



Queen In Exile

by Oliver Strong

QUEEN IN EXILE

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Chapter 1

McCann was on his way with the others to London for a final press conference. The airship was making its way from Paris, the home of the second astronaut Louis Beaumont. The last four cities on the list were that of the traveller's home nations Seoul, Delhi, Paris and finally London. Louis described it as a 'déplacement du cirque,' going from city to city speaking to the press.

Airships were the preferred mode of air transport now especially since hydrogen was in such common use; they were cheap, clean and quiet. Travelling on the airships was the single part of the media tour McCann enjoyed and he suspected the same of the others. It was a break from the constant exercises in Geneva and the grilling of the media.

McCann was eager to reach London, it was where he was born and raised; a city that had risen from the ashes more than once in the last century. He looked forward to seeing his parents, especially his mother who had flown in from her home in Tel Aviv to see him before he left.

His father had met his mother whilst serving in what was named the oil conflicts, a conflict that ironically made the resource obsolete by the time it was settled. They had separated on good terms after he had joined the Navy, it still wasn't entirely clear why. He suspected they stayed together for him but he didn't really care, they were on amicable terms and never spoke ill of one another so he was content.

The voice of the captain announced over the coms 'You should be able to see London on the left; we'll be landing in about an hour.'

McCann put down his paper and peered out of the window, he could see a few tall buildings, monuments of a bygone era. Most of the tall sky scrapers had been obliterated in the past, what hadn't been destroyed by military strikes had been washed away by tsunami.

Most would have left the city and started a fresh, but like San Francisco in the early 20th century they refused to surrender and built each time from the ashes. Big Ben could be seen in the distant fog, one of the few monuments which had been restored, a testament to man's stubborn resistance to any type of logic. He smiled to see his home slowly advancing.

'Looking forward to the press conference?' jested Ryu.

McCann looked towards her but didn't answer; he smiled before his gaze returned to the city.

'Well I am, the last one and we can finally get down to business,' stated Ryu.

She was itching to get into space and couldn't wait to be the first woman to set foot on the red planet. She wanted to be the first person to set foot on it also and wasn't secretive about her ambitions.

'All good things come to those who wait,' said McCann thoughtfully as he looked out of the port window by his seat.

'So does arthritis and dementia Duncan, I want to lift off before I'm retired by the state!'

By the next day the four Astronauts were in the conference centre, sitting at a desk in front of the press, by now they were a well-oiled machine. Having done this so many times before, alongside all of the other televised interviews that were allowed by the I.S.A they were rarely stuck for words. It started as usual, 'So have you decided who will be the first person to step onto the surface of Mars? Or are you still undecided?'

This was usually directed to McCann as he was the flight commander and the bookies favourite, 'That's for mission control to decide, however we could always draw straws if it came down to it.'

Journalists were taking turns in asking a single question and the next in line stood up 'This is for Louis, since the Paris conference three women have claimed you are the father of their baby and are demanding a DNA before you leave. Do you have anything to say to them or any comment on these claims?'

Louis snarled 'I have nothing to say to those people, I've never met them nor desire to do so.'

'Then you deny you may have fathered those children?'

Louis maintained his snarl as the others smirked 'I've barely had time to sleep and eat in the last year, let alone getting three women pregnant!'

'So you have a problem with being labelled the "Cosmic Casanova" or is it justified?' replied the journalist who just refused to give it up.

'Can we please move on now,' said the man directing the conference to chuckling in the background 'and please no more questions concerning the gutter press, thank you.'

The next to stand up looked at the fourth astronaut 'This is to Hassif, being the only member of the mission without flight experience do you feel awkward or intimidated?'

'I'm not required to pilot anything so no,' replied Hassif 'I'm on the mission to keep the computer systems running. They do most of the flying anyway, we're just cargo until we touch down.'

Hassif, a man selected for his ability with computers. His talents were undeniable, able to analyse and repair any computer failures he was a human back up system. The director then took the mic 'Last question to Major Ryu Yong please,' and pointed to a journalist who took his cue.

'Major how do you feel about having to spend the next seven months with these three men alone? Most women would jump at the chance!'

'Well we've spent the last three years training together so I suppose I'll be able to tolerate another seven months.'

'It seems odd that the I.S.A has selected four bachelors for this mission, why do you think they did that?' asked the press journalist.

'You'll have to ask them, I'd say having a family to think about could cause an individual to be less focused and prone to error.'

The director stood up announcing that was all and the astronauts were shuffled out.

That night while Louis did his Network America interview, Hassif went to see the sights and Yong stayed in the hotel, McCann waited in the lobby of the recently refurbished Savoy hotel for his parents. It was and still is the premier place to stay in London and every room had been booked by the I.S.A for security reasons. The Savoy merged modern elements with the styles of the early twentieth century, quite tastefully. His parents were chauffeured to the hotel and ushered in, his mother hugged him and his father shook his hand.

'How have you been son?' she said in her Middle Eastern accent.

'The same as always mum and how have you been?'

'Good, the family is good too, it's been so long.'

McCann ushered them to the hotel restaurant where they sat and discussed things over a meal. His father sat down and looked around at the restaurant then at his son, 'Well I'd probably have to mortgage my house to eat here again!'

'Oh stop being so vulgar James, always talking about money even now!' snapped Ofra.

'Hey I was just giving the boy a compliment, I wonder if they do doggy bags here?'

McCann laughed with his father but his mother was more concerned with seeing her son before lift-off, she lacked a jovial attitude even at the best of times.

'I have seen that space lift they're going to tie you on, I pray it doesn't snap and you fall back down and crash! Will they test it before you go on it?' his mother whispered to him noticing someone was listening.

'They use the damn thing all the time Ofra!' bellowed James 'It's a lot safer than those rockets, he'll be fine!'

Duncan held his mother's hand across the table and said softly 'The orbital lift is the safest form of transport in existence, you were at more risk on the airship flight here mother.'

'He's got more chance of crashing when landing, now that's the risky part!' stated his father.

Ofra shuddered, 'Could you please shut your mouth about crashing or any disaster?'

James caught a black look from Duncan and decided to remain quiet, he knew better than to antagonise his estranged wife any further in front of his son.

'So how long will you be here Duncan?' asked James in a lighter tone.

'Two more days, I and the others have interviews and other media events to attend then it's back to Geneva.'

James an overweight and balding man in his seventies was beaming with pride 'To think the furthest I ever got was flying transport choppers whilst dodging towel head SAMs, and here I am seeing you a Colonel commanding a mission to Mars.'

Despite his years he, like his son was tall and he still cut an intimidating figure, but at this moment there was nothing intimidating about him merely tearful joy, 'So what about that Korean lady you're going with? Do you think I have a chance, or did that French bastard get there first?'

James and Duncan laughed but Ofra sighed, an Israeli woman of Arab descent she had long curly black hair with a light caramel skin. A great

beauty when she caught the eye of a young Navy pilot and even today her looks could be appreciated despite her years.

‘She is a nice girl and about your age.’

Duncan cut his mother off ‘She's married to her career, or should I say obsessed, she considers men an unnecessary distraction from achieving her goals in life, I don't think she's interested in starting a family.’

‘Yes but you need to find a woman you know? You're not so young now. You're successful and good looking, what are you waiting for?’

His mother constantly brought up this subject whenever they spoke, McCann was ill at ease whenever the subject or as he described it “the spectre” arose but it was important to his mother, ‘I'll start looking after this mission, all right mother?’

‘After the mission!’ she shrieked ‘I could be dead in a years’ time you know? There are many nice girls that would have you right now near us you know?’

McCann rolled his eyes and made promises to come and have a look when the mission was over.

After the meal they moved on to the bar, a 1920's style which seemed to be a prevalent theme throughout the Savoy or at least that's what McCann thought it was. They sat down with their drinks and his father snuck him a cigar which they both lit up. McCann was not allowed to smoke them but he slipped them in here and there, his mother didn't like them but put up with it.

His father questioned him on his crew and what he thought of them and shared some laughs concerning the press. His mother was far too concerned to make small talk that night and most of her conversation was about safety and getting back. McCann spent the evening chatting with his parents as the media buzzed outside as bees around honey. He and his parents could feel the energy of it even whilst hidden from view. After a long meal and discussion it approached 10 pm, McCann informed them it was his scheduled time to sleep and had to go. His parents said their goodbyes and departed, a proud father and a worried mother.

The next day McCann awoke at 8am and had his morning coffee, something he wasn't strictly meant to drink due to caffeine but it was his morning routine and like tobacco he refused to give it up completely. He

put on a blue shirt, black trousers and some black trainers which looked similar to shoes; he liked the comfort, and met his comrades for breakfast.

The day was spent going over schedules with I.S.A directors and Louis being told off by the PR department for his out-going interviews. Hassif was sitting at his 3D tablet solving code problems; he said it helped him keep on his toes. The tablet was a device that most people owned, the mobile phone of the 22nd century it had motion detection and the processing power that a hundred years ago a warehouse of super computers would fail to match. For most it was a device that was used for communication, entertainment to even driving your car. For Hassif it was an extra organ, watching 3d projected representations of code and solving the errors using hand gestures and voice commands. It baffled the others in a way that calmed them, providing a sense of security.

Ryu listening intently and digested all the information in her usual disciplined fashion, a stickler for efficiency. Louis joked she probably has a PHD in minimalism. Ryu didn't take chances, if anything was to go wrong it wasn't going to be due to her. In fact Ryu was considered for mission leader and would have got it if it was not for her almost Zen disciplinarianism. It was decided that her personality would negatively impact the other three so they plumbed for McCann.

McCann was a silent type that during a mission only spoke out of protocol when required; he had a rather black sense of humour which probably originated from his parents influence; his father being a jovial optimist and his mother possessing a rather nihilistic streak.

That evening McCann was chauffeured to his Network America interview being held in London. Louis had been there the night before and McCann was expected to raise the tone. Being interviewed by Jerry Habeeb, a respected journalist, "Habeeb's Hour" was the most watched current affairs broadcast on planet Earth. Jerry was dressed in his signature late 21st century style, a collarless shirt with a pocket watch clipped onto the breast pocket. He was in his mid-forties, dark hair receding apart from the peninsula of short hair jutting out in the middle. He was from Boston originally but his Mediterranean features and tan could have put him anywhere from Sicily to Syria, It was only when he spoke you realised where he was born and educated.

McCann sat opposite Jerry; he'd gone over most of the questions earlier that day in the hotel. Dressed in his best charcoal grey Italian suit with a black shirt that sported a small winged collar, he chatted with Jerry before they went on air. Jerry was reassuring him and trying to keep him calm as he did with all his guests; letting him know that nothing too risqué was going to happen.

McCann smiled and nodded, his fine grooming and his bespoke suit definitely exuded that he was relaxed and in control. Though this could be quite deceptive often he gave the impression of a cool exterior only to be the opposite, like a calm pool of water masking a raging torrent below. Tonight however he was calm, he had faced far worse in the past than a TV presenter with some possibly awkward questions.

The music played and the main lights came on along with a green digital on air sign. Jerry looked into camera 1 and spoke in his deep direct voice 'Hello and welcome to Habeeb's hour and tonight we have another one of the intrepid crew of the Athena, Flight commander Colonel Duncan McCann.'

McCann smiled and replied 'Good evening Jerry.'

Jerry continued 'In less than one month Colonel McCann and his three crew mates will lift off for Mars. However it will be two weeks before you even make orbit! Now I've had this explained to me but for the benefit of those that either haven't or still don't understand can you explain this?'

McCann smiled and obliged 'Certainly Jerry, it's actually a very simple principle. There's a ribbon anchored at two ends; one on Earth where we lift off and another in orbit on the station Tsiolkovsky.'

Jerry interrupted 'Right now that's the part I think we all understand, there's a cable between the Earth and the Tsiolkovsky. How do you move up the cable though and why doesn't it snap? I don't understand how it takes the strain.'

'Well first it's a ribbon not a cable and second it's made from nanotubes,' replied McCann.

'So what's the difference between a ribbon and a cable and what the hell is a nanotube!' Jerry asked with a smile.

'Well it's a ribbon because that shape can better withstand or avoid hits from space junk and meteorites, as for nanotubes Jerry you've got me there! That's not my area,' grinned McCann.

Jerry gave a playful puff then continued 'So how do you move up it and why does it take so long?'

'The ship is attached to a crawler that sends cargo to the Tsiolkovsky every month; we're pretty much hitching a ride on it. The crawler itself moves slowly up at first so as not to put too much stress on the ribbon but then gradually gathers pace. It gets its power from a second ribbon, as fuel would weigh it down, and returns via a third ribbon,' replied McCann matter-of-factly.

'Alright, now people have asked if it's possible that the Tsiolkovsky could come crashing into the Earth and push us into another holocaust? A lot of people still aren't comfortable with there being a massive asteroid so close to our planet, let alone the fact it is anchored to us!' inquired Jerry.

This had been the original fear when the orbital lift was being set up, a space station hewn out of an asteroid selected from the asteroid belt so close to us terrified many people. Many believed we were setting ourselves up for a mass extinction and it took a lot of persuading the public before opinion was on the side of the I.S.A.

'The station is very high above us in geostationary orbit, it swings back and forth due to the crawlers but imagine it being like a pendulum. It only swings so far before it has to swing back to its centre. The station is also manned constantly and has state of the art computers with backups and an AI that would correct any deviation with the on board thrusters,' replied McCann.

'Well I hope that helps some of our viewers sleep easier tonight!' quipped Jerry.

McCann had answered these questions before and still people didn't seem to understand that the planet wasn't going to be wiped out. He put it down to the fact that most people often let their hearts rule their heads and fear was a powerful emotion. Some just seemed to get a kick out of doom mongering and spreading panic, thankfully cooler heads had prevailed.

'So what will you be doing once you get to Mars Colonel?' asked Jerry.

'If all goes well we'll be overseeing the final construction of the first Martian base and secure the Martian orbital ribbon,' replied McCann with a slightly excited tone to his voice, but not enough to be detectable unless you knew him.

‘So why do we need a manned crew, as far as I've learnt the whole base has been constructed by robots. What are you going to do that they can't?’

‘The I.S.A would like some engineers to be there on site to oversee it, make sure the base is habitable, oversee the connecting of the ribbon system and monitor the first crawler. It could be done remotely from orbit but this project has too much invested in it not to send us. We'll be doing several jobs at once, when we're finished Mars should be ready for the first steps in colonizing a new world and I find that very exciting,’ replied McCann.

‘I see, so that accounts for why this mission has a crew with such a broad scope of expertise. What will each member be doing once there down there, I mean to say what area will their specific responsibilities lay in?’ Jerry inquired.

‘Well Louis will concentrate on the construction and repair systems, making certain the nanites are all running properly and checking that the architecture is sound. Hassif will be on the computer systems, making sure the central computer is hooked up to the SI and operating properly. Major Ryu will be piloting the drones, doing recon missions of the area such as geo surveys and she will be piloting the drone during the ribbon attachment. I'll be co-ordinating the mission and reporting to Geneva on progress, making certain orders are carried out.’

Jerry gazed at McCann with an expression some might say of envy, which was understandable who wouldn't want to go?

‘So how will you return once the mission is complete?’

‘We intend to use the orbital lift to haul ourselves to Edwards (The Mars station) and then launch from there back to Earth, if all goes to plan.’

‘Now I'd like to talk about how you'll travel between the planets. You're going to use a maser to shoot you there and what's more this has never been done before! Aren't you worried you'll be vapourised or something?’ said Jerry with a playful tone.

‘No we won't get vapourised; it's actually an old concept just like the orbital lift. Once in space the Athena will open a sail and point it towards the moon, then a large maser on the moon will fire onto the sail pushing the Athena faster and faster towards Mars. One has been constructed on Deimos, the smallest moon of Mars and that will push us back. The Martian one shall be operated remotely from the Edwards.’

‘Why are these masers based on moons and is there a chance we on Earth could get hit by them?’

It was something that the doom mongers had been asking since growing tired of predicting another great extinction event thanks to the Tsiolkovsky.

‘The masers are placed on the dark side of each moon so we can't shoot ourselves and the moons have no atmosphere so it means there's no resistance. Allowing more efficient power transfer and of course they're closer to the target,’ replied McCann.

‘What if the Mars maser missed and hit Earth? Isn't that possible and what damage would it cause? Or even worse what if it hit the Tsiolkovsky?’

‘Nothing, the chances are miniscule of that happening and if it did there isn't enough power to cause any damage to the Earth. The range of a maser is quite small and you'd need a lot more to budge the Tsiolkovsky from its orbit!’ smiled McCann.

‘So I'm not going to get cooked in my bed when you're returning?’ jested Jerry.

‘No Jerry, you'll be fine.’

Jerry looked at McCann ‘Now I'd like to chat about your career before the I.S.A. You were a navy pilot I gather; please tell us a little about that.’

‘I joined the navy perhaps through a sense of obligation, since it's a family tradition.’

‘Is that an obligation to tradition or an obligation to something else?’ countered Habeeb.’

‘Obligation to the Royal Navy, I was educated and raised there so it seemed a logical choice.’

‘So what did you start out as in the navy?’ asked Jerry.

McCann smiled as he began reminiscing about a part of his life he hadn't gone over in a long time ‘I first entered active service as a flight sub-lieutenant, I was assigned to a missile cruiser for a few years; as part of the crew that flew one of the then newer VTOL transport craft, I was very fortunate to get it as my first job.’

‘Then later you went onto serve on a carrier I believe, could you tell me about that?’

On hearing Jerry's request McCann's smile faded as his mind hit upon something else ‘Then the world seemed to catch fire again, the Eastern

States embargoed South America and in East Asia war was being declared like it was going out of fashion.

I was assigned to HMS Hermes in the mid- Atlantic; as there was a shortage of combat pilots; at first we flew anti-submarine cover for the Americans. After sometime I was selected for the SBS.'

'Could you explain to some of our viewers what the SBS is?' interjected Jerry.

'It's the Special Boat Service the navy's answer to the SAS if you will.'

'How do you get selected and what are the requirements?'

'Anyone in the UK armed forces may apply, if selected there are several fitness and survival tests in different environments culminating in a resistance to interrogation test.'

'So tell us what happened after you joined SBS? Was it as exciting as it sounds?'

'Exciting is very subjective Jerry,' spoke McCann in a serious tone 'it was exciting at times, just not the type of excitement you would welcome. I ended up flying an Atlas VTOL craft, or as we called it the flying crate. It was a fine craft, a massive box with two wings and a jet on each. In flight it looked just like a flying cargo crate, hence its name. I also piloted the smaller Hummingbird.'

'You've not mentioned in past interviews that you were involved with the British assault on Soledad. Could you tell us what part you played in that fateful operation?' asked Jerry.

McCann sat back obviously annoyed at the question but began to explain his part in Soledad, an assault on a coastal citadel in Colombia...

When the United States broke up due to the collapse of the fiat currency system it caused a domino effect, leading most notably to China imploding. However China was by no means the only nation to change drastically, in the turmoil South American nations lost support causing drug lords to take power. The coast of South America from Venezuela to Peru then into Bolivia and Paraguay became autonomous regions run by Cartels and Warlords funded by cocaine (their new currency).

After the Americans had settled on an agreement and the old U.S was broken up into three parts, the Eastern States, which comprised of most of the major north eastern states, and the most conservative, took Japans lead and embargoed the drug producers that endangered the stability of their nation. Eventually they had the Southern Union and Western States on board, then the re-formed EU followed and McCann was assigned to an aircraft carrier. Flying a small craft loaded with torpedoes and depth charges he spent most of his active service hunting submarines that were used to slip past the blockade and deliver the product to the buyer. The HMS Hermes was a King William II class carrier, outfitted with the latest EU made scram drones, air transport and anti-submarine VTOL craft, it was a floating city. Built after the oil conflicts had left the British fleet in tatters and with scram drones in mind; it had been used previously in the subjugation of the African pirate states and only the best were considered to serve on her.

Unlike carriers of the past the scram drones were launched not via a runway but fired from what looked like a rocket artillery launcher. Two giant rectangles split into eight square tubes sat at each end of the ship, loaded with scram drones to fire out when need be.

The scram drone landed by flying into a net at the end of the runway similar to conventional jets but the scram drones had no undercarriage, just as the scram drone approached the net the wings were swept back into the fuselage along with any weaponry and landed on the belly. The material on the belly was very tough and easily replaced, below decks in the hangar, if damaged.

McCann flew a VTOL craft something that required him to actually pilot, rather than sit in a booth safe below decks. Helping the Americans maintain an effective embargo on drugs he spent his days or nights hovering around, dropping sonar buoys and when a target or "drug sub" as they called it was identified he'd fly over and drop a smart torpedo that would hunt it out and hopefully sink it.

It was a routine McCann had got used to and he took pride in his work. One day after his shift he sat in the officer's mess with a hard copy of the Times. In fact he preferred to read papers considered much lower brow. However his superiors would have frowned on it and they wouldn't have lasted long in the officer's mess.

McCann lit up a cigar and sat with a large whisky reading when one of his flight crew sat next to him 'Bloody hell man, are you puffing on one of those cancer sticks again?'

'Why don't you try one Jenkins, no point in being a teetotaller all your life. Look at what happened to Hitler, the man didn't drink or smoke and ended up shooting himself! I'd hate to see you go the same way,' replied the short brown hair of McCann that bobbed over the paper.

'Listen old boy, SBS selection is coming up again this year and you'll never make it by smoking those things.'

Jenkins gestured to the tablet he was holding.

McCann turned down his paper and looked at Jenkins much like a father looking at his naughty son 'Good luck, I hope you make it in this time,' he replied as he turned the paper back up and resumed reading the article on the high court judge arrested for alleged virtual stalking.

Jenkins had been applying for SBS since he first was assigned to active duty; McCann had seen his type before. He had Jenkins classed with the other excitement seekers, he used to call them the "over the mountain squad" as his type were always searching for excitement and glory and it was always just over this mountain. Jenkins mountain was passing SBS selection which he'd failed to do 15 times. 15 times he'd applied and hadn't been asked to try out once. Ever since McCann had known him on the Hermes Jenkins had done little else but twitter on about the SBS.

For the last two years McCann had become pretty tired of listening about it on a regular basis. One of the officers had joked that he'd applied to the SBS selection just to get away from Jenkins. It had soon become a running joke on the ship amongst the officers, although it only seemed to encourage Jenkins.

'Why don't you apply Duncan, the selection quota has gone up to 500 this year more than double the usual!'

This got McCann's attention; he dropped his paper, put his cigar down and took the tablet from Jenkins 'Really? Any reasons given why?'

'No but I think we can all assume that this blockade is going to heat up now,' said Jenkins in his excited tone of voice.

'Perhaps, although maybe they are just low on personnel this year? A lot of retirements?' asked McCann.

He knew that Jenkins had friends who'd made it into SBS and suspected Jenkins finger was close to the pulse of what was happening.

'No, no, no that's not the reason. Manchuria attacked Russia last week and last night Korea broke the siege of Vladivostok!' Jenkins was almost unable to get the words out quick enough.

'Well good for them but what has that to do with the SBS recruiting an extra 300 this winter?'

'Well don't you see old boy? Russia has officially gone to war in China and joined the Japanese embargo. It gives the Americans a free hand to attack the Cartels,' blurted Jenkins.

McCann sat back in his seat and looked at the tablet, by now a small group had gathered around, it did make sense. If Moscow was officially embargoing the drugs, instead of trading weapons to keep it out of their country, then the balance of power was changing. Moscow was about to get embroiled in a war against potentially all the warlords it supplied in China. They wouldn't have the time or resources to be concerned with the South American cartels.

'I'll tell you what Duncan if we both apply and don't make it I'll stop complaining about those awful cigars,' poked Jenkins.

'And if we both make it in?'

'You won't have to listen to me prattle on about being selected for the SBS I suppose!'

