

Ephialtes: The First 101 Pages

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www.ephialtestrilogy.com

info@ephialtestrilogy.com

EPHIALTES

THE FIRST 101 PAGES

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GAVIN E PARKER

So suffered Ares, when Otus and mighty
Ephialtes, the sons of Aloeus, bound him
in cruel bonds, and in a brazen jar he lay
bound for thirteen months; and then would
Ares, insatiate of war, have perished, had not
the stepmother of the sons of Aloeus, the
beauteous Eëriboea, brought tidings unto
Hermes; and he stole forth Ares, that was now
sore distressed, for his grievous bonds were
overpowering him.

Homer, *The Iliad* Book V

CHAPTER 1

The War is Over

He smacked the oak surface twice with an open palm, the *slap-slap* cutting through the burbling speech around the table, reducing it to one or two voices which quickly trailed off to silence. “The president has been delayed for a second time, so I’m just going to kick things off here and get some of this out of the way so we can get right to it when he arrives in,” he half turned in his chair and a Secret Service man stepped forward, cupping his hand to his mouth as he leant in and whispered into the senator’s ear. The senator nodded ‘thank you’ and the Secret Service man stood back, scanning the perimeters of the room. The senator continued “. . . the latest we have on that is about three minutes.”

The secretary of defence was seated a few places down the large cabinet table. She glanced up from her notes. “What is it this time?”

The senator looked over. “They’ve had another teleconference on the apron at Love Field. Just straightening out some kinks. Don’t worry, this is happening.” The senator drew a line through something on the papers in front of him. He looked up over the glasses perched on the end of his nose and, glancing around the table, he cleared his throat. “The time is 15:04 on this January 22, 2241. I’ve been instructed by President Cortes to open this meeting and brief you all on the historic announcement the president will be making at five o’clock this evening.” A brief sound of whispered chatter skittered around the table. “Progress at Jakarta and Mumbai has been good,

and what you've been hearing in the news reports is largely accurate. The president wants to make the formal announcement to you himself, but I can tell you the news is good." There was another wave of chatter. For the first time the senator allowed himself a smile. "You can appreciate that this is privileged information and that," he grinned, "for the rest of the afternoon, at least, we remain at war. So if any of you sons of bitches let this out we'll have you for treason." There was good natured laughter, the chatter now louder still and more excited.

The senator spoke again. "One more thing." He glanced down at the sheaf of papers before him on the desk. There was nothing for him to read there but he knew it would add some solemnity to what he was about to say. "It's been a long and difficult road to get to this point. Some of our young men and women have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, for our safety, and for the protection of all we hold dear. I think it would be appropriate for us to spend a few moments in silent reflection on the great sacrifice that has been made, and on those who made it. Would you please all stand."

Around the table cabinet members began to rise. The last sounds of shuffling feet faded and they stood in silence, heads bowed.

Gerard White slipped into the room as the rest of the cabinet retook their seats. As he strode to his place near the head of the table he caught the senator's eye. "One minute," he mouthed, also making a 'one' hand gesture. As he slipped into his seat an aide quickly placed some documents in front of him, but he paid no attention. He was looking at the senator. "Well, Peter, it's a great day, and a great achievement for the administration, especially your guys up on the hill."

After a pause the senator replied. "A great day indeed. We couldn't have done it without you, Gerard. We're all grateful."

White waved a hand. "Oh, come on now. Team effort. We're all in this thing together, you know that."

The senator gave a stilted nod. "I guess so."

There was a sudden scrape of chairs and, instinctively following the others about them, White and the senator rose to their feet.

President Cortes strode quickly to the head of the cabinet table flanked by two Secret Service agents, his assistant trailing a little behind. "Please, sit," he gestured, grabbing the back of his chair and

throwing a commanding glance about the room. "I want to thank you all for coming. I'm sorry I'm a little late, but I guess these things never run smoothly. Anyway, we're all here now, so let's get on with it." As he stepped around the chair one of the Secret Service women pulled it out for him and he sat down. The assistant placed some papers in front of him and moved the pre-poured glass of water two centimetres closer, like she knew that was just where he needed it. He half-turned and nodded 'thank you', picking up the top sheet and quickly skimming down it before he started to speak.

"I have come here this afternoon directly from Jakarta where, as you know, I have been personally overseeing the final stages of the USAN delegation's negotiations with President Tsou, Prime Minister Takisawa and General Nkemjika. This third and last series of mediations has been the most difficult and delicate of all attempts at negotiation so far, particularly in light of the recent incidents in Reykjavik and Boston. There were many moments when hope faded, and it seemed we would walk away with nothing. But, through the great and tireless work of our negotiators, we did not walk away with nothing."

There was a murmur around the table, which the president rose his hand to quell.

"Ladies, gentlemen, it is my proud duty to inform you that at 12:00pm today, 22 January 2241, I put my signature to the accords, along with President Tsou, Prime Minister Takisawa and General Nkemjika, ending current hostilities as of 17:00hrs, Eastern Standard Time, this afternoon."

A cheer rolled around the table and the president allowed himself a smile. "At that time I will make a," he paused to allow the noise to subside, ". . . at that time I will make a public address to the nation and the world, and the fourth world wide war will be at an end." There was a second wave of cheering, stronger this time as at first a few then the entire cabinet rose to their feet, clapping and whooping. The president soaked it in, taking the hands offered to him and shaking them firmly, an automatic politician's response.

"Let's hear it for the president!" The call came from halfway down the table and was met with a huge cheer. The president stood and raised two hands above his head, outstretched, a familiar gesture to anyone who had followed his campaigns. He angled his head down in faux humility and thrust his hands slightly forwards and upwards, the gesture answered by a surge of cheers. He held the pose for a few

seconds, then dropped one arm to his side while the other waved to the far end of the table. He looked about the room, making individual eye contact with nods here and small gestures there, working the place like the true professional he was.

The senator held out his hand. "Congratulations, Mr President."

"Thank you, Peter," the president said, quickly shaking then moving on to the next proffered hand.

Presently, Cortes gestured for the cabinet to be seated, and the hubbub died down. "The past few years have not been easy. On this day we can celebrate and, Lord knows, no one should deny us that. But there is still a great deal to do. We have lost so much; men and women, materiel and yes, a little bit of faith, too. We have now to regain our strength, rebuild our countries and redouble our efforts to make these United States and Nations once again into the great paragon of virtue and freedom that we know them to be.

"I have to go now to prepare my address, thank you and God bless you all." He walked down the room to the exit, pausing only once to shake an offered hand and laugh politely at the quip offered with it, then he was gone.

White spoke. "*Once again into the great paragon of freedom?* So does that mean elections?"

The senator shuffled in his seat and coughed. "This is rhetoric at this time but with the war over there can be no reason to continue with the suspension of elections. I think that's clear."

"And that's going to be in the address, tonight?"

The senator frowned. "Gerard, today is a celebration. The war's over, we won."

"What did we win? Last time I looked at a map, or at a balance sheet, we've won diddly-squat. The latest reports from the treasury show that -"

The senator was holding up his hand. "Gerard, Gerard, what we've won, today, is peace with honour and that's what's going in the address tonight, Peace with Honour. We've had seven very difficult years of fighting, and six difficult months of negotiations, and now here we are, where we want to be, with the fighting over and a new dawn of rebuilding and prosperity around the corner. The suspension of elections is just one of many sacrifices we've had to make in order to achieve this goal. But the war's over now," he could barely believe he was saying the words, "and the suspension of elections is one of many issues we will come to address in the very near future."

White stared across the table at him, trying to read his face, which remained inscrutable. "But for now, elections remain suspended?"

"For now. We'll get to it. I happen to know that the president sees it as a level one priority. He hated to do it, you know. We had to persuade him."

White snorted. "Hated to do it? I hate it too. And I'm going to keep on at this until he makes it right."

"Gerard, you worry too much. This isn't some tin-pot republic. This is the United States and Nations."

White backed down, thumbing through his papers. The senator spoke now to the room, louder. "That's it folks! War's over, you can all go back to bed!" White stood up, gathered his papers and left, mixing in with the assorted cabinet members, aides and Secret Service personnel filing towards the door.

