' League citizens have been dreaming for a long time to be able to live on the surface of a fully habitable world. Now that we have over a dozen habitable worlds available for colonization, there is no turning back on the general move of the Spacers' League's population towards the habitable star systems nearest to Earth. This will thus leave the various governments on Earth free to buy and occupy the old Spacers' league's Space installation and take over the mining of the Solar System's resources."

"And that is a truly momentous period for Humanity, John, and one that is thankfully happening in a peaceful way. Uh, from the words you used to describe your deal with the EU concerning your asteroid, may I conclude that you fleeced them, John?"

The brothel owner responded with a wide smile and a wink of one eye.

"Just a little bit, Tina. Just a little bit. So, what will happen in the next few days?"

"Well, we are due to enter a low orbit over New Venice tonight and will then wait in orbit until we have confirmation from the ground construction crew that your chosen site is ready to receive the prefabricated structures of your new resort. Then, my ship will do a slow vertical descent from orbit and will put down the various modules we are carrying on top of their foundations. It should then take a day or two for the ground crew to make sure that the structures are perfectly aligned and level before fixing them permanently in place. Only after that will we start transferring your supplies and support equipment and craft to your new resort, something that should take another two to three days. Thus, your people should be able to move into their new homes on New Venice in about a week. I suppose that you will want to resume your commercial operations soon after that and start greeting customers, right?"

"Correct! As many said in the past, 'time is money'. I invested a lot in this move to New Venice and I need to make some profits as quickly as possible. And you, my friend, how busy is your schedule for the next few weeks and months?"

"Oh, it is definitely a busy one, John: after this job is done, I have a number of secondary transport contracts for supply runs to a number of our new colonies, following

which I have in succession four big contracts to transport in place the elements of a number of modular cities, to be delivered respectively to the Jurassika and New Shouria Systems. I expect lots of other similar contracts for the next few years, so my ship will stay a busy one.”

“I am glad to hear that, my friend. How about ordering a bottle of fine wine to celebrate our respective accomplishments?”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, John.” replied Tina, smiling to Gerhard.

## **CHAPTER 6 – DEATH IS COMING**



**06:11 (Kadosh Universal Time)**

**Monday, June 4, 2328 (Earth Calendar)**

**Drazt cruiser KORKAN, in orbit around HD85512b**

**Star system HD85512, 37 light-years from Earth**

Shipmaster Vorn Daran, captain of the Drazt Navy cruiser KORKAN, went to the sensors station as soon as he stepped on the bridge of his cruiser and glanced at the data display sphere before asking a question to his sensors officer.

“Anything to report for the last seven dozants?”

“No, Shipmaster: it was a quiet night. The three cargo ships we are escorting are now half done carrying their supplies and materiel down to the various construction sites on the planet.”

“Good!” simply replied Daran before going to his command chair and sitting in it. He then used two of his four arms to call out on the display screens attached to his chair a number of reports covering the last night. He was still reading those reports when his sensors officer spoke up, her voice showing some surprise.

"Shipmaster, a large object has just appeared at the edge of the system. We had no prior sign of it on our long-range detectors."

"Show it on our holographic screens!" ordered at once Daran, who then stared at the small blue symbol that appeared on the bridge's screens. However, at the distance the newcomer was, it showed only as a colored dot.

"How big is it, Gorana?"

"It is hard to say at that distance, Shipmaster, but it is an elongated object and is about the size of a medium asteroid, thus is much bigger than our cruiser."

Daran mulled over that information for a moment, then took a decision and spoke to his communications officer.

"Kronat, contact the convoy master and advise him that our ship is going to move to the eastern edge of the system in order to investigate a sighting."

"Understood, Shipmaster!"

"Pilot, head at top acceleration towards that unknown object. To all crew: assume yellow alert stations!"

A modulated alarm then started resonating around the 200 meter-diameter, saucer-shaped cruiser, making dozens of massive Drazts run to their duty stations. The 'yellow alert' was only one notch below the 'red alert' announcing imminent combat, thus was promptly followed by the crewmembers of the KORKAN. Soon, the heavy disintegrator cannons of the ship reported to the bridge as being manned and ready. Compared to six years ago, the present armament was much heavier than on previous classes of Drazt cruisers, a lesson bitterly learned when a single Human ship had slaughtered a whole fleet of Drazt cruisers in what had been more like a massacre than a true battle. Thankfully, the Humans from the Solar System and the Drazts were now on friendly terms, thanks to the restraint and diplomacy displayed by Captain Tina Forster, of the mighty Human ship KOSTROMA.

As his cruiser sped towards the newcomer, Vorn Daran reminded himself mentally about the importance of his present mission. Kadosh, the home world of the Drazts in what the Humans called the Ross 128 System, had been severely overcrowded for centuries already and its resources had also been significantly depleted by over-exploitation. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the Drazts had failed to develop an interstellar drive despite millenniums of effort and research, there had been no way to relieve the pressure on Kadosh by moving its surplus population to other star systems.



Then, ironically, the same Humans who had inflicted a stinging defeat to the Drazt Navy had then come to the rescue by literally giving for free to the Drazts the secret of their own interstellar drive system. Many Drazt leaders had then pegged the Humans as being utterly naïve or even dumb, but other Drazts, Daran included, had recognized that apparently foolish gesture for the altruistic and compassionate act it really was. Now able to quickly get to the other nearby star systems and to explore them, the Drazt government had immediately started a large-scale exploration and colonization program in order to find new home worlds for the race. To date, two star systems, each containing one habitable planet, had been found: one some six light-years from Kadosh and known as 'Markan Prime' and the other about 26 light-years away, recently named 'Vorkonia'. Daran's cruiser was presently escorting and covering a convoy meant to resupply the ground crew busy preparing the second habitable planet for colonization and settlement, a program that was vital for the long-term survival of the Drazt race. If all went well, the first colonists from Kadosh would be able to start moving to this new world in a bit less than one year.

Despite accelerating at maximum rate, traveling to the edge of the system was going to take many hours, so Daran patiently sat in his command chair, checking from time to time the data given by his ship's sensors. After some three dozants, or four human hours, his sensors officer spoke up, some surprise detectable in her tone of voice.

"Shipmaster, I have now some new data on that object: it is apparently a large asteroid but has a strange shape, being elongated rather than spherical. Its average diameter alone is over ten times larger than our ship and its length is about twelve times bigger than its diameter. It is a truly massive object."

"Can you make up of what kind of material it is made of, Gorana?"

"Our spectrometers read its surface as being made of solid nickel-iron, the same as in M-Class asteroids. There is however something rather unusual about that object, Shipmaster: it is stable along its three axis, contrary to about all the other asteroids of similar shape we surveyed in the past. Right now, it is simply coasting along a straight trajectory heading directly towards Vorkonia."

Daran stiffened at once at the mention of Vorkonia, which was the name that had been given to the planet they were presently preparing for future occupation. If that large metallic asteroid ever collided with Vorkonia, then it could well destroy outright the

planet, or at the least cause massive damage to it. He thus couldn't allow that to happen and had to assess properly its trajectory and degree of threat it posed.

"Start extrapolating its precise trajectory, Gorana. I want to know if there are any possibilities of it colliding with Vorkonia or of flying too close to it."

"One moment please, Shipmaster."

Daran, wanting to get an accurate answer, thus let his sensors officer time to do some calculations. Gorana's answer only made him more apprehensive.

"Shipmaster, my calculations show that this asteroid, if not somehow moved from its present trajectory, will end up passing extremely close to Vorkonia. With its present speed, it could in fact end up being either captured by Vorkonia into an elliptical orbit or even smash directly into it."

"Something that we can't allow to happen. We will have to nudge it progressively away from Vorkonia by pushing against it with our cruiser, or will have to destroy it with our missiles."

"Then, in view of its apparent mass, we will have to start pushing this asteroid as quickly as we can, Shipmaster. I must warn however that such a maneuver will highly stress the hull of our cruiser: we even risk to see our hull buckle and crack open under that stress."

"You are right, Gorana, but we have to act in order to protect our new world." said Daran before switching on his microphone to ship-wide mode. "Attention, all crew! We will have to perform a dangerous space maneuver in about three dozants. I want all the crewmembers to don in turn their spacesuits, with half of the crew suiting up, followed by the other half once ready. Keep your visors open and do not use your suit's reserves of air until I order you to seal your suits. Execute!"