The people around them laughed and the officers started egging McCann on. Jenkins brought up the electronic application on the tablet and the laughs became a roar with shouts of 'go on do it!' and 'drinks on me if he applies!'

McCann put his thumb to the tablet and his application was sent to cheers and applause, he looked up at a man in his forties with a moustache standing next to him 'Drinks are on you tonight Peterson!'

Six months, several combat fitness tests and one gruelling RTI (resistance to Interrogation) test later and McCann was flying an A-2 Atlas VTOL craft; transporting squadron Gama and their equipment to the Hermes. He had

been selected to apply for SBS and had made it into the final 500 as had Jenkins who was posted with squadron Omega.

McCann was excited to see his old comrades on the Hermes again so soon, he had been as shocked as Jenkins was elated when they both found out their applications had been accepted. There was a great celebration on the Hermes; McCann suspected many were ecstatic to be seeing the back of Jenkins due to suffering years of his god awful yapping concerning the SBS. After a month of fitness, combat and navigation tests they both made it through and got past the RTI test. McCann was put in Gamma squadron, a general purpose squadron that had been running operations in Madagascar. By the time McCann joined most of the pirates had been disbanded and much of it he suspected was a dry run for the Americas.

For the most part he piloted the smaller Hummingbird VTOL, used for small unit insertion and extraction, on the surface it seemed similar to his former job on the Hermes, in reality it was very different. Nearly all the flying was at night and by now he'd developed nerves of steel due to months skimming jungle canopy waiting for the next radar warning or burst of tracer fire attempting to knock him out of the sky.

McCann set the massive transport down on the flight deck, the deck then lowered the transport inside the hangar. The craft was lifted off by an arm and the lift rose up to fit back into the flight deck and make it complete again. The hangar was massive with 5 Atlas transports and a myriad of smaller vehicles and separate bays for drones. McCann opened the rear hatch of the craft and powered everything down, he then marched out and stood in line with his SBS comrades.

All were made present and correct and after a few words from Brigadier General Greetham the men were dismissed and escorted to their quarters. After reaching his quarters and dropping off his gear the bell rang, McCann opened his door.

Standing there was Commander Peterson 'How's the SBS been treating you old chap?' said Peterson as he presented him with a Habanos cigar.

'Thanks Robert,' said McCann as he took the cigar on offer 'I'm still alive so they've done a good job.'

McCann began to put his few possessions away and asked 'So how has it been on the Hermes?'

'Same old, same old, Duncan. So why are you SBS boys here?'

'I can't say anything about that Robert, I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry yourself, Jenkins told me the same thing yesterday.'

McCann looked around rather surprised.

'Didn't you know Jenkins was here old chap?'

'No he was assigned to a different squadron; I don't know where he's been for months. Is he still on the Hermes?' inquired McCann.

'Yes, you've been invited to the officer's mess by Admiral Mansfield at 20:00 hours. Jenkins should be there so bring plenty of good stories for us will you?'

'No problem, I'll be there on the dot.'

'See you later then.'

'Later.'

Peterson left him to finishing tidying up his quarters.

That evening McCann walked into the officer's mess on the Hermes wearing a freshly pressed uniform and sporting his SBS emblem which read "By Strength and Guile". As he stepped in the room erupted to a rendition of "for he's a jolly good fellow".

McCann was rather embarrassed at such attention but he smiled through it.

Jenkins approached him and shook his hand 'Great to see you old boy, how've you been?' he asked showing off his SBS badge with obvious pride.

'Very well thanks, so where have you been hiding out all these months Jenkins?'

'The last three months we were in Guyana, bloody awful place. Six of us were living off bananas and caterpillars for two weeks!' laughed Jenkins which caused McCann to laugh along with him.

'Emails and such weren't permitted not that there was any time for it.'

Next he was approached by his former commanding officer Admiral Mansfield; a man in his fifties and going grey. He was very proud of the fact that two of his officers were selected for SBS and wanted to show them every honour whilst they were back on board. The Admiral approached them and McCann saluted. Mansfield returned the salute then offered his hand which McCann shook. 'So how has my other SBS boy done? It's good to see you on board again McCann,' said the Admiral in a booming voice.

'Well I saved the world once and romanced at least five world leader's wives!' replied McCann with a wink to roars of laughter.

‘But most of all I didn't have to listen to Jenkins talking about applying for the SBS!’

Jenkins smiled and the Admiral patted him on the back and led him to the bar where he ordered him a drink. McCann took a non-alcoholic port to go with his cigar. Tomorrow was when the operation began and he couldn't drink anything alcoholic.

The evening went well as he and Jenkins mixed with old comrades and traded war stories, competing in “past acts of gastronomic degradation” as the Admiral described it. Later it got on to speculation as to what was going on with two SBS and one SAS squadron on board the carrier. Everyone knew there was going to be an assault, they just didn't know where and when aside from the Admiral and other top brass from the SBS and SAS. A second British carrier, HMS Prince of Wales, had joined the task force along with the American Carrier USS Constitution.

The Americans had already moved in on the Colombian Pacific coast and it seemed logical the British were going to make a go of the Atlantic coast, whilst the French were fighting their way through Venezuela.

The next day McCann and his flight team were called to the operations room by the Brigadier General. Inside the Admiral and his staff briefed McCann's team on their mission. They were to fly a humming bird into Colombia and insert a team close to Soledad's main military airbase undercover of night. The SAS were to first, take down the radar network and neutralise the missile defence shield; which guarded Soledad and the surrounding area from and air assault. Allowing the SBS to drop larger teams inside to neutralise the port and airbase before the enemy could respond. All this opening the door for the main forces to land and capture the port then surround Soledad and force a surrender before the afternoon.

The SAS had been in the area for weeks already and were prepared to take down the radar net in 20 minutes. With that the Brigadier ordered his SBS to prepare for take-off and wished them good luck.

Twenty minutes later and McCann was skimming the ocean towards the enemy airbase, he could see Jenkins banking off in the direction of

Soledad's military port thanks to the electronic display the computer fed onto his helmet visor. He could feel butterflies in his stomach. This was something that comforted McCann and reminded him he was alert, which he kept under control as usual.

Outside it was pitch dark, the display on his visor superimposed the true image of what was outside along with all pertinent information to the mission. McCann could see the beach approaching with Soledad only 3 miles to the west; the port attached to the city and Jenkins moving in close to it.

The Brigadier then came over the comms informing McCann that the radar was down and it was time to insert. McCann increased the speed of the Hummingbird as far as he could and made for the airbase, at that point flares shot into the sky searching for enemy aircraft much like a blind man using a cane to see. McCann landed his craft safely only a few hundred metres from the airbase perimeter opened the rear hatch. His cargo of twenty men and a light armoured vehicle filed out. Once they were clear he lifted off and made back for the carrier reporting the insertion a success.

After having landed on the Hermes McCann was called back to the Brigadier, as he made his way back the flight deck was busy. Scram drones were launching into the sky to intercept the incoming enemies. Crews were waiting on the deck checking and rechecking the Atlas transports that were prepared to drop off cargos of men and tanks. McCann got out of the way and made his way to report in, leaving his flight crew in the hummingbird.

'Flight Commander McCann reporting, Sir,' said McCann saluting the Brigadier.

The Brigadier returned the salute 'Excellent, did you see anything of Jenkins on the way back?'

'No Sir, I witnessed him approaching the port but once the radar was down I didn't see him again. Why is something wrong Sir?'

'He should have made contact with us by now, we'll see. How did your job go McCann, any trouble?' asked the Brigadier getting off the subject of Jenkins.

'No problems Sir, in and out without a hitch nothing to report.'

McCann was still concerned for Jenkins as he turned to look at the tactical display of Soledad and all the objectives. From a quick glance he

could see all wasn't going as it should, his concern grew for Jenkins and the squad he had dropped off at the airbase.

Ninety minutes into the operation and the situation had greatly deteriorated, the HMS Prince of Wales had been hit by two fully loaded enemy scram drones and the deck was ablaze. The USS Constitution had taken minor damage but was still fully operational, the HMS Hermes had escaped so far, but probably not for long.

The enemy was using the scram drones as guided missiles since the airbase was about to fall into SBS hands. Instead of bringing them back for re-arming the pilots were ramming them into the carriers at Mach 5 and launching a new one. McCann had been ordered to fly into the port and search for Jenkins squadron and extract them if possible. McCann and his team lifted off just as a scram drone flew into the deck and exploded, the damage seemed superficial to the ship but McCann witnessed crewmen being flung around by the impact. Despite his concern for them he concentrated on the job in hand and turned his full attention to Jenkins and Omega squadron.

As McCann approached the port he could see dawn was breaking, now that the glow of the fires on the carriers was behind him. From above he could see the British and Americans had already formed makeshift LZs either side of Soledad but were being pounded by missile fire from within the city. It was obvious that the forces in the city would inevitably surrender but not until they had inflicted as much damage as possible.

Scram drones circled the air like vultures looking for a corpse, when a target within the city was spotted the computer locked on and fired on it with cold mechanical prejudice. McCann found it to be a most distasteful sight so turned his gaze towards the port; where his on board computer managed to identify a damaged Hummingbird smoking on the ground. His heart jumped into his mouth, when he'd got his composure back he hovered around the site for as long as he dared and called it in reporting no sign of the crew. The Brigadier recalled him back to the Hermes, so McCann dutifully turned and made his way to the carrier as an Atlas went the other way to the LZ.

Two days later and the Prince of Wales had withdrawn for repairs. Jenkins and his entire team were still missing and the Americans were preparing to assault Soledad since the citadel commander had refused to

surrender and the local cartel was moving an unknown force towards the area.

The enemy had lost their airbase to the SBS who had secured it for the Hermes and Constitution, the port had been secured and all that remained was the burnt out city of Soledad.

'Why don't those bastards surrender?' boomed the Admiral whilst he toured the Hermes early in the morning inspecting the damage with the Brigadier.

'They're afraid of the cartel Sir,' replied McCann who had been spending the morning standing on the deck looking out over the sea at a smoking Soledad in the distance, wondering where Jenkins was.

'Afraid? How do you mean Commander?' asked Admiral Mansfield.

'If you surrender then your family will be executed, however if you're captured whilst in combat that's different, Sir,' replied McCann in a rather philosophical tone.

'So you're saying they're waiting for us to attack so they can give in?'

'No Sir, but I'd bet it's going through their minds right now,' replied McCann staring into the distance 'any word on Jenkins and his crew, Sir?'

'None, we didn't find any bodies just that his Hummingbird was hit by an anti-tank mine. Poor blighter must've landed on the bloody thing. I'm sure he got away Commander.'

'Then why haven't we heard from him Sir? Unless he's either dead or in that city held captive,' said McCann still staring out.

'Don't let it get to you, if we find them I'll let you know, all right?' replied the Brigadier to which McCann nodded in thanks; before returning to looking out over the carrier at Soledad.

Jenkins had been annoying in the past but he was a good reliable man and McCann was worried for his comrade. The citadel was half destroyed by missile fire from scram drones that still circled the city like vultures over a dying animal. They hit it time and again patiently. McCann was fine with a good clean fight but watching Soledad go through the death of a thousand cuts with his friend possibly alive and injured inside was torture.

Later that day the American tanks began to open fire; McCann could hear the boom of the cannons as they smashed a path through the winding, walled city streets of the citadel. By midday the Americans had sliced through the city unopposed, any difficult areas were demolished by

tank fire. By that afternoon the General in charge of the city had been found dead. He committed suicide at his HQ rather than be captured and have his family killed.

Jenkins team was discovered in the city, they had split up after the Hummingbird hit a land mine. They'd spent the last couple of days hiding in Soledad, sabotaging enemy communications and defences. Some were captured and tortured, some killed, others somehow made it. McCann was informed that they were being lifted onto the Hermes and ordered to extract them. When the Englishman and his team got to the airbase Soledad was in ruins. British and American soldiers combed the city either suppressing resistance or pulling out corpses which sat in massive rotting piles. The sight of bodies in the hot sun some with bloated tongues thrusting out of the mouths turned McCann's stomach. On landing he saw Jenkins carrying a stretcher with one of his comrades on it, ten of them got on board. McCann kept waiting for the others to turn up until Jenkins walked into the cockpit, in a rather sorry state, and whispered 'That'll be all, you can take off now.'

McCann could smell the stench of rotten flesh on Jenkins as the co-pilot got up to let him sit next to McCann 'It's good to see you old boy, I was worried when I saw your Hummingbird,' said McCann as Jenkins strapped himself in.

'So that was you was it?' replied Jenkins in an understandably tired voice 'I'm sorry but it was too dangerous, couldn't endanger you as well.'

It then went quiet as McCann lifted what was left of Omega squadron back to safety. Within a few minutes the fleet appeared over the horizon. Jenkins looked shocked 'What the bloody hell?' he said breaking the previous silence as they approached the Hermes. He surveyed the damage done by the enemy 'Where's the Prince of Wales?'

'She's had to get repairs, they kamikazied us as we were taking the airbase. All the carriers got hit but the Prince of Wales got the lions share. Five direct hits in all, fully loaded scram drones at Mach 5 into the flight deck The Hermes got hit too but it was a lot less serious.'

'Any casualties?' inquired Jenkins thinking of his crew mates,

'Bates bought the farm along with six hands and Peterson took some nasty burns. It would've been a lot worse if we hadn't got our drones up in the air so quickly. Still it's good to see you alive, how did your boys do?'

‘Not so good, we hit a mine on landing and had to abandon the Hummingbird. The port was just a big booby trap full of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. The vessels in the port had been abandoned and disabled; our only option was to either head for the surrounding countryside or make a dash for the city. We chose the city as the safer option and thought we could still help out. Two days of hell old chap with 20 dead because someone bungled the reconnaissance, bloody awful!’ bemoaned Jenkins as he sank back into the seat.

Within two weeks Soledad was secured and being used as a naval base, four years later the last of the cartels was hunted down in the jungles of Bolivia. Those countries conquered were split up between the American nations and those who supported them. The Eastern states taking Ecuador, a location that would place them in good stead in the future.

McCann spent another 7 years in SBS attaining the rank of Colonel in the Royal Marines. Much like the SBS joining the ISA was a similar affair, whilst having a drink at the officers club in London Jenkins brought it to his attention. Jenkins was applying and McCann decided he could do with a change of scene from all the blood and guts, so he went in with him. Jenkins didn't make it but McCann was selected for flight commander based on experience, ability and his psyche profile.

‘So that's about the short version of my story Jerry, I hope I didn't send you to sleep?’ quipped McCann.

‘Well that was a truly fascinating saga and I hope your comrade Jenkins is well and watching this today, but my final question is who's it going to be Colonel? Who has been chosen to set foot on Mars first?’ inquired Jerry in a now subdued tone.

‘We haven't been told yet Jerry, but I think they're just trying to keep you all in suspense!’ smiled McCann.

‘Well the bookmakers say it's going to be you, next it's Major Ryu. Are you going to be making any bets before you leave?’ jested Jerry in his bombastic manner.

McCann laughed ‘No Jerry I'm not a gambling man.’

'Do you have any words prepared in case it's you?' probed Jerry, it was almost a certainty it would be McCann but the I.S.A hadn't released a statement.

'I haven't had time to think about it Jerry, but if it is me I'm sure I'll think of something,' replied McCann.

'Well that's all the time we have, America wishes you a safe journey and we'll see you back here in this studio sometime next year.'

Jerry brought his hand up and McCann shook it 'Thank you very much we'll all do our best to make you proud.'

Chapter 2

Back in Geneva McCann awoke at 7pm sharp, just before the early morning alarm. He got dressed and went to the mess hall to grab breakfast with his comrades. He took a bowl of muesli and a decaffeinated coffee. All food was measured out into exact portions; the I.S.A was leaving nothing to chance. McCann found Major Ryu sitting alone at a table and joined her, she was snacking on some vegetables and rice it didn't look very appetizing but the muesli wasn't exactly bacon and eggs itself.

'Good morning Colonel, please sit down,' chirped Ryu. She was always up bright and early on a morning. She was sharp all the time but McCann couldn't fathom how anyone could be such a bright spark on a morning except for a child on its birthday. Then again today was a special day, lift off was two weeks away, today they would prepare for their final flight to Ecuador to begin their slow ascent to the heavens. Rather anti-climactic compared to the rockets of yesteryear, but far safer!

'Good morning Major, anyone else up yet?' inquired McCann.

'No, just us. I could hear the buzz from mission control in my room I don't know why those two need an alarm to wake them,' stated Ryu.

McCann nodded, mission control had been buzzing all night; checking and re-checking all the systems on the orbital lift, the Athena and their computers at ground zero in Ecuador. So much rode on this that failure was something that the mission director William Faraday had nightmares about; although he let none know of it.

He had been the head of the I.S.A for the last 15 years; the main force behind the push for the orbital lifts, before climbing to his present position. For over 30 years the orbital lift had been a possibility but a massive war of words had raged over it on Earth. The cost, the risk and the fear of a disaster that would eclipse all of mankind's conflicts put together prevented it from being constructed. What had convinced enough leaders wasn't the fact that it would open up the entire solar system; nor the fact that it would slash the costs of launching satellites and allow mankind to perhaps colonize other planets. No it was the fact that Russia had announced they were going to build one. They had selected an asteroid from the asteroid belt. With drones cutting and tunnelling the inside they

would construct the station soon. Moscow announced they'd move the Tsiolkovsky into orbit within ten years.

After that an even greater wave of panic and fear struck, having to pay tolls to Moscow for the use of the lift. Mankind as usual showed how petty and pathetic he truly can be. Human life was no longer a concern, now it was the horrifying thought of Moscow having a monopoly on space travel and access to all those resources. Moscow would have been in charge. The European Space Agency quickly broke with N.A.S.A and negotiated before anyone else. Agreeing to pay half the credits for rights and having it anchored on their soil. Moscow waited for everyone else to start making offers, soon the Americans decided it would be cheaper to build their own, rather than win the "Mother of all bidding wars".

Then the Europeans started to back off and consider their own alternatives, smaller satellites but further out, compressed structures and all sorts. Soon the Asians were looking towards getting there, with the resources of India, Japan and Korea they formed their own coalition to build a working orbital lift or space elevator as they preferred to call it. All the time the Russians were speeding towards actually doing it, the others were arguing amongst themselves.

Before long they all realised there was no way to beat the Russians to it but they could get it done shortly afterwards, so the others banded together and the I.S.A was formed. Based in Geneva they decided on building a smaller satellite that was in a much higher orbit. It would require a much longer tether; however a university in India had solved the problem. They could grow nanotubes long enough to do the job without having to weave them together. The Russians were going to weave theirs; a woven tether could take far less stress than one grown in a single piece, allowing the I.S.A to send larger payloads into space. Moscow soon had talks with Geneva; the result was a Russian station using an Indian ribbon anchored in Ecuador with the HQ at Geneva. Moscow entered the I.S.A.

Over the years the old space agencies faded and merged all they had into the I.S.A, this was to be the greatest construction in history. Projections put it as earning more than any other endeavor in mankind's history and offering such advantages militarily that no nation could own it, or at least afford not to have a stake in it.

The I.S.A over the years became its own master. It was now unclear who controlled the organization since no single nation owned enough of it to claim ownership. Yet without Moscow providing a station, India growing the nanotube for the ribbon linking it to Earth, the Eastern States providing the highest point on Earth to Anchor the station; and finally The EU providing a HQ to co-ordinate it all along with the next generation of SI, it would not work.

The I.S.A became autonomous to a certain extent and William Faraday was its director, perhaps the most powerful person in the world? Since he could cut any nation off from space, perhaps, but certainly the most stressed!

Faraday walked into the mess hall and approached McCann and Ryu 'So where are the other two?'

'Haven't seen them yet sir, I'm sure they'll be down presently,' replied Ryu.

A moment later Hassif and Louis walked through the automatic doors into the mess hall, both were smiling. They seemed to have been sharing a joke or some amusing anecdote on their way to breakfast.

'The early bird catches the sky lift boys!' said Faraday turning to the LCD clock on the wall which also displayed a countdown to lift off.

'Don't you worry yourself, we have it all in hand mien Fuhrer!' joked Louis.

Hassif laughed but neither McCann, Ryu nor Faraday were in the slightest bit amused. Louis never took anything as seriously as they thought he should and Hassif was too ready to be his partner in crime.

'Louis, shut your bloody mouth and get your breakfast,' replied Faraday in his stiff upper class English accent, an old Etonian and Cambridge man he didn't have much patience for Louis Beaumont even at the best of times. He tolerated Louis as best he could or perhaps suffered him would have been his choice of words; Louis was unfortunately indispensable unlike his attitude.

'Forgive me mien master!' cracked Louis whilst smiling.

Faraday was on the verge of another explosive rant, McCann had got used to this over the years due to Louis and his antagonistic attitude towards all authority figures.

McCann quickly intervened 'Louis just do it now,' in a stern but calm voice.

Louis went from giggling satyr to having a rather irritated expression; he didn't like being spoken to in that manner. In fact no one had spoken to him that way before he came to Geneva and put on an I.S.A uniform. Many wondered if he'd last one month, but going to Mars was such a powerful lure that he controlled himself as best he could.

He respected McCann and Ryu above anyone else for some unknown reason; perhaps it was their military records. The fact McCann was an ex-SBS pilot and Ryu flew drone scram jets for her country during the Manchurian war. It was the one thing the two had in common other than being the only people Louis ever listened too; whatever the reason, without another word he went over to the counter and ordered his breakfast along with Hassif.

Faraday took a moment to calm himself; the stress of the last few months had been enormous. Faraday felt that the future of humanity itself was on his shoulders and if he made a mistake he would have doomed not just the I.S.A but his fellow man also. Faraday was the San Andreas Fault on legs and no one that knew him envied his position.

'When you're all finished you've got a final physio and psyche test, so report to medical by 08:30 hours. When the doctor releases you meet me in the briefing room, understood?' said Faraday.

'Yes Sir,' replied the four as Faraday walked out through another set of doors.

After breakfast McCann left the mess hall and strolled down one of the many long white corridors to the medical wing. A staff of 50 of the world's best professionals dedicated to ensuring the good health of the four astronauts. The wing was equipped with all the state of the art equipment; the head of the department Doctor Weissmuller could monitor them from his office, even on Mars. Each astronaut had nanites injected into their blood stream; hooked up to a microscopic body monitor, which acted as the nanites central nervous system, injected into the flesh at the rear of the neck. The chip in the neck sent data via the Athena to and from the Doctors main computer in his office, monitoring every aspect of the patient's physical condition.

Nanites had been used in medicine for many years now; they had replaced minor surgical procedures such as removing blood clots or tumors from the body. Weissmuller had developed his nanites to carry out many other emergency procedures if needed and he could do them from Earth. McCann walked into Weissmuller's office, the doctor sat at his computer, a mahogany table with three displays and a silver glove.

Weissmuller a bald man in his 70's sat in his comfortable matching mahogany chair and with one hand in the glove was typing up Major Ryu's report. He tapped different parts of his own hand to give commands and select words, with one hand he could type a report and with his voice he ordered the body monitors to run self-diagnostics and check the hosts for any abnormalities. It was quite a sight to behold, the office gloves were an older technology not used much today, as you could fully interact with speech and had motion detection, but Weissmuller didn't see why he couldn't use both and get his work done twice as fast.

'Good morning doctor, do the nanites give me a clean bill of health?' asked McCann.

'It looks promising Duncan, you shouldn't croak for at least another week!' replied Weissmuller in his thick German accent as he dipped his head and looked over his spectacles at him. For some reason the doctor didn't have his eyes lasered. He said the spectacles helped him think, it seemed a crazy notion but his work spoke for itself.

'You have been a naughty boy whilst you were away Duncan, you know I could have reported you for drinking that caffeine and smoking that cigar, I hope it was a Havana!' said Weissmuller slowly, still looking over his spectacles.