The senator was deep in conversation with one of his advisers, who had slipped into a vacated seat to his right. The adviser was holding a paper on the table in front of the senator, moving his finger across some lines about a third of the way down the page. The senator was shaking his head. "No, no, they have to wait. And it can't go out like that, have Spector re-draught it."

Farrell stood behind the senator and waited for an opening. The senator had seen him approach and was well aware of his presence but made him wait all the same, stretching out the conversation with the aide far longer than was strictly necessary. Eventually he turned and, as though taken by surprise said, "Farrell! You need a minute?" Farrell remained standing.

"I do, actually, Senator."

The senator gestured. "Take a seat, I'll be right with you." Farrell and two assistants took up seats opposite the senator. The room had emptied now. Farrell waited while the senator scribbled notes on the papers in front of him, then handed them off to his aide. "See that he gets this right away," he said, then turned to Farrell. "What can I do for you?"

"It's Mars, Senator."

"Mars?"

"Yes, sir. We've been monitoring communications and modelling population growth and industrial production, and we think there is reasonable cause for concern."

"You do. Why?"

"You're aware of the Kasugai study, published last year?"

“Should I be?”

“Well, the study showed that, theoretically at least, Mars has been capable of total independence from Earth for the last eight years. That is to say, the population is now large enough, and production is big enough and varied enough, for Mars to maintain its current status, in terms of economy, population and production, without any,” he repeated for effect, “*without any* input from, or indeed trade with, Earth.”

The senator eyed him quizzically. “That’s great, isn’t it? We’ve conquered another world, a historic feat.”

“Well, Senator, it is a great achievement, I’ll grant you that much. But what if the Martians decide *they’ve* conquered another world?”

“Decide . . .”

“It’s like this, Senator. They don’t need us. Some of the younger Martians now are fourth, even fifth generation. Most of them have never been here, heck, most of them couldn’t afford to come here if they wanted to. They don’t feel any allegiance to us. Remember, the most vocal anti-war movement was based on Mars.”

The senator brought his hand up to his chin and rubbed it thoughtfully. “And they’re talking about this, are they, the Martians?”

“Well yes, sir, it seems they are. We’ve been monitoring coms across the planet and between planets and it does seem that this idea is out there. The war has alienated lots of people and the idea of Martian independence or a so-called Free Mars -”

“Sheez!” the senator said, unable to help himself.

“. . . the idea of a Free Mars has been gaining lots of ground.”

The senator took his glasses off and began cleaning them, rubbing the glass with a carefully folded cloth. “So what do we need to do?” Farrell looked at him, momentarily lost for words.

“Well, at the moment nothing. But we do need to be aware of it. I mean, that’s what we’re here for, to flag up these potential hot-spots before they become actual hot-spots. I don’t know what we could do now, practically. Resuming elections would help politically, but with the celebrations coming up -”

“What celebrations?”

“Sometime in the next few months the one hundred thousandth Martian will be born. It’s going to be a big whoop on Mars. It may serve to focus minds on just these issues we’re talking about. So with that in mind, maybe some counterprogramming might be of use? We could give it prominent recognition here. Have a big parade with an

address by the president, or something like that. Maybe we should have sent someone senior over there to lead the celebrations.”

“Believe me, Farrell, if I could send the vice president to Mars I would.”

“Well, I just think we should be thinking along those lines. Hearts and minds, you know. It’s probably nothing, but we should be keeping an eye on it.”

The senator stood up and offered his hand. “Thanks for that, Farrell. Thanks for bringing that to our attention.” His face cracked into a smirk. “We’ve just got out of one war, we don’t want to be getting into another. Particularly one that’s a hundred and forty million miles away - we’d lose home advantage.” He winked.

Farrell smiled. “I’m sure it won’t come to that, sir. Not if we keep on top of it.”

The senator turned and left.

Farrell and his two senior aides got back to his office at the Department of Foreign Affairs around 16:30. Farrell sat at his desk, quickly checking for any notifications on his secure terminal before kicking his chair back and swinging his feet up onto the desk. His silver hair made him look older than his forty-eight years, and his matinee-idol good looks, which he’d managed to kid himself had somehow been a detriment to his political career, were fading. “What time’s the address?” he asked the aides.

“Five o’clock”.

“Can we get it up on there?” He indicated the blank wall opposite his desk.

“Sure.”

“Okay, we’ll do that. And do we have champagne, anything like that?” The second aide was looking down at her mobile communication device. “I’m getting on to that now. You want the good stuff?”

“Aw . . . middling? I do *want* the good stuff, but I’ll stick to what I can afford.”

“Okay. Four magnums of the not-quite-best champagne, on their way.”

“Great. Can you get everyone up here for the address? Say, five minutes before?”

“We’ll do that. Should be great. You know Shirley?”

Farrell thought, blankly.

“She’s assistant to the junior secretaries. Anyway, she has a son in Mombasa. She’s going to be in bits. It might make for a great photo, you hugging her and looking understanding?”

Farrell baulked. “Oh come on, you hard hearted-bitch!” he said, but smiled too.

“That’s the kind of thinking I’m paid for,” the aide chirpily replied.

Farrell sunk into thought for a little bit, then wondered aloud, “Are we right to worry about Mars? Is that even our department?”

The woman aide looked up, startled. “Well, it is foreign, isn’t it? I mean, how much more foreign can you get?”

Farrell thought. “It just seems, I don’t know, different, somehow. So far away that it’s not even foreign. And surely it’s just part of the USAN, isn’t it? I mean, it’s not a country or even a state. Marineris is about the size of a small town.”

The aide cut in, “No, it comes under us alright. And we’re right to be monitoring.”

“But there’s nothing to it, is there, really? This chatter about breaking away, independence and all that? Armchair warriors and know-nothing kids. They’d shit the bed if we just left them to it, wouldn’t they?”

“Maybe. But we’re paid to be paranoid, so we are.”

“And anyways, they’re halfway across the solar system.”

“Some of the time they are. Every couple of years they swing by real close - fifty million miles or so. And apparently Helios are this close,” she gestured with thumb and forefinger, “to developing usable sized fusion engines which will turn interplanetary travel upside down. You could hop across in your lunch break, almost.”

Farrell frowned. “Helios have been about to reveal their fusion engine tech ever since I was a kid. There’s no quick or easy way to or from Mars. It’s a six month trip, minimum, and even then you have to wait up to two years for a launch window. They need our tech, we need their deuterium, free trade, honour, loyalty, yada, yada, the end. I just wanted the senator to know that, even without a war on, we have stuff to be doing over here. We’re on the lookout for any problems, we’ve got our ears to the floor and our eyes on the horizon and our fingers on the pulse. Forever vigilant.” He flashed a big phony smile at the assistant.

“Sheesh,” she said, “and you haven’t even had any champagne yet.”

CHAPTER 2

Kostovich

Dr Daniel Kostovich eyed the barren landscape ahead. Dried brown dirt and the straggliest of sun-beaten foliage stretched before him to a distant and just discernible clump of buildings. It was hot in the suit, and the restricted movement made him feel trapped. He needed to get out of the sun, but he needed to know he was safe. Continuing to scan the horizon for movement he lifted one huge metal leg, then the other, and moved forward. He spoke into the mic. “Stocksy, Bacon. I’m comin’ to getcha.”

A voice crackled back over the headset. “What about me?”

Kostovich grinned. “Dennis? Time I get over there, Stocksy and Bacon will have taken you out already. If you haven’t just fallen over.”

“You’re a funny guy, Dan. That’s why I’m going to kill you last.”

Kostovich laughed. “It’s great that you still believe you have some worthwhile abilities, Dennis. Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.”

Dennis’s voice came back over the com. “I’m going radio silent now. Gotta concentrate. Have asses to kick. Out.”

Kostovich noted a small outcrop of rocks about two hundred metres from his position. He headed toward them. He brought up a terminal in his HUD, set his mech on an automated course for the outcrop, then brought up a new screen to which he half-whispered a

command, "AI 328, scan all channels. Flag and list possibles, report on completion. Confirm estimated time of completion."

A crystal clear and honey-drenched female voice replied immediately. "Scan completion estimated at less than two minutes."