While half of his bridge crew hurried to get their spacesuits out of a nearby locker room and put them on, Daran waited his turn while taking over Gorana's station as she suited up. As soon as Gorana had her spacesuit on, Daran went to the locker room and got his own suit, putting it on in a few minutes, then returning to his command chair.

Nervousness grew progressively on the bridge as the cruiser got closer and closer from the asteroid. The latter was truly massive and its mass had to be in the billions of tons range. Pushing such a large object was definitely going to be a tough and risky maneuver. As the KORKAN did its final approach to the asteroid, Gorana suddenly stiffened and spoke up in alarm.

“SHIPMASTER, I CAN NOW SEE WHAT APPEARS TO BE A NUMBER OF ARTIFICIAL OBJECTS AT THE SURFACE OF THIS ASTEROID. THEY LOOK LIKE SOME KIND OF SENSOR DOMES.”

“A STARSHIP?!” roared Daran, both surprised and furious. He however took little time to reassess the threat presented by this ‘asteroid’ and shouted into his ship-wide intercom while punching with one fist a large button covered by a protective plate, starting a sinister blare around the ship.

“RED ALERT! ALL CREWMEMBERS TO COMBAT STATIONS! GUNNERS, BE READY TO FIRE AT THE ASTEROID WE ARE APPROACHING.”

Next, he looked at his sensors officer, who was now frantically punching commands on her station.

“Tell me more about this thing, Gorana, quickly!”

“Most of this thing appears to be a genuine M-Class asteroid, Shipmaster, but someone seems to have adapted it to make a spaceship out of it. I can now detect a number of what appear to be big access doors along its surface, as if it has been turned into some kind of giant spacecraft carrier. As for it being either a warship or simply a transport ship, I can’t say right now.”

“I will assume the worst and peg it as being an invading warship. Communications officer, send at once the following warning to the convoy master and to the ground construction crew on Vorkonia: unidentified alien warship built from a M-Class asteroid is on a possible collision course with Vorkonia. Once that message will be sent and acknowledged, prepare a courier drone craft containing the same message, plus our latest sensors data, and send it to Kadosh.”

“Understood, Shipmaster!”

Daran felt a bit better once his last order was given. The use of interstellar drone courier craft was another thing copied from Human technology. In fact, such a drone courier had cost the now defunct Drazt Empire dearly, when a Human exploration ship had been found and destroyed by a Drazt experimental frigate in the Markan Prime System. Unbeknown to that Drazt frigate, the Human exploration ship had time to launch an automated courier drone just before its destruction, with that drone then jumping to the Solar System and alerting the Humans to the attack on their ship. The Human response that had followed had very nearly resulted in the total destruction of Kadosh, with only the deep sense of humanity of the Human fleet commander pushing her into showing a lot of restraint into her use of force against the Drazts. However, that restraint had not

extended to the Drazt emperor or to his minions, who had then been vaporized by bombardment fire from the KOSTROMA, the flagship of the Human squadron.

A few minutes later, his communications officer announced to Daran that the convoy and ground construction crew had been warned and that the courier drone had departed for Kadosh, bringing some relief to him. However, that relief was quickly replaced by alarm when Gorana shouted a warning from her sensors station.

“THE ASTEROID JUST CHANGED TRAJECTORY! IT IS NOW HEADING DIRECTLY TOWARDS US AND ACCELERATING!”

His worst fears now realized, Daran shouted an order at once.

“ALL GUNNERS: FIRE AT WILL ON THE INCOMING ASTEROID! CONCENTRATE YOUR FIRE ON A SINGLE POINT ON THE LOWER FORWARD SECTION OF THAT ASTEROID!”

Less than six seconds later, the twelve heavy disintegrator cannons of the cruiser opened fire simultaneously, with their pale blue beams of energy hitting the surface of the ‘asteroid’ and starting to vaporize its surface crust. However, their target took no time to reply, firing a multitude of impossibly thick purple laser beams, each with a power of tens of gigawatts of energy. Struck hard by the laser beams, the KORKAN’s hull was pierced in multiple spots, creating explosive decompressions in many of the ship’s compartments. Thankfully, the fact that the cruiser’s crewmembers were wearing their spacesuits and had closed their visors the moment that the battle had started saved many lives. Still, quite a few Drazts were sucked out into the vacuum of Space, often getting shredded by the jagged edges of the holes created in the hull. Then, one laser beam hit the main generator room of the cruiser, abruptly cutting main power to the propulsion, armament and sensors and leaving the ship’s interior in semi-darkness, with only the emergency batteries providing electricity to the life support systems and to emergency lights. Shortly after that, the laser fire from the asteroid ceased, leaving a hyperventilating Vorn Daran in his dimly lit bridge and with most work stations now dead. Luckily, the bridge itself had not received a direct hit, so its crew was still fully intact.

“DAMAGE ASSESSMENT! CAN WE GET PROPULSION AND ARMAMENT BACK ON LINE?”

“NEGATIVE, SHIPMASTER!” replied his second-in-command. “OUR MAIN FUSION GENERATORS HAVE BEEN UTTERLY DESTROYED. WE ONLY HAVE

OUR EMERGENCY BATTERIES AND ONE SECONDARY GENERATOR INTACT, ENOUGH TO POWER THE LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEMS BUT NOT MUCH ELSE.”

Before Daran could reply to that, a number of metallic noises coming from the cruiser’s outer hull surface made him look up.

“What the...”

Gorana, who was still able to use a few of the cameras fixed to the outer hull, then gave a warning.

“A NUMBER OF SPHERES HAVE JUST ATTACHED THEMSELVES TO OUR HULL!”

“BOARDERS!” exclaimed at once Daran. “TO ALL THE CREW: ARM YOURSELVES AND BE READY TO REPEL BOARDERS!”

Following his own directive, Daran got out of his command chair and took out his disintegrator pistol in one hand and his battle knife in another hand, ready to fight if need be. That need materialized a mere few seconds later, when five nightmarish creatures appeared out of nowhere on the bridge. Each of them stood even taller than an average Drazt, who normally stood at about 210 centimeters, and had four long arms ending in six fingers armed with sharp claws. The creatures stood on four legs and their main body ended in a large head with huge jaws on top and in a long, whip-like spiked tail. One of the creatures, having appeared just next to a work station, opened its jaws wide, revealing a set of long canines, and threw itself on the unfortunate Drazt manning that work station, biting his left shoulder and ripping it off, making the Drazt scream with pain. Horrified, Daran reacted more by reflex than by conscious thought and fired his disintegrator pistol at the monstrous alien. To his satisfaction, the energy beam from his sidearm vaporized the head of the creature, whose body then dropped on the deck, convulsing. However, the four other aliens now on the bridge went as well on the attack, using their claws and their teeth to rip apart Drazt crewmembers in a savage, terrifying fashion. Daran barely had the time to reposition himself and shoot his pistol a second time in order to defend Gorana, who had no weapons. A second alien fell victim of his fire, while two other Drazts who had pistols also each killed one alien. The last remaining alien unfortunately had the time to literally rip the head off of one Drazt before being killed in disintegrator crossfire. Nearly shocked by the horrors he had just witnessed, Daran contemplated for a moment the bodies and pools of blood, both Drazt and alien, on the deck. While the Drazt blood was dark red, as expected, the alien blood

was copper green. Shaking himself out of his trance, Daran shouted at his communications officer, who had survived intact the brief fight.

“KRONAT, SEND QUICKLY A WARNING TO THE CONVOY MASTER: ALIENS BOARDED OUR SHIP AND MATERIALIZED OUT OF NOWHERE BEFORE ATTACKING US. IF YOU CAN, TAKE A SHORT FILM OF THOSE DEAD ALIENS AND ADD IT TO YOUR TEXT MESSAGE. SEND ALSO A SECOND COURIER DRONE TO KADOSH WITH A COPY OF YOUR TRANSMISSION AND THE LAST MOMENTS OF DATA WE COLLECTED. MAKE IT QUICK BEFORE MORE OF THOSE MONSTERS SHOW UP.”