McCann grinned back at the doctor, he had gotten to know the doctor well over the last three years and they had become firm friends 'You know me Frank always living on the edge!'

The doctor gave a slow light laugh 'Don't worry I won't tell the Director, I'm just glad to know that the nanites operated properly. That trip you four had was the furthest distance they've been tested at this year, I just need to have a look at your body to make sure they're doing their job.'

He pointed towards a bed in his office; McCann lay on what was a raised bed which lay on a semi cylinder. Once he lay on it the doctor made a hand gesture with his free hand at a screen on his desk. To McCann's right and

left rose two halves of the cylinder until they came together above him. The bed was now completely inside a plastic cylinder. Weissmuller watched one of his monitors intently as it took McCann's readings, loaded them onto his computer, and the information was synced with what the nanites were sending him.

'Excellent,' said Weissmuller after a minute or so, he then made another gesture and the cylindrical casing above McCann broke in two and slowly returned into the other half below the bed.

'You may rise now,' said Weissmuller 'how have you been Duncan, have you had any bad stomachs or headaches? Anything at all please let me know,' Inquired the doctor as he looked at a different monitor now and typed up McCann's report with the glove.

'No I've been fine Frank, no complaints at all.'

'Well you're A+ for the physical Duncan, you can go and have your brains picked now. If I don't see you before lift-off have a safe journey.'

McCann thanked him and made his way down the hall for his psychological assessment; he waited outside the door and touched the pad that served as the doorbell. After a moment the door slid open to reveal a lady in her 50's with red hair sitting on a large comfortable leather chair, she smiled and gestured to the twin of her chair facing her over a coffee table.

'Come in Duncan and please sit down,' said Doctor Valorie Pitt

McCann made his way to the chair. She reminded him of a school mistress or some other strict authority figure, disguising her wrath behind smiles and soft talk, an iron fist in a velvet glove if ever there was one.

'So how was your trip Duncan, did you have fun visiting all those cities?' asked Valorie in her usual soft and calming tone.

'Well I enjoyed seeing my parents, apart from that it was nothing special really.'

'I see, was it good to see your parents together again?' inquired the doctor.

McCann felt very uncomfortable. He was always looking for the ulterior motive behind her questions, especially when it involved relationships and childhood.

'Yes I suppose it was, it was nice to see them together after so many years.'

Then she seemed to quickly change her direction 'So did you get along well with the others? Any problems at all?'

Again it made him uncomfortable he wondered if she had found what she wanted and was digging for something else or was she trying to get him to drop his guard? 'No, it went fine,' replied McCann almost robotically.

The doctor smiled and relaxed in her chair 'You know Duncan it's like having a conversation with my second husband; you're always worrying about what I'm thinking. There really is no need to be so defensive you know.'

'I'm sorry doctor, but this type of thing has always made me feel awkward, it's nothing personal.'

'What type of thing do you think this is Duncan?' asked the doctor calmly.

'It feels like the Spanish inquisition is interrogating me. No offence intended doctor but I am the kind of man that really likes to keep to himself. Long conversations aren't really my forte.'

'Yes we've discussed this before and we still haven't got to the stage of you calling me Valorie yet. Why do you think that is Duncan?'

'Perhaps it's because you make me nervous and I like to keep you at arm's length and not calling you by your name helps me achieve that?' replied McCann in an almost sarcastic tone.

'Very good Colonel, it seems you've read a little in the last few years on psychology ... know thine enemy?' asked the doctor calmly with a wry smile.

'No doctor, it's not you it's just that being analyzed makes me nervous, really I didn't intend to insult you or cause any offence.'

'Really no offence is taken Duncan, after nearly 30 years in this job and 4 husbands it takes far more to get my feathers ruffled!'

McCann gave a smile.

'There is one thing I'd like you to do just for me before you leave Duncan.'

'What's that Doctor?' asked McCann who seemed genuinely intrigued.

In three years the doctor had never made such a request, even her requests in the past were merely orders wrapped up in soft words.

'I'd like you to call me Valorie, not for any reason other than that it would make me feel better, could you do that?'

It seemed a very odd request from a woman who had seemed to be so hard and self sufficient, 'Of course, I'm sorry about not using your name in the past, I didn't mean ...'

The doctor cut him off 'No need Duncan, I'd just like to have you call me by name. After 4 failed marriages this has been one of the most successful relationships I've had with a member of the opposite sex, I just want you to use my name.

Don't worry you've passed the psyche test Duncan, you're one of the most stable people I've ever met.'

The doctor then picked up a tablet and started reading and typing 'Your brainwaves have been fine; I was just confirming that all was good and you hadn't gone nuts since we last spoke.'

'Thank you ... Valorie,' replied McCann.

The doctor looked at him and said rather disappointedly 'That was a joke Duncan.'

'Sorry Valorie,' replied McCann.

'Well get going Duncan, you're completely sane and in fine mental condition, good luck ... we're all wishing you well,' said the doctor as she gestured to the opening door.

McCann thanked the doctor and promised he'd use her name when he spoke to her in the future, then he briskly walked out as he broke a sweat.

Two weeks later they were at ground zero in Ecuador, inside the hollowed out mountain of Cayambe. Cayambe was actually an extinct volcano and the highest point on the equator. Being the highest point it meant using less nanotubing and less stress as a whole on the orbital ribbon.

The first few hours were spent being prepared by various prep teams, running through emergency drills and breakdowns of the ships systems which they all knew back to front anyway. Faraday was his usual self, with enough pressure running through his veins to crush a submarine. Then the time came to suit up and board the cart that would take them to the

Athena. It was an open top cart, mostly for the press of the world. The four got on and were driven through a tunnel and out into what was a titanic cavern filled with loading bays and other tunnels leading off to more bays. The press was allowed in a small area along the carts route and closer to the Athena than the public. The public that were allowed in stood at a distance and watched.

The architecture made the cavern seem like a massive coliseum hewn out of rock. The launch pad or the orbital lift station was surrounded by buildings that made up the coliseum walls and protected the crawlers when they initially started their journey. Also a roof at the top of the volcano could be slid over it all, leaving only the three ribbons coming through in case of very bad conditions. The buildings were occupied by the orbital control centre, dedicated to monitoring the orbital lift, crawlers and the ribbons.

The cart stopped short of the boarding station, the Athena was attached to a crawler. The crawlers were cylinders that encompassed the meter thick ribbon, holding onto the ribbon tightly with rollers. Using powerful magnets powered by a charge from a second ribbon the crawler pulled its way up the ribbon; slowly at first but after some days it would reach quite a high speed, by that time the rollers would have moved off allowing just the force of the electro magnets to pull the crawler and it's payload to orbit in perhaps a couple of weeks.

Usually it took less time but the Athena was a very hefty payload, the sky lift had never been tested with such a heavy load but the engineers were quite certain it was well within safe operating parameters.

The four stepped off the cart and onto the launch station and looked at the Athena for the last time until they reached the Tsiolkovsky. The Athena was a short fat cylinder itself. Forming two distinct sections with a large sphere on the bottom (similar to a gigantic thermometer) which the astronauts couldn't see at this distance due to it residing below the boarding level somewhere in the subterranean floors of the pad where the ribbons were anchored onto reels.

The ribbons were surrounded by a metal cylinder; McCann peered over the edge viewing it. This was where a lot of the work was done by engineers checking that everything was ship shape and removing crawlers on returned; checking them after unloading and placing them on the other

ribbon to be loaded in the bay above that McCann, Ryu, Louis and Hassif were in before their skyward journey.

When ready the crawler was hoisted up to the ground level where the payload was attached; so the Athena's rear end was hanging inside the giant metal cylinder below the earth. Also there was a lot of cargo for the Tsiolkovsky, far more than usual. This was due to the fact that the weight had to be equalized around the crawler so that it remained as stable as possible and didn't put any adverse strains upon the ribbon when it moved to the Tsiolkovsky.

The crew in their space suits took McCann's lead and walked along the gangway to the open hatch. They turned and waved to the public while the press jostled for position to snap them, as had been practiced they stepped in one by one. After stepping inside the Athena her hatch closed behind them and the gangway retracted. The Athena shining white with its name in vertical black letters along the cylinder (probably for the press) began to inch its way up the ribbon.

Inside the ship all four were sat in the command room, they had strapped themselves in with their backs to each other as they faced a panel on the wall and monitored the craft. Carrying out checks and answering all mission controls questions they would be spending the next few hours like this. It was one of the most crucial moments of the mission though from the outside, watching a crawler slowly move its way upwards you wouldn't know it. In-fact it was quite the anti-climax, but to those who had been training for three years or more inside and those who'd fought for decades to be at this point it was a very tense few hours. However there was no crisis and the Athena gathered pace as she ascended out of the volcano and into the heavens with her four mortals.

The Athena had been travelling for close to two weeks, attached to the crawler moving faster than a bullet train along the ribbon. The crew however only recognised the speed on checking the computer. The weather had been good with no turbulence so the journey thus far was

smooth. The crew took shifts, shuttling between the three sections of the Athena. Sleeping quarters were Spartan with little privacy, bunked down much like a U-boat. However it was still adequate, they would have their meals in the same section and the toilets and showers were separate, located in the mid-section.

McCann awoke and sat up in his bunk, pulled a side panel off the wall and his meal tray slid out, held in place by a taught arm. The inside of the wall panel he'd pulled out was the meal tray and inside the alcove were a series of small panels each with a different meal inside. He had 3 choices for his breakfast meal and chose the mid panel. It was a porridge/muesli concoction put together by the nutritionists at the I.S.A. He also took out his water bottle for the day and a container with orange juice in it.

After eating his first meal of the day he put the remnants in a trash compactor which was also inside the little alcove by his bunk, then replaced his meal tray back in place so that now it became part of the wall again.

The Englishman made his way to the shower; it couldn't be used properly as there was still too much gravity. So he entered the cylinder, closed it then let a little warm water run into a small bowl and sponged his body down. Once finished he then drained the bowl and left. The toilets could still be used however, as they worked better under gravity and wouldn't need the airflow suction system until they were away from the Earth's influence.

McCann didn't shave, he never did it more than once a week normally. He had decided beforehand he'd only shave for the broadcasts that would be released to the media, thankfully Faraday agreed.

Drying his body he returned to the sleeping quarters where Ryu and Hassif were asleep and dressed himself. Pulling out a second panel by his bunk he found his clothes draw, first his underwear, next, he put on his space suit. The first astronauts of the 20th century wouldn't have recognised it as a space suit. It was such a thin and light weight piece of clothing that it was nick named the space glove. It was a space suit of one piece that was no more than 3 cm at its thickest and weighed no more than 10 kilograms. The strength came from a skeleton of flexible fibres

woven into the suit; it protected the wearer from the rigors of space whilst allowing them to perform tasks without being impaired by the suit.

The helmet was made out of a tough composite plastic and totally retracted into a neck slot at the back. The only detachable part were the gloves, which were inter changeable with several different designs depending on the work you were doing. The whole thing reminded McCann of some of the more modern fencing clothing he used on the pistes today.

McCann then climbed the small ladder up through the hatch into the command module situated in the top of Athena's thermometer design, Louis was sat in the command chair and on hearing McCann entering he turned in the chair and got up.

'Good morning Duncan, did you sleep well?'

'Very well, how is everything here? Anything to report?'

'No, it's been fine,' replied Louis as he stood aside for McCann to sit 'I've been chatting with Athena most of the time. I can't wait to get to the Tsiolkovsky!' said Louis in a tired voice.

Louis sat down next to McCann at his regular station which primarily monitored engineering.

'How are you today Athena?' asked McCann.

'I'm doing very well Colonel, how are you?' replied the SI of the Athena.

All space faring vessels had some kind of a Synthetic Intelligence but Athena was a massive step forward. She had the closest approximation to a synthetic brain ever put on any type of vessel.

Mankind had possessed the ability for some years now to grow computers. The CPU and many of the parts that made up the central nervous system of a computer could now be bred. It was a costly and difficult process, for now.

Also the SI (Synthetic Intelligence) could be programmed to do what any computer could do, but the higher processes beyond number crunching had to be taught to some degree. Not everyone was happy with the situation, many ethical questions had been asked, but fortunately so far it hadn't been necessary to confront them.

For instance the question was posed about using them in future droids, could it be justified installing what was perhaps a sentient being that we created into a droid and have it work in slavery? What about weapons?

Drone fighters? Or even worse missiles? For now there were few grown SI and only a handful of them could be considered sentient ... maybe, and Athena was one of them.

'I'm good Athena, how was Louis?' asked McCann.

'He is well Colonel, he's improving at Othello,' it was her favourite game 'would you like a game Colonel?'

'Not right now Athena, it's a bit early in the morning for me, maybe later,' replied McCann as he scanned through the logs of the last 14 hours.

'Very well Colonel, if there's anything you need just ask,' said Athena in her soft voice.

'Thank you Athena,' replied McCann.

After checking the logs and doing a systems check on the Athena and crawler McCann relaxed in his chair and started reading the newspapers. Most were running stories of the mission and each day their schedule was reported along with interesting facts concerning the crew, mission and equipment. The gutter press ran far more sensational stories concerning the mission, all ultimately involved sex; usually full of innuendo about who was doing what to who and how.

McCann enjoyed reading the gutter press, much to the distaste of pretty much everyone else. He didn't make a big deal out of it nor did he impose it on others, he just found it entertaining along with what most considered trash TV. McCann enjoyed watching people make idiots of themselves on television. The DNA tests the lie detector tests and finding out the latest innuendo concerning his alleged sex life.

McCann himself saw no shame in enjoying it and was certain most others took the same guilty pleasures. Only that they were too afraid to admit it, fearing the opinion of their peers over their own honesty. Besides someone has to watch it and read it otherwise why would you transmit or print such outrageous material?

McCann had settled on a two page story that started off about how close the crew had become in the last few years, insinuating the obvious. Then ending in describing how in theory an orgy might be conducted in zero G in the Athena's aft section. McCann found the whole thing hilarious, and let out a few sniggers.

'So what does the shit press have to say this morning?' asked Louis with his signature French snarl they'd all grown used to. He knew what McCann

was doing since one of the rare times he expressed humour was when sniggering like a schoolboy over trash media.

McCann ignored Louis' disdain and read on continuing to giggle at the ridiculousness of the whole article.

Louis continued 'I don't know why you read that damn trash! You British and Americans have spread it like a plague, trash TV, trash food you damn people do nothing but live on trash! You're like a pig, you know that? Vous vivez que de la merde!'

Louis was working up to one of his outbursts so McCann put down the tablet he'd been reading from 'What's up Louis?' asked McCann in a friendly voice; he detected there was more on Louis mind than a gutter press article. Louis was looking anxious and McCann was curious as to what had set it all off. He knew Louis didn't start cursing in his mother tongue without good reason.

'Those papers, they're full of lies I wish that you wouldn't read that shit.'

'I'm sorry Louis I didn't know I was annoying you, I'll read it later.'

'It's not that, it's just that you read it at all, why do you bother with it?'

'It relaxes me and I enjoy it, if that's a problem I'll stop reading it Louis.'

'No, it's okay, it just makes me angry when I think about what they publish.'

McCann started thinking; Louis was often the focus of the trash media and their innuendos. He noticed that Louis seemed to quite enjoy the attention until about 6 months ago at which point he began to snarl whenever it was brought up. As launch date approached the attention got more intense, private lives were dug into and a lot of claims were made. Around then Louis took on a whole different demeanour, at least at work he did. Louis put on the same smile as always for the cameras but McCann suspected what had caused his abrupt change in attitude, though he never said.

McCann put his tablet back in the holder at the console; he didn't want to aggravate Louis any further. As he did Athena's soft voice spoke from the console, 'Incoming transmission from Director Faraday to Colonel McCann.'

'Acknowledged Athena,' replied McCann.

The image of Faraday came up on the view screen above the console 'Good morning Colonel,' he said in a calm voice. It seemed that the

successful lift off and continued smooth voyage had lowered his blood pressure significantly.

McCann replied 'Good morning Sir, nothing more to report everything is ship shape.'

'Excellent Colonel, Athena is working 100% and we confirm that all systems are optimal, how are the four of you doing personally?'

'Everyone has been good, Sir, Louis and Hassif are no more annoying than usual and Major Ryu is running at full efficiency.'

'Excellent, you'll be docking with the Tsiolkovsky in under 36 hours, then after that there will be a press interview the following day with that Habeeb fellow. So make sure all of the crew are clean and shaven.'

'Understood Sir, it's nice to know our biggest worry is an interview, we must be doing well?'

Faraday said in a relaxed tone 'Keep your eyes open Colonel, but yes so far everything has been going to plan. The next time we speak should be on the Tsiolkovsky if all goes well. I just wanted to check in with you personally, good luck with the docking Colonel.'

Faraday's image left the screen, McCann could speak to anyone at the mission control but it was reserved for utilitarian matters. Idle chit chat was forbidden, only Faraday had that privilege, which he had only used to check on their well-being, usually before an important event.

The important event to come was the docking with the space station and then the interview. Jerry Habeeb had been invited to a control room in Geneva at the I.S.A and would pose several questions to the crew. It was a necessity in this day and age, the exploration of space was no longer an endeavour funded by tax payers money. The I.S.A scrounged about for every penny it could, it was policy. Every opportunity to bring in money was used within acceptable parameters.

For instance Faraday wasn't prepared to have a fast food chain slap an advert on the Athena or the space suits. He didn't want to trivialise what they were doing but interviews were a great method of free advertising and a way to bring in extra funds. Network America had paid for the exclusive rights to interview the crew during the mission. At the same time it put the whole endeavour into the media generating interest in the public. That interest brought in many corporations and governments that wanted a piece of the Mars dream. Once there was a foothold on Mars the

rest of the system was open, the opportunities for governments and Corporations was massive to anyone that could see ahead.

Mining companies were looking at the asteroid belt, mining an almost infinite supply of minerals in zero G. Right now it wasn't viable economically for them, but once colonies were established the first ones there now, would pull in the biggest profit later. Hydrogen production on Mars was in the more immediate future, the massive polar caps beckoned begging to be exploited. H₂O was the most valuable resource in the solar system at the moment, it provided the basics for exploration and exploitation. Hydrogen and Oxygen, the most efficient fuel known, it was required if you were going to send drones to search the belt. Mine it and return the spoils, and once Mars had an orbital lift those corporations would have the rights to a supply of it.

It was expected that there would be an old fashioned land grab in the asteroid belt at some point in the near future. Mining corporations staking claims on the richest asteroids, with court battles following the legal mess. However before that would be Mars. No doubt once a regular human presence was established there would be a lot of prospecting, exploration and research. The Mars base was set up so that all contributors would get a fair shake.

McCann glided into the sleeping quarters to check up on Ryu and Hassif, they were both up and eating their breakfasts. Sitting in opposite bunks they were chatting, McCann said good morning, Ryu was her usual self but Hassif wasn't taking too well to the low gravity breakfast.

'Are you going to be able to keep that down Hassif?' asked McCann.

'Don't get stressed, it's just the gravity, it feels like my meal has a mind of its own. I'll get used to it,' replied Hassif.

'Either that or you'll get used to throwing up in a bag, so that we don't have to dodge your last meal, keep it with you at all times Hassif.'

Ryu nodded towards the plastic bag Hassif had next to him, whatever the gravity if you felt odd you kept it with you. Hassif nodded at Ryu and chewed slowly on the scrambled eggs on toast concoction he was squeezing out of a tubular package, much like a giant tube of tooth paste.

'Everything okay for the docking, McCann?' asked Hassif.

'We're all ship shape; as long as you keep your breakfast down we should dock without a hitch in a few hours. You can both take your time getting ready, meet you in the cockpit,' as he was finishing McCann pushed himself up and into the cockpit.

The Athena was close to the Tsiolkovsky, they had left the atmosphere of the Earth and her gravity hours ago. McCann supposed it wasn't much fun to go to sleep at 1G then wake up at zero G then have to eat your breakfast and go to work. Ryu seemed to cope with it, as she did with most things, without complaint. Hassif wasn't taking it as well but McCann was certain he'd get over it, he always was a slow starter but after he warmed up he quickly adapted. Besides they had three hours, McCann was certain Hassif would be back to his old self before then.

McCann glided into the command module and strapped himself in opposite Louis, who was in a good mood. He couldn't wait to stretch his legs ... so to speak, on the Tsiolkovsky.

'Data stream steady Colonel, Tsiolkovsky has given us the go ahead to begin deceleration,' said Athena in her soft calm voice.

'Very well Athena you may begin deceleration now, how long until we dock with the Tsiolkovsky?' asked McCann.

'T-minus two hours and thirty six minutes Colonel, the Tsiolkovsky reports all systems are optimal, she also hopes to see you soon Colonel.'

'She?' inquired Louis 'you know someone on there McCann?'

'No I don't, who is she, Athena?'

'The SI on the Tsiolkovsky Colonel, she is excited to meet all the crew.'

Louis chuckled 'For a moment there I thought you had a girlfriend McCann, I was about to send an email to your mother!'

'I'm sorry could you clarify that for me Louis?' inquired Athena.

Louis started to laugh but McCann cut in 'Enough, concentrate on the job Louis! He was attempting to be humorous Athena.'

'I'm sorry Colonel, I didn't intend to pry into your personal affairs,' apologized Athena.

'Thank you Athena,' replied McCann as he took a sharp look at Louis who was still smiling.

The Tsiolkovsky was also fitted with an SI of its own, it didn't have one at first, synthetic intelligence was in its infancy.

As the technology developed it was realised that two computer systems running on entirely different software that was normally incompatible could easily communicate with an SI in control of each. An SI could learn any operating language very quickly, with one installed on the Tsiolkovsky and one at Geneva compatibility was no longer an issue.

The Russian SI wasn't as advanced as the Athena when it was installed, but over time it grew in experience, the ability of these computers to grow and adapt made them unique and they quickly became indispensable. Unlike most of the first generation SI it hadn't failed, many shut down due to imperfections when first grown. The imperfections only manifested years later after the SI had developed into sentience; and what by human standards would be called a mental breakdown suddenly took place one day without warning. The Tsiolkovsky had been one of the few that fortunately had no imperfections at "birth". Athena was a next generation SI but the Tsiolkovsky made up for it with experience, in human terms you could say a case of wisdom over intelligence.

Soon Hassif and Ryu joined them in the command module. Ryu sat at the controls ready to take over the deceleration and docking process if the Athena failed. The chances were minimal but nevertheless it was always required to have a human pilot ready to take over.

McCann took a look at Hassif who was busy checking over the software looking for any blips; 'Feeling better Hassif?' inquired McCann.

'Sure,' replied Hassif without looking away from his monitor.

McCann was satisfied, though he noticed he had his vomit bag attached to the velcro patch on his space suit leg. McCann inquired about the crawler with first Louis then Athena, all seemed to be going smoothly.

Right now the crawler was slowly breaking using electro magnets; it would slow down from the speed of a bullet train to that of a cyclist. The powerful engines that allowed the crawler to clasp onto the ribbon with its wheels and manage to push the payload from a slow crawl to that of around 180 MPH were now using those electro-magnets to slow it back down to 10 MPH. The Tsiolkovsky would let the crawler move up inside of her and then bring her to a halt with a magnetic net. The Tsiolkovsky crew were set to over-look the unloading of the crawler. First detaching the crawler then later re-attaching it onto the ribbon going downwards. The

Athena would be moved to a separate bay with an atmosphere and prepared for a space launch.

During that time the crew would be guests on the Tsiolkovsky where they could stretch their space legs, take a break and be interviewed by the world press.

The Athena approached the looming hulk of rock that orbited Earth, attached by a few ribbons that had now grown in diameter. Clamped to the crawler she moved towards the gaping hole that the ribbon disappeared into.