Inside the mech Kostovich stood a little over four metres high. Stood on the ground next to it he would be less than half that size. At twenty-nine years of age he was the youngest department head at Venkdt Mars Corporation. His department was Research and Development. He had been a prodigy at school and often had to deny that his parents, in particular his father, the renowned physicist Craig Kostovich, had modified him in utero to be a brainiac. He'd considered the possibility himself. His dad was crazy, but not that crazy. Dan had just been lucky with his genes, lucky with his nurturing family, who had indulged his 'experiments' and 'research', and lucky to have been around when the settlement at Marineris was still just about a frontier town with people happy to let a little kid ask questions about the place, the landscape and the fancy kit that enabled them to survive there.

He won a prize for his advanced AIs when he was thirteen. That was even reported back on the old home planet, though somewhere near the end of the bulletins.

Kostovich had breezed through school, embarrassing his teachers and alienating his peers. He started on his first PhD (artificial intelligence) when he was just turned seventeen and completed his second (astrophysics) at twenty-two, though that one was just for fun.

He'd raced up the ranks at Venkdt by identifying flaws in their processes and suggesting solutions. Within a couple of years of starting there he had saved them hundreds of thousands and made them millions. In R&D he oversaw all development projects, but his special baby, the thing he got hands-on with (hands-on a keyboard, at least) was AI. Kostovich didn't need to be a great designer of products or processes, though he had the skills to do that, because what he really excelled at was designing AIs that designed great products and processes. With his knowledge of computing networks, cyphers, telegraphy and encryption he could protect that intellectual property from others and rent its power to them.

He'd been head of R&D at Venkdt for two years. The initial thrill had worn off, somewhat. He now found himself correcting tedious and obvious errors in the work of others, and endlessly tinkering with his AIs and monitoring systems. He had risen rapidly, but now

there was nowhere left for him to rise to. It wasn't like he could be headhunted by Hjälp Teknik - they had less than a tenth of the resources of Venkdt - and he had no desire whatsoever to go to the home planet, a place he had never been and never wished to. He was fourth-gen Martian, and to him Earth was a foreign and backward looking place, millions of miles away and of only academic interest. He was top of his particular tree at Venkdt, with only the board and Charles Venkdt above him (and they weren't going anywhere soon) and, all things considered, that wasn't a bad place to be. It maybe lacked excitement, but that could be had outside work in things like competitive IVR games.

The honey-voice spoke, "Scan complete. Two anomalies detected."

"Okay. Run AI 14S and AI 14V on the anomalies. Multi-decrypt and report, please give me the estimated time of completion."

"Completion in five to six minutes," came the reply.

Kostovich manoeuvred the mech from behind the outcrop and spied the cluster of buildings. "Thermal," he said, and the vista in front of him changed to a blue, yellow and red child's painting, which he quickly scanned. Nothing. "How long to completion now?"

"Five minutes."

He made his move, breaking from his hiding place and striding toward the hamlet. At pace the mech could travel at around 15km/h. Right now he was vulnerable, but he couldn't have stayed hidden behind a rock forever. Crossing the open ground he scanned back and forth across the buildings, looking for any sign of movement, his finger held lightly over the trigger in his right hand. At thirty metres out he heard a 'ratatatata' and a percussive 'ka-boom!' It was difficult to locate, but seemed to be from the opposite end of the hamlet.

Dennis's voice spluttered over the com. "Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch!"

"Morning, Den," said Stocksy. "Thanks for the missiles." Stocksy was now one up on them, and had access to missiles in addition to the machine guns they had each started with.

Kostovich hove closely to the perimeter wall and inched around, trying to get a look down the main street. The buildings were Earth style, above ground and battered. The place looked like some of the news reports from the war on Earth.

"Stocksy?" Kostovich asked into the com.

"Hey, Dan. Don't worry, I've got plenty for you too."

“See you in a bit. Looking forward to it. You seen Bacon?”

“Nope. But when I see him, I’m gonna fry his ass!”

Bacon crackled over com for the first time, “Never gets old, Stocksy, never gets old.”

“Probably camped out somewhere,” said Kostovich. “Do you want him or shall I do it?”

“Well,” Stocksy replied, “if I get him I’ll be on guided missiles, Dan. If you get him, it’s honours even for the final showdown on Main Street.”

“I don’t need superior hardware, Stocksy. I already have superior tactics. Take him if you want.”

Kostovich spoke to his AI, “How long to completion?”

“Two minutes.”

Kostovich knew Bacon liked to camp in buildings. A building with a mech shaped hole in it very likely had a Bacon camping inside it. Bacon’s tactics were as obvious as Dennis’s, so he’d be facing out into the main street waiting for someone to wander down it. Kostovich continued circling the perimeter, carefully watching all potential danger points as he went. He was just crossing a side road out of the ville when the corner of the building above him exploded into shower of dust and fragments, which rained down about him. Bacon was still on the machine gun; it had to be Stocksy. Kostovich ducked and continued, working over in his mind where Stocksy was. It was a narrow road, so to have hit the back of it he could only be in one specific area midway down Main Street on the opposing side. Glancing to his left as he continued his anti-clockwise orbit of the town he saw some rubble. Bacon.

“How long to completion?”

“Forty-five seconds.”

Kostovich pulled back from the perimeter and ran around it in the direction he had been going. As he passed the building Bacon was hid out in he fired a burst of machine gun fire into it, but was gone before Bacon could make the full turn necessary to return fire. Bacon was turning back when Stocksy’s missile hit him, and he was out of the game.

“Head shot!” Stocksy declared.

Kostovich made for the top of Main Street. “Completion?”

“Completing in ten, nine . . .”

As the countdown finished Kostovich peered gingerly around the corner and up Main Street, where he could just see Stocksy's missile arm pulling back behind the corner of a building.

"Decryption complete. Competing systems owned. Total time five minutes and forty-three seconds."

"Please run AI M22 on competing system Stocksy."

Kostovich now stepped boldly out onto Main Street and walked up it at a casual pace.

With a flick of the eye he switched the com to Stocksy. "Stocksy? Comin' to get ya, fella!"

"M22 is now complete on competing system Stocksy," said the AI.

"Dan?" said Stocksy, "I hate to do this, but . . ." Stocksy ran across the street, all the while locked onto Kostovich, who implacably strode toward him. Just before the midway point Stocksy's mech juddered as two missiles launched from the forearms, leaving a cloud behind them as they streaked down Main Street. Stocksy had planned to run back into cover on the other side of the street, but on seeing his missiles get away, locked-on and with no reply, he decided to stop and savour his moment of victory. The huge mech skidded very slightly as it came to a stop on the far side of the street.

The missiles streaked passed Kostovich and out of the end of the ville. At first Stocksy couldn't figure out why there had been no satisfying double boom, and the smoky missile trail blocked his view. For a split second he knew something was not right. In the time it took him to figure out what was wrong the missiles had already turned about and had rushed back to the place from whence they came.

Ba-Boom!

The top of Stocksy's mech was totally destroyed. The lower half fell to its knees like it was bowing before its superior.

"Good game," said Kostovich.

"Goddamn, Dan, that's cheating!" said Stocksy.

"It technically isn't," said Kostovich. "If you don't like it we can turn off cyberwarfare next time."

"We should, too," Bacon chimed in. "It gives you an unfair advantage."

"It's advantageous to me, but it's perfectly fair. Only a fool wouldn't play to their advantages."

"I'm done here," said Dennis.

“Me too,” said Kostovich. “Later.

“Later.”

“Later.”

“See you later, guys.”

Kostovich pulled off his headset and slumped back into the sofa. He blinked twice and shook his head, quickly looking about the room to re-orient himself.

He glanced over at his terminal screen and could see something blinking red in the notification area. “Put that up on the wall,” he said. The terminal appeared on the wall in front of him and he began to read. “Show me that report, bottom right,” he said.

“USAN Monitoring?” the AI asked.

“Yes.” The report enlarged to fill the wall and Kostovich began to read it, glancing through the lines with a slight frown. He had sent one of his AIs to covertly worm its way into the USAN’s secure information systems months earlier. The operation was so delicate that, initially at least, it was not to report back. Its preliminary task was to remain undetected while it monitored the system. Kostovich had programmed it to monitor as long as it felt necessary. Any sort of premature call home risked exposure. The AI was absolutely not to do that until it was convinced it could do so safely.