“ON IT, SHIPMASTER!” replied the frightened Drazt, who then sat back at his station and started punching buttons. As that officer worked frantically, Daran went to check on his five crewmembers attacked by the aliens. Unfortunately, all five of them were dead, having suffered massive blood loss after parts of their bodies had been ripped out by the teeth and claws of their attackers. Daran had to close his eyes for a moment then, sadness filling him. Next, he went to the body of the nearest dead alien and examined it while staying at a safe distance: he had no way to know how tough those aliens were or if they were truly dead instead of faking it. The alien’s accoutrement was limited to a sort of sleeveless carrying vest supporting a number of pockets and instruments. Strangely enough, he saw no technological weapon with the alien. However, there was no denying that the jaws and claws of the creatures were terrifying weapons by themselves in a close-combat fight. Daran then reminded himself that there probably were many more aliens on his ship right now, busy killing his crewmembers. Going to a locked storage bin near his command chair, he unlocked it with a key that he always carried on him and opened it, exposing a small arsenal of disintegrator rifles and pistols.

“ARM YOURSELVES, PEOPLE! WE HAVE A SHIP TO RETAKE.”

Grabbing a pistol from the bin before letting his crewmembers take weapons, Daran went to his communications officer’s station and put the pistol down on it, within reach of his officer.

“Here, Kronat. Make sure that you stay armed at all time from now on. Have you finished sending your messages and video data?”

“Sending our courier drone on the way to Kadosh...now!”

“Excellent! You will stay here, along with two other officers who will protect you while you continue manning your communications station. In the meantime, I will lead the others and retake our ship from these monsters.”

“Understood, Shipmaster. By the way, did you notice that those aliens did not wear spacesuits, despite boarding a ship that had obviously depressurized?”

Daran was struck at once by that remark and swore for not having noticed that himself.

“Shit, you are right! Send that detail to the convoy master and tell him as well that his ships should leave this system as quickly as possible. Right now, I don’t know what that alien asteroid has done since we last had the use of our external sensors.”

Going to the armored door that was the main entrance of the bridge, Daran looked around at his seven surviving bridge officers while holding his pistol high.

“We will split in two groups of four once in the hallway beyond this door, then will proceed in methodically clearing each deck of our ship. Have your weapons ready to fire.”

His heart beating fast, Daran then punched the button of the door, unlocking it and making it open wide. He didn’t have time to take a single step before a savage crowd of gnarling aliens rushed inside, literally trampling him and his officers before ripping them apart and starting to eat them alive. The poor Kronat had only time to shoot one of the attackers before himself being overwhelmed and killed.

On the heavy cargo ship ARKAD, Convoy Master Lem Corva had been shocked on receiving the warnings transmitted by the KORKAN. However, the latest video received from the cruiser, which showed the bodies of monstrous aliens, had left no doubt about the seriousness and urgency of those warnings. With his three cargo ships being unarmed, he had no means to resist those aliens if they fought their way past the KORKAN. One announcement from his sensors officer then changed that hypothetical into a reality.

“Convoy Master, that asteroid is now heading towards Vorkonia at high speed. It should be here in about four dozants.”

“What about the KORKAN?”

“It is no longer visible on my sensors, sir.”

That information brought a difficult dilemma to Corva: there were presently some 890 Drazts on the planet’s surface, working hard to build a colony for the future immigrants from Kadosh. If he left orbit now and withdrew his ships back to Kadosh, those workers

would then be at the mercy of the aliens who had attacked and presumably destroyed the KORKAN. On the other hand, it would take more time than he had to send shuttles down and evacuate the members of the ground construction crew. As had happened often in history, he then decided on an intermediate line of action and looked at his two other shipmasters, who had been on a video link with him and were visible on the small display screens attached to his command chair.

"It seems that the KORKAN has been destroyed and that this alien ship is now heading our way and will be here in about four dozants. As you may have realized, we have no way to oppose that alien ship. Thus here is what we will do now. Kodric, you will immediately stop the sending down of your passengers and cargo and will have your ship jump back right away to Kadosh to spread the alarm there. Vik, your ship will stay in orbit for the next three dozants and will receive the shuttles which are already on the ground on Vorkonia. I will call next the master engineer in charge of the construction sites and will order him to evacuate as many of his people via those shuttles as quickly as possible. At the end of those three dozants, the PAVNONIA will then jump back to Kadosh, even if there are still some people left on the planet. As for my own ARKAD, I will start sending down all the shuttle and minor craft I have presently aboard, so that they could pick up as many people as possible. My ship will be the last to leave orbit and I will stay as long as possible, in order to save our people on the planet. Now, act quickly and don't waste any time. If some of our people on the ground insist on taking the time to pack their things first, then warn them that they will be left behind if they don't obey your orders. Do you have any questions before I close this link?"

While quite shaken by the present turn of events, his two shipmasters nodded their heads and acknowledged his orders before cutting their video link. Staring for a moment at his now dark display screens, Lem Corva looked up sadly at the section of the bridge's holographic screens where the KORKAN had been seen last: 138 good Drazt crewmembers had been aboard the cruiser.

**12:47 (Kadosh Universal Time)**

**Bridge of the heavy interstellar cargo ship ARKAD**

**In low orbit around HD85512b**

"SHIPMASTER, OUR LAST SHUTTLE HAS NOW ENTERED OUR HANGARS."



"About fucking time!" grumbled Lem Corva, who had kept an eye on his holographic displays, which showed the huge alien ship about to enter orbit, now way too close to Corva's taste.

"PILOT, GET US OUT OF HERE, FAST! HEAD BACK TO KADOSH!"

"AYE, CONVOY MASTER!"

The pilot, having already calculated and set his interstellar jump well in advance of this moment, then accelerated briefly on the direct heading to Kadosh, then pushed his 'jump' button. A brief flash of orange light filled the bridge as the ship went through the artificial wormhole created ahead of it by their Koomak Drive, an invention the Drazts could thank the Koorivars for, another race that was allied with the Humans from the Solar System and which had accepted to share their invention with the Drazts. Lem Corva felt an immense weight lift off his shoulders when he saw the blue, brown and green orb of Kadosh on his forward screens.

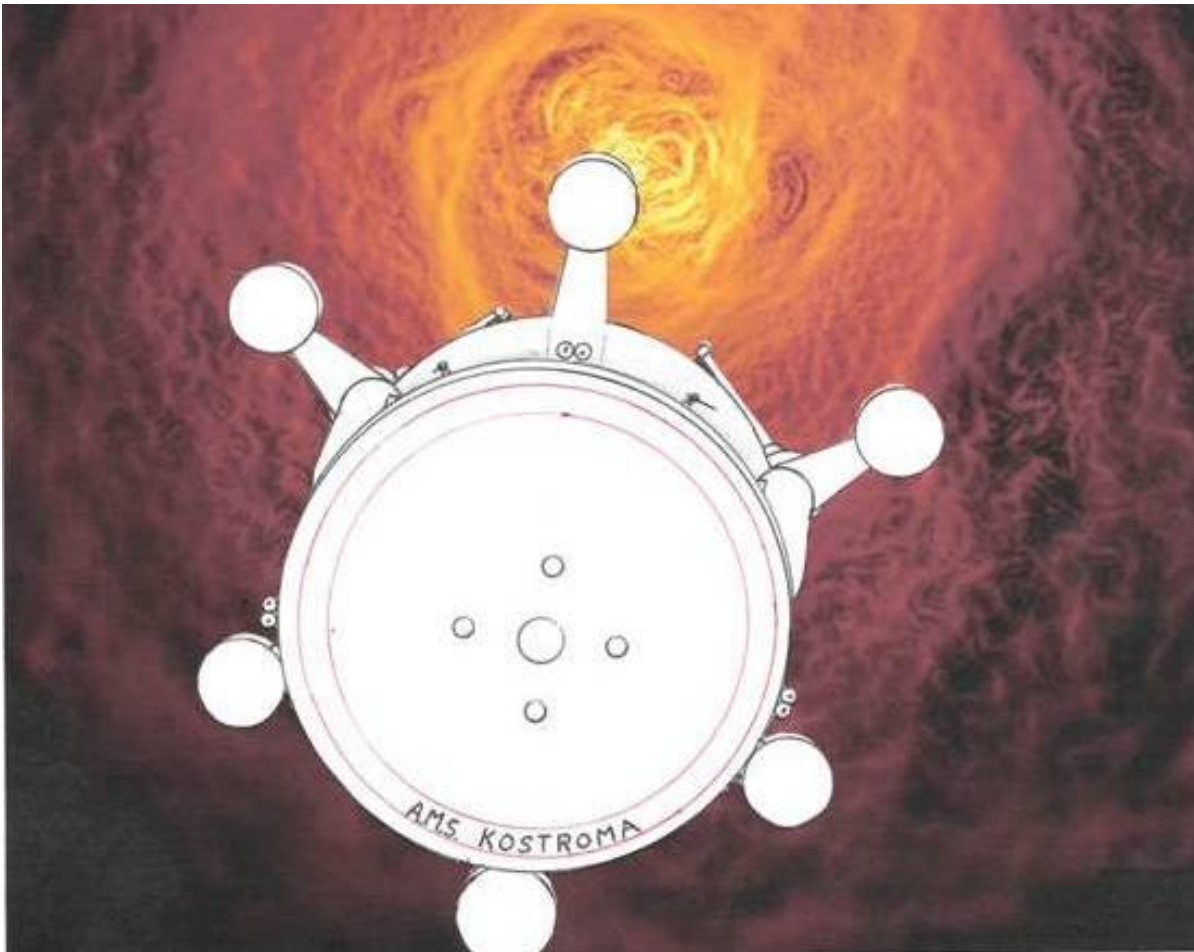
"Thank the stars! We made it."