The crew watched this mammoth sight through the monitors, there were no portholes on this craft only tiny cameras on strategic points along with heat and radar sensors. The crawler was now moving along the ribbon just on momentum, the engines were turned off. The crawler slipped inside the Tsiolkovsky effortlessly, bringing its payload to a halt just below a collection of metallic discs that were suspended from metal cylinders attached to the cargo bay roof. The ribbon continued upwards into the black hole cut out for it, lined with some light super strong metal. The magnetic discs broke the crawler's approach, as soon as the crawler reached 0MPH it locked the wheels and held itself and the precious payload in place ready for the Russians to unload it.

Now the Tsiolkovsky was in control, the SI monitored as the crew of the station closed the orifice below them. Removing the blue planet from view and leaving a small hole that allowed the ribbon to enter. The robots moved in, their concertinaed arms extended from the walls and clasped onto the Athena. Using the pressure from each arm they held a firm grip on the Athena.

Once four arms had a firm grip the order was sent for the crawler to release her. McCann felt nothing, strapped in inside the command module all four of them watched and waited for at least an hour. Slowly the four arms manipulated the Athena in front of a large entrance that lead to an inter locking bay area. Once in front of the entrance another arm peered through and clasped onto the Athena. Three of the main docking bay arms released, allowing the two arms one in each bay to slowly move the Athena to her new resting place. The bay door they'd come through now slowly came down after the last of the original arms released and retracted

back into the first bay, 30 minutes later it was closed, another hour and it was pressurized with an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere.

McCann had been speaking with the station commander Leon Titov, a well-built man especially for someone who'd spent so much time in space, with a mane of black hair. He was informing McCann that his officers were about to come in and greet them as they left the Athena. McCann concurred, turned off the monitor and told the others to prepare, he went to the sleeping quarters and pulled out an expensive bottle of cognac.

McCann had requested it before the flight, Faraday had permitted it as it was just good etiquette in his opinion. The Tsiolkovsky was almost solely crewed by Russian cosmonauts, Moscow refused to give up its control of the station. Relations between the station and Geneva were often strained with personalities grating on each other; station commanders refusing to take orders from the I.S.A and likewise.

One day a Russian scientist working at the I.S.A was busted for smuggling alcoholic drinks onboard a crawler payload. After an investigation it turned out the reason he had his projects done in a timely manner was due to the illicit cargo he smuggled towards the heavens.

The scientist was reprimanded but the shipments remained, that was the end of any problems with the Tsiolkovsky. Since then all kinds of luxury goods have made their way into orbit. Even today despite the crew containing a larger multi-national I.S.A contingent, the command is still left to the Russians and a bottle of fine old Cognac goes a long way to keeping on the commander's good side.

McCann and his crew could feel the gravity of the Tsiolkovsky as they put on their suits to leave the Athena and visit Titov's crew. The Tsiolkovsky had a small gravity due to tidal forces on the asteroid.

She was held in place by tidal stabilization, the top of the Tsiolkovsky weighing less than the bottom causing the earth to pull on them by different amounts. The larger pull on the bottom part causes it to point towards the Earth; this tidal affect stabilizes the Tsiolkovsky in orbit and creates a small gravity through the tidal forces.

The gravity was enough to get dressed properly in and was no doubt a great aid to the cosmonauts running the station.

Athena spoke softly 'Pressure has equalized and Colonel Titov is awaiting you outside Colonel.'

McCann replied 'Thank you Athena, please open the airlock, we're ready to depart.'

'As you wish Colonel.'

The hatch opened and the four travellers stepped carefully down the steps in the low gravity, holding onto the safety rail. McCann clutched the rail with one hand and a bottle of cognac in the other. Titov and three of his officers stood waiting; Titov was eyeing the bottle and giving a smile of satisfaction.

The bottle had become a symbol of respect, a required tribute; if it weren't there he would have to punish the ISA until reimbursed or suffer the ridicule and scorn of his comrades. Besides Titov wasn't a vengeful man and although he'd have to, he didn't take any pleasure in the prospect of making life difficult for others.

Chapter 3

McCann stepped off the gangway and slowly approached Titov; they shook one another's hand whilst at the same time McCann passed over the Cognac.

'Was your journey troubled at all Colonel?' asked Titov in his best English.

'No it couldn't have gone better and please call me Duncan.'

'Then you must call me Leon,' replied Titov with a friendly smile 'this is Podpolkovnik Cherkesov,' said Titov pointing to the middle aged man next to him.

McCann shook his hand 'Good to see you Cherkesov. I hope you don't mind me using your second name since your first is a bit of a mouthful!'

The crew of the Tsiolkovsky seemed a little taken a back or just embarrassed, Ryu interjected 'Podpolkovnik is Russian for Lieutenant Colonel, Sir!'

McCann suddenly had the desire for something large and heavy to come crashing down, taking the attention away from his attempt at humour. McCann apologised for a faux pas rather than a bad joke since he wasn't sure if anyone recognised his attempt.

Chereksov accepted awkwardly then Titov step forwards whilst offering his hand to Ryu 'It's an honour to meet you Major, the crew have been awaiting your arrival.'

Ryu almost blushed 'Thank you Polkovnik,' she then saluted Titov which made the crew of the Athena even more uncomfortable than they already were.

Titov looked rather embarrassed or flattered or both, it was hard to tell. He returned the salute, shook her hand and said softly 'You must call me Leon, you will join us for a drink before you leave Major? My crew is most anxious to meet you in person.'

Ryu did blush now, McCann stared at Louis and Louis stared back with a quizzical expression, Hassif was no less befuddled. They were all asking each other telepathically "What the hell is happening?"

Ryu seemed to be acquainted with Titov or at least Titov was familiar with her. How did she know him? How did he know her? If she did why hadn't she mentioned it? Why did all the Russians seem to know who she

was and want an audience with her as if she were Royalty? All these questions were now burning inside the three male members of the Athena. Ryu was about to get a good interrogation as soon as they could get her alone and wrangle the information out of her.

After the introductions Titov handed the Cognac to one of his junior officers and began to take the crew on a tour, 'Mr. Hassif and Mr. Beaumont, Lieutenant Pankov shall give you a tour of relevant systems.'

Hassif and Louis followed him towards engineering.

'Duncan and Major Ryu please follow me to command.'

McCann and Ryu wearing their silver space suits minus the helmet and gloves followed him along a white corridor constructed of hardened plastic panels. Titov was dressed in his slightly bulkier cosmonaut suit, all white with his RKA and ISA emblems on either side of his chest. The Russian Space Agency still kept their insignia in use; it was all over the station. Whilst others had relinquished control within the ISA many years ago the Russian still refused to make that leap of faith. They still saw themselves as partners rather than subordinates to Geneva.

Titov showed them around the command centre, a large room in the signature Tsiolkovsky dirty white. All the time McCann was making glaring looks at Ryu, she attempted not to notice. McCann had a short chat with the Tsiolkovsky, he considered the SI to be quite amiable for a Russian, though he preferred the Athena. Although both were prompt and pragmatic the Tsiolkovsky left him feeling a little cold whereas the Athena didn't. McCann put it down to being in contact with the Athena for so long. He was certain Titov would find many character flaws in the Athena that put him off.

After a while Titov escorted them to their accommodation on the Tsiolkovsky, each room had two bunks so McCann and Ryu would be bunk mates. Real estate inside the asteroid was at a premium right now. She had to be crewed 24/7 and they were in the process of making new tunnels and constructing new quarters.

Titov invited Ryu to the celebrations at 19:00, allowing her three hours to prepare. The rest of the crew were invited but it was obvious to all who the centre of attention would be. In fact McCann couldn't say that this celebration was for the Athena and the voyage to put down the first roots

of humanity on Martian soil. No, it was fairly obvious to him and the others that this was all about Major Ryu and her presence here.

Titov said his farewell after securing Ryu's promise to turn up; next McCann escorted her into their quarters, as if a member of the Gestapo. McCann wasn't the type to beat around the bush. Probably thanks to years of watching the Springer show more than anything else, 'You didn't tell me you were acquainted with Titov or the crew here.'

Ryu smiled 'I didn't tell you because I'm not acquainted with any of them as far as I know, Sir.'

McCann didn't want to play games with her so he just asked 'Alright ... Major ... why does Titov grin like a buffoon when he lays eyes upon you and why are they throwing a party in your favour?' he said rather abruptly.

'Perhaps it's my smile or my stunning personality!' she joked taking pleasure in keeping McCann hanging on.

'Well certainly not your wit!' replied McCann.

'Look who's talking ... Kovnik!' quipped Ryu as she let out a big laugh.

McCann was very taken aback. Ryu was not an emotional person and to see her chuckle was rare however McCann had never witnessed her find anything so amusing as to laugh out loud before.

At that moment Louis and Hassif crashed through the door, 'Is everything alright? We heard a scream!'

To be fair it was far more likely for Ryu to scream than laugh. Yet they were no less curious than McCann and were not passing up the opportunity to interrogate her in private.

'Shut the damn door, Louis,' McCann turned back to Ryu 'my thanks for saving me some embarrassment back there but you haven't answered me. Why is it when you walked into the command centre every single one of them saluted you before me? It was as if I barely existed! And now they're throwing a party in your honour and don't try and tell me it isn't!' inquired McCann as the other two stared intently at Ryu.

Ryu expelled some breath through her nose, the sound she made when she was annoyed or frustrated 'I was decorated by Moscow, I was in the media for a while. It seems some of them remember it, are you satisfied now?'

'To be honest no I'm not!' replied McCann.

'I was awarded the Order of Kutuzov and Suvorov; it was a long time ago.'

McCann knew less about Russian military decorations than Hassif did about getting a date. However judging by the reactions he'd witnessed earlier today he was certain that Moscow wasn't giving them away to the first guy that threw a grenade.

'So what exactly are the medals for?' pushed McCann.

'It was for the assistance we gave in the Russian campaign to repel Qian Jing,' replied Ryu who was growing weary of the grilling. 'Oh and I'm also an honorary Colonel, just in case it comes up,' added Ryu as if it had slipped her mind for a moment.

Louis raised his eyebrows at Hassif and thought to himself 'I wonder how many villages she had to nerve gas to get those?'

Hassif nodded in agreement almost as if he could read his friends thoughts.

'OK you two, get to your quarters there's a party in the lounge at 19:00 we'll see you there,' ordered McCann.

Louis and Hassif left and McCann apologized to Ryu for the interrogation.

That evening the party was going well, most of those attending were gathered around Ryu as she recanted stories of the war. Hassif was mingling with the group around Ryu whilst Louis stood by the makeshift bar chatting.

McCann sat with Titov complementing him on the celebration and the wide array of liquor at hand. Titov plonked an ashtray on the table smiled and produced a brown leather case from his pocket, McCann recognised it as a cigar case.

'What do you have there Leon?' asked McCann.

Titov opened the case to produce 6 cigars lying down alongside each other. Titov had several of his crew stealing quick looks; smoking was prohibited for obvious reasons. Firstly the fire hazard but it also burnt precious oxygen and forced the atmosphere scrubbers to work harder than they should. Some of the looks were disapproving whereas others were of envy. Technically the drink was prohibited also, but in this era things were

changing. Earth orbit was no longer some far flung place where total discipline had to be maintained; now it was merely an extension of Earth. The Tsiolkovsky was a Behemoth, a far cry from the likes of Mir. If something went horribly wrong on the Tsiolkovsky it could be dealt with and the SI was meticulous at monitoring and maintaining the rock.

Titov offered the contents of the case to McCann 'I have heard you like to smoke, please be my guest.'

McCann took one of the Robusto cigars, he examined the red and gold band closely and deduced it was a Partagas serie D. McCann wasn't usually a Robusto smoker but he would never turn down a good Cuban, he took one out as did his companion.

Titov then passed him his guillotine cigar cutter 'Relax it's all cleared with the Tsiolkovsky, we can smoke in here when off duty.'

'Thank you,' said McCann as he took the cutter and sliced the cap off his cigar.

He passed the cutter back and he took the silver gas lighter from Titov. Both of them lit up their cigars and began to smoke whilst others gave some odd looks.

'How the hell do you get away with this then?' inquired McCann.

Titov smiled 'We spend a lot of time on this station; the crew is large enough for some of us to have genuine leisure time here. The Tsiolkovsky understands that keeping her crew happy is important, when we can let off stress we work better. She makes certain Moscow or Geneva don't get concerned about our relaxation.'

Suddenly it hit McCann, his crew's information wasn't being relayed through the Tsiolkovsky they were having their details sent via the Athena. For a moment McCann panicked. He hit his communicator and the Athena replied in her usual soft tone 'Yes Colonel? Is there something I can do for you?'

'Athena are you transmitting our bio signs to Geneva?' asked McCann in a slightly shaky voice.

'Yes Colonel, is there a problem Colonel?' asked Athena calmly.

'Shit!'

'I'm sorry Colonel but are you feeling alright, Sir?' asked the Athena softly.

Titov found this all very amusing much to McCann's irritation. However McCann was worried about what would happen when Geneva saw alcohol and nicotine coming through on their readouts. The nanites would inevitably pick up the drinks that were flowing freely and the cigars he and Titov were smoking. McCann asked then began to demand he speak to Doctor Weissmuller. He was causing a stir and many of the Russians peered over at the table he was sitting at with Titov. The heated one way conversation continued as McCann hurriedly paced up and down. He envisaged himself being demoted and blamed for anything that went wrong ... if they weren't recalled before they left the Tsiolkovsky. Ryu, Louis and Hassif were shocked at what they saw, they stood motionless and at a loss.

Finally he got Weissmuller on his communication badge 'Hello? Duncan is that you?'

'Thank god, yes Frank. Listen are you receiving the bio signs?' screeched a desperate voice.

'Not yet Duncan, the next transmission will be in 3 hours, why?' replied the doctor.

The information was sent every 24 hours along with all data recorded by the Athena in a data packet. If the Athena were not in a decompressed launch bay right now he could have headed down and made the arrangements so that he wouldn't be tarred and feathered by Faraday upon his return.

Since the Tsiolkovsky had a direct link to Geneva through the ribbon connecting the two he could get in touch with them and head the data packet off at the pass so to speak. McCann explained his predicament and the Doctor listened. Weissmuller calmed him down and agreed to make sure Faraday didn't see anything he didn't need to. McCann thanked him and the doctor assured him that he'd keep an eye out in the future.

McCann sat back down at the table with Titov, he took a large drag from his cigar and knocked back his Cognac in one go. Titov was grinning; he picked up the bottle 'Another?'

McCann just nodded towards the glass and Titov poured 'I must say the Cognac you brought is very good, Colonel.'

McCann didn't reply he just sat back and tried to relax, the room had gone back to what it was doing before the scene. Titov and McCann began

chatting mostly about the Mars expedition. Titov was quite envious, as was to be expected, he was an ex-military pilot who ended up serving in space. For him as with most it was the adventure, now he had grown quite comfortable after having run the Tsiolkovsky for so long and familiarity had overtaken adventure. Meeting McCann reignited that lust and he would have done anything to have joined him. However he was the victim of his own success, he ran the Tsiolkovsky so well that he would never be considered for anything else while he commanded her.

McCann sat and unwound whilst Titov questioned him about details of the mission mostly concerning maintenance of the Martian base at Pavonis Mons. As the evening moved on McCann recovered from his shock and had been having a long interesting conversation with Titov. He had discovered a lot of information about running a large station that he didn't learn in Geneva.

Titov was an encyclopaedia on power conservation and short cuts that weren't covered back on Earth. Titov pointed out that McCann would still have to learn some things the hard way due to a different environment. One point he stressed was converting the water reclamation system as soon as possible. McCann didn't understand it as it was far too technical. Neither did Titov totally, but he promised to have one of his technicians go over it with Louis.

On the Tsiolkovsky the urine had been diverted from water reclamation and into a converted fuel cell. Fuel cells used for the most part refined hydrogen as fuel, although there were many different types in existence that could use an array of fuels, the ISA preferred pure hydrogen as the only by product was pure water; which is fine as long as you can power the 2500C pressure oven to separate water into hydrogen and oxygen, creating the fuel (hydrogen) and the catalyst (oxygen). Which then re-combine in the fuel cell produced power with a by-product of pure drinking water.

The Tsiolkovsky had some problems in its early stages, all of the solar arrays weren't functioning and the station was suffering brown outs. Without the arrays Titov couldn't run the hydrogen oven to cook the water; which in turn powered the fuel cells which in turn powered the water reclamation, atmosphere scrubbers and 99% of the systems on the station. Once the solar arrays broke down and the batteries were out a vicious cycle began. They were using power sent up the ribbon from the base

station in Ecuador to stay afloat. That meant a crawler couldn't be powered to simply deliver some liquid hydrogen. With emergency power and brownouts it would take months to get the arrays fixed and everything running again.

Everything was on minimal power and it seemed the new space age had come to a screeching halt thanks to a few solar panels failing. Titov had a meeting with his officers; he needed an idea or something to get those panels back online. They didn't have repair drones for the arrays yet and even if they did he wasn't sure if they had enough power to run them.

A tech made a suggestion at the meeting that sounded quite ridiculous to Titov. He suggested making some alterations to the fuel cells and using urine and oxygen rather than hydrogen and oxygen. There were some uncomfortable looks, some thought he was joking others just thought it was madness, run a fuel cell on urine? It seemed equally preposterous to Titov and under normal conditions he'd dismiss such a suggestion; however under normal conditions the tech wouldn't have suggested it and these were not normal conditions.

The room went silent and the tech took the opportunity to explain the science before someone could speak.

He explained that urine contained hydrogen and it was far more efficient to use urine as you didn't need a hydrogen oven. He went on to point out that in the rural community he grew up in farmers used fuel cells powered by urea; it was easily available and cut their fuel bills since they didn't need to use any hydrogen or any of the other fuels used in the cells.

Titov looked at his chief engineer, the engineer told him that he would consult the Tsiolkovsky and find out if enough of their fuel cells could be converted.

Within a week the station was up and running as normal, the crawlers were sent straight away with repair drones and the arrays were fixed. Titov's position as station commander was cemented the day the arrays were back up and working. Titov told McCann he always had enough converted power cells to keep the station running on urine.

It was a fascinating story and McCann intently listened as he puffed away. When Titov had finished he asked what was wrong with the solar panels. He explained that some of them were faulty due to poor manufacturing, causing a massive failure of entire arrays.

McCann shook his head in disbelief that such a thing could occur while thanking him for the information. The Englishman requested that the same tech speak with Louis and give him the plans whenever he could.

Titov then chuckled and said something in Russian about the future of humanity saved by a pot of piss. McCann understood the jist and laughed as did Titov, both of them enjoying the evening.

As the evening drew on Titov inquired about Ryu, he seemed interested in what she was like when off duty. McCann pointed out she was pretty much the same person. Titov seemed a little disappointed to hear this but nonetheless he didn't appear surprised. McCann asked about her and what she was decorated for.

This time Titov did show some surprise 'You didn't know?' he asked.

'The ISA isn't a military organization, I knew she was a drone pilot during the Manchurian war and a good one, but aside from that she has never expanded on the subject,' replied McCann.

'You know she'd never had any formal training as a pilot before she first flew in combat?'

'No I didn't, so how?'

Titov cut him off and began to explain with a look of satisfaction and mild intoxication.

Titov recalled how during the early part of the war the drug lord Qain Jiang had invaded the now reformed Korea.

Jiang needed a port desperately, to both import his weapons to maintain his position and export his poison to pay for it. Since no one would give him passage to conduct business his choices were either that of fighting with other warlords to the south, attacking the Russians to the east or invading the Korean peninsula.

Korea being the softest target he invaded, with all the armour and air power he could muster, he made a rapid advance. Japan and Taiwan had supported Korea in an alliance to stop the warlords of China but they were

under siege themselves and the assault took everyone by surprise. Japan and Taiwan were unable to assist their ally.

China had broken up into a series of kingdoms run by warlords of varying brutality many years ago. Initially they had fought amongst themselves until after several years of fighting they agreed to an armistice. Before this there was little Manchuria was able to do about the blockade. Japan, Taiwan and Korea were the only nations in the region prepared to make a stand against the warlords.

Within the first month most of Korea's drone pilots had been killed in surgical strikes on airbases using nerve gas. The Koreans had years of catching up to do experience wise. Flying drones with computer assistance was standard practice however inexperienced pilots came to rely on it as a crutch more than an asset. Manchurian pilots were successful in every strike they made, always getting their target with small losses. The scam drones they purchased from Russia were tried and tested and the most reliable money could buy.

The Koreans and Japanese had developed their own drones, but they had rarely been used in combat against other drones. As a ground attack drone the AI assistance had worked well, keeping up a total sea blockade. Sinking ships and hitting the odd undefended port, but against another drone in a dog fight the computer assisted crutch was kicked out from under them.

Soon Korea was on the verge of being over-run, without air superiority they couldn't field any ground forces. They had the drones but there were not enough pilots trained in flying them. They were desperate and had no more than a week or two to find enough pilots who could fly them in combat; otherwise Jiang was about to roll into Seoul unopposed. The military sent out dozens of recruiters and locked down the net with adverts for pilots. Within a few days a Lieutenant, one of the many recruiters sent out, came back with a fairly sorry looking group of teenagers which included Ryu.

When asked what they were doing there he explained his younger brother used to compete online. His clan had won the national gaming league in the simulator division, which included the current scam drone simulator used by the military to train their own drone pilots. Apparently they were set to compete at a world tournament before the war broke out.

His superior made no secret that he felt this was a preposterous idea and even questioned the Lieutenants' sanity. It sounded like an April fool's joke made in very bad taste, suggesting he allow these scruffy children charge of a scram drone.

However he was under orders to consider everyone and to give every single applicant a competency evaluation versus an AI, no matter what the circumstances. He signed the Lieutenants' tablet with his thumb. Still shaking his head he sent him and his brother's ragtag clan on to the simulation centre.

At the simulators the gazes were no different, mostly of disbelief. The Lieutenant informed the obviously intimidated teenagers to wait in line for their test. He made his way to the Colonel that was coordinating a warehouse filled with every simulator in the country that they could get their hands on. It gave them the ability to evaluate hundreds of applicants at a time. The Lieutenant handed his tablet over, the Colonel looked at him then gestured towards the kids, 'Who on earth are they?'

'They have come to do their duty, Sir,' replied the Lieutenant.

The Colonel didn't like his answer 'Do any of them have a pilot's license? Most of them seem too young to drive!'

'No Sir, however I've seen them fly drones in simulators before. They are better than any qualified pilot I've witnessed. I felt obligated to bring them here.'

'We shall see,' he sighed 'send them to area C. We have some free simulators there, let them fly against the AI Lieutenant,' the Colonel pointed all the way down the warehouse to where block C was.

'Thank you, Sir.'

The Lieutenant took back his tablet after it had been approved with the Colonel's thumbprint.

What they didn't know is that these kids had competed on this very same simulator many times in tournaments. They had all thrashed the most advanced AI along-time ago and in one tournament they had gone up against an SI built in Germany; developed by the military to train the most advanced pilots.

The German scientists had jokingly christened it "The Red Baron". They were proposing the use of Advanced SI flying a wing of scram drones for the Luftwaffe. The scientist showcased it first in Germany and after it had

beaten nearly all their best pilots, getting another such demonstration set up was difficult. The Red Baron was resigned to being shown off at gaming tournaments and net programs until the military had gotten over it. Although most air forces were interested in developing the idea behind closed doors, they were frightened by the concept just as much. Of the hundreds of contestants one had beaten it, Ryu, and according to the hosts she had the largest recorded margin against it.

After reaching block C then defeating the AI effortlessly and shocking everyone by doing so they were sent to block D. On arrival they saw there were only 6 simulators divided into two teams of 3. A General and several other officers watched the combat on screen intently as the hopefuls that beat the AI faced off against each other. They all stood making notes and running back the footage; pointing out sparks of talent that could be used and perhaps developed in the short time available.