Like a forlorn lover Kostovich had waited for his AI to return. He had assumed it would take a few days before he heard anything, but very quickly the days had developed into months. He didn’t know what might have happened.

There were three options. The first was that the AI had been intercepted. Kostovich found that difficult to accept. From various reconnaissance attacks he had mounted previously he understood the landscape he was going into. He knew there were certain vulnerabilities in the system, and he had programmed his AI to exploit them. He felt sure it had not been compromised.

The second option was that the AI had failed. He could not countenance this possibility. He was a maestro at programming AIs and this piece had been one of his finest works.

Option three was the only one which seemed viable; that his AI was still burrowing around the system undetected. This meant that the crack was much more complex than he had expected. He was willing to concede that much. If the problem was harder than had been anticipated, so be it. He had unwavering faith that his creation was equal to the task. All it needed was time.

The report had been tasked with monitoring all output from the USAN government and military. The AI had the ability to encode messages into standard communications if necessary. If it felt unable to communicate directly it could attempt to do so covertly, via an overlay on some mundane communication.

Kostovich scanned the report.

Nothing.

In the last twenty-four hours the government and military had publicly released over thirty-two thousand communications, ranging from county administration notices to full governmental reports. They were all clean; no coded communications.

Kostovich was tired. He had had a long day and the game, despite being fun, had been somewhat draining. He usually checked for a call from his AI at least twice a day. Every time it failed to call home was a disappointment. This time was no exception. He decided to call it a night.

“Continue scanning,” said Kostovich. “Make a report every eight hours. And, of course, ears remain open for a standard call.”

“Yes, Dr Kostovich,” the terminal replied. “Will there be anything else?”

“Can you order some more Pop-Tarts?”

“Of course, next delivery will be tomorrow at 08:30.”

“That’s great.”

Kostovich awoke at 08:20 next morning. He swung his feet out of bed and sat there for a moment, not quite awake, before rising and shuffling into his living room, slumping onto the sofa. “Anything overnight?” he said through a yawn.

“Yes,” the AI said. “AI 2257 reports: *‘Success’*”

Kostovich jumped up. “What? Success? Gimme the details. I want them on the wall.”

Kostovich’s living room wall came alive with the display from his terminal. He could see it right there, in letters twenty centimetres high: *‘04.39 Level 6 security owned?’* Kostovich silently punched the air. “Pull me some Level 6 data,” he said. “Anything regarding . . .” He thought. “Anything regarding domestic disturbances on USAN military bases in the last two weeks.”

“Yes, Dr Kostovich.”

Kostovich had to wait only a few seconds before text began scrolling up his screen. Emails, court documents and all kinds of communications were there for him to see. Level 6 was the lowest level on the USAN's security scale. Nothing here would be of the slightest importance or interest. But he was in. The AI was alive and was chewing its way through the security levels. All he needed to do now was wait, and a treasure trove of information would open up to him.

He wanted to tell someone about the staggering achievement he had just made, but what he had done was illegal and, as it currently stood, rather pointless. All the good stuff was still to come. He thought about what he should do. "Get me an appointment with Venkdt," he said.

"Christina Venkdt?" the AI replied.

"I wish. No, fix me up a meeting with Charles Venkdt."

"Mr Venkdt doesn't have any openings until next week. Would you like to proceed with booking the appointment?"

"Sure. It's not important."

Kostovich once again scanned through the lists of uninteresting low-level government communications.

"Your Pop-Tarts have arrived," said his terminal.

"*Oh, yes they have,*" said Kostovich, grinning broadly. "Pop some in, would you?"

CHAPTER 3

Welcome Home

Sliding his hand down the rail as he went, he moved in descending circles down the helical staircase. He reached the bottom and strode across to the bar. It was nearly empty now, as he liked it. By Artificial Earth Time it was past 2:00am. He pulled a seat up at the bar and punched a command into his coms device. A robot arm mounted on rails in the ceiling behind the bar glided smoothly past him, its speaker emitting, “Coming right up, sir,” as it went. The arm quickly and without error grabbed a shot glass and placed it on the bar, then turned to grab a bottle. It whisked the bottle to the glass at great speed then instantly slowed for the pour. As soon as the drink was poured the speed increased dramatically as the bottle was placed back on the shelf. The arm returned. “This first drink today is complimentary as part of your trip. Subsequent drinks will be charged to your account. A maximum of five drinks is allowed in any twenty-four hour period. Enjoy yourself, and drink responsibly.”

“Screw you, pal.”

“Have a nice day.”

He took a sip of the drink and winced a little. At the other end of the bar a solitary older guy was lost in his comdev, prodding the screen and issuing the occasional whispered voice command. He looked up and, after a pause, put the comdev in his pocket. Grabbing the beer in front of him he stood up, half falling from his chair. He sauntered up the bar. “Hey, friend,” he said.

Bobby Karjalainen half-turned to him and offered a forced, thin smile. "Hey," he said. The man sat himself down next to Karjalainen and stuck out his hand expectantly.

"Name's Mike, how're you doin'?"

Karjalainen took the hand and shook it. "I'm doin' good," he said. "Ain't seen you down here before. Thought I knew just about everybody on board."

Bobby shrugged. "Been in my room mostly, or the gym."

"That would explain it!" Mike said, too loudly. "You won't be catchin' me in no gym!" He grinned at his remark and, from politeness, Bobby smiled back. "So you've been holed up in your room, eh? That'd drive me crazy. I have to get out and talk to people. I'm just about stir crazy already. I'm lookin' forward to pullin' in tomorrow. I hate these trips, I really do." Bobby took a sip of his drink. Mike continued. "What can you get up to in your room all day? Beats me how you could do that."

Bobby placed his glass on the bar. "Well, you know. You've got the VR, music, enhanced sleep. Kills the time," said Bobby.

Mike gave him a sidelong look. "Beats me. I have to get out and talk to people. Can't stay cooped up. I hate these trips."

"You travel a lot?"

"Yes sir, business. This is the third time I've made this trip in twenty-five years. Imagine that! I've pissed three years of my life away, floating through space." For a second he looked genuinely saddened by the thought, but soon picked up. "At least they pay me well for it! I guess it put the kids through school, anyhow?"

"That's a way to look at it."

"How about you? First time out?"

Bobby drew a breath. "I've been out once before, going the other way. But I'm on my way home now."

"Way home? You're a Martian?"

"I'd have to say I am. And I'm going home, if you want to drink to that."

"To home," said Mike, raising his glass.

"To home," Bobby echoed.

Mike took a deep gulp of his beer. "So what you been up to on the old home planet?"

Bobby looked Mike in the eye. "I've been serving my country."

Mike took a second to process the information. "The Army? Let me tell you right off, I got nothing but respect for you guys. Nothing

but respect. Some of these protesters, well, it makes me sick. The only reason they can parade around with their fancy-dan nonsense is because of guys like you. Where'd you serve? London? LA? I did a year myself, as a reservist. Mainly from home, you understand, but I get it. 'The discipline, service, honour.'

"Lahore."

Mike fell silent for the first time and glanced around the bar as if a script boy would be there to whisper his next line to him. "Lahore?" he said, cautiously. "That had to be pretty rough, right?"

Bobby frowned. "Yeah, it was rough alright. But we'd trained for it. We knew the risks going in."

"Well, I take my hat off to you, sir. I do really." Mike searched for something else to say. "Can I get you another drink?"

Bobby looked at Mike. "Sure."

Mike called out to the robot arm, "Bar keep! I'd like another beer over here and . . ."

"Whisky."

"And a whisky for my friend."

The robot arm zoomed up the bar. "I'm sorry, sir, but we are not allowed to serve you any more alcoholic drinks; today's limit has been reached."

Mike leaned toward the arm. "Now you look here, this is a war hero and we want our drinks, okay?"

"I'm sorry sir. Would you like to file a customer services incident report?"

Bobby cut in. "Could I have a beer and a whisky?" he asked.

"Of course, sir, coming up." The arm whirred off to prepare the drinks.