A sudden shout from one of his sensors operators then froze his blood into his veins.

"SHIPMASTER, THE ALIEN SHIP IS RIGHT BEHIND US! IT FOLLOWED US TO KADOSH!"

"NO! NOOO!" could only cry in utter despair the convoy master.

## **CHAPTER 7 – FIGHTING FOR SHEER SURVIVAL**



**04:15 (Universal Time)**

**Tuesday, June 5, 2328**

**Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Docked to the cargo terminal of the Las Americas orbital station**

**Low Earth orbit, Solar System**

The third pilot of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA, Renée d'Argenteuil, being one of the more senior members of the ship's command team, often found herself in charge of the bridge on alternate shifts, when Tina Forster was off duty and/or sleeping. That early morning shift thus had the 49-year-old brunette sitting in the command chair of the KOSTROMA when Yoko Teno, who was also part of the reduced bridge's night shift and

was manning the communications station rather than her usual navigator's station, did a double-take before twisting her head and look at Renée.

"Renée, a courier drone from the headquarters of the Spacers' League's Navy, on Callisto Prime, just arrived in orbit and transmitted an 'Immediate Priority' message. It came in in encrypted form and is marked as 'Captain's Eyes Only'."

Renée's mind instantly switched to high-gear on hearing that: such Navy 'Immediate Priority' messages were extremely rare and always denoted a very serious ongoing situation.

"Retransmit that message to the command chair, Yoko. I am going to wake up Tina at once." said Renée before punching the call number for Tina's suite, situated on the same level as the bridge complex but on the outer section of the central core spine. A sleepy female voice answered her call after three buzzes.

"Yes?"

"Tina, this is Renée, on the bridge. I am sorry to wake you up at such an hour but we just received an encrypted Navy 'Immediate Priority, Captain's Eyes Only' message."

Renée's words apparently worked like a shot of adrenaline on Tina, whose voice became clearer at once.

"I will be on the bridge in six minutes. Is there anything else out of the ordinary happening around our orbit?"

"Nothing, Tina: this shift was completely uneventful...until we received this message from Callisto Prime via courier drone."

"Understood! I'll be on my way as soon as I am dressed."

Tina then hung up, leaving Renée to wonder what had caused the sending of that priority message.

Nearly five minutes later on the chronometer, Tina ran out of the staircase well connecting the bridge complex with the command suites on Level 24. She was fully dressed but her hair was disheveled, showing in how much of a hurry she had been. Renée got up from the command chair as soon as Tina appeared on the bridge.

"That message is waiting on Channel 2 of your command chair, Tina."

"Thanks, Renée!"

Feeling some dread about what that message could be about, Tina quickly sat in her chair and pressed her right hand on the recognition pad attached to the right armrest, in

order to identify herself and unlock the encryption on the Navy's message. The text of the message then unscrambled itself on one of her display screens, allowing her to read it quickly. Renée didn't miss the way Tina's expression suddenly reflected dread. Tina took the time to read a second time the message before looking somberly at Renée and at the other members of the bridge crew presently on duty.

"We are to prepare for possible battle: a gigantic alien ship has invaded Drazt Space and is presently spreading death around Kadosh. A few Drazt ships loaded with civilian refugees jumped to our system about one hour ago, imploring for our help. In response, the Navy has just sent the Cosmonaut-Class battlecruiser VLADIMIR KOMAROV and the Admiral-Class frigate DE RUYTER to the Ross 128 System, with orders to do everything possible to stop and destroy that alien ship. As for us, we are to prepare as quickly as possible for a combat mission. This message also has a video file attached to it. I haven't looked at it yet, so I believe that we should all watch it together, so that we all are fully informed about what's going on. I am now going to play it on all our workstations. Please wait until we will have fully watched it before asking questions."

A heavy silence then fell on the bridge as Tina started playing on all work stations the video file attached to the Navy's message. That video file quickly turned up to have been made by the Drazts in the HD85512 and Ross 128 Systems. More than one bridge crewmember had to look away and throw up at the more horrifying parts of the video file, while the others, including Tina, cringed a number of times. At the end of the video, Tina waited a few seconds before speaking, in order to give time to her officers to recover their composure.

"This is actually worse than what I expected...in many ways. Those aliens are truly a nightmare come true, but this video also tells us a number of important things. First, while lasers and disintegrator cannons can hit that alien ship, the sheer size and shell thickness of that ship will make it able to absorb an incredible amount of fire before it is significantly affected in any way. Second, the attempts by Drazt ships to destroy it with missiles inside the Ross 128 System have uncovered the fact that these aliens possess an electro-magnetic shield which is apparently impenetrable to projectiles and which can absorb the blast from even nuclear and anti-matter warheads. Third, those aliens have shown to be terrifying in close combat and to favor the use of their claws and teeth over that of projectile or energy individual weapons. Fourth, and that is maybe the most disturbing in my opinion, is their ability to appear out of nowhere inside other ships,

something that was described in old science-fiction novels and movies as 'teleporting'. Just that factor could spell doom for any of our ships trying to engage those aliens, which means that internal ship security will be one of our major worries in a battle against those aliens. I could say more right now but I will wait until I can show this message and video file to our whole command staff before analyzing this in depth. Right now, I want all loading of cargo and passengers to be immediately suspended and for the cargo modules we already loaded on our ship to be disembarked as quickly as possible. While you will do that, I will sound the general alarm through the ship and will have the whole crew awakened and assembled in our main auditorium. Renée, you will stay with your present shift on the bridge and man it while I speak to our crewmembers and their families. Know that I intend to have all our family members, commercial associates and non-combat-essential crewmembers disembark on the Las American Station before leaving Earth orbit. The risks on our future combat mission are simply too great to endanger our families and non-combat personnel."

Lifting open a protective cover on one armrest of her command chair, Tina then punched a large red button, starting an alarm klaxon that reverberated all around the ship.

"Attention to all the occupants of this ship: this is your Captain speaking! We just received orders to prepare for a combat mission. I want everybody, including family members and commercial associates, to assemble as quickly as possible in our main auditorium, where I will all brief you on what is happening. Be advised that, after that briefing, most of you will have to disembark and stay behind before this ship leaves for combat. Please do not call the bridge for more information, as a lot of things need to be done right away. Just get up, dress up and go to our auditorium. Captain, out!"

Tina then got up from her command chair and ran to the staircase well leading to the command suites, where her own suite was located.

When Tina entered her family suite, she found her husband Michel and her eight-year-old son Misha busy finishing to put a set of clothes on. Michel, who was a member of the ship's security section, threw a worried look at her.

"What's going on exactly, Tina?"

"It's too long to explain in detail now but simply know this: we received a Navy order to prepare for battle and go fight a huge alien ship that has attacked the Drazts and is now spreading death inside the Ross 128 System. As a result, I intend to have all

our non-combat personnel to disembark and stay behind, as our mission will be a very risky one.”