The busy discussion stopped and the General looked at the ragtag clan that had been lead in by the Lieutenant, 'What's this lieutenant? A joke?' stated General Pak as he approached them.

'No Sir, they've passed the AI and are here to be tested again,' replied the young Lieutenant quickly.

The General looked at them and then starring at Ryu asked sharply 'Where did you learn to fly girl?'

'I learned to fly at home ... Sir,' she replied timidly.

There were some chuckles in the background but the General was not amused, his country was staring into the abyss and his sense of humour was on leave.

'So you're not a qualified pilot then?' he said again in his stern and intimidating manner.

'No, Sir,' she replied.

'What makes you think that you and your sorry group would be any use against Jiang's pilots when our best are in their graves girl?' he barked.

The last question angered Ryu; the General was unaware that her family in the north had been gassed by the Manchurians. Her father died from the nerve gas attack. The village was evacuated with her mother surviving the initial attack, only to die later in a mobile triage centre before any treatment could be given. Her brother was away at university thankfully.

Her sister was being looked after by an aunt though she suffered from severe lung problems thanks to the gas and wasn't expected to survive.

Jiang was merciless with the use of nerve agents; it was a quick and easy way to dispose of the enemy. He had no qualms about it being used on civilians for the purpose of terrorizing a population into submission and clearing his path to his goal, which was Seoul and an unconditional surrender.

Ryu gave a hard stare and said calmly but sternly 'Why don't you just give us a chance instead of wasting our time?'

The room fell quiet; the staff were expecting Ryu to be thrown out on her backside. However the General had worse things to worry about than his pride right now and didn't respond to her outburst.

'Very well girl you and two of your friends can get in over there.'

He pointed towards the three booths nearest to her and gestured towards three men waiting to be tested. The three opponents strapped themselves in but the three kids looked at each other and Ryu asked that their chairs be deactivated. General Pak nodded and the seats were deactivated, they had never flown and found the motion to be a distraction.

The test commenced, 6 scram drones in 2 teams of 3 facing off. Flying into a combat zone that they were not permitted to leave during the test. The test was short but the observers were very excited by what they had seen. The next 3 were tested against a fresh threesome, as the last were sent home.

Sure enough they won quickly and easily. Afterwards General Pak approached Ryu 'Very good girl and my congratulations to your friends, give me that Lieutenant.'

He took the tablet and put his thumb to it 'I'll accompany you and your team to block E.'

'Thank you, Sir,' replied the Lieutenant as he smiled quickly at his brother.

The General was smiling with excitement; he had forgotten Ryu's earlier comments as he led them towards the final testing area.

Block E was where the people that made it had a final test against experienced combat drone pilots in one on one situations. General Pak

ushered them in, it was much the same as the previous block only there were two booths. Yet one was manned by a proven scram drone pilot.

General Pak approached his opposite and quickly stated 'General I have some applicants that show great promise.'

Then he said under his breath 'Do not judge them by appearance.'

General Kim looked hard at them over Pak's shoulder. It was difficult for him to believe these children who were in need of a haircut and some decent clothes were capable of making the grade, 'Very well, perhaps the young girl in the shorts would like to try her luck first?'

It was hard to tell if he was being sarcastic or not but Ryu got in the booth and General Pak requested her booth seat be deactivated. The techs complied and everyone watched the screen as the combat began. General Pak was transfixed but Kim seemed to be rather uninterested. If it weren't such dark times he'd have thrown the kids out and let the drill Sergeant instill some discipline into them for an hour or two.

The combat started to get Kim's attention since Ryu hadn't been shot down in the first 10 seconds. His pilot who was one of their best seemed to be struggling to get a fix on her. It was a game of cat and mouse that he just couldn't finish. His pilot was becoming rather frustrated whilst Ryu remained relaxed and focused.

The clan knew what was happening and had seen it time and time again. Her opponent thought he was chasing and just half a second away from ending his enemy; when in fact he was no more than the puppet. The room fell very quiet as the team of techs watched with bated breath, observing the two combatants ascend further into the simulated atmosphere. Twisting and turning around each other in what seemed a dance of death, a dance that Ryu was leading unknown to her opponent. Her clan mates had all been caught out by this strategy at least once.

She manipulated her pursuer into a steep climb, luring him very close before she slammed on the air brakes and cut power to her engine. She also hit the landing parachute, the virtual parachute tore and the cord ripped away from her drone bringing her drone to a relative standstill. Her opponent flew past and before he realised that he was now the hunted; he was shot to pieces by Ryu's cannons, with a Joseon air to air missile fixed onto him turning his drone into a ball of fire just for good measure.

Her opponent in a fit of anger slapped his controls as hard as he could. Kim ordered the techs to continue the simulation, he ordered Ryu to land the drone. She let her drone go into a steep dive, kick starting the scram engines back into life. Without the parachute she landed it softly in the designated area, causing superficial damage if any.

She stepped out of the booth with a beaming smile to cheers from her clan mates, her opponent was not amused. He just had some misfit girl in shorts that had never flown before wipe the floor with him. She made him look like a rookie and he felt extremely embarrassed. The team that had watched the display was quiet and didn't know what to say. General Kim approached her and with a smile 'Welcome to the air force young lady! If your friends can fly half as well as yourself you'll all be having a go with the real thing before the day is over!'

She smiled and gave a little bow; however Ryu felt the animosity coming from the other pilots.

'Tell me where did you learn to fly that well?' asked Kim.

Ryu who was quite bubbly after her victory started rambling 'I learnt from this flight programme at home. Then I used to play it on the net for fun. I was pretty good and joined a clan that competed. We won the nationals and were set to go to Lanageddon again this year in Leipzig. That was until we were attacked, we were favourites to win in the combat simulator section.'

The clan leader and brother of the young Lieutenant stepped forward and stated 'She is the best at the drone simulators. We wouldn't have won the nationals without her and she holds the record against the Red Baron.'

Kim nodded (not that he knew anything about these gaming tournaments) and looked at the young Lieutenant 'Well done Lieutenant it's good to see an officer that will show initiative and take a risk, especially now. We'll test the others first then I want you to get them all into some appropriate clothing. We will see how they do on the real thing.'

'Thank you Sir,' replied the Lieutenant.

Kim put his hand firmly on Ryu's shoulder 'We'll see what our Red Dragon can do against Jiang's pilots!'

Within 48 hours the clan were suited up with clean haircuts and flying combat missions. Much to the disdain of pilots who felt these kids hadn't earned the right to scrub the toilets, much less fly a scram drone. The clan

had been kept together and allowed to form a flight team. Initially they were under the guidance of at least one experienced officer. The first missions they performed poorly, much to the satisfaction of others, they were routinely sneered at and dismissed by their peers.

Finally Ryu complained directly to General Kim. She argued the flight leaders were holding them back. Kim's faith in these youngsters was so strong he had the flight leaders removed that day. The clan was now flying alone which even further enraged the veteran pilots. However the results started to come through, losses dropped to almost nothing and the enemy started to experience difficulties. General Kim soon ordered a strike at an enemy HQ which reportedly was coordinating the land invasion. A positive blow might hold them off for a few more weeks. He had a chat with Ryu and the rumour was she had convinced him on the use of nerve gas. Although it was certainly ordered from above the rumour remained.

Jiang was unprepared for such an attack. He and his Generals had expected to be in Seoul before the Koreans could have organized such an operation. Assuming they had any competent pilots left.

Many people found the thought of using chemical warfare abhorrent and Kim wasn't very comfortable with it either. Ryu had no such qualms and after the war in an interview she described it as "Justice served".

Jiang didn't have the means for a sea invasion so he had planned a land invasion from the north. With air superiority he could have supplies, soldiers and armour airlifted. The peninsula was nearly all mountainous terrain and would require total air cover.

After a month of these new pilots, many being recruited from the national gaming league, under the tutelage of Ryu and her wing, the likely hood of a speedy invasion was slipping away with each after action report that came in. His Generals were at a loss as to where the extra pilots came from. They didn't believe the reports of kids from gaming clans; it was dismissed as propoganda to demoralize their own pilots.

Now that the Koreans had new airbases set up inside mountains previously used as nuclear bunkers, it meant nerve gas or bombs wouldn't be much use even if Jiang knew where they were.

Jiang received a report from a very ill looking officer. It summarised how some low flying scam drones had used the terrain to avoid radar; nerve gassing the entire forward HQ that was coordinating the invasion. Jiang

went pale as the blood drained from his face; he stood quietly staring at the report for a while. The room was silent, no one dared say a word or move a muscle for fear of Jiang's response. Jiang placed the report on the table and quietly ordered a withdrawal to Manchuria. Retreating behind their defensive line of anti-air missile installations; he believed it would serve as cover for them to re-launch another offensive in a month or two ... they never did move onto Korean soil again.

After months of heavy fighting in the air Jiang was running at a massive deficit. Even his drug sales couldn't cover the expense of purchasing all the new weaponry he required to replace his losses. He was forced to start selling his drugs to the Russian mafia. Previously the Russians had agreed to supply him with weapons under the promise he would not import his drugs into their country. Moscow had secured the same deal with many warlords and unscrupulous leaders around the globe. This policy had cleared up most of the drug problem in one swoop. However Jiang was desperate, and when caught selling his poison by Moscow they cut off all arms trading with him. In the same action Moscow threatened a weapons embargo to anyone trading with Jiang.

Jiang now cut off from all and without an ally attacked Vladivostok with all he had. Hoping a quick victory would give him the port and force the Russians into removing the embargo. Catching the Russians by surprise he besieged Vladivostok. Jiang employed his drones to try and gas the population into submission or extermination, either option was acceptable.

The Korean military decided on not getting involved with the Russian conflict. They had expelled Jiang from their country but were cautious about moving too far into Manchuria. For many years Moscow and Korea had poor relations due to the arms dealing. They had sold weapons to the same warlords that strove to destroy Korea and now annex Vladivostok. The Korean government deemed it poetic justice that Russians were being slaughtered by the same weapons Moscow had sold to the warlords.

However Ryu was not in agreement with her government's policy. She was now the ROKAF top gun having attained more kills than any other pilot and promoted to Captain all within 6 months. The name Red Dragon had stuck much to the disdain of those pilots that felt they had earned their positions; through hard work at the academy and long hours in flight training. They still sneered at her and all those gamers recruited along with

her. The difference was that now they only dared sneer behind her back, keeping any smart comments to themselves. In fact most of the top 20 pilots were gamers that had been recruited since the war. Many of the old guard were very bitter about it.

Ryu had spoken to General Kim about assisting the struggle at Vladivostok. Kim ordered her and all pilots that they were not to engage Jiang's forces on Russian territory. A no fly zone over Vladivostok and the surrounding area occupied by Jiang's army was to be strictly observed.

She and Kim had become good friends and he no doubt was her biggest advocate. He knew she wanted the ROKAF to attack Jiang while he was besieging Vladivostok. Hoping to catch the Manchurians off guard again and land another painful blow, but he pointed out it was not to happen. The General had spoken out about helping Russia at the last staff meeting. However the years of bad blood between the countries were too much to put aside for some.

So Ryu started flying sorties as close to the border as she could. Vladivostok would hold out for a week at the most. The Dragon was waiting for an opportunity, until finally she got it. On the way to strike a military camp in Dongning one of the wingmen spotted 3 drones heading towards Vladivostok. Ryu immediately ordered everyone to engage, they all knew they were to leave one intact to withdraw. This had been discussed beforehand and agreed upon in private with her clan mates. Ryu didn't want their true intentions to be recorded by the drone booth.

They swooped up from their usual position of flying barely a few feet above the ground to avoid all anti-air and radar. Attacking the Manchurian drones they destroyed two but left one to chase into Russian air space.

Ryu and her wing pursued the Manchurian drone into the no fly zone. In a short time flying at Mach 5 they hit upon the besieged city of Vladivostok smouldering in the distance as a funeral pyre at dusk. Ryu's drone that was now painted red with a dragon motif dropped out of super cruise and along with the others spread out hugging the ground.

The Manchurians were still in the process of scrambling fresh drones as the bulk were busy engaging the Russians to the north. The Manchurian HQ descended into panic when 7 Korean scram drones were spotted roaring in. After playing back the footage in the air command bunker one

man declared he saw a red drone amongst them, the panic turned to terror.

The NBC klaxon started to scream out. Men and women scrambled for their Nuclear, Biological and Chemical warfare suits. If the anti-air instillations around the HQ didn't stop them they would have to suffer a chemical attack before engaging their drones.

The wing of 7 drones screeched through the air, too close to the ground for the anti-air to get a lock and fire. They were carrying a full payload of nerve agent and anti-bunker missiles. The plan was to lock on to any bunkers with the AI as they flew over the HQ and fire on them, trying to break them open. At the same time they would fire an even spread of missiles loaded with a nerve agent warhead, designed to impact the ground piercing most structures; then after a small explosion quickly releasing the agent in a massive plume covering the maximum area in as short a time.

This they accomplished in one fly over of the panic stricken camp. Ryu's wing then made a tight bank and went balls to the wall for the Korean border. All the time sticking as close to the ground as was possible, which at Mach 10 is not an easy feat. However they only had to maintain it for a very short time because once they hit Mach 5 and as long as the enemy was behind them nothing was fast enough to catch the Shogun scram drone.

The fastest speed a Russian MiG drone had been record at was Mach 5.7.

As they approached Mach 10, Korea was seconds away. The clan began to decelerate landing safe and sound at their air base just north of Pyongyang.

Ryu was punished behind closed doors for her actions, as publicly the other pilots wouldn't have taken it well; even those that disapproved of her still respected her ability and what she had done for their country. She pointed out they were engaged in Manchuria and chased them into Russian airspace. Once there they retreated after dumping the payload in order to achieve maximum speed.

She took full responsibility, her actions were never forgotten, there remained a black mark on her record.

As for Jiang once again his plans had been thwarted by the misfit girl, the eastern HQ was devastated. This time however his forces were not as fortunate. After losing all air cover for only an hour the Russians took the opportunity and moved in. Occupying the HQ and imprisoning the officers. All others were shot on the spot, their bodies burnt in a massive pile. Vladivostok was liberated in a few days; the ROKAF stated it was a planned attack. Claiming Moscow had not been warned for fear Jiang might get word.

Within a year Jiang had fallen back to Shenyang. With Russia bearing down from the north it took only another year before he had been shot by one of his own men. Killing another's child was far less painful than watching your own being burnt in heaps. It caused many of Jiang's staff members to plot against their commander in chief, surrendering his head at the first Korean military outpost along their defensive line.

Two and a half years after it began Ryu was an air force Major and decorated by Moscow for the liberation of Vladivostok. A national hero in two countries, but many questioned what she and other pilots did to attain that victory. Yet nearly all agreed it was required, after many years in the ROKAF Ryu eventually joined the I.S.A. For nearly three years her reason for living had been revenge. Then for a year after that she was still patrolling Manchuria eliminating pockets of resistance.

After final victory and Korea had annexed Manchuria she felt empty, her motivation for existing had gone. As a philosopher once said "He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster".

It seemed that Ryu had become that monster. By fighting with Jiang she and her comrades, just innocent children when it began, had become as cold and brutal as the evil dictator themselves.

Nerve gassing the enemy into submission without mercy; even after the war was over using napalm against small towns and villages that threatened to revolt. Where Japan, Korea and Taiwan had once cowered in fear of the warlords, now the warlords were quaking in their boots.

Moscow joined the embargo on the warlords of China, added to that an ROKAF of the most experienced drone combat pilots in the world. Those that didn't surrender were eventually annihilated.

To fight and defeat the beast Korea had become the beast. No one cared for human life anymore, or to be precise enemy human life. After all was

said and done Ryu needed a challenge. Something to do other than hate, since 10 years on there was no one left to hate anymore. Thinking about what had happened to her family and village was a motivating force during the war. Yet once all the warlords had fallen it was depressing. With no one left to punish for her pain she needed to take on something. Before the abyss sucked her in and her hatred swallowed her.

When General Kim discovered the I.S.A was going to send a manned mission to Mars in 5 years and needed a drone pilot he wrote out an application for her and sent it in. He had witnessed her deterioration since the war. Kim was concerned that if she didn't find a cause she would destroy herself, he'd been by her side like a father; guiding her and keeping her out of harm's way when he could. He had led her down this path and now it had come to an end, at a cliff. If he didn't get her onto another path she would certainly perish in his opinion.

Her application was accepted and when Kim told her she was going to Mars, Ryu was shocked and a little hurt that he'd done such a thing without informing her. When he mentioned about being the first woman on Mars it had a certain allure. Ryu forgot her initial reaction 'Thanks, I'll give it some thought,' she smiled 'but you owe me for not telling me first!'

Ryu gave him a smile, took the papers and left his office.

Under his breath Kim muttered 'We all owe you a great deal young girl.'

Titov's story and McCann's cigar both came to an end at around the same time and McCann was enchanted by both. He was taken aback that the dedicated woman he'd been training with all these years had come from such humble circumstances. He raised an eyebrow and took a hard look at her as she stood chatting with her admirers 'Amazing, bloody amazing!' he whispered to himself.

His attention was then grabbed by the sound of breaking glass. McCann looked to his right and witnessed Louis scrambling to his feet. Three burly Russians moved in on him after having obviously thrown him across the room 'Louis!' he groaned knowingly.

On the surface McCann deduced Louis had used his fabulous personality to antagonise someone new, since his favourite target, Faraday, was no

longer present. Unlike Faraday these chaps didn't believe Louis was indispensable, quite the opposite. Louis was an experienced fighter, thanks to his social attitude, however he had definitely bitten off more than he could chew.

Titov was amused by the entertainment unfolding and poured himself another drink as he lit his second cigar of the evening. He offered a second one to McCann but he was already getting up to break up the fracas, before his nanite engineer got put out of action. McCann however was blocked off by several crewmen, whatever Louis had done it must've been serious for them to ignore his rank.

McCann looked at Titov who was sitting down enjoying the show 'Aren't you going to do something Titov? I need that man in one piece for god's sake!' cried McCann over the noise.

Titov didn't reply but began to howl with laughter as he witnessed Hassif crawling from under the table towards the door. This would've been amusing at another time and place and Louis probably deserved it. However McCann was responsible for this mission yet he was powerless to stop the kicking Louis was about to receive.

Louis was now against the wall being punched around the body by the largest Russian as the other two held him in place. Titov was enjoying the first good entertainment he'd had in several months, whilst Hassif was scurrying out of the door back to his quarters.

McCann caught a woman's voice shouting something in Russian and the ruckus seemed to dissipate. It was Ryu, she walked through the crowd that stood around watching the beating holding McCann back. She then spoke something that McCann didn't understand but caused the large fellow beating Louis to a pulp to nod his head and walk away. The other two flung Louis to the floor and followed their crewmate to the bar. McCann dived in and with the help of Ryu picked a battered Louis up from the floor then carried him back to his quarters.

On the way back McCann asked Ryu 'What did you say to them?'

'I told them he'd had enough, what was that all about?' replied Ryu.

'I've got no idea, I suppose he'll tell us tomorrow or maybe Hassif can shed some light on it after he's come out of hiding!'

'It's lucky for Louis that you broke the Manchurians at Vladivostok, otherwise he'd have been mashed.'

Ryu looked past Louis and at McCann 'What else did he tell you?'

'Is there anything else I should know?' replied McCann as he stopped walking and looked back at her.

'No, there isn't. Now let's get this bum back to his quarters,' said Ryu as she turned and began walking again.

The next morning the four travellers gathered in Louis' quarters. McCann stood over him as he sat on the bed elbows on knees and head in hands. Grumbling due to the combined pain of the beating he'd received the night before and the hangover he acquired that morning.

'Fucking lache!' grumbled Louis as he cursed Hassif 'You left me to those bastards!'

Hassif remained silent.

'So what happened Louis? Any reason for them beating you to a bloody pulp?' asked McCann.

'I don't know, all I know is that fucking Indian ran and left me to face them!'

McCann didn't believe him but neither he nor Hassif was forthcoming and they had both a media conference and a launch today. He was wondering how he'd explain Louis sporting a black eye, he began to discuss the problem with Ryu.

She shook her head, looking at Louis and Hassif she ranted 'Jesus, it's like having kids except they're trapped in the bodies of two allegedly responsible adults. They should've given us parenting courses before letting these idiots loose!'

'I have an idea,' whimpered Hassif.

'What!' shouted Ryu almost biting his head off.

'Well during the media interview Louis could wear a pair of the sun goggles they use for safety here. They look just like those sports glasses skiers wear.'

McCann looked at Ryu, she just shook her head and Louis shouted 'You cannot make me wear those. I'd look like a prick!'

The corner of McCann's lips rose as he gave an evil smirk to Ryu and she smirked back.

‘Good idea, go get a pair Hassif we'll meet you for breakfast in the canteen,’ said McCann.

Later the four of them were eating breakfast to sniggers from the Russians as Louis sat there with his specs on, eating his porridge. Soon the other three began to chuckle as they tried to down their meal. All to the displeasure of Louis, who kept pointing out how he felt about wearing the goggles. Hassif told him to look on the bright side, that due to the low gravity he didn't take such a heavy beating. McCann had a good laugh but Louis once again failed to find the humour.

However Hassif had made a very interesting observation, because of the low gravity it took far more effort to inflict as much punishment as you could on Earth in a similar situation. Also depending where you were on the station would dictate the gravity and how the fracas unravelled, due to how the tidal forces on the rock created the artificial gravity. Back on Earth Louis wouldn't be walking the next day.

Louis was characteristically unthankful for small mercies and blamed everyone else for a situation that McCann was certain he'd instigated.

Later that day during the media interview the four of them were with Titov, all trying to hold a straight face. Whilst Louis sat there feeling a fool. When asked by Jerry Habeeb why he was wearing the goggles McCann interjected ‘Louis is trying to set a new trend out here in space Jerry!’ to a chorus of laughter in the background.

Network America had the exclusive rights to the voyage and Jerry was the main correspondent.

‘Is that a fact, are those designer sunglasses Louis?’ asked Jerry.

‘They are Russian,’ replied Louis quietly to even more laughter which puzzled Jerry and no doubt anyone watching.

‘So Duncan tell me how have you found the Russian hospitality so far?’

‘Well I've found the Tsiolkovsky and her crew to be most hospitable.’

‘What about you Colonel or is that Plokovnik Titov? How have you found your guests?’

‘Either is fine and I've enjoyed their stay. I think we've been a great hit!’

Titov started to crack up, just managing to blurt out ‘Especially with Mister Beaumont here!’ before regaining his composure.

Louis sat with a straight face throughout the whole interview which only tickled the others funny bone even more. With Louis taking everything in

typical poor humour they eventually finished the interview, leaving Jerry a very puzzled man.

Next Faraday came on the screen 'Louis what in blue blazes do you think you're playing at man? Take those ridiculous goggles off now!'

Louis tore them off to reveal a big shiner on his right eye.

'Louis slipped and hit his head, we didn't want to concern anyone back home,' explained McCann.

'Listen McCann, it's your job to keep things under control. That includes that horse's arse Beaumont, I don't want anymore surprises or fashion statements is that understood?'

'Yes Sir,' replied McCann.

'Well you launch in three hours so good luck to you all, best wishes from everyone here,' the screen turned off.

Faraday was back to his pressure ridden self, the less he saw of Louis the better. It was time to embark; they said their thanks to the crew of the Tsiolkovsky and the Tsiolkovsky herself before walking to their quarters to get fully suited.

The team of four made their way to the launch bay where the Athena now awaited her human cargo. Titov and Cherkesov met them for the send off. Titov shook them by the hand and offered McCann a pack of five cigars "Something to enjoy whilst on Mars and remember us by."

McCann thanked him greatly and put it away in one of the tool pockets on his suit.

Cherkesov then offered something to Ryu; it was a silver chain with an old Soviet hammer and sickle emblem on it.