"See that!" Mike cried. "Even the machines have respect for a war hero!"

Bobby smiled and shook his head. The arm placed the beer and whisky on the bar in front of them. "Your account has been debited. You have two drinks remaining for the current period. Enjoy yourself, and drink responsibly."

Mike grabbed his beer, thrusting it toward Bobby. "To drinking responsibly," he said, with a slight slur in his voice.

"To drinking responsibly," Bobby answered.

After taking swigs they sat in silence for the next few seconds, Mike toying with the edge of a bar mat. He glanced up at Bobby. "What was it like?"

“Lahore?”

Mike seemed ashamed now at having asked the question. “Yeah, Lahore.”

Bobby pulled himself back in his seat, tilting his head to one side as he searched for an answer. “It was rough. Like they said. But we held on to it. And some of us got medals, too.”

There was a pause, then Mike said, “We’re all very proud of what you guys did. I mean,” he struggled for words, “. . . thank you. Thank you for your service.”

Bobby nodded. “It shouldn’t have happened that way, but,” he paused, “. . . but we did all we could and we made it in the end.”

“People actually died, didn’t they?”

“They did. We lost thirteen squads, thirteen commanders. Worst losses of the entire war.”

Mike’s mouth fell open.

“Thirteen?” he repeated, dumbfounded. “My God . . .”

“Twelve mechs to a squad, with the command drone. You don’t want to be losing a hundred and fifty tactical fighting units in the biggest battle of the Fourth World War, but what can you do? War sucks, huh?”

Mike was still staring. “But the people. *Thirteen*. They said it was four in the bullets.”

Bobby smirked. “Well, you know. The first casualty of war and all that. Anyway, we held onto Lahore, and you know the rest. Peace with honour.” He offered up his glass. Mike chinked his against it.

“Peace with honour,” he said.

Mike shuffled in his seat and studied the drinks behind the bar as if he had never seen them before. “You know,” he said, “I’m a bit of a history buff. Military history, that sort of thing.” Bobby looked at him quizzically. Mike continued. “That’s what I read, mostly. I’ve read hundreds of books about that stuff, especially the world wars, one, two and three. And of course I’ve been following this one, your one, in the news. Different to being there, I guess. How about you? Do you read that stuff?” he asked.

“Not really,” said Bobby. “We did a little in training, studying tactics, strategy and so forth, but I’m not much of one for history.”

“It’s really interesting,” said Mike. “It fascinates me.”

Bobby sipped his drink.

“I was a big supporter of the Commander Program, you know? A lot of people didn’t like it but I knew it would be good, I knew it would work and I knew it would be worth it. I think we lost our way with the drones. We lost something, you know what I mean? It made war too easy. Everyone was far too willing to reach for the military option when there were no risks involved. It made war, somehow,” he struggled to find the word, “. . . dishonourable. Apart from this last war, do you know when the last time the USAN, or even the old USA as it was then, last deployed human soldiers on the battlefield?” Bobby shook his head. “It was 2087, WWIII. That was the last time until this one, a hundred and fifty years without a single live soldier deployed on the field of battle. Even in the civil wars it was all drones on the battlefield. The Battle of Seville was actually fought in sheds in Kentucky.” Bobby nodded. “So I take my hat off to you guys. That takes some balls, to do what you did.”

“We just did what was asked of us,” said Bobby. “I’d have been just as happy to have sat in an air-conditioned shed in Kentucky than have had my ass shot off in Lahore. I just felt like I should give something back. The old country asked people to serve, so I did.”

“What was it like in the Commander Program?” Mike asked.

“It was okay, I guess,” Bobby replied. “We did all the standard training in the sims like regular soldiers, and then some field training on top. Training with the mechs suits was pretty rough.”

Mike cut in, “Mech suits?”

“Yeah, the command drones. They’re the same as the drones in your squad but with less ammo to allow space for you to be in.”

“How many drones to a squad?” asked Mike, even though he knew the answer.

“Twelve, including the command drone. Each squad is eleven drones and one commander. The drones can all act autonomously, but can follow direct orders from the commander. If the commander is injured or incapacitated, control of the squad will fall back to remote pilots based outside the theatre of operations. But all the while you’re in the field the squad commander has total operational control. The whole point of the program is that an operational commander there in the field, with direct personal experience of what is happening, is better placed to make situational judgements than someone sat maybe three thousand miles away. There’s no substitution for actually being there on the ground.”

“But the risks are,” Mike paused, “unbelievable. And you volunteered. Incredible.” Bobby smiled. “Someone had to do it.”

Someone may have had to do it but it needn't have been Bobby. He was born a hundred and forty million miles away, and with his family connections he could easily have remained out of it. His father Jack had been mortified when Bobby told him he had volunteered, and had threatened to disown him. In truth Jack was terrified about what might become of his son, but he masked that feeling with anger, casting Bobby out of the House of Karjalainen and pulling his younger son Anthony even closer.

Bobby had always been the most difficult of the two boys, in trouble at school, in trouble with girls, in trouble with the police, but his easy smile and winning ways had always managed to get him through. When he was younger his sheepish grin and ‘what the hell’ shrug worked on his father too, but as he got older Jack Karjalainen became increasingly immune. He still loved Bobby but found it harder and harder to let him know it. Maybe that's why Bobby volunteered; to get a reaction out of his father. And maybe it worked, but Jack Karjalainen would never admit to it.

“Incredible,” Mike said to himself. “Can I get you another drink?”

“I don't think you can,” Bobby said, and then to the machine, “Hey, barkeep. Same again here.” The robot arm performed its whirring magic, finishing with its weary message about drinking responsibly.

Mike grabbed his new beer and took a sip. “What did it feel like?” he said.

“Feel like?”

“Yeah, what did it feel like, the fighting?”

“It felt like the sims. You've played the sims right? *Mech Azimuth 4* and all those? It feels just like that, but with hard work and no resets.”

“Yeah, but, I mean . . .”

“What?”

Mike took a breath and searched for the words. “I mean in an actual battle, firing actual weapons at actual people?”

“Yeah? Well,” said Bobby, “they were trying to kill me, and they had volunteered to be there just like I had. They knew the risks; so did I. I guess it felt good.”

Mike laughed. At first a nervous giggle, but then a full-throated belly laugh. “You hard-hearted son of a bitch,” he said. “You're a cold-blooded killer!” He laughed again. Bobby laughed a little too.

It wasn't quite true, what he had said, but it sounded good to the fans and the war buffs, and it put them off the scent of how he really felt.

"I guess so," Bobby said, "I guess that's what made me an effective soldier."

"I guess it did," Mike replied.

Bobby downed his remaining whisky. "I'm turning in now, Mike. It was good to meet you."

"Well," Mike said, "before you go I'd like to make a toast to the returning hero." He raised his glass. "To . . ." He paused blankly. "I'm so sorry, what was your name again?"

"Karjalainen. Bobby Karjalainen."

"Yes! Yes, I knew I knew your face. Goddamn! Great book. *Great book.*" Mike grabbed Bobby's hand, shaking it vigorously as he continued. "To Bobby Karjalainen, and all those like him, to whom we owe our freedom, and because of whom we can sleep safely in our beds at night. Chin chin!" Bobby clinked glasses with him, though his own was empty. Bobby slipped from his stool and made to leave but Mike grabbed his shoulder. Bleary-eyed, Mike looked straight at Bobby and said, with all the sincerity he could muster, "Welcome home, Bobby. Welcome back to Mars."

The port was sparsely populated. Flights from Earth arrived only every two years. For most of the time the space was used for warehousing and the staff on duty today were security personnel from the main USAN base at Marineris. They knew exactly who was coming and they knew exactly what they were bringing with them. Every milligram had to be accounted for on the flight and, in addition to the exorbitant cost, a thorough medical and psych exam was necessary before anyone could be cleared for interplanetary flight. The cost would have made the trip off-limits to Bobby but the army picked up the tab both ways; as a volunteer for the military on the way out and as a war-hero on the way back.