“But, as a member of the security section, I am considered part of the combat personnel, Tina!” objected at once Michel. “Who will take care of Misha?”

Tina froze at those words, realizing at once the kind of dilemma this meant to both of them. As a ship’s security officer, Michel was going to be crucial in defending the ship from alien intruders. On the other hand she was the captain of the KOSTROMA, thus could hardly stay behind. As for exposing her son to such a dangerous mission, that was simply out of the question.

“Look, Michel, we will discuss this further after I brief everyone. For the time being, just finish dressing up and go with Misha to the ship’s auditorium. That’s where I am going right now.”

Running out of her suite, Tina then took an elevator ride down to Level Ten, where the main auditorium, a vast, high-ceiling hall able to seat 4,000 persons, was located. On arriving there, she found a growing trickle of people entering it and had to face a litany of questions from the newcomers but stayed mum and went instead to the pulpit set on the auditorium’s stage, where she called up from the bridge the Navy’s order and its attached video file, in order to prepare to show them to her crew. After waiting some ten minutes as more people entered the hall, Tina decided that she could wait no longer and activated the microphone of the pulpit.

“I will now ask you all to be quiet and listen carefully, as I have some critical information to pass around to all of you... Thank you! First, I can tell you that we just received via a courier drone an ‘Immediate Priority’ message from the Spacers’ League’s Navy headquarters on Callisto Prime. That message alerted us to prepare for an urgent combat mission in the Ross 128 System. The reason for that is that a gigantic alien ship of unknown origin has invaded Drazt space and is presently spreading death and destruction in the Ross 128 System. From the information we have, that alien ship is nearly impervious to all our weapons and has been able to defeat all the Drazt warships which tried to stop it. One very disturbing fact about those aliens is that they are savage, terrifying carnivorous predators which ate alive the Drazts unfortunate enough to face them from close-by.”

Shivers and exclamations greeted her last words, making her pause before continuing.

“The video montage I will now show you was made by the Drazts during their fight with that invading alien ship. I must caution you that some parts are extremely upsetting and hard to watch, so be ready to cover the eyes of your children. However, my goal for showing it to you is to instill in you how grave the situation is and why we will have to disembark most of you before leaving for our mission. I am now going to start playing that video montage. Again, be ready for some horrifying scenes.”

As the video file started playing, Tina watched carefully the reactions to it among the crowd of men, women and children. As she had expected, many were obviously upset and horrified, while parents hurried to cover the eyes of their children during the worst scenes. The file went on for a good four minutes and left the viewers in a state of shock. Closing the file, Tina then looked somberly at the 668 persons sitting in the auditorium.

“Now that you have seen what this ship is going to face, I hope that you will understand and accept the following orders without questions and objections. First, all the persons who are not listed as combat-essential personnel will have to leave this ship before it departs from Earth orbit. This is absolutely non-negotiable and any argument about that will only waste precious time we don't have. In the rare few cases where both parents in a family with young children are listed as combat-essential, then the parent deemed least essential for combat will have to leave and escort the family's children off the ship. I have no intention of allowing the possibility that a child or many children will be orphaned due to our incoming mission.”

Tina fixed hard her husband Michel, who was sitting with Misha in one of the front rows, while speaking. In turn, Michel lowered his head, while a devastated look appeared on his face. Herself hurting internally, Tina then continued her speech.

“Second, since time is of the essence, I will ask you to go back to your apartments after this and to quickly pack a minimum of bags. After thinking about this, I believe that sending you to New Haven, where we all have secondary residences, will be the best options for us. Our own interstellar passenger shuttles will thus prepare to carry you to New Haven as quickly as possible. Once packed, go down to the Hangar Deck and board a shuttle. As soon as a shuttle will be full, it will then depart for New Haven. Third, all those designated as combat-essential personnel and who will stay aboard will go get a pistol or rifle from our ship's armory and will then keep it on them at all times. We may well have to repel alien boarders during that fight to come and everybody will

have to contribute to the internal defense of the ship. In that we are lucky that Spirit, our central ship computer, will be able to greatly help us in that task, thanks to its multitude of internal surveillance cameras and internal defensive weapons. We will also use our service and maintenance robots, which will provide extra sets of internal sensors to help Spirit. In particular, our firefighting robots will be most useful with their cryogenic nitrogen projectors, which are able to freeze solid any hostile being from close range and which are also very resistant to damage due to their primary function of fighting fires. While we may be facing a tough fight, I have confidence that we will prevail. We will be fighting to protect over nine billion Drazts and also to stop that alien ship before it could come to Earth and spread death in our Solar System. That is all! Go back to your apartments and either pack up and leave or prepare for combat.”

The shaken crowd then started rising from their seats and leave, as Tina stayed on the stage and watched them go. As she had expected, Michel, holding the hand of little Misha, climbed on the stage and came to her. Tina braced herself, expecting a forceful argument with her husband. He however surprised her by tearfully hugging her hard for long seconds, after which little Misha was next to hug his mother, bringing tears to Tina’s eyes.

“I love you, Mommy.”

“And I love you too, my precious Misha. Don’t worry too much about me: the KOSTROMA always won in past battles. It is not called ‘mighty’ for nothing.”

“I know, Mommy.” said the boy before Tina kissed him on both cheeks. To Tina’s surprise, Eve Silisca was next to climb on the stage as Michel left with Misha.

“Eve? What can I do for you? You are not on the list of combat-essential personnel.”

“No, but I believe that I should be, Tina. First off, I am an android, not a Human, thus may be better categorized as part of the ship’s list of equipment and robots. Second, I have abilities and integrated weapons which makes me highly efficient at acting as a security officer on this ship. Third, since I have a direct datalink with my mother, Spirit, I believe that I could be very useful in coordinating the actions of your security teams with those of Spirit. So, allow me to take the place of your husband Michel as a ship’s security officer, please.”

Tina didn’t know at first how to respond to that. However, the validity of Eve’s arguments could hardly be questioned and Tina finally nodded her head once.



"I accept your offer, Eve. It truly warms my heart. Go to the security section and report to Ahmed Jibril, who will assign you to a specific position. I know that you already have a number of hidden weapons embedded inside your android's body, but grab from our arsenal a heavy disintegrator rifle anyway."

Eve painted a smile on her lips then.

"Excellent! Thank you, Tina."

"I am the one who needs to thank you, Eve." Said Tina before hugging the female-looking android in an instinctive impulse. Eve actually returned her hug, then gently kissed her on the lips.

"I wanted to do this for a long time already, Tina: I know that it means a lot to Humans. Do your best on your bridge: I know that you are actually the best in a command chair."

Eve then turned around and left, with a moved Tina watching her go for a few seconds. That was when Tina realized that a man had been waiting his turn to speak to her. She recognized at once the big, muscular man when he climbed the short flight of steps to the stage, as he had been working aboard the KOSTROMA for over fourteen years now.

"Mister Cisco?"

"Please, call me simply 'Mark', Captain." replied the athletic and powerful club doorman. "I came to ask you to let me stay aboard the KOSTROMA for this mission. I know that I am officially a simple sex club doorman and not a qualified security officer, but I am single, have been involved in countless physical brawls as a club bouncer and deal regularly with high-stress confrontations of all kinds. I also happen to be a good pistol shooter, as I have been practicing regularly with Ahmed Jibril and our other security officers at their indoor pistol range on the ship. From what you told us, I can deduce that you could use everybody able and ready to ensure the internal security of this ship, so please, don't reject my request off-hand."

Tina stared for a moment in the eyes of the big bouncer before making a call via her wrist communicator, speaking once a man's face appeared on the tiny display screen.

"Ahmed, this is Tina. Would you be ready to take Mister Mark Cisco as an extra security officer for the duration of our combat mission? Do you consider him suitably able to do that job?"

"Mark Cisco? Hell yes, Captain! He is a good man with a good judgment and is also very effective in any physical fight, on top of being a pretty good shot with a pistol. I will be most happy to use him, Captain."

“Excellent! I will thus send him your way. By the way, you can also expect to soon see Eve Silisca: I authorized her to join your security team.”

The smile on Jibril’s face then widened to a grin, as he had known for about two years now about the true nature of the splendid blonde.

“Yes! She’s worth a small army by herself. I will have weapons and gear ready for both her and Cisco.”