'What's this for?' asked Ryu as she took it.

'It was my great grandmothers then my grandmothers and then my mothers. She died in Vladivostok; I'd like you to have it.'

Ryu accepted the necklace whilst fighting back the blushes.

'It will bring you good luck, Major,' finished Cherkesov.

Titov and his first then stood back as the airlock door opened, the four stepped in and it closed behind them as they all sealed the helmets on their suits. They walked through the next door as it opened into the massive launch bay hewn out of the asteroid. All was clear but for the Athena that sat at one end near the airlock door they had just stepped through.

At the other end was a massive metal bulkhead like door. Once ready it would open and the magnetic catapult would fling the Athena out into space towards the red planet.

The catapult was actually the same device as the net. A set of discs that used electro magnets to either bring a vessel to a halt or propel it out into space; usually for launching satellites into orbit. Today it was firing the Athena out beyond the moon and into the crosshairs of the maser that would push her the rest of the way.

The crew got on board and strapped themselves into the chairs in the command room. McCann was in constant contact with Geneva re-assuring them and double checking.

‘How was your stay with the Tsiolkovsky, Colonel?’ asked the Athena.

‘Very interesting thank you Athena, they had some good tips for when we land,’ replied McCann as he re checked the fuel cells after Louis.

‘Yes the Tsiolkovsky was good enough to download it all, I must say I did miss you all,’ said the Athena in her usual calm voice.

‘Thank you Athena, we missed you too. How has everything been whilst we were away?’

‘Everything has been functioning within acceptable parameters. If it weren't I'd have informed you Colonel.’

McCann smiled ‘I know Athena, I was just making conversation.’

‘Oh I see Colonel, I'm sorry, my experience is rather limited on social interaction.’

‘There's no need to apologize, Athena, besides your social abilities still outstrip those of Louis!’

Ryu and Hassif chuckled and before the Athena could reply McCann cut her off ‘Humour Athena. I'll explain the joke to you later, after launch.’

‘Understood, thank you Colonel.’

‘You're welcome Athena.’

After all the diagnostics and checks had been run through, the door to space opened. The crew strapped themselves in tightly and the magnets grasped the Athena. The ship was lifted from the floor and slung bottom first into the blackness, after a few minutes of checks the Athena announced they were on course.

Chapter 4

[The Athena hurtled on a trajectory sending her into the orbital path of the planet Mars.](#) With the correct speed the planet would intercept them at the same time she reached her destination.

The crew had spent the last days making preparations for the journey, Louis had been supervising the unfurling of the sail. The sail wasn't a sail in the true sense nor was it a solar sail. It was in fact a fine mesh of nanotubes unfurled in a hexagonal disc at the end of a mast protruding from the top of the Athena; which was now pointing at the dark side of the moon.

The sail was an amazing piece of technology. Conventional solar sails used a reflective mirror which, when hit by photons from the sun, gave a small push to the craft bearing the sail. It was a great way to travel since fuel was not required, thereby reducing the mass of the craft. However it took a long time to get where you wanted to go due to the slow acceleration.

Previously they had been used for unmanned craft on long flights and for manoeuvring in orbit. Changing the angle of the mirror or sail allowed a craft to manoeuvre without the need for thrusters and their fuel, when it came to a manned mission they were too slow. The Tsiolkovsky could fire out an object only so fast with her catapult. Nowhere near the speed required to get to Mars within the one month time frame the I.S.A had set itself. Even with a conventional solar sail Faraday was looking at the better part of a year. Chemical powered engines were too bulky, other types were either too large or dangerous.

Lasers were suggested to propel a craft with a sail, the trip would still take at least three months, but it was disregarded. The power requirements for the lasers were beyond the means of the I.S.A despite the array of international backers. The power required to generate a beam strong enough was unworkable, a fusion reactor would be required on both moons and the laser would need constant maintenance. Faraday's advisors concluded it couldn't be done.

Then a Japanese-American team, who had been working on nanotubes produced in India, sent a paper to Geneva that landed on Faraday's desk.

Instead of a bulky laser that was almost impossible to power they suggested a maser or microwave laser.

They proposed using a sail of woven nanotubes. With nanotubes woven into a mesh at the exact spacing as the wavelength of the microwaves. The microwaves hitting it would have much the same effect as a mirror hit by a high powered laser. A maser is far more efficient to power and requires little maintenance, plus they had an ace up their sleeve.

A small amount of chemical propellant could be pumped through the nanotubes and onto the surface of the sail through pours. When the microwaves from the maser hit the sail the chemical would evaporate. The combustion would massively increase thrust. Only a small amount of the chemical was required, hardly more than a few litres or 6 pints.

Faraday jumped on it, had the idea tested in space with the Tsiolkovsky using a small maser to propel an unmanned craft to Venus. It had arrived within a week setting a new record for reaching the planet.

The team of scientists were moved to Geneva and work began on constructing some off world masers. Thanks to the new technology it was possible to reach the red planet in a month.

However, a maser was needed at the other end to slow the craft down before it could reach a speed that allowed entry. The test craft had burnt up when attempting to aero break. Its massive momentum caused it to disintegrate in the thick atmosphere of Venus. Faraday was certain this would not happen to Athena, it couldn't! His psyche just didn't allow for such a catastrophe. A maser was built by drones on the Martian moon Deimos and besides, they needed to get back after their work was done!

Louis observed quietly as the mast which had been erected over the last two days began to unfurl the sail. It would take two to three hours, but Louis was required to be there in case anything untoward happened. He watched the monitor as it opened up from the end of the mast and out. First like water from a fountain only to open as a flower blooming, all in very slow motion. Being alone in the command room or the aft section was the time Louis most cherished. He could be at peace without distractions. The coldness and predictability of machines is what attracted Louis to them, he was a fiery man of passion and this brought balance to his life.

Having worked in civil engineering for many years he was well experienced, with nanites being his favourite area of expertise. He had

worked with corporations in manufacturing to medical science. Leaving each and every one more efficient than when he arrived. He never stayed long despite the number of contracts offered to him. He could have been a very wealthy man but for his transient nature.

Louis didn't mix well with others and disliked familiarity unless it was with his nanites, the only things he believed that would never judge him. When the I.S.A was looking for engineers he got an email along with many others. There was a contract for several years which almost caused him to trash the mail. Before he did Louis noticed there was an opening on the craft to travel to Mars itself, no flight or space experience required. He'd only be spending a month or so in space, so why not?

He could fly to Mars and work there for a year, preparing the Mars base for habitation and possibly stay on afterwards. Louis would have to train for four years in Geneva; however he was willing to suffer it for the money. Louis decided to apply and if he didn't get the job the world would keep turning, his expertise were always in demand here on Earth.

After several gruelling tests consisting of repairing and reprogramming nanites then using them to fix many different objects, from a simple outer wall in a vacuum to a malfunctioning light chip Louis got the job.

The four years had been hard for Louis, he felt he was always stuck under a microscope being observed or analyzed by Faradays' minions. The thought of Mars and a year's solitude on an alien world kept him going. Louis hated being "Faraday's slave" as he often put it, but he tolerated it. Whilst oblivious to Louis, everyone else had tolerated the Frenchman as best they could.

Louis made friends with Hassif quickly seeing him not as a kindred spirit but just someone who appreciated his privacy. Like Louis he wasn't too happy working in groups but preferred to rely on himself, the only person Louis could really relate to.

Watching the monitor Louis heard Ryu float into the command room and buckle herself into her seat.

'Morning Louis, how's the sail doing?' asked Ryu in her chirpy morning voice.

'Everything is going well, another hour and I'll check out the propellant tanks then connect it all up. We should be ready to go in a couple of hours. How was breakfast?'

‘Not bad actually, a cheese omelette with one of those oat biscuits filled with apple. What did you get?’

‘Nothing special, it's not exactly nouveau cuisine here in zero G. I'm looking forward to the menu on Mars. I'll just have to suffer this until we land and can eat like civilized human beings again.’

‘Good morning Major Ryu, how are you this morning?’ asked Athena.

‘Fine thank you, how are you Athena?’

‘I'm fine and thank you for asking Major.’

The command room went a little quiet as Ryu and Louis both stopped what they were doing.

‘Is there a problem Major?’ inquired Athena.

‘Nothing,’ replied Ryu ‘it's just I've never heard you say you're fine before, it was a surprise.’

‘Colonel McCann and I spent some time discussing socializing and the application of humour in social situations during his last shift. Was my reply appropriate Major?’

‘Yes it was Athena, as I said I was just surprised to hear you say it.’

For the next hour Ryu checked the data packets, sent and received, along with all systems. She reported in to Geneva whilst the Athena discussed her understanding of humour and though she understood it, Athena failed to find McCann's joke amusing.

Louis carried on observing the sail unfurl, when finished an hour later he went aft to check up on the propellant tanks. Ryu told him to wake the others on the way whilst she kept an eye on the ship. Ryu requested authorization from Faraday to link with the maser station on the moon whilst Louis was busy.

Soon McCann and Hassif joined Ryu in the command module, Hassif began running over Athena's calculations for the first shot as he called it. Making sure the disc was pointing at the right angle to the maser and craft was essential in ensuring the correct trajectory. Small corrections would be required no doubt, but carried out later minus the propellant.

This sail allowed fast bursts of speed associated with chemical rockets, combined with the ability to make slow accurate corrections in course associated with conventional sails. When there was no propellant the weave of the nanotubes caught the right wavelength of microwaves like a net catching fish, it gave that push needed to correct the Athena.

Athena had made the calculations whilst Geneva and Hassif checked them. In reality Hassif made his own calculations then checked them against the Athena's.

All the time Hassif had an earphone in one ear playing music which he swore helped him concentrate. The music was very irritating the first time the other three had experienced it in simulations. Faraday had christened it "That god awful Indian racket!"

McCann and Ryu let it slide after Hassif had compared it to them jogging or working out whilst listening to music. Louis however was not nearly so forgiving. Despite everyone bending over backwards for him he was characteristically unwilling to do so for others. Faraday was as usual ineffective at controlling Louis who relished picking on Hassif and his musical tastes at each opportunity. McCann ended up clamping down on him, whatever McCann had said privately to him that day; Louis never complained or raised the subject again.

Hassif had finished his calculations and it seemed Athena agreed with him. A moment later Geneva sent their conclusions which all matched up.

Louis floated in from the aft and buckled into his seat 'The tanks are ready to go.'

'Sail orientation, propellant and maser burn calculated and set,' said Hassif as he certified the calculations.

'Check,' replied McCann 'Ryu you're cleared to link with the maser?'

Ryu linked up with the maser on the dark side of the moon and started running checks. The other three now waited for her to clear the maser. She would be firing the microwaves at the sail. The angle of the maser was as critical as that of the sail. After a few minutes silence she cleared the maser. McCann sent the news to Geneva that all was cleared and they were awaiting authorization for the first shot. Ten minutes later McCann received the go ahead, he ran through a last set of checks which were confirmed by the others and Athena.

'Ryu you have the go ahead to fire the maser,' said McCann.

Ryu glanced over the orders she was sending once more and hit her touch panel 'Maser will fire in T-minus 2 minutes.'

She announced as a countdown came up on each crew members panel. Hassif turned off his music putting his tablet and earphone away to prepare for the impact. Everything had been stowed away as when the

Athena was propelled towards Mars anything floating would not. This meant a floating tablet could hit the wall or even a crew member or to be more precise the wall would hit the object as it was pushed into it. This could cause a hull breach or a crew member's death, a vice of such high curves of acceleration in zero G.

'Maser to fire in T-minus 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Maser fired successfully everything is functioning within normal parameters,' announced Athena as they all braced.

Hassif was watching the data roll across his screen as he checked the Athena's calculations. Louis was going over reports from the nanites examined engineering reports on the mast, sail, tanks and structure. Ryu monitored the Moon maser constantly.

After the crew confirmed Athena's assessment McCann put his hand out over the panel in front of him 'Engaging propellant tanks for first burn.'

He hit the panel and all hell seemed to break loose, at least to the untrained observer. For just five seconds small amounts of propellant seeped through the pours. The maser cooked it as soon as it reached the surface of the sail resulting in a massive controlled explosion. The ship shook violently as the lifeless body of a sailor in the clutches of a furious Polythemus. The thrust was tremendous; no manned craft had ever experienced such a thing. Although there was no G force to deal with in space the sheer thrust upon the mass was putting great stress on the Athena. The controlled burn accelerated her into space as her crew could do little but wait for the five seconds of time to end. Those five seconds felt longer to her crew and even longer to Faraday who waited alongside ground control with bated breath.

'Primary burn completed, current speed 150,000 KPH, analyzing course and trajectory,' announced Athena after the shaking had stopped.

Louis was busy looking over his reports as Hassif started on analyzing the first shot and calculating what course corrections would be required.

'Course and trajectory analyzed, new course calculated, sail orientation and Maser trajectory calculated,' announced Athena.

McCann sent all the data to Geneva and waited for their conclusion whilst Hassif looked it over himself.

The first shot was successful, and as expected, the trajectory that the Athena was on to meet Mars was a little off. Everything had to be re

calculated and checked for the second shot, the fuel burns had to be broken up for this reason. Also there was the fact that Athena could only take so much punishment at a time. Too much and the mast and sail could be permanently damaged. Replacing it wasn't so much of a problem once they had reached Mars as there was a year to get a replacement and fit it. The problem was that once you were at such high velocities you needed to slow the craft down. Otherwise entering the atmosphere or just making orbit would tear Athena to pieces.

Geneva checked and gave the go ahead, along with Hassif. Louis changed the orientation of the sail which was still being hit by the maser. Slowly over the next 30 minutes Athena's course was corrected; using the force of microwave radiation bombarding the sail from the Moon.

When all was ready they gave another 5 second burst of propellant, pushing her to over 200,000 kph. After corrections McCann released the fuel a third time until she passed 300,000 kph, and finally a fourth which pushed her to a record speed for a manned mission of 442,000 KPH. The sail remained out as the Athena took the benefits of the maser before its power faded away.

This was the single downside of the maser compared to a laser. A laser had superior power transfer over distance whereas the maser would lose power with distance quite drastically.

Back on the ground there were celebrations after McCann had completed all checks and sent logs of the entire manoeuvre to Geneva in a data packet.

Faraday was relieved, all had gone well. With only minor course corrections required the mast and sail were in good shape. In a couple of weeks Athena would be ready to begin breaking, in preparation for Mars orbit.

Everything seemed to be on track, after Faraday had a private chat with McCann and the crew giving his congratulations he retired to his bed. Faraday had a bedroom built next door to his office in Geneva and slept like a baby.

The next two weeks were uneventful, the crew ran through the usual work schedule McCann read his papers. Ryu remained focused on her work and increasing her efficiency, Hassif listened to his music as he made projections of their arrival time; calculating the required deceleration from

Deimos. Louis grumbled as little as possible spending as much time as he could alone in the aft. For the most part he monitored the shield that protected the Athena from space debris at such high speed.

It was a hardened carbon composite dome covering the aft end of the Athena which now pointed towards their destination. A magnetic field ran around it helping to keep particles away. The shield was still hit by micro meteors yet absorbed all the strikes, easily keeping Athena safe. When it was time the Athena would briefly swing around pointing her sail towards Mars. The Deimos maser would start the braking process by firing several times. After each braking burn the Athena would swing back around so her shield may protect her for as long as possible.

Calculations were made for the next burn and a few days later she'd use her gyroscopes to change attitude fire a small burst then swing back again. After 39 days Athena was preparing to enter Mars orbit. The mast had been retracted and she was moving slow enough for the gravity of Mars to pull her in to orbit.

The red planet now loomed on the monitors and McCann had spent many a quiet hour alone on duty marvelling at it. The braking process had been completed and Athena now crept upon her destination at a pace which would allow entry into the atmosphere, in theory at least.

'Beautiful isn't it?' said Louis floating into the fore section and startling McCann who was almost hypnotised by the image.

'Yes, you're up early today!' replied McCann in a half jest.

Today they were to be the first manned craft to enter the Martian atmosphere and land.

'I didn't sleep very well, let me know when you want the shuttlecock.' referring to the method of entry into Mars.

'As soon as you're ready Louis you can open her up,' replied McCann in a relaxed manner never taking his eyes off the monitor.

Louis floated to his seat, buckled himself in and began to run the checks. After 10 minutes he informed McCann he was ready. McCann gave the go ahead and the shuttlecock began to unfurl.

Athena had 3 sections fore, mid and aft. The aft was by far the largest section which possessed the space shield. It protected Athena and her crew during space travel and entry into the Martian atmosphere. Followed by the smaller mid-section then the smaller and conical fore section pointing away from Mars.

Where each section met the other the ship had gully or some might say a waistline. At these points where each section met the other, a large collar of carbon began to protrude. The one closest to the shield where the aft and mid-section met came out at a 60 degree angle then the collar where the mid and fore section met came out at a 70 degree angle and even further turning Athena into what looked like a massive shuttlecock. Thus this entry method was christened the shuttlecock, the purpose being to cause enough drag in the thin Martian atmosphere to slow down the Athena. Also the large size of the shuttlecock fins would dissipate the heat, reducing the chances of failure in the heat shielding whilst stabilizing the crafts orientation.

McCann was now in sole command, real time contact with Geneva had been lost weeks ago so all the decisions rested on his shoulders. Athena had made contact with the SI on the Edwards in Martian orbit. The station itself was without a human crew and solely run by the SI, although this would change in the future.

After the shuttlecock had been unfurled and checked by both Louis and Athena; the next couple of hours were spent with Hassif consulting and checking Athena's projections for entry. She was to enter the atmosphere at a slight angle, using drag from friction with the atmosphere and gravitational pull to slow her down. This was to be done in one manoeuvre, an aero snatch as McCann had named it; as opposed to executing many atmospheric flybys over several months in the standard aero braking technique.

There was added danger but simulations on Earth had proven to be promising along with several tests on small vehicles in the Earth's atmosphere. Since Mars had a much thinner atmosphere risks were lowered and having them in orbit aero braking for a year wasn't an acceptable amount of time for many reasons. Faraday wasn't getting them there within a month to spend a year aero braking.

Lastly Ryu arose, after breakfast she floated into her seat. Inside the command room the others could feel her energy as she entered, despite all sitting back to back facing their workstations. Athena greeted her as usual and she slipped into her seat and buckled in 'Ready to go gentlemen, what's the ETA?' she chirped.

'Hassif do you have the ETA yet?' asked McCann.

'Just give me ten minutes to check Athena's calculations again,' he replied whilst engrossed in the mish mash of equations on the panel before his seat. All went silent until a few minutes later he replied 'The earliest window is in 83 minutes and then there's a second window in 217 minutes, it's your choice Colonel?'

McCann thought for a second then said 'Athena I want to prepare for the second window, understood?'

'Preparing orientation for entry window in minus 214 minutes and 43 seconds Colonel,' replied Athena as she began the countdown.

McCann then sent the last data packet to Geneva, until they made touchdown, and retracted the communications antenna.

'Time to entry 90 seconds,' announced Athena as everyone strapped themselves in and braced. Athena would be tackling the entry with the crew overseeing.

Athena hit the Martian atmosphere and everything shook violently, it reminded Ryu of an earthquake she had experienced as a young girl. The shaking became so violent it was hard to concentrate on her monitor. If she hadn't run through these simulations on a weekly basis for 3 years the readout would be meaningless and unintelligible. Ryu focused and made sense of the blur in front of her.

'Shield temperature 100 degrees Celsius,' announced Athena.

At the same moment Ryu could feel the gravity pulling her down into the seat. The space suits compensated by administering pressure to the limbs automatically, lowering susceptibility to blackouts.

'Shield temperature 500 degrees Celsius,' announced Athena as the crushing forces of the aero snatch tore at her frame.

Athena maintained her orientation through temperature manipulation of the fins on her shuttlecock. The fins were a compound, holding layers of inert gas inside the carbon collar. Athena would manipulate the

temperature and gas density forcing the fins to flex and bend to her will, maintaining control over course.

'Shield temperature 750 degrees Celsius, altitude 9 kilometres,' announced Athena in her calm voice.

It was the last thing Ryu remembered before she blacked out.

Something went wrong, McCann didn't know what but it had turned from a major earthquake to the most brutal rollercoaster ride imaginable. It felt as if Athena had been hit or hit something or had a breach, he didn't know. All he knew for certain was that she was tumbling helplessly and in danger of being ripped apart by the stress and heat. McCann struggled to remain conscious even with his suit inflating to maintain enough blood pressure to feed oxygen to his brain.

'Athena regain attitude control!' screamed McCann as best he could.

The pressure on his chest and lungs was almost unbearable and although he was shouting his voice was hardly audible. Athena didn't answer him.

'Athena are you operational?' he pushed out.

'Yes,' came a timid response from Athena.

McCann had remained calm. He had been in similar situations in the past, but when he detected fear in her voice it sent a shiver of panic through him. For a few seconds he was paralyzed by an infectious terror. Regaining his composure he whispered 'Can you regain control Athena?' to which there was no reply.

They continued to tumble through the Martian atmosphere spinning towards the ground and destined to become another impact crater.

'Athena give me manual flight control now!' he pushed out of his aching chest.

Straight away the tops of his seat arms slid back revealing two touch panels on each arm which McCann was struggling to keep his fingers over.

'Yong!' wheezed the Englishman.

Only to hear the timid voice of Athena state 'Major Ryu Yong is unconscious Colonel.'

'Louis, Hassif?'

'Engineer Louis Beaumont and Technician Hassif are both unconscious Colonel.'

McCann was struggling, trying to stop the tumble before Athena broke up in the atmosphere. He didn't know the speed, altitude or heat. He was trying to enter the atmosphere by the seat of his pants and without any visual aid, he felt like a fly in amber, struggling in vain.

McCann was reducing the tumble but for all he knew they could hit the ground or break up in a couple of seconds. Yet he had to do something, he wouldn't sit by and accept the inevitable.

Then Athena called out in a slightly stronger voice 'Major Ryu Yong has regained consciousness, Colonel.'

Ryu was barely awake with what felt like the mother of all hangovers.

McCann shouted as loudly as the forces on his body permitted 'Yong are you there?'

He waited a moment and just as he started to speak her name again she whispered with all her might 'Yeh.'

'Yong, Athena is out, what's our status?'

Thanks to the helmets on the suits they could speak to each other and hear properly otherwise their whispers would have been unintelligible.

'Four point six km a second, two k Celsius, seven k meters, hull secure,' whispered Ryu as she used every ounce of concentration to read the panel in front of her.

Suddenly McCann's monitor turned on, displaying a view outside from one of Athena's external cameras. Somehow Athena had snapped out of it, activating his display.

She was incapable of regaining control herself but she must have been cognisant of their perilous situation. McCann was grateful for the view allowing him to halt the tumble since the shaking prevented him from reading any instruments properly, added to that his visor display was malfunctioning. It refused to activate, this was the only way for him to get an idea of their orientation as the craft spun out of control.

Within 5 seconds of Ryu coming back he had the tumble under control and Athena was once again pointing in the right direction. She was no longer spinning but Athena herself was still incapacitated.

Ryu continued to call out the status, now McCann's goal was to make a landing, no matter where it may be, that they could walk away from. Once committed to the aero snatch there was no pulling out into orbit. The

Athena had no form of standard self-propulsion. Once she began her entry there was no way out.

A shallow angle had to be maintained, the atmosphere pushing against the shuttlecock until she had slowed enough to re-orientate into a steeper angle and begin the second stage. That had all just gone to hell, the angle was off and Athena was hurtling towards the ground. The craft plunged far too fast and at far too steep of an angle, which McCann and Ryu were both well aware of.

McCann just kept thinking of something Jenkins had said to him when on their way to try out for SBS "This is what separates the men from the boys Duncan!"

McCann muttered it under his breath as he struggled to live.