On finishing his final tour Bobby had been paraded as something of a poster boy back in the USAN. His easy smile looked as good on the bulletins as it did on the posters, and he maintained enough gravity to make his flip and scripted answers to the tougher questions (tougher, but not tough. No one in the media would be dumb enough to ask an actual tough question) seem weighty and considered. He had consented to a ghost-written book, *Return of the Warrior*, about his

experience in the Commander Program. The only part people were interested in was the Battle of Lahore. Bobby signed off on the book, even though it bore scant relation to the events it depicted. It had been jazzed up into an adventure story with just enough true horror and grit left in to make it seem serious and worthy. In reality it was a trashy and jingoistic thriller to be chosen above others because of the words 'true story' (in fact, *'The Explosive True Story!'*) and the picture of Bobby looking suitably determined and heroic on the cover.

Bobby had ridden his fifteen minutes expertly and had enjoyed every moment. He'd been on seven different chat shows across four countries and had spoken at two prestigious universities. The rock star life had been great, but the travelling and the easy availability of admiring women had eventually come between him and Askel.

After initial training Bobby had served two outstanding virtual tours out of the famed 'Kentucky Sheds'. It appeared he was preternaturally gifted at remotely piloting attack mechs and drones, and he had an unusually well-developed sense of tactics and strategy.

His prodigious skills had not gone unnoticed and when he volunteered for the newly announced Commander Program he had been snapped up immediately.

As one of the first volunteers Bobby had been in the Commander Program more or less from the very beginning. His training group had worked closely with Helios Matériel Corporation, one of the top military contractors, in developing the command drones. Initially these had been adapted standard drones with little or no ammo. Important systems had been moved about the chassis in order to make room for someone to sit inside. This worked out okay in initial VR training but in field trials the problems became more and more apparent. The command drones were underpowered, under armed and under armoured. When it became clear that no amount of rejigging was going to solve the problems, Helios brought in their second most senior designer and briefed her to rebuild the design for the command drones from scratch. Her name was Askel Lund.

Bobby worked closely with Askel. He knew what was needed and he was always keen to test prototypes on the training grounds. Bobby was a passionate advocate for the command drones to be armed. Initially it had been thought that with the firepower of eleven battle drones at his or her disposal there would be no need for the command drone itself to be fully armed. Bobby knew that in a tight-spot the

command drone would need to defend itself, maybe even using manual controls.

He knew too the value of armour. The Commander Program had been sold as a glorious return to the days of ancient warriors, risking their lives in honourable battle for the greater good. Some of that made sense to Bobby, but he didn't think soldiers should be throwing their lives away as a sop to some crazy ideas about honour and valour that were centuries out of date. Death on the battlefield was a possibility; it didn't have to be a duty.

Askel worked at the design and refined it with Bobby's input until she had honed it down to something usable and effective. The command drones stood four metres high and looked very similar to the humanoid mech drones they commanded. This was important, as it prevented the enemy easily identifying and picking off the commanders. The command drones had space in the body cavity from where the commanders piloted them. The commander's head was exposed to the front to allow the situational awareness that was at the heart of the program, but could be sealed off in a split second. A Plexiglas screen would instantly deploy to protect the pilot from any incoming threat. Once, in the training field, Bobby's visor deployed when a bee harmlessly bumbled past at a distance of five metres.

The headsets the pilots wore relayed live information to them via audio coms and a head-up display. Advanced algorithms processed all available data and, based on the situational scenario, mission objectives and a detailed analysis of the pilots previous actions, would only display information deemed likely to be useful. Commands could be issued to the commander's drones visually, verbally or via predetermined 'situational' responses. The drones had a huge array of fully customisable routines in addition to their independent heuristic evaluation techniques and constantly adapting AI.

Askel and Bobby had kept their relationship secret, fearing it would jeopardise their respective positions. They thought it might be perceived as unprofessional. The clandestine nature of their liaisons just added to the fun for Bobby but Askel had found it difficult. She took her job seriously and she hated the idea of the cliché that their relationship was; the serious professional woman bowled over by the rugged, handsome and rough-round-the-edges man in a uniform. To her there was more to it than that. She felt that she understood Bobby, having come from a well-known and wealthy family herself, and she knew that she saw a different side to him than he showed to

the rest of the world. Bobby was the easy-going, up-for-anything guy, modest with it even though he knew how easily he fell to almost any task at hand, and he projected a what-the-hell, devil-may-care roguishness that the people around him loved. He was dependable, smart, just-a-bit-crazy-but-not-too-crazy and above all, something of a bad-boy. Crucially, not so bad that he was dangerous to know, but just bad enough that hanging out with him felt very slightly naughty. When you were with Bobby it felt like you might get caught and told off at any moment, and that was a *good* feeling. Askel knew that feeling; all those who knew Bobby experienced it at one time or another. But Askel felt she knew something that few if any others did; the real Bobby, the man at the core. That Bobby was sensitive, thoughtful and filled with a restless, searching melancholy. That was the true Bobby. Askel's Bobby.

Bobby shuffled along the check-in line, observing his surroundings. The building was large and like most buildings on Mars was mostly underground. It was pressurised against the unbreathable and low pressure Martian atmosphere, with a minimum of the structure above the surface. The entrance bays were served by ramps sunk into the ground. Thick reinforced Plexiglas skylights made up the bulk of the above ground parts of the structure. The skylights were bordered by rails on which were mounted brushes and power-jets which periodically whooshed up and down them, clearing the ever-present Martian dust which accumulated whenever the wind got up, which was often.

They had transferred from the landing vehicle through an airlock into what was, in effect, a large coach. They were then driven the few short kilometres to the warehouse terminal. Another trip through an airlock and they were ushered through to this larger area.

Bobby was relishing the luxury of space as he moved slowly up the line. The journey from Earth had taken six months. Since he had stepped into the 'bone-shaker' HLV back in Ontario half a year ago this was the largest space he had been in. From the HLV he had transferred to an HEO shuttle which had taken him out to the interplanetary craft, where he had spent the bulk of the journey. That ship never landed; it was on a permanent elliptical orbit around the sun. Once every two years you could hop on near Earth, and hop off six months later at Mars. The eighteen month return trip was unmanned and used primarily to transport freight, the most precious of which was the deuterium on which the early Martian economy

had been founded. A second interplanetary solar orbiter was on a different orbit; Mars to Earth in six months with the eighteen month journey on the return.

The solar orbiters were functional but, necessarily, minimal. Space was at a premium. The ships had been designed so as to *feel* as big as possible to their inhabitants. The crew was limited to one doctor and one engineer, all other roles being fully automated or seen to by service drones. There was a gym, use of which was highly encouraged, and a combined refectory and day area in addition to the cabins. Cabins were equipped with entertainment centres, Immersive Virtual Reality (IVR) units and other home comforts. Customers could also opt for 'Enhanced Sleep' where, by means of drug therapy and careful electromagnetic manipulations of the subject's brain, the user could sleep for extended periods of up to three or four days at a time. This was a good option where there was, essentially, nothing to do for six months, but too much ES could lead to extended feelings of fatigue and headaches.

When the solar orbiter was close enough to Mars the passengers transferred to an HMO vehicle which took them down the landing craft in Low Mars Orbit. From there it was a mildly hair-raising trip down to the landing site.

Bobby was now two people away from being processed. He could hear the two security personnel in front of him processing the line. It was standard stuff; name, occupation, purpose of visit. It was, he thought, largely pointless. No one gets to stowaway on an interplanetary space craft. Every person is checked and rechecked and monitored constantly through all stages of the flight and every transfer. If a passenger caught a cold the security services would know it before they did. This was just a hangover from an earlier way of doing things. It felt like this was how you *should* run a terminal, so this was how they did run a terminal.

Bobby stepped up to the first border guard, who did not look up. "Hold out your comdev and state your name, nationality and purpose of visit."

Bobby moved his weight from one leg to the other. "Robert Harvey Karjalainen, USAN, I live here."

The guard looked up, acting for all the world as if Bobby's identity had come as a surprise to her. "*Bobby Karjalainen?*" she said.

Bobby looked her in the eye. "That's right," he said.

"Bobby Karjalainen the war hero?" The guard squinted at him.

"I served," Bobby allowed.

The guard exaggeratedly gestured to her colleague. "Hey! We've got us a war hero here. How about that?" she said.