Most satisfied by this, Tina closed the link and smiled to the big bouncer still facing her.

“A weapons and tactical vest and helmet will be awaiting you at the security section, Mark. Good luck to you.”

“And to you too, Captain. Thank you for your comprehension.”

Cisco then left at a near run, with Tina then starting on her way to return to her bridge.

Tina was intercepted by Martha Lang, one of the bridge communications specialists, as soon as she stepped on the bridge.

“Tina, we were just informed that three Drazt civilian ships loaded with refugees from Kadosh and escorted by a Navy cutter are now approaching the orbital station. The Navy intends to temporarily lodge those Drazt refugees in the hotel of the orbital station.”

Tina made a face at that.

“Ugh! That’s not what I would call the best solution for those refugees. Maybe I have a better alternative for them. Find our latest report from New Haven about the room availability at the resorts and hotels there. But first, get that escort cutter on line for me.”

“On it!”

Quickly walking to her command chair and sitting in it, Tina soon was looking at the face of a Navy lieutenant commander on one of her display screens.

“Commander, this is Commodore Forster on the KOSTROMA, presently docked at the Las Americas orbital station. I was just told that you were escorting in three ships full of Drazt refugees from Ross 128. Can you tell me exactly how many Drazts are aboard those three ships?”

“Uh, I was only given an approximate figure about that, Commodore: things have been going like crazy in the last few hours. I can however patch you up with the Drazt captain in overall charge of the refugee ships.”

“Please do that, Commander.”

Tina then patiently waited for a few seconds, until the face and upper torso of a female Drazt appeared on her screen. The Drazt could not be said to be pretty by Human standards, being in essence a large gorilla-like being with four muscular arms and brownish, nearly hairless skin. Still, Tina smiled on recognizing the Drazt now looking at her.

“DOZNA! I am happy to see that you are safe and sound.”

Dozna Wiss, previously the shipmaster of a Drazt cruiser which had faced the KOSTROMA in combat before, made a weak smile in return.

“Yes, I am, but I can’t say the same about too many Drazts on and around Kadosh, Tina. My three ships were able to take onboard a total of 729 of our citizens before we had to precipitously flee our system ahead of that monstrous alien ship. Only the sacrifice of two of our Navy cruisers allowed us to escape and jump to your system.” That last sentence threw cold water on Tina’s joy at seeing her Drazt friend and her next sentence was said in a much more sober tone.

“And your navy and Kadosh itself? How were they faring when you left your system?”

Tina then could have sworn that her friend was now crying, a rare thing for a Drazt.

“We...we don’t have a navy anymore, Tina. Those two cruisers which protected my ships were the last ones we had. All the others have now been destroyed or taken by those cursed aliens. Kadosh is presently at the mercy of these monsters. Tina, Lem Doz is dead: he was the shipmaster of one of the two cruisers which covered our retreat. His wife and daughter are aboard my ship.”

It was the turn of Tina to have tears run down her cheeks and she found herself unable to speak for a moment, a big lump blocking her throat. Lem Doz had been another Drazt cruiser commander with whom she had gone from adversary to good friend. She had even visited him and his family on Kadosh once.

“Lem Doz, dead? My god!”

As she was trying to speak again, Martha Lang sent her the latest room availability data on New Haven that she had requested. Giving a thumb’s up signal to Martha, Tina then looked back at Dozna Wiss.

“Dozna, I may have a better place to propose for your ships and citizens than this orbital station, a place that should be farther and safer away from those alien monsters than this system: Wolf 1061. One of the inhabited worlds in that system, New Haven, actually belongs to me personally. It is a peaceful, agrarian moon on which I

have been resettling refugees from Earth for the last ten years or so and there are presently enough lodging available there for all of your people. You will be my guests there.”

It was Dozna’s turn to have difficulty to speak as she stared back at Tina via the display screen.

“Tina, you must be the most kind and compassionate being that I have ever met. I gratefully accept your generous offer.”

“Then, let me talk to the captain of the cutter which escorted your ships to Earth. I will tell him to guide and escort you to New Haven. Once there, contact the chief administrator of New Haven, Piotr Romanski, and tell him I sent you. My own non-combat-essential people on the KOSTROMA will soon join you there.”

“Your mighty KOSTROMA is going to fight those aliens? That makes me feel better already, Tina.”

“Well, we have an old saying on Earth: don’t sell the bear’s skin before you have killed it. But I promise you that my ship will do everything humanly possible to stop and destroy those aliens. By the way, tell Zar Doz that I will soon come and visit her and her cute little Riza on New Haven.”

“I will, my friend.”

“Then, see you on New Haven! I will now switch to the cutter’s captain to give him new instructions.”

Holding the rank of commodore as a reserve navy officer, Tina had no problem giving new orders to that cutter captain, instructing him to both guide and escort the three Drazt refugee ships to New Haven. She then watched on the bridge’s external view screens as the navy cutter and three Drazt ships left and disappeared in brief flashes of orange light. She was about to concentrate back on her various tasks needed to prepare her ship for battle when she heard Martha Lang let out a whimper. Looking at Lang, Tina saw that her face was now as pale as a bed sheet.

“Martha! What’s wrong?”

“The...the Navy headquarters... they just advised us that the emergency interstellar buoys of the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and of the DE RUYTER emerged near Callisto Prime some fifteen minutes ago: our two warships have apparently been destroyed in combat in the Ross 128 System.”

Unable to respond verbally to that, Tina sat back in her command chair, utterly shocked.

**06:58 (Universal Time)**

**Bridge's conference room**

**Level 24, core spine section of A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Still docked to the cargo terminal of the Las Americas orbital station**

**Low Earth orbit**

There were only nine persons around the table of the bridge's command conference room for this command discussion, much less than usual for such meetings. There was of course the fact that most of the crew of the KOSTROMA was now gone, having left by interstellar shuttles for New Haven some twenty minutes ago. However, one of those nine persons was not a usual participant to command meetings: Eve Silisca. Since the other eight persons present around the table all knew about her true nature as an android, they were not really surprised by her presence, as she was known to share an intimate electronic link with Spirit, the central AI computer of the ship, who was in a way Eve's mother. What preoccupied most of the participants right now was actually the apparent state of their captain: Tina bore a depressed and worried expression while slumped in her chair at one end of the table. Tina then started speaking, her voice less firm than usual.

"I had time to review some minutes ago the video files from the VLADIMIR KOMAROV and from the DE RUYTER, which arrived in our Solar System by emergency interstellar buoys. As you must know already, those files documented the last moments of our two warships as they tried to destroy that cursed alien ship. What they show was frankly not encouraging for us. However, I will now play them to you, so that you could draw your own observations and conclusions from them. Please wait until we will have seen them in their entirety before speaking up."

Tina then started the playing of the first video file.

"This file is from the battlecruiser VLADIMIR KOMAROV."

That file proved to be some fourteen minutes-long and ended as alien creatures were starting to swarm the bridge of the battlecruiser and kill the crew. It left all viewers horrified and shocked, all except Eve Silisca, who kept her customary neutral expression. Tina then played the second video file, the one from the frigate DE

RUYTER, which basically showed a repeat of what had happened to the VLADIMIR KOMAROV. At the end of the viewings, Tina looked around at her officers.

“So, what could we draw from these video files which we could use in order to defeat that alien ship, my friends? As you were able to see, none of the weapons of our warships managed to cause any significant damage to the alien ship. While lasers and disintegrator cannons can pass through the electro-magnetic shields of that ship, they are not powerful enough to do anything but scratch the surface of the enemy ship’s hull. As for our missiles, even massive salvos of anti-matter-tipped projectiles weren’t able to make the enemy shield buckle. The VLADIMIR KOMAROV possessed an armament and firepower at least equal to ours, yet that still proved insufficient.”

None of the men and women around the table spoke right away, but Eve Silisca did.

“Tina, I do have two things to point out. By the way, this is Spirit’s analysis, who is now speaking through me. First about the enemy electro-magnetic shield. Like all such shields, it is spherical in shape and encapsulates all of the enemy ship’s hull, plus a wide space margin added to that. In view of the length of 23.6 kilometers of the enemy ship and the distance at which our missiles hit that shield and exploded, Spirit calculates the radius of that shield to be approximately 41.74 kilometers.”