Ryu could feel the force leaving her chest but speech was still difficult 'One point three k a second, five hundred Celsius, three k meters, hull secure.'

'Engaging second stage,' said McCann as he touched the panel on his seat arm, setting off a massive breaking parachute.

The parachute flew out of Athena's cone and gave a huge jolt to all those attached. The parachute was massive due to the thin Martian atmosphere; this made it useful only in breaking; intended to have been used when Athena was descending at no more than 500 metres a second. However McCann had no choice as the ground loomed closer.

Ryu and McCann once again felt a massive g force on them but only for a second as the force tore the parachute and it was released. Breathing and speaking was becoming a lot easier.

'Status!' shouted McCann over the noise of the atmosphere hitting the Athena.

'Speed seven hundred and fifty two meters a second, skin temperature two hundred and thirty Celsius. Altitude two thousand and one hundred meters hull is intact, Sir!' screamed Ryu.

Athena was still moving too fast and too close to the ground but McCann had no choice 'Engaging third stage!' he then pressed his panel.

Areas of Athena's skin blew off and helium filled balloons quickly expanded from the cavities. Athena was suddenly covered by a metallic skin made from several balloons attached to her. The balloons expanded to cover over twenty times the area that Athena had originally occupied. The

purpose was to slow the descent and give a soft landing but McCann was now using them to aero brake and wasn't sure if they would take the strain. In fact he very much doubted they would, but they might buy him some extra time to slow down; and maybe when they hit the ground Athena wouldn't break into pieces leaving them all as permanent residents of the God of War.

Again there was another jolt as the balloons inflated and McCann felt his body attempt to lurch from the seat. The straps held him in but he could feel his stomach shoot up then down again, giving him the feeling of being sick. McCann could no longer see anything through the camera as it was enclosed by the helium balloons. However he could read the panel and get an idea of what was happening.

Next the ship began to turn and shake much like a calf in the jaws of a crocodile, thrashing around as the others watch her pulled under to meet certain fate.

The balloons were bursting due to the heat and pressure of the aero braking, sending the craft once again into a spin which McCann was helpless to prevent.

Secondary balloons began to inflate and McCann could no longer control the descent as the fins of the shuttlecock were covered. All he could do was silently wait and see. As the altitude got lower Athena called out in a loud voice "Warning rate of descent is not within safety parameters, brace for impact!"

McCann held on tight, the last thing he remembered was Ryu shouting in Korean. When translated it was something along the lines of 'See you in hell Duncan!' before he blacked out.

When McCann regained consciousness everything was pitch black. He wondered for a second if he was dead and had awoken in Elysium? Or more likely the pit of some silent hell, perhaps the halls of Hades or worse Tartarus! Until he moved his fingers and felt the arms of his seat.

He must have hit a panel as it lit up and allowed him to look around and make something out of the darkness. Out of the gloom he made out his workstation in front of him. McCann surmised the fore section had no hull breach since his helmet was retracted and he could breathe without difficulty. He then realised he was hanging in the seat.

Athena was on the Martian surface at an angle, this told him she was probably still in one piece.

'Athena, respond please,' said McCann tentatively.

'Yes Colonel McCann,' replied a calm Athena from the darkness.

'What is your status Athena?'

'Several breeches in the aft hull. Primary power cell failure. Emergency power cells operational. Touchdown successful, location unknown, Colonel.'

'How are the others Athena?'

'All are unconscious, I detect no further injuries.'

He could tell she was still out of sorts; her replies weren't as precise as they should be. She seemed to be waiting for him to take the initiative as if she had no idea of what to do next. McCann feared Athena may have suffered a catastrophic failure similar to past SI. Perhaps due to the impact during entry, or was the impact he felt due to her first losing control in the atmosphere? He didn't know but he didn't have the luxury to sit about and analyze the mental condition of his SI right now, he had to find out where they were and contact the station on Mars before something worse happened.

McCann ordered Athena to power the lights; he then let himself out of his seat carefully holding onto the straps as he let himself down. He moved first to Louis, however McCann realised he'd suffered a concussion from the landing; he stumbled about trying to keep his footing. He grabbed Louis' shoulder and shook it as he called his name.

Louis croaked into life 'ce qui m'a frappé?'

It seemed McCann wasn't the only one that had a concussion. Louis was decidedly punch drunk.

'Louis, are you alright?'

Louis just looked back through the gloom at McCann with a quizzical expression whilst held firmly in his seat. It looked as if he didn't understand him.

'Ca va?' asked McCann in his best French.

'Okay,' replied Louis.

'Parle Anglais?'

'Sure, where are we?'

A wave of relief came over McCann, for a moment he thought his engineer might have suffered a brain injury. Louis started to unbuckle himself until McCann stopped him.

‘Louis I need you to check the ship, we hit something in the atmosphere and had to make an emergency landing. Athena is unresponsive so do your best, I'll get Hassif to give her the once over.’

Louis nodded and got to work silently on his panel. McCann then brought Hassif back to life.

Hassif required several minutes before he could even focus his bloodshot eyes on his work station and begin to run Athena through her paces.

Lastly McCann awoke Ryu who opened her eyes just a crack ‘We made it?’ she asked him with a smile.

‘Yes, but I don't know where we are. I need you to get in contact with Tharsis. If you can't get the GPS to work then they can at least find us and hopefully pick us up.’ McCann was referring to the Mars station Tharsis, named after the volcano range it was built at.

‘Understood, Sir,’ replied Ryu as she started on getting the antenna working.

Within 20 minutes Ryu had made contact with Tharsis and had a fix on their position. They had crash landed south of the equator in the Terra Sirenum region close to an old crater named Dokuchaev.

They were way off target.

Athena was expected to touchdown softly somewhere just west of Pavonis Mons at the equator where Tharsis had been constructed. Now they were 60 degrees south of their target, more than 3,000 miles off.

McCann ordered Ryu to immediately send a hauler to collect them. It would take five days to pick them up and another eight to get them back to Tharsis, at best speed. This led McCann to his next worry. The emergency cells would only last 48 hours before being exhausted. He sat on the floor waiting for Louis’ report, which when delivered he groaned.

Louis informed him that the fuel cell in the aft was too damaged to be fixed by nanites. Louis would have to go into the aft to fix it. McCann thought for a moment and sat on the floor with his crew.

‘So this is the situation, we have to take a gamble. Louis needs to go into the aft to fix the fuel cell. However the aft hull was breeched on landing. This means we'll have to use the mid-section as an airlock.’

McCann then gave Louis a serious look 'That means if you don't get the fuel cell online you'll have to stay there in your suit and survive on its power Louis.'

Ryu quickly interjected 'Couldn't we just turn off power except the suits and wait it out? We could use up the power left in the emergency cells to recharge the suits right?'

Hassif shook his head as he climbed down from his seat to join them on the floor 'That would work for two maybe three people but not four. There's not enough power. We need to power the antenna and maintain a signal with the hauler that's coming for us; if it loses the signal it will stop and return to Tharsis. At best one of us would have to be sacrificed within the next hour for us to meet that. Two people to do it for sure,' he said it grimly holding his tablet in one hand.

The others new he was correct, Hassif didn't make mistakes.

'Can we leave the Athena here and walk to the hauler?' asked Louis, but once again Hassif just slowly shook his head.

'Okay McCann I'll do it,' stated Louis.

McCann nodded and they all engaged their suits just in case of another breach. They weren't certain that Athena's readouts could be trusted 100% anymore.

Hassif had come to the conclusion that Athena wasn't physically damaged but was just refusing to co-operate. He couldn't explain it and without the computers at Tharsis and a link to Earth he doubted there was anything he could do.

They opened the hatch to the mid-section 'Good luck Louis!' said McCann as they closed it again.

Louis climbed down into the mid-section, on his way down the ladder he looked through the small open hatches into each compartment. The sleeping quarters, supply compartment and shower and toilet seemed all intact. When he reached the bottom of the ladder he used the manual locking system to open the hatch.

'I'm opening the hatch to the aft section,' he spoke into the mic, inside his closed helmet.

As he opened the hatch there was a whoosh of air, much like a stiff breeze escaping into the aft, then nothing. Louis stepped down onto the aft section ladder and shone the light of his torch over the hull. From what he

could tell part of the aft structure had compressed under the pressure of impact. He couldn't see outside as there were no holes just one side of the aft hull that had taken a massive hit and crunched up.

He had to use the lights on his suit to guide him as there was no power in the aft at all. He made his way down the crooked and disjointed ladder until he got to the power plant compartment. It was on the same side that had been compressed and upon entering he could see much of the compartment had compressed and dislodged the fuel cell. Louis came to the conclusion that most of the damage was done not by the crushed walls. But the fact that the compression had forced the fuel cell to come loose meant it had been flung around the room causing severe damage.

'What do you see Louis?' asked McCann as he and the others waited with bated breath.

'The fuel cell is trashed, but I've seen worse. Give me half an hour and I'll let you know if I can fix it.'

Louis lowered himself to his knees and lifted the metre long fuel cell by its handles. He pulled it up out of the depression it had punched into the floor and back onto the original mount. Louis then realised what he'd done. He'd lifted something that on Earth weighed 100kgs, the weight of a large man, with little discomfort. On Mars it only weighed about 30kgs. He hadn't had time to contemplate the gravity until now and it took him aback for a moment.

Louis then spent ten minutes looking around for his tools which had also come loose in the crash. The hydrogen tank had been damaged during the crash and was empty. The spare was useless, but fuel cells are able to store very large amounts of hydrogen inside them. Louis expected there to be plenty fuel inside if the cell had kept its integrity and not been cracked. If he was lucky, all he had to do was fix it back on its mount and wire it back up again.

An hour later he called into the fore section informing McCann he could attempt to switch power over to the main fuel cell. After five more attempts and Louis instructing his nanites to patch back together the internals of one of the remaining computers the fuel cell was online.

After fifteen minutes of the fuel cell running without a hitch McCann ordered Louis back. He secured his tools then made his way into the mid-section. Louis closed the hatch to the aft section then waited on the ladder

watching the panel next to the hatch leading to the fore section. The panel gave a read out of the atmosphere as Athena pressurised the mid-section from the weak Martian atmosphere to one of Earth, then reduced the large carbon dioxide content of the Martian atmosphere to a nitrogen oxygen mix.

When the readout gave an Earth atmosphere and the green light came on Louis hit the wrist panel on his suit, retracting his helmet into his suit. He took a deep breath then opened the hatch to the fore section to see the smiling faces of his friends welcome him back.

The power problem seemed to be solved, at least temporarily. McCann didn't know how much hydrogen was stored inside before the crash. He guessed there'd be more than enough and Louis agreed, nevertheless it would be prudent to conserve as much power as possible. That meant he would hold off sending a data packet until the hauler reached them. Athena could plug into the haulers massive power plant to safeguard against another power out.

McCann couldn't really rely on the damaged fuel cell. He reckoned that it only needed to last about 78 hours, if it broke beyond repair the emergency cells would keep them going until the hauler arrived. Earth would get nothing for at least five days. McCann knew Faraday would be going insane thinking the worst. However Faraday would know Athena was operational once the hauler at Tharsis had been activated and sent to collect them. At worst he'd assume they'd all died after such a hard impact, McCann chuckled at the thought.

All four had been sitting around for three days now monitoring the Athena. Hassif had been working on the Athena to try and find out what was wrong with her but to no avail. She was mostly unresponsive and rarely spoke on anything other than utilitarian matters.

Louis constantly monitored the structure and fuel cells. He spent a lot of time getting the nanites to reconstruct the power plant main computer.

Ryu spent her time in contact with the hauler monitoring its progress at regular intervals. She noted on several occasions their relative luck. They had landed in a very flat area and although there was a great distance between them and Tharsis it was pretty much all flat plains. When Louis scoffed at her observation she noted Mars not only possesses the highest

peak in the solar system but the deepest canyons too. If they had landed in say Capri Chasma the hauler would've been unable to recover them.

'What is so funny?' Louis asked McCann in a rather angry voice after hearing him chuckle for the second time that day.

'Just the thought of Faraday going bananas thinking we're all dead, could you imagine it?'

The others went quiet, they were unable to share McCann's sense of humour.

'I can't believe you, laughing at a time like this, we could all die and you are laughing about Faraday going crazy?' grumbled Louis.

'It could be worse Louis!' chirped Ryu.

Louis gave his signature sneer 'It could be a lot better to, why did our SI have to go nuts just then? It makes no sense and now we're stuck with it until we get to Tharsis. The damn thing could kill us all before then!'

No one wanted to say it for the last few days as Athena was certainly listening, but everyone was thinking it. For some it was the fear of what she might do next, would she finish the job? For McCann it was a case of, if Hassif could do nothing now there was no point bringing it up until they were safe at Tharsis. Louis however was once again demonstrating his lack of social skill, linked with a poor sense of self-preservation that had already got him beaten up once on this mission. No one replied and Louis went back to what he was doing. The subject wasn't brought up again and two days later the hauler reached them.

The hauler looked like a large tow truck, a big flatbed on top of eight circular tyres made from plastics. There was no cab but just two long arms and four small ones at the edges of the flat bed; the arms used suction cups to pull Athena up the ramp and onto the bed then hold her down for the journey. One of the small arms found the top of Athena's fore section and placed itself on the top of the cone, McCann opened up the nose cone and the flatbed inserted the power connection. As soon as a regular power supply was confirmed McCann sent his first data packet. Five days late, but better late than never and now Faraday could get a good night's sleep!

Shortly after sending the data packet McCann received a transmission from Geneva confirming that it had been received. The next order of the day was to get cleaned up. The crew had spent five days in their suits without the use of the toilet or shower. The suits absorbed all fluids through a microscopic mesh into an organic layer made of bacteria.

The holes in the mesh were too small to let a bacteria cell through but large enough to allow moisture inside. The bacteria colony held in a thin layer of the suit would draw in moisture and break it down, retaining the moisture and consuming the nutrients and chemicals. The desiccated faeces would be broken apart by any movement ranging from walking to breathing. It would then be spread out in zero G or move towards the pull of gravity, dispersing around the suit to be caught in small pockets at different points inside.

These mechanisms were only intended to be used in emergencies.

The fore section that they'd lived in for over 5 days was as Louis pointed out "Smelling like the inside of a packet of peanuts".

Eventually Louis had deemed the mid-section safe so they took it in turns to shower and clean out their suits. Finally they could get a decent sleep now that their beds were available, until that point they'd been using the floor of the command room to sleep on.

The next day McCann arose to the snoring of Louis. Despite Louis sounding similar to a bear sleeping off a bottle of whisky, coupled with the movement of the hauler and the odd feeling of low gravity he slept like a baby. Sitting up he pulled out his tray and found porridge was on the menu for breakfast. It was served inside a silver plastic container which instructed him to squeeze it along its length then shake. He did so releasing a chemical that when mixed with the milk created heat cooking the porridge inside the packet.

His coffee was prepared in a similar manner. After consuming his meal through the straws provided he put it away and made his way up the ladder to the command room. His head popped in the fore section. The low gravity caused McCann to be wary so he slowly made his way into his seat. He was used to zero G and 1G but 0.3 G would take time to get used to.

'Good morning Duncan,' said Ryu greeting him from her seat.

'Good morning Yong, how has it been?' replied McCann buckling himself in.

'A data packet arrived two hours ago, it's for you.'

McCann realised that Athena hadn't greeted him again. It wasn't the first time she'd forgotten to do this since the crash and the silence concerned him.

'Thanks Yong. Good morning Athena how are you?' said McCann trying to solicit a response from the SI but there was only silence.

'Still nothing,' said Ryu 'she's listening, just not responding.'

McCann shook his head. Athena was still hiding inside her shell and remained mostly unresponsive.

McCann activated his workstation and started to view the data packet sent from Earth. According to Faraday the Edwards had monitored an explosion near the Athena during entry. At the moment, the best theory was that the entry had caused a pocket of methane in the upper atmosphere to ignite. Creating a shockwave that initiated the tumble. As to what happened to Athena the techs were certain there was no physical damage. Psychiatrists in Geneva proposed that the reality of an imminent death and loss of control for the first time had caused Athena to go into shock.

Faraday was relieved to discover they were all alive and would send a new message with a packet by the time they reached Tharsis. Faraday ended his message commending McCann and Ryu.

Later that day McCann explained the crash theory to Louis who stated that the theory wasn't possible unless there was enough oxygen which he believed was unlikely. McCann showed him the footage of their crash that Geneva had sent with the last data packet. There was indeed a flash of light close to them upon entry.

'There's a flash of light but it doesn't look like something was burning or exploded to me,' stated McCann.

Hassif moved closer to the monitor displaying the footage 'Perhaps it's just the Martian atmosphere? But if the shockwave caused us to tumble it seems off.'

'How so?' inquired Ryu.

'The angle the shockwave would hit us at doesn't conform to the ships movements. I don't think it was the shockwave that knocked us off course,'

replied Hassif matter of factly.

'Maybe it startled Athena and she went into shock and that started the tumble?' asked Louis.

'No,' replied Hassif pointing towards the readout next to the footage 'Athena was operating normally before and for a short time after we began to tumble. I think her condition is due to whatever knocked us off course but it wasn't that explosion I'm sure. That's assuming it is a methane explosion.'

Louis was working up one of his moods as he launched into rant 'Faraday must know this if we do, why are they talking shit to us? I think they fucked up and are covering themselves! We have a broken SI and I bet the ship broke up on entry. It was probably our own hydrogen and oxygen exploding. Those fucking idiots are trying to get us all killed!'

'Enough!' shouted McCann firmly 'We have plenty to do before we reach Tharsis, let's concentrate on that, then we can take another look at this.'

'Fine, that's assuming Tharsis isn't as bugged and flawed as this ship. If we make it there!' sneered Louis.

The trip to Tharsis was uneventful and within nine days the hauler reached its destination; a large complex of prefabricated blocks that over the years had been put together by automated workers. Tharsis had been delivered piece by piece and with the Edwards in orbit overseeing the project. A sprawl of thick white crates had been erected like pieces of Lego.

Where the blocks were thickest in a large square formation two wings sprouted off. One wing contained a garage which was the direction their hauler was headed for. Although the intention was to have a central square with two columns on either side, over time pieces had been added and taken away and plans changed leaving nothing exactly uniform. With many small off shoot blocks here and there, although the original intent for the architecture was clear from a distance.

Tharsis was built at the foot of Pavis Mons a now dormant volcano that sat on the Martian equator. A tunnel had been cut out below the ground into the volcano, where the orbital ribbon was set to be attached to the Edwards waiting in orbit above.

The hauler entered the garage, after they had waited 5 minutes for the large thick door to close the crew were ready to leave the Athena. They all sealed their helmets and checked the oxygen supply. When all four had

confirmed their suits were in working order McCann lead them down to the aft section. The rear section was crumpled however the hatch leading outside was still in place.

McCann was unaware if it still functioned, he tried it and it swung open with far more ease than it should. McCann was relieved that they wouldn't have to cut open the hatch. Now the problem was the deflated balloons covering the open hatch.

McCann thought for a moment then through his mic he said 'Athena release the balloons from the hull please.'

Without reply the metallic sheets fell away onto the ground revealing the large open garage. McCann could see three droids waiting for him and his crew to leave so that they could lift the Athena from the back of the hauler and begin preparations for her integration into Tharsis. They were from three to five feet tall sporting a chest of instruments. All possessed two robotic arms ending in an assortment of tools, they rested on two caterpillar tracks which propelled them.

A fourth droid carried a narrow gangway, which it placed in front of the hatch. The droid was hidden beneath, steadying the gangway on its back. The gangway was inviting McCann to step on and into the history books as the first man on Mars.

The others waited for him to step out. The Englishman did something unexpected, he turned around to face Ryu.

'Ladies first!' McCann gestured towards the gangway leading onto the Martian floor as a gentleman holding a carriage door open for his lady to step out.

Ryu was gob smacked; something she had dreamed about was becoming reality. She had no idea why McCann was offering it to her but she took it before he changed his mind. Ryu moved rather quickly onto the gangway and holding the rails walked down.

This was being transmitted to Earth, just not in real time, they were watching with a 12 minute delay. The garage and the entire Tharsis base had live camera feeds all over it. Looking around Ryu suspected the droids were also filming her journey to be the first person on Mars, their heads moved in concert tracking her path downwards.

On her way down she started to think about what to say. She had fantasised enough about this moment surely she could recall something

from one of those dreams! Reaching the end of the gangway she paused, the others were still inside the Athena watching. Louis and Hassif were wondering why McCann had given Ryu the honour of being first whilst they waited to hear what Ryu had to say and finally it came.

Ryu remembered something she'd considered saying in such a situation, she was always prepared. A tender voice spoke 'I step upon the soil like a leaf falling onto the ground. I hope one day the autumn arrives and many leaves shall cover it.'

Then she stepped off onto the Martian ground, or the floor of the prefabricated garage. It wasn't strictly Martian soil but it was Mars and it was a publicity shot that would always be remembered, replicating aspects of Armstrong's legendary first step on the moon.

She put both feet down and the others began to clap and cheer before they quickly followed her down onto the floor of the garage.

Once assembled they made their way to the nearby airlock where inside they were decontaminated; next the crew made their way to a second room with showers where they disrobed, leaving their space suits and all possessions behind. Their former suits were destroyed and the crew of the Athena decontaminated again in chemical showers, blasting them with a warm mixture of water and chemicals then hot air. Next they were sent into a third small room where they slipped into the new suits awaiting them.

After redressing the crew stepped into Tharsis, a brightly lit place with natural UV lights and white walls. Many of the adjoining blocks had walls removed to create open spaces. Along with natural lighting and white walls, this was intended to reduce any depression the occupants might suffer during their stay.

McCann slipped into his suit and fastened it up, 'Well first thing's first we need to get to the command centre, are we all ready?'

He looked at the others they were dressed but Hassif was still struggling to slide the suit up his body after having put his legs in.

Louis stretched his arms and said loudly 'A walk would be a nice change from those machines.'

He was referring to the resistance machines they used on the Athena. Strapped in and pulling on elastic cords to exercise their body, it prevented muscle and bone wasting and had gotten old quick for Louis.

When Hassif was ready they took a stroll along the southern wing to the command centre in the central square. Their helmets were retracted now and they were breathing the atmosphere on Tharsis.

Louis was the first to complain as usual pointing out how stale it was.

The circulation system had still to be turned on and McCann was visibly annoyed at Louis 'For God's sake man, what is your bloody problem? You couldn't stop moaning and doom mongering whilst on the Athena. Now we're on Tharsis you're complaining because the atmosphere circulation hasn't been activated yet! What's next?'

McCann then put on his best impression of Louis ranting 'C'est merde I was wiping my ass and the toilet paper broke! Now I have poop all over my hand, I want to speak to Faraday, NOW!'

Hassif burst out laughing and Ryu put her hand over her face to cover the fact she was laughing to.

Louis was not amused by McCann's parody of him. He forced up one of his sneers 'I'm telling you McCann the toilets are going to be the least of our problems after what happened with that crazy SI! I hope you will all get a big laugh when it hits the fan again!'

Ryu put her hand on Louis' shoulder and said consolingly 'It could be a lot worse Louis, we might not be here to worry about the next crisis.'

Louis made a grunting noise which meant he agreed, reluctantly.

As they walked the half mile McCann started some small talk since the mood was lifted and Louis was subdued.

'Where did that speech come from Ryu?' inquired McCann 'It sounded quite Zen to me!'

Ryu smiled, she was still feeling the buzz from being the first person on Mars, 'Something like that. Why did you give it to me?' referring to the honour of stepping off first.

McCann kept looking forward as he strolled and the other three including Louis listened intently.

'If you hadn't regained consciousness when you did we'd all have the honour of being the first pizza on Mars, you earned it.'