Bobby looked away. The guard said, "Mr Karjalainen, could you please turn your face toward me as I have to positively identify you." It was nonsense. Bobby's comdev, like everyone else's, was biometrically encoded to him only and facial recognition at all points on the journey confirmed his identity. Whether a border guard thought Bobby looked like his most recent picture on file was neither here nor there. Any imposter would have been picked up on the ground at Ontario, and ever since then the system had had a lock on him.

Bobby continued to stare at a particularly uninteresting crate he had spotted halfway down the warehouse. The guard spoke, slowly and deliberately with ice on her words. "Hey. War hero. I'm talking to you."

Bobby flicked his eyes in her direction without moving his head.

"Please turn your face full onto me so I can positively identify you," she said, adding with venom, "Mr Karjalainen."

"Can I please go?" said Bobby. "It's been a long journey and I want to get home and rest."

The guard nodded a gesture at her colleague, who followed her around the desk and stood behind her as she took up a position side on to Bobby. "Sir," she said, with as little respect as she could give that word, "please place both hands palm down on the desk."

Bobby eyeballed her. "Really?"

"Hands on the desk, sir."

Bobby stepped to the desk and placed both hands on it as requested. The desk was low so he was slightly bent over. The guard walked behind him, kicking his legs apart. "You might think you're a big deal, but you ain't. Killing all those Asians? Big, tough character, huh? You don't impress me. Anything in your pockets that shouldn't be there?" She started patting him down without waiting for an answer. "I read your book. You come over like an asshole," she said.

"Thanks for the review," Bobby replied, "I'll pass it on to the writer."

The guard squatted down and started patting up Bobby's legs. As she got to the top of his left leg he glanced down and winked at her. "Why, thank you Miss," he said. The guard quickly span her hand around and grabbed Bobby's balls, squeezing hard. Bobby grimaced, but was determined not to react further.

“Think you’re funny? You might be Charlie-Big-Potatoes back there, mowing down third-worlders and tellin’ everyone how great it was, but you’re in my world now. I’m gonna put a flag on you, and you’d better keep in line.” She let go and stood up. “If you spit on the sidewalk we’re gonna pull you in, and we’re gonna see how you were aggressive and uncooperative at Immigration, and we’re gonna think that maybe you need to be incentivised to get your shit right. You understand me?”

Bobby looked at her blankly. “Think so,” he said.

The guard strode back around the desk. “On your way,” she said. Bobby smiled at her and nodded to her colleague. He turned, walking toward the sign that said ‘Exit.’ The guard called after him.

“Welcome to Mars. War hero.”

Bobby stepped into a driverless cab just outside the port. He had ordered it from his comdev while he was in the queue at immigration. Immediately it set off down the tunnel-like roads, which were darkening now as evening fell. Looking through the clear roof of the cab and the Plexiglas ceiling of the road-tunnel he could make out the first few stars visible that night. He saw a particularly bright one and wondered if it might be Earth. The day he left he had come to the port in a cab very like this one, but on that day there had been a dust storm. The only thing visible then had been a wall of that muted bloodstain red colour the planet was famous for.

The Karjalainen’s family seat, as his father jokingly had it, was a few kilometres from the port. Bobby switched on the cab’s built in comdev. He flicked through a few news channels and was surprised at the amount of local coverage. From his earliest memories right up to when he left the news had always been predominantly about Earth, and mostly about the USAN. He felt he knew Earth. That had been one of the reasons he had found it so easy to leave his home to go there. The stories he was flicking past now were as likely to be about Mars as they were the home planet. Hospital staff were considering a strike at St Mary’s and Venkdt Mars Corp were due to make an announcement about their plans to start exploiting the asteroid belt.

Bobby had been following home planet bulletins on the trip out. Watching the news here in this cab he felt, for the first time in seven years, a very long way from Earth.

The cab slowed to a halt outside the house where Bobby grew up and he stepped out from it. The Karjalainens, being one of the pre-eminent families on Mars, had a dome fronting house in Central Marineris. Domes on Mars were expensive and generally only used for public spaces, but in some very exclusive neighbourhoods a dome would be the centre piece of a residential area with private housing about the perimeter. Bobby's family's house, like the others in this swanky burg, was mostly underground, extending back beyond the edge of the dome. A portion of the front, though, including the entrance hall, was above ground inside the circumference of the dome. The dome itself was eighty metres across and had been built by Hjälp Teknik, the Karjalainens' company. Six other houses shared the luxury of the dome, but the Karjalainens' was by far the biggest. The land in the centre of the dome was grassed and landscaped, and Bobby remembered climbing the trees there when he was a small boy. They were good memories.

Bobby tapped his comdev to pay the cab and slung his duffle bag over his shoulder, turning to walk up the path to his old home. As he reached the front door he noticed that it was already open and a slender figure was slouched in the doorway, in shadow from the light behind it.

"You're back," the voice from the shadow said, redundantly.

"Hey, Anthony," said Bobby, breaking into a smile and offering his hand.

Anthony grasped the hand reluctantly and said, "Dad's not here."

"He's not?" said Bobby.

Anthony shook his head. "At the hospital. Again."

"Oh," Bobby said, and took his hand back from Anthony. "Is it bad?"

Anthony turned into the house and Bobby followed him inside. Anthony half-turned and spoke over his shoulder, "Well, not good. Like the last time, I guess. I hope."

They walked down the hall to the kitchen where Anthony decided he should, at least for appearances sake, play the role of a gracious host.

"Can I get you anything to drink? Have you eaten?" he said.

"I'm beat, Tony, I'm gonna turn in in a bit. Cola?"

"Sure," said Tony. He took a cold can from the fridge and handed it to Bobby. Bobby cracked it open and took a swig.

"I saw you had a book out," said Anthony.

“Yeah? Did you read it?” Bobby asked.

“I don’t like books about the military,” Anthony replied.

“It’s not such a great book, anyways,” said Bobby. “Which hospital is Dad at?”

“St. Joseph’s. We can visit tomorrow, if you like.”

“I would. I’d like to see him. D’you think he’d be okay with that?”

Anthony shrugged. “He’s dying. You’re his oldest son. I guess he would.”

Bobby nodded. “I’ve sent him the odd message over the last few months. I think he’s thawing a bit.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Anthony, uncommitted.

Bobby finished his cola, crumpled the can and threw it across the room into the bin, where it landed dead centre without touching the sides. He grinned and mock-shouted, “Score!” He wanted to think that he and Anthony were fourteen and twelve again. Anthony wasn’t having it.

“It’s good to be back, Tony,” said Bobby.

Anthony Karjalainen half-heartedly suppressed a sneer. “Is it?”

Bobby slung his kit bag into the corner and crashed onto his bed. He closed his eyes and thought about the day. Images from the exhilarating trip on the landing craft, the incident with the up-tight border guard and his uneasy reunion with Anthony floated about his head. He thought about his father and the illness that was slowly dragging him down. He tried to sleep - he was tired enough - but he just couldn’t do it. Opening his eyes he looked about the room, *his* room, or rather his twenty-one-year-old self’s room. The posters seemed a little silly now, but still bought a smile to his face.

He swung his legs around and sat up on the bed, reaching into his pocket to pull out his comdev. He scrolled through the contacts, stopping on one and tapping the screen. He held the comdev up to his ear and walked over to his old desk, listening to the dial tone. He flipped through an old notepad on the desk absentmindedly. The dial tone stopped and he heard a woman’s voice.

“Hey, this is Christina. I’m busy just now, leave a message. Buyee!” The recording stopped. Bobby coughed and paused a second, thinking.

“Hey, Christina, it’s me, Bobby.” He paused, searching for words again. “I’m back. Call me.”

He ended the call and lay back on the bed. This time, he was asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER 4

Rumbles

Two Secret Service men with dark suits, dark glasses and concealed coms furtively stepped inside the door, one taking a position either side, both scanning the room and turning their heads slightly as they spoke into their concealed mics. They nodded to each other in agreement and pulled the door open. Two further agents, a man and a woman, strode briskly into the room. Having analysed the layout two days in advance they knew exactly where they were going. The man moved directly to the far corner, where he stood with his back to the wall, surveying the customers and waiting staff as the early evening clientèle went about their meals. The woman went to a discreet opening at the back of the restaurant where, just out of view of the customers, was a tastefully designed and tastefully small sign reading ‘Staff Only.’ She took up a stance, side on to the kitchen and side on to the restaurant floor, with legs apart and hands loosely behind her back. She too whispered something into her mic.