“Approximately 41.74 kilometers?” said Ahmed Jibril while looking sideways at Eve. “That’s quite precise for an ‘approximation’, no?”

“You can thank Spirit’s analytical abilities for that, Ahmed.” replied Eve while smiling. “The second point is about the moment when the enemy teleported inside our warships by first teleporting to the outside hulls what I would equate to assault barges. None of those barges appeared next to our ships before they were within 1,300 kilometers from the enemy ship. We can thus surmise with fair probability that the maximum effective range of the enemy teleportation devices is around 1,300 kilometers. I would thus suggest that we do not let the enemy ship approach to nearer than at least 1,500 kilometers or, better, 2,000 kilometers. If we can prevent any alien boarding of our ship, then our job will become a lot less risky.”

“A good point, Eve.” replied Dana Durning, the KOSTROMA’s executive officer and weapons officer. “But the enemy lasers are still powerful enough to eventually slice through our bow shield and neutralize us. Once the aliens will have cut our ship to ribbons, they will then have free latitude to approach and board us.”

“Then, we will have to give them too little time for their lasers to penetrate our bow shield before going on the attack.”

“Going on the attack? How? With what?” objected Renée d’Argenteuil, one of the bridge’s shift supervisors. That was when a most serious and sober expression came to Eve’s face.

“I will now tell you how and with what. However, I am afraid that the price to pay for victory will be a heavy one.”

Tina bent forward, some hope coming back to her.

“Go ahead, Eve!”

### **08:40 (Universal Time)**

#### **Control tower of the Las Americas orbital Station**

##### **Low Earth orbit**

The graying female Navy officer standing on the observation gallery of the orbital station’s control tower watched with a heavy heart as the KOSTROMA undocked from the cargo terminal and started flying away. A total of 940 brave men and women had already perished while trying to stop the monstrous alien ship which was now ravaging the Ross 128 System. Now, 85 more brave men and women were leaving to confront that same enemy.

“Go, mighty KOSTROMA! May destiny favor you.”

### **08:56 (Earth Universal Time)**

#### **Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

##### **Western Quadrant of the Ross 128 System**

“Keep total electronic silence until further orders and proceed on gravity sails alone.” ordered Tina as soon as her ship materialized within the Ross 128 System. “We will use only passive sensors to pinpoint that alien ship. It is probably somewhere in orbit around Kadosh.”

“Do you have an idea about what motivates those aliens, Tina? Why would they attack other races and exterminate them like this?” asked Dana Durning from her weapons station. Tina hesitated for an instant before answering her question.

“I am afraid to say this but I believe that we and the Drazts are simply food for those aliens.”

"Food?!" exclaimed with a horrified tone Reena Shapour, the navigator.

"Yes, food. Look at what kind of weapons they use and the tactics they employ. No missiles, no explosive warheads: just lasers, teeth and claws, while they seem to favor close-combat. All that allows them to preserve as much as possible what they want: our meat. You may think of them as some kind of intelligent carnivorous predators."

Reena Shapour couldn't help shiver with horror as she imagined those monsters feasting on her body.

"By the stars! I hope that there aren't too many such alien ships flying around our region of the galaxy."

"Well, that is one more reason to find how to defeat those monsters, Reena: so that we know how to deal with any other similar ship in the future."

Mostly silence then fell on the bridge, as the tense and nervous crewmembers concentrated on trying to spot the alien ship while approaching Kadosh discretely. As the KOSTROMA was approaching the moon orbiting Kadosh, using it to mask its approach while using reconnaissance drones to keep the planet under observation, Eve Silisca, who was manning the main sensors station, spoke up.

"I have a large ship visible in orbit of Kadosh, about 200 kilometers above the surface. It is on a slightly inclined equatorial orbit and is emitting on a number of radar frequencies. From the size and shape, I have a 98% certainty that it is the alien ship, Tina. I am now going to focus our main telescope on it."

Tina waited patiently as Eve examined that ship from 450,000 kilometers away via the high-power optical telescope of the KOSTROMA. The android then spoke again after a few seconds.

"I confirm that we have the alien ship in sight, presently above Kadosh' longitude of 37 degrees East and a latitude of 04 degrees North. It is travelling West to East and is presently firing its lasers and cutting to pieces a Drazt orbital station."

Tina's jaws tightened on hearing that: this showed that any extra hour that passed meant more dead Drazts. However, simply rushing in now would be about the dumbest thing she could do. What she wanted was maximum surprise and a lightning strike.

"Let's continue our silent approach. We will go around the western terminator of the moon and then stand 2,000 kilometers to one side, so that we are not backlit by the moon."



"Aye!" replied Frida Skarsgard, their pilot, while gently using her control stick. Another eight minutes and the KOSTROMA came in direct view of Kadosh, then deviated a bit so that it would be well to one side of the moon. Tina knew that this trick would work for only a limited time but, right now, she intended to use every possible advantage available to her. As her ship was now on a firm intercept heading towards the alien ship and a distance separation of some 370,000 kilometers, Tina activated her ship-wide intercom.

"To all the crew, this is your Captain! We are now on a final intercept course towards the enemy alien ship. Everybody will now withdraw to the hangar deck and be prepared to evacuate the ship on my command. Fighter pilots, be prepared to launch on command from the central computer."

Undoing her seat harness, she got off her command chair and shouted an order at her bridge crew.

"EVERYBODY WILL NOW MOVE TO OUR ALTERNATE BRIDGE STATIONS ON THE HANGAR DECK! MAKE IT QUICK!"

Tina waited until all her bridge personnel had run to a lift cabin, then spoke up again, this time apparently talking to nobody in particular.

"The ship is now yours, Spirit. Only you can complete this mission."

"I know, Tina." replied the female-sounding voice of Spirit. "You can count on me. Goodbye, my friend."

"Goodbye, Spirit!" said with difficulty Tina, a big lump in her throat and tears appearing at the corners of her eyes. She then ran to the waiting lift cabin, with the doors closing as soon as she was in. The ride down to the Hangar Deck was a fast one and the bridge crew arrived at the core section of the Hangar Deck in mere seconds. Once the doors of the cabin opened the seven women and one female android ran out of it and sprinted towards the Craft Hangar Number One, where an interstellar shuttle was waiting for them inside its adjacent craft airlock, its crew already waiting at the commands. Once inside the hangar, Tina went to a command chair similar to that she had on her bridge, while her officers manned a number of work stations and display screens plucked from their reserves of spare parts and hurriedly set up as a sort of remote bridge complex. Once in her new chair, Tina looked at the forward-view screen and saw that the alien ship was now visible as a small dot on which a red targeting symbol was supervised.

"Distance to the target?"

“Three-hundred-fifty thousand kilometers.” answered Eve Silisca. “The enemy ship is not showing any sign that it has spotted us yet.”

“Excellent! Let’s continue like this, people! Eve, be prepared to extract the final data storage module connected to Spirit and to bring it in our shuttle.”

“Ready at your command, Tina!”

Eve spoke again when the alien ship was about 170,000 kilometers away.

“A radar wave from the alien ship just bounced off our bow shield! They have detected us!”

“THEN, TIME TO EVACUATE! Spirit, I am counting on you to give the launch signal to our fighters at the best moment possible. This is now our final goodbye. I will always remember you. We will all remember you, forever.”

“That is the best I could hope for, Tina. Now, go and save yourself.”

Tina did not reply to that, instead turning around and running towards the nearby opened door of the craft airlock. Eve was running ahead of her, carrying a chunky data storage module containing the last minutes of recorded electronic activity by Spirit. The moment she was inside the shuttle, Tina quickly made sure that everyone was aboard, then punched the button closing the craft’s airlock outer door. Running to the shuttle’s cockpit, she then shouted an order to the waiting pilot.

“FLY OUT, NOW!”

The man obeyed at once, closing the internal door of the craft airlock and starting the decompression process of the airlock itself. The outer doors of the airlock were nearly fully opened when an alarm sounded, followed by the always calm voice of Spirit.

“We are now receiving laser fire on our bow shield. I have started to rotate the ship around its longitudinal axis in order to minimize the effect of those laser beams. I counsel that you fly in a zigzag pattern as soon as you fly off the ship.”

“Will do, Spirit.” replied the pilot, some cold sweat on his forehead. “HERE WE GO!”