Ryu heard his words but she found it hard to understand. When she asked herself if she could have given it up the answer was no. She was just trying to stay alive during that crash and McCann might have landed it

without her help. Ryu felt a little guilty about taking the honour now that she thought about it.

'Hassif, what are we going to do next concerning Athena?' asked McCann.

Hassif had been reading his tablet whilst walking. He looked up and starred forwards for a moment then answered, 'The computer on Tharsis will be able to give her the once over properly. I should be able to diagnose any problems but I think this will take some time Duncan.'

'Will there be any problems running the station without her?'

'No, we should be able to do everything without her, although it will obviously take more time.'

McCann wasn't going to risk hooking up Athena to the central computer. He wasn't prepared to authorize her control of the station, until he knew why she had shut down and could safe guard against it happening in the future.

While they were stretching their legs the Athena was being decontaminated. The Athena would remain in the garage for three days whilst she and everything inside is scanned for living organisms. If any were found they would be removed for study in the biology lab. Previously the plan after decontamination was for the fore section to be removed then taken to the command centre by hauler. Where from the outside she would be inserted into the mainframe computer at Tharsis, and Tharsis would become Athena.

For now that was on hold, it was up to Hassif to make some sense of the situation. The four walked into the command centre on Tharsis, a large room with several designated workstations. The room was constructed from a dozen of the prefab blocks that made up the station. Walls had been removed to make for a large working environment. There were nine doorways leading out with work stations arranged in clumps around the edges of the room; leaving space for a central area that had a small table. Made from the same carbon material as the station the table possessed a projector in the centre used for 3D displays. Each seat had its own small station and monitor with the station commanders seat at the end. It was a small table by most people's living standards but it was clear where McCann was to sit. Used for meetings and long distance conferences with Earth McCann hadn't seen much need for it with the four of them and

Athena. However since recent events he envisioned it would be in frequent use.

Hassif was first in, finding his tech station he quickly sat down and began talking to Tharsis. Hassif began working on getting data from Athena downloaded as quickly as possible.

Louis sat down and began the laborious task of going over the structure of Tharsis, checking for leaks or and faults. He had a lot of logs to look back through and it would take weeks, without Athena, to give Tharsis a proper checkup.

Ryu sat down to make sure the drones were all in order; checking the orbital ribbon was ready to be deployed. When that was done she'd be spending the next days making sure the delivery system was ready. It was going to be a tricky feat to get the ribbon from ground to orbit without the assistance of Athena.

It was difficult enough when they attached the Tsiolkovsky ribbon, it took five attempts even with everything the I.S.A had to offer backing up the pilots. Ryu had herself to rely on with no backup ribbon. If she failed they might have to wait months for another to be delivered but as she kept telling herself that's why she was there, to get it right first time. McCann spent his time checking the command centre and making sure it was all in order. He had a little office that he was quite proud of.

On their break Hassif was giving him a ribbing about it after Ryu said it reminded her of her headmaster's office at school. McCann smiled and took it all in good humour. He was rather flattered that on this entire station he had his own little annex containing a table with a work station that had his name on it.

Working conditions weren't the only improvement. Each crew member had their own room, which was more of a relief for Ryu than the others. In her opinion men lived much like pigs which is why they got on so much better with each other than women when living in close quarters. Ryu didn't appreciate the smell of men living together and found it very hard to tolerate. Especially after being woke up in the night so often by Louis snoring. Ryu was in no doubt why he was single.

Ryu was a light sleeper after active duty in the ROKAF; frequent alarms forced her to rush to the booths in the middle of the night when Jiang's scram drones made it through the Korean defences. Even today she leapt

up out of bed in the night. Only to realise there were no Manchurian drones screaming through the night sky carrying a payload of nerve gas. Her own room would be a massive relief.

Food was also better, it was still mostly freeze dried and prepackaged, though Faraday had made sure there was a stash of cryogenically frozen products. There were dairy products, meat, fruit and vegetables. It made quite a difference being able to sit at a table and eat it with cutlery and drink out of a glass.

Louis never being happy naturally grumbled that the strawberries had a strange taste after being frozen and they weren't "quite right".

However after Hassif asked if he didn't want them he refrained from complaining again. Louis was right, some food tasted a bit odd after being thawed but it was good enough and they all appreciated it.

Chapter 5

A few days into their stay on Tharsis McCann had become a little agitated. Ryu questioned McCann on what was wrong but he wasn't forthcoming, leading the others to wonder what he was holding back on. Ryu was curious but remained silent whereas Louis was certain Faraday had told him that Tharsis was in danger. Convinced they were all about to suffer another calamity. Hassif was too buried in his work with Athena to be concerned. To be honest McCann was only slightly anxious but it was amplified in the others perception due to his usual cool and calm nature.

On the fourth day McCann began to pester Louis about moving the Athena. The fore section had been removed and the whole ship decontaminated. Under normal circumstances the Athena, still inside her fore section, would be moved out. The operation to insert her into the hub of the Tharsis computer would already be underway.

Louis saw no need to do anything until either Athena was working or they needed the garage area for something more important than storage. McCann however was very persistent on the subject and Louis became very irritated. Finally by the sixth day Louis agreed to move the fore section to a separate holding area on Tharsis. McCann's reasoning was that Hassif could work more efficiently on her looking for physical defects. Freeing up the hauler in the garage after the droids had finished dismantling the rest of the craft.

Louis saw no need for this to be done so early but he did it, if only to get McCann off his back. When the Athena had been moved to a technical bay closer to the command centre Louis informed McCann. Like a flash McCann marched out of his small office and through the door leading into the south wing which lead back to the garage. Ryu turned her head quickly only to see his back as he started to make small bounds in the low gravity down the long hall way.

Louis looked at Ryu 'He's been going on about that garage for days, what do you think he's looking for?'

Ryu rolled her eyes and turned back to her station, she'd been plotting a new course for one of the drones in the upper atmosphere 'I have no idea Louis.'

Louis was starting to get worked up again 'Three days he's been harassing me about moving the fore section out of there. I think Faraday wants him to check the ship out, without us knowing.'

Ryu shook her head 'Another conspiracy theory Louis? Maybe he's on a secret mission for the illuminati?' she said sarcastically.

Louis frowned 'I'm being serious; he's hiding something from us!'

Ryu became rather fed up 'I'm serious too Louis, he has his job and you have yours, I suggest you get back to it and stop concocting another conspiracy theory.'

Louis didn't reply he just stood still in the doorway watching McCann bounding off into the distance.

McCann reached the airlock; pressing onto his wrist tablet he sealed his helmet automatically. Looking around to make sure he was alone he punched in some commands to the Tharsis security system. Next McCann began the airlock sequence to enter the garage area where the mid and aft section of the Athena sat on the ground.

After going through the airlock and finally into the garage he approached the remains of the vessel that had brought them here. The balloons had been cleared away and the heat shield removed. The aft sat on the ground one side partially crushed by the force of the landing. It caused the mid-section to lean over on the crushed side with an open hatch on the other side that led in.

McCann quickly took a metal ladder with two hooks at the top, lifted it then moved over to the open hatch. Once at the hatch he hooked the ladder in the open hatchway then quickly climbed inside. Whilst doing this Louis had been frantically trying to start the cameras up in the bay, somehow they'd been turned off and he no longer had clearance to operate them. Ryu was doing her best to ignore him as he cursed and threw abuse toward his monitor; lucky for Hassif he was busy in the technical bay and out of earshot.

McCann turned his helmet lights on and made his way up into the mid-section, he stepped into the living quarters. The four bunks were inside two on opposite walls, on the rear wall sat four sections where the food trays were pulled out each day.

McCann took out an alun key, it was a hexagonal metal bolt attached to a screw driver handle which contained a mechanical engine. He felt along

the wall below his tray and on finding the spot pushed the key in and turned the engine on. Two handles popped out of the wall, McCann put the tool back in his leg pocket. He then took a firm grip on the two handles and pulled a large plastic box from inside the wall.

He quickly set the hefty box on the floor, getting to his knees McCann started to unscrew the six locks which held the top of the box closed, using the same screw driver device. When he had the top unlocked McCann hurriedly took it off and set it on the nearest bed. Inside was a large selection of food packets ready to be dispensed each day for the astronaut's meals. After deconstruction, most of the Athena would be recycled and the excess food was to be taken and stored on Tharsis. McCann was rushing to get there before the droids could get to it.

After removing some food packets McCann found what he was looking for. Several boxes of cigars all vacuum sealed. McCann took them all out and put the draw together again before slotting it back inside the wall. He did the same with the box that supplied Ryu's food dispenser then Louis's and finally Hassif's.

By the time he'd finished McCann had quite a haul. After he'd checked the contraband McCann was satisfied it had all made it. A dozen boxes of his favourite Cuban cigars along with a cedar lined carbon plastic humidor. Not forgetting a dozen bottles of his favourite single malt Scotch all undamaged by the crash.

McCann was grinning from ear to ear. He put his hand into his other leg pocket taking out a small polyester square. He unfolded the square until it became a large carrier bag then placed his booty inside. McCann zipped it all up by pressing the open edges of the fabric together and carefully made his way out of the ship.

McCann withdrew to the airlock after putting the ladder back, exactly how he'd found it. Once back inside Tharsis he set the cameras to reactivate in 20 minutes. It was just enough time for him to make a bolt for his quarters and stash the bag away without anyone knowing. He started down the hall making for his room which was just west from the command centre. McCann reckoned he could make it in there without being seen as long as Louis was minding his own business.

Louis was going ape trying to get the cameras back on. He'd been calling McCann on his suit communicator, to no avail. McCann's communicator

was set on busy. So Louis had been pressing Ryu to set off an alert but she wasn't interested. McCann's vitals were all fine and showed he was working at something and didn't want to be disturbed.

Just as McCann slipped past the command centre and made a left turn Louis stepped out missing him by seconds. Louis was looking in the opposite direction towards the garage and didn't see McCann duck around the corner behind him. The Frenchman couldn't wait for the cameras and went off on his own down the south wing to check out the garage.

McCann hid his stash away in his quarters. He would sort it all out later, stage one of his mission had been accomplished. He'd managed to smuggle a good 500 cigars and his favourite malt whisky. First from Earth to Mars then from the Athena to his quarters before the Tharsis droids started to dismantle her. The droids would've no doubt destroyed his booty after they inevitably found it.

McCann then speedily made his way back to the command centre when he heard Hassif greet him from behind 'Good morning Duncan, everything alright?'

McCann stopped dead, turned and made his excuses about looking for his tablet. Hassif smiled then went for his coffee break in the nearby lounge.

McCann was concerned over being seen, but realised they'd all discover his escapade sooner or later anyway. The cigars and Scotch were safe and sound in his room and that was all that mattered for now. He nipped back into the command centre 'everything alright Ryu?'

She turned her seat to display her signature mother superior expression 'No it isn't, I don't know what it is you're up to and I don't care, but Louis does and he's got it into his head that you're on some secret mission from Faraday.'

McCann looked around and noticed Louis wasn't present 'Where is ...'

'He's trying to spy on you in the garage after you turned the cameras and security systems off. I'm sure he'll be back when he realises you're not there.'

McCann went into his office to wait for Louis return. Fifteen minutes later he walked in out of breath, after consulting Ryu he entered McCann's office. Louis shortly left with a face like thunder, walked over to his station

and got back to work. For the rest of the day he spoke to no one but muttered under his breath in his mother tongue.

That evening they were all in the lounge, the crew would spend the first and last hours of the day relaxing there. It was to become the officer's mess when the base was fully manned but for now it was dubbed the lounge. They could view Earth television which was piped to Tharsis through Edwards every day. McCann usually had a newspaper of his choice printed out to read quietly.

Hassif was still engrossed in his tablet consulting with the experts at the I.S.A concerning the Athena problem. Later when he had time he'd answer emails from the public sent via Geneva.

Louis and Ryu were arguing on which program to watch. Ryu was tired of the film noirs and Louis had an aversion to the Korean soap operas that Ryu watched. They managed to work out an arrangement, a sort of timeshare on the TV which Hassif was elected to referee. McCann watched his trash TV on the link in his room. He'd often excuse himself for an early night to watch the latest edition of his favourite television show "Cheaters". In his opinion it was a classic piece of entertainment recently revived. The others looked down their noses at it, calling it sleazy or trashy. Yet McCann was certain they enjoyed watching it as much as he did.

That night McCann went into his room and appeared carrying a tray of drinks and a bottle into the lounge 'Gather round ladies and gentlemen.'

McCann set the tray on the lounge table which was a long coffee table flanked on one side by a large settee which curved around to cover one side and an end of the table. They all moved over and sat down 'What's this?' asked Hassif.

'This, is highland cream!' replied McCann as he pulled the cork out and began to pour a little of the dark orange coloured liquid into each tumbler.

Hassif gave a puzzled look 'Where did you get it from? This isn't in the stations inventory.'

Louis took his glass 'He smuggled it here on the Athena, in the food crates,' then he raised it to smell and inspect the whisky rolling it in the glass.

Ryu took her glass and sipped it 'Well I can't say I ever liked whisky but this stuff is pretty good. I hope you brought enough for us all, Sir!' she said

after tasting the silky smooth spirit that had been aged 21 years in port casks.

McCann stood then raised his glass to the others and said 'A toast to the first person to set foot on an alien world!'

Louis and Hassif rose and held their tumblers aloft and Hassif said 'To Major Ryu!'

Ryu began to blush and once the others had a drink she stood up, 'To the man that got us down in one piece,' to which they clinked their glasses and took another drink then sat back down.

McCann poured them all another dram 'What happens when Faraday finds out?' asked Ryu.

'The doctor is making sure he won't, if he does then he'll just have to deal with it. We came all this way, risked our lives and nearly died due to a faulty SI. I'm buggered if I'm going to go without a Scotch and cigar on an evening. I think we all deserve it, don't you?' replied McCann who was starting to sound similar to Louis.

The other two were waiting for her approval; she thought on it for a moment and replied 'I guess so Duncan. Just make sure you don't set off any alarms and Louis doesn't get drunk again.'

He nodded and they all went back to sipping their malt. Now that McCann had owned up he went on to tell the story of how he smuggled his booty onto the Athena. McCann had several "Brothers of the leaf" as he described his fellow cigar smokers, who conspired to assist him. Apparently they worked servicing the Athena on the night shift. The extra food containers that would end up in Tharsis stores were removed and replaced. The cigars and whisky were secured. As long as it wasn't discovered the only difficulty would be removing them before the Athena was deconstructed and recycled.

If the droids discovered them they would've been incinerated along with any other unspecified biological material. McCann went back to his quarters and brought out a stainless steel ashtray that looked like an urn with a lid. He then offered a cigar to the others. The dark brown sticks were sat in a hard leather pouch that was sculpted into the shape of four tubes with a cigar in each tube.

Louis took one whilst the others refused. McCann flipped the lid on the pouch and put it back in his leg pocket then passed his guillotine cigar

cutter to the Frenchman. After cutting the cap of the cigars McCann pulled the lid from the ashtray and from inside produced a small hand welding torch. He'd accosted it from an engineering supply locker on Tharsis.

Before lighting his petit corona he hit his communication pad on his wrist tablet, ordering Tharsis to disable the smoke alarm system in the lounge; at the same time increasing the air purification to maximum. On doing this he immediately smelt the ozone being pumped into the air and began to toast the foot of his Ramon Allones small club corona.

After it was smouldering he passed the torch to Louis who did the same. They spent the next hour relaxing and chatting. The conversation turned to Athena. Hassif was certain he was making progress, or to be more exact Athena was. She was coming out of her shell of her own volition; he believed it was a case of getting over the shock of the crash. Hassif predicted in a week she'd be fit for an interrogation. After which she could be installed once given the all clear from Geneva.

McCann was cautious but relieved, the sooner she was installed the better. They could get down to business whilst she managed Tharsis. At the moment they were getting very little done due to the extra workload and it was becoming tiring.

Louis however wasn't so happy at the prospect. He still didn't trust the SI and felt uncomfortable about her being in control after what had already happened. However unless she was installed their mission would be terribly delayed and that wasn't acceptable. After they'd finished discussing work they put on some Earth news. There wasn't enough time for anything else before bed so they watched some reports concerning their mission. The crash landing had been hot news but was taking a back seat to the first woman on Mars. Ryu felt rather embarrassed due to so much attention focused on her.

She'd only ever thought about the moment of stepping onto the planet not the aftermath. People she didn't even know from women's groups were using her as some sort of role model for other women and it made her rather uncomfortable. Rather than concentrate on her achievement they were trying to turn it into some battle of the sexes in space, which she found more demeaning than anything else.

They caught the end of an interview with Faraday, recorded before the first data packet was sent from the surface. Faraday was visibly tired

answering questions from Jerry or at least trying. Faraday was making an attempt to let the world know that all was not lost; hoping to calm the financial backers of this very expensive venture. McCann paused it to watch later before turning the smoke alarm back on and making his way to his quarters for a good night's sleep.

Two weeks later and they were preparing to integrate Athena. She was now fully functional and Geneva had given her the all clear. It was still a mystery as to what had happened and why, but those concerns were on the back burner as the mission took precedence. There was a lot of important work to be done. Without Athena in place they couldn't even begin to get the orbital ribbon prepared for attachment to the Edwards.

Ryusat twiddling her thumbs most of the day, double checking flight paths of the drones gliding in the upper atmosphere, monitoring the weather and geology. Whereas Louis and Hassif were loaded down with work, due to the Athena problem Hassif had barely scratched the surface on his workload of certifying different backup systems throughout the base. McCann had spent many a frustrating day being told they weren't moving quick enough, usually by Faraday himself, and that he had to find a way to get Athena working yesterday.

Athena had been hoisted onto the roof of Tharsis. After having been moved to the hub of the command centre she was lowered into a specially constructed pit. The pit was designed to be a snug fit for her. Louis closely monitored the operation at his station ready to take charge in case the droids made a mistake. The other three stood close behind him, watching Athena descend. Once inside the droids released the clamps and reeled the steel cords back into the crane, mounted on what looked like a flatbed truck. It was in fact a droid itself designed for this specific purpose. Once Athena was inside, the open top of the pit closed.

A sheet of carbon slid out from the side until it reached the other side sealing Athena inside her new home. Hassif went straight to his station and began to feverishly tap the surface of his panel as lines of code ran before him on the monitor. Inside Athena's latest residence the Tharsis mainframe

was physically linking to its new master. Once the bond was made Tharsis would become the slave computer and Athena the master.

'It's done,' said Hassif.

'And?' asked McCann.

'Athena has made the link without error, you should be able to speak to her now Colonel.'

With some tension in his voice McCann spoke to her 'Athena, are you there?'

After a few seconds came a reply 'Good afternoon Colonel McCann. I'm glad to see you Major Ryu, Technician Hassif and Engineer Beaumont again. How are you?'

Athena's soft calming voice that had become so familiar over the years was a joy for all four of them to listen to.

'I'm very well thank you Athena, are you and Tharsis operating within normal parameters?'

'We are both operating within normal parameters Colonel. Is there any task you'd like me to perform?' replied Athena in her usual soft and polite manner.

'I'd like a full diagnostic scan of the station and its systems please.'

'Very well Colonel, I'll have the results within two hours.'

McCann put one hand on Louis shoulder and his other on Hassif's, 'Well done lads. I want you to keep an eye on things Hassif, then go through the diagnostic results with Louis. Let's make sure Athena is 100%, understood?'

Hassif nodded and sat at his station monitoring everything Athena did. Louis and Ryu went to the lounge for a coffee break whilst McCann hung around the command centre to regularly update Faraday on Athena's progress.

The day had gone smoothly, according to the reports Athena was running properly. The four of them retired to the lounge at the end of the day to relax. Especially Hassif who'd spent the last six hours straight at his station without a break. McCann had his whisky out again and everyone was invited to take a dram. McCann lay back in the comfy sofa with his newspaper and his feet outstretched on the coffee table. The comforting feeling of the whisky warming his chest relaxed him instantly. He could taste the port from the cask it'd been aged in for 21 years. It had such a full

flavour yet was silky smooth, with no bite or bitter after taste, this was the reason he would only drink single malt whisky.

It had been a particularly exhausting day for all except Ryu. Louis didn't mind her backlog of soap episodes on the television since he was too tired to concentrate on anything. Louis sat with McCann sipping his whisky but he refused a cigar. The other three weren't smokers, Ryu and Hassif only drank on special occasions.

McCann took out a cigar and went to tap his wrist tablet before stopping himself, 'Athena?'

The now omnipresent Athena replied 'Yes Colonel? Is there anything I can do for you?'

'Could you please turn off the smoke alarm in the lounge and increase the air purification?' he asked in a tired voice.

'Very well Colonel, is there anything else I could do for you?' replied the master of Tharsis.

'Just put the smoke alarm back on when I finish my cigar will you?'

Athena complied with his request.

McCann felt confident that come tomorrow they could start on what they were sent here to do. More than a month had been lost thanks to a crash landing and a traumatised SI. Tomorrow Louis could get to work on securing the orbital ribbon to the volcano and making sure the tunnels were safe. Ryu could start work on running the drones through their paces and if all went well the ribbon might get attached shortly.

After McCann finished his cigar he put down his paper and made his way to the observation room which was directly above the lounge. He walked up a small steep staircase into a small room with a large plastic window on each wall. Sitting on the floor with a whisky in one hand he watched the sun set on the red planet. It reminded him of trips to his mother's homeland.

He reminisced about a journey to Lake Tiberias; Martian dusk was eerily familiar and reminded him of that trip to the desert. The sun set over a rocky landscape with the volcano Pavis Mons behind him. McCann had got into the habit of going to the observation room in the evening now. Something about it drew him in and reassured him. He felt not so far away from Earth here. In fact he felt closer to his family watching the Martian sunset than when he was training in Geneva.

Later on Louis joined him. He also was captivated by the unique landscape and the rusty tint of the sky 'Beautiful isn't it?' remarked Louis.

'Yes it is,' replied McCann.

They both sat for a while watching the Martian dusk, McCann wondered what was waiting out there to be discovered.

'Mystery, fate and love.'

'Sorry?' he replied.

'It's how my mother described the desert, mystery, fate and love.'

Louis chuckled 'Well maybe mystery and fate my friend but don't come looking to me for love!'

McCann smiled 'Don't worry; I'm sure my mother has that prepared for me when I get back.'

'Ah yes your inevitable marriage, does she have a bride for you or is it still undecided?' Louis jested.

'I'm sure my mother has someone in mind. I'll probably get dragged to Tel Aviv the moment we land and she'll auction me off, that's if she hasn't already!' said McCann whilst staring out into the Martian wilderness.

This was the only time Louis had heard McCann speak freely about the subject since he'd known him. Everyone had met his mother after the day she visited him in Geneva, brandishing a catalogue of young prospective brides. McCann was humiliated but since it was his mother he bit the bullet and humoured her. The Englishman was furious but refrained from humiliating his mother in front of everyone. He sat down and looked through the catalogue with her and the next day in the privacy of her hotel gave her a telling off. After that he had to suffer Louis' taunts on the subject, it took sometime before it was no longer mentioned on a daily basis.

The distance from Earth, and his mother, allowed McCann to relax and speak his mind on the subject or it seemed that way to Louis anyhow.

'Why the hell is your mother so obsessed with getting you married?' asked Louis who now decided to grill him on the subject. Since McCann was speaking about it and he may never again, why not ask?

'Where my mother comes from if a man my age hasn't married it's because he's either poor, diseased or homosexual. So it's of paramount importance to get me married off to a good family, for her anyway,' replied

McCann still observing the Martian landscape with a glass of whisky in his hand.

‘But you were with the Special Forces, you fought in god knows how many battles. Surely everyone understands you didn't have much time for bride hunting?’

McCann smiled and turned to him, it was the naivety of Louis which he found amusing ‘That just leaves homosexual then, doesn't it?’

Louis' face screwed up a little on hearing this ‘And what if you were? What would she do then?’

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