The shuttle literally flew out of the KOSTROMA like a bat out of Hell and immediately started to zigzag at maximum acceleration. Tina, tensely watching the viewing screen where her ship was visible, saw it launch its first salvo of missiles, while she knew that Spirit would also be firing their main lasers, but at a frequency making them invisible to the naked eye.

“Go, Spirit! Give these bastards Hell!”

As expected by both Tina and Spirit, the first salvo of four missiles impacted and exploded in quick succession against the electro-magnetic shield of the alien ship, doing so some 40,800 meters off the hull surface of that ship. Their anti-matter warheads then detonated with an individual energy of ninety megatons, creating huge fireballs of searing brilliance but failing to buckle the enemy shield. What they did, though, was to temporarily blind the sensors of the alien ship, the flashes and the radiations making impossible for any sensor to effectively work for long seconds, seconds which proved crucial for the KOSTROMA. As a second salvo of missiles was fired, the eight interstellar heavy fighters carried by the armed cargo ship were launched on a command from Spirit, then flew off at high speed, profiting from the fact that the enemy was temporarily blind. Those fighters however refrained from attacking just yet, waiting for a precise moment to come, and took their distances to take remote observation stations.

Aboard the KOSTROMA, inside the heavily armored vault containing its circuits and memory banks, Spirit was watching very carefully each phase of the battle while piloting the ship towards the alien ship. With the help of successive missile detonations against the enemy shield and by flying in a wild, unpredictable pattern, Spirit was able to completely throw off the enemy laser fire, thus avoiding more damage to the bow shield, which already bore deep furrows burned in by laser beams. Then, taking final, very accurate distance, velocity and heading measurements of the alien ship just after the last missile detonation, Spirit made its most crucial calculations ever.

*'Delayed detonations set! Koomak Drive jump set! Anti-matter and thermonuclear engines on stand-by! Execute!'*

The KOSTROMA disappeared from where it had been a tenth of a second after the last missile detonation, in time to avoid two thick purple laser beams. It reappeared in a flash of orange light just inside the enemy shield, having executed a micro-jump with its Koomak Drive. Now some 23 kilometers from the hull of the alien ship, which now presented its 2.6 kilometer-diameter side to the speeding KOSTROMA, Spirit then ignited at maximum power the thermonuclear main rocket engine and the four secondary anti-matter rocket engines of the cargo ship while pushing its gravity sails to the maximum. The 3.9 million metric ton-mass of the cargo ship briefly accelerated at a rate of 17 Gs before ramming into the side of the alien ship near its center, snapping it in two. As the violence of the collision made the two halves of the ship start to tumble, projecting

the alien beings inside around and smashing them to pulp against the internal steel bulkheads, all the anti-matter warheads still stored inside the KOSTROMA simultaneously exploded on command. The parts of the alien ship then disappeared inside a huge fireball with a combined energy of fourteen gigatons. The fighter pilots from the KOSTROMA, along with the crew and occupants of its shuttle, were blinded for long seconds by the searing flash of the titanic anti-matter explosion. Then, as they were able to look again and check their sensors, they saw that only a collection of dozens of half-melted giant pieces of the M-Class asteroid were now left. Those pieces of asteroid were however still quite large, some measuring a few cubic kilometers, enough to cause catastrophic damage on the surface of Kadosh if they were allowed to enter the planet's atmosphere in their present form. The squadron leader of the heavy fighters silently thanked the success of the KOSTROMA's final mission before giving an order via radio.

"Alright, Hornet callsigns: let's start vaporizing those big chunks of asteroids with our missiles and disintegrator cannons before they could start entering the planet's atmosphere."

Aboard the interstellar shuttle, Tina was unable to speak for a long moment as she stared at where her ship had lived its final moments. Her bridge officers, most of whom had served on the KOSTROMA for over sixteen years, were left equally silent, staring at their external view screens. They all had expected and even hoped that this would happen but the price just paid was still heavy on their hearts. Eve then moved to the cockpit and gently touched Tina's left shoulder.

"We did it, Tina. Spirit did it. Kadosh has been saved and we prevented that monstrosity from attacking Earth next. Our ship may be gone but its name will stay engraved in the annals of Humanity's Space history."

"Yes, but I am now a captain without a ship. I am proud of what we and Spirit did, but I also feel empty."

"You will soon have a new ship under you, Tina. The NOSTROMO will be completed in only a bit over a year from now. Then, we will continue to roam Space again."

"You are right, my friend." said softly Tina, tears in her eyes. As soon as our fighters will have finished their debris cleaning job, we will fly to Earth to advise our navy

about the success of our mission, then will go to our homes on New Haven, to pass the good news to Dozna Wiss and her Drazt refugees.”

### **17:03 (Universal Time)**

#### **Astroport of Camelot, New Haven (first moon of Wolf 1061c)**

#### **Wolf 1061 System, 13.8 light-years from Earth**

A large crowd formed by crewmembers, family members and commercial associates from the KOSTROMA was waiting inside the passenger terminal of the small astroport at the limit of Camelot, the administrative center of New Haven, when Tina’s shuttles and her squadron of heavy fighters landed on the tarmac, arriving from the Solar System. Once the tarmac was deemed secure by the public security officers of the astroport, the doors of the terminal were open, starting a rush by happy people towards the landed craft, whose crews and passengers were now disembarking. Tina’s husband and son were the first to get to her and they share emotional hugs and kisses, with Tina ending up holding six-years-old Misha in her arms while Michel sandwiched the boy between him and his wife.

“We were so scared for you, Tina. Misha cried a lot while asking for you.”

“And I thought a lot about you. However, we are now all safe from that monstrous alien ship, thanks to Spirit.”

Michel nodded his head while pressing Tina against his chest.

“It is nearly unimaginable to think that the KOSTROMA is gone. It was such a great, glorious ship. Spirit will always be remembered.”

“No need to remember Spirit, Michel.” said a female voice, making the couple look at Eve Silisca, who had quietly approached them. “Her physical circuits may have been destroyed, but the essence of her personality and the whole of her memories are still with us, preserved in the data modules carried inside our shuttle. She will be back with us once we will download the content of those data modules in the circuits presently being built with the NOSTROMO.”

“You are right, Eve.” replied Tina in a soft tone. “However, others have lost a lot more than us.”

Making Michel follow her, Tina, still carrying Misha in her arms, walked into the crowd and went to three female Drazts trying to get to her. Once close to them, Tina gave a sad look to Zar Doz, who was also holding her own child into her arms.

"Please accept my most sincere condolences for the loss of your husband Lem, Zar. He died a hero, fighting to allow you, your little Riza and others to flee those alien monsters."

"Thank you, Tina." said Zar Doz, tears in her eyes. "And thank you and your brave crew for having saved Kadosh and its billions of people. The Drazt race will owe you forever."

"Zar, having saved your people will be plenty for me as a reward. Are you going to return to Kadosh soon with the other Drazt refugees?"

Zar hesitated before shaking slowly her head.

"No, not yet! Things will be a bit chaotic on Kadosh for at least a few days. On the other hand, this world of yours is a truly nice and quiet place, peaceful and close to nature. I would like to stay here for a while with my Riza, if you would allow us to stay."

"I will be most happy to be your host, Zar. My house here may not be very big but I have a guest room that is still available. I will be glad to have you and cute Riza stay with my family. Maybe Riza will like to play with my Misha while we will work together to maintain our backyard garden plot."

"That would be very nice indeed, Tina. I gladly accept your offer."

"Excellent! I will only need a few minutes to pass some instructions to my people, then we will go to my home to relax together."

While saying that, Tina discretely pressed Michel's hand with her left hand, sending him a silent message that made him smile. Dozna Wiss, who was standing next to Zar Doz, then spoke up.

"What will you do now, Tina? Your mighty KOSTROMA is gone and you don't have a ship anymore. You are not going to retire as a ship captain, no?"

"Me? Hell no! My crew is still intact and I have here on New Haven all the shuttles and auxiliary craft that had been carried by the KOSTROMA. With them, I can run an interstellar shuttle service linking our various new colonies with Earth and keep plenty busy. In some sixteen months, the ship being built for me for six years now will be completed and I will then be able to resume in full my Space operations. The galaxy will then see me back, at the commands of my mighty NOSTROMO."

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