A few seconds later Vice President Gerard White entered. He smiled and shared a joke with the maître d’hôtel, clasping one of his hands in two of his. The maître d’hôtel gestured to a table on the restaurant floor, and White thanked him and moved toward it.

White sat down at the table as another Secret Service woman slipped into position at the table opposite.

“Hello, Mr Vice President,” said Madeline Zelman.

“Hello, Ms Zelman,” White grinned.

Madeline flung her hand about the room, gesturing to the agents. “Do you ever get tired of all this rock-star nonsense?” she asked, smiling.

White smiled back, “No, never.” They laughed gently and easily.

“I know you don’t have much time so I’ve already ordered,” said Madeline.

“Good, good,” White replied, quickly adding, “Not the fish?”

“Not the fish,” Madeline echoed. “I thought we’d start with Pan-Seared Crab Cakes with Cajun Remoulade and have the Jambonneau of Duck with Wild Rice and Pine Nuts for the main.”

“Crabs and Ducks?” said White. “So you’re dragging me as near to fish as you can, huh?” He smiled at Madeline and she smiled back as she took a sip from her glass.

“Wine?” Madeline offered.

“I’d better not. I have a committee later.” White reached for the carafe of water in the centre of the table and poured himself a glass.

“Great news about the war,” said Madeline.

White nodded. “Not so great from a business point of view,” he said.

Madeline frowned at the remark. “Come on, that’s low. We’re not in the war game, we’re in the armaments game. Different thing.”

“Is it?” asked White. He was hoping to pull the subject back to something lighter as soon as possible. He only had one hour with Madeline and he didn’t want to spend it arguing about the morality of her portfolio.

Madeline was the majority owner of Helios Matériel Corporation, the number one USAN defence contractor. She had long held that in her line war was bad for business. If it came to an actual shooting war then her products had not served their true purpose; deterrence, or ‘Peace Through Superior Fire-power,’ as the t-shirt had it. Madeline preferred Teddy Roosevelt’s ‘Speak softly, and carry a big stick.’ All Helios did was provide big sticks. The best big sticks in the business, she thought.

“What are you going to do with those carriers now?” asked White as the waiter served the entrée.

Madeline thanked the waiter. “Deliver them to the client as planned,” she said. “Like we were always going to. And the client is . . .” She pretended to search for the name, like she was solving a difficult riddle. “. . . the USAN Government, I think. Heard of them?”

White chuckled. "I surely have," he said. "We'll be paying for those damned things until my grand-kids have retired," he said, gently shaking his head.

The two carriers, known together as the *Aloadae*, were to have been the crowning glory of the USAN Army Commander Program. The two ships - the biggest spacecraft ever built - had been designed to provide an extremely rapid response to any perceived threat, in any theatre at any time, on the surface of the Earth.

The carrier ships carried twelve dropships each and were to be stationed in permanent low Earth orbit, able to move around the globe as and when necessary. Each dropship could deliver a Commander Program squad to the surface of the Earth within twenty minutes of the order being given. Each dropship was fully automated but nominally piloted by the human commander of the squad. Eleven humanoid-shaped mech drones hung in the bays behind the pilot. Once the squad had been dispatched the dropship would then act as an aerial drone. The dropships had limited but useful firepower and were a huge asset in terms of reconnaissance.

The first carrier, *Ephialtes*, had been delivered three months ago. The peace talks were well under way at that time so, despite some skirmishes along the most bitterly contested borders, there had been no deployments made from it. Delivery of the second carrier, *Otus*, was scheduled for two months' time. The great warship was to be borne into the heavens two months after the war it was designed to fight had ended. White was sanguine about that. Maybe Madeline was right after all. Maybe the carriers had added to the deterrence element of the USAN's military might. Maybe that had played a role in the negotiations and therefore, maybe, *just maybe*, the carriers did help to bring about the end of the war, just as they had been designed to. Still, he'd rather not be paying for the damned things. Winning the war was one thing. White's focus now was on winning the peace and for that he, or rather the USAN government he represented, would need every spare cent there was.

The meal was agreeable and they ate together. As White had hoped, the conversation turned more convivial. They chatted about their kids and their day to day lives. Madeline's daughter Melissa had just got engaged to a realtor, and Madeline wasn't convinced it was a great match. For a short period White was far away from the jungle of government.

Presently, he looked at his watch and patted the sides of his mouth with a napkin. "Look, this has been great, Madeline," he said.

"You're not staying for dessert?" Madeline replied.

"I'd love to, but," he shrugged, "I've got to run."

White stood up and leaned across the table to kiss Madeline on the cheek. "I love ya, babe," he said into her ear and, winking, he straightened his tie and left.

Audrey Andrews sat in the biggest chair in the room. It was premium ethically grown leather, very comfortable, and higher than the other chairs. In front of her were two long, short coffee tables end to end, with two rows of slightly less comfortable chairs surrounding them. On the tables were bottled water and bowls of fruit, which no one was eating. In the chairs were the brightest and the best of the defence department, or at least the most senior, and Andrews was their leader.

Andrews leaned forward. "What have we got?"

"Domestic terrorism is at a nine year low," said a man to Andrews' left. "There have been no major incidents in the mainland this year and only one last year in the entire USAN, where the perpetrators were quickly apprehended and their cell closed down. The powers granted us under the Restrictive War Measures have proved invaluable in intercepting terrorist communications. There'll always be a few loopy-loos with a cause picked up from the internet, and there's not much we can do about them, but the traditional domestic terror groups have all but been eradicated."

"Overseas?" said Andrews

A woman to Andrews' right, seated a little way down from her, responded. "The Asian Bloc poses no immediate threat. We are continuing to monitor communications and it seems they are as relieved as we are that the war has come to an end. There are some dissenters near the top of the regime - we've always known about them, of course - but even they recognise that the terms of the armistice were a necessary compromise. They would have been unable to sustain their casualty rates into the future and they knew that we had the upper hand in all areas - military, economic and logistic. Great wars always come down to battles of attrition, I guess, and in the end we managed to grind them down. The war has done lasting damage to their economies and infrastructure. They currently pose

the weakest of threats, but their capacity to act against us in the short and medium term has been neutralized.

“Of the unaligned countries, none have the necessary economic or military power to pose a significant threat, nor the inclination, either. The greater USAN is probably now in the most secure position it has been in for the last hundred years.”

Audrey smiled. “That’s good,” she said, “thank you.” She glanced down at her papers. “We find ourselves in the happy position of not having a war to fight. Of course, that doesn’t mean there’s nothing for us to do. I expect that in the next few months we’ll be hearing about cuts to our budgets, so I’d like you to start thinking about that now. I’d also like to ask you to consider how we should be rethinking our force deployment to best support the new peace and guard against any flare-ups in the more contested regions.

“Before the end of the summer I’d like a series of reports prepared. Budget reviews, analyses of our most problematic borders, and a deep overview of the geopolitical landscape we will be dealing with for the next five to ten years. A major war like the one we’ve just been through comes along maybe once every few generations, and thank God it’s over, but peace tends to be fleeting, so very soon it’s going to be back to pre-war business as usual for us. Our nation spans the globe and you can bet that someone, somewhere, is grinding an axe even as we speak. Tin-pot generals and wannabe revolutionaries bringing a little local misery into the world are likely to be the crux of our business for the foreseeable future.”

At the far end of the tables a woman timidly raised her hand. “Ms Andrews?” she said. Heads turned to look at the woman, who half lowered her hand and shrank back a little. Andrews leant forward, better to look at the woman.

“Yes?” said Andrews.

The woman steadied herself. “You know there has been some seditious talk coming from Mars?”

Audrey looked at the woman. “There has? Well, get that into the report on geopolitics if you must, but I’d rather we focused on plausible areas of contention.”

“One of our monitoring stations on Mare Orientale has recently picked up some conversations, believed to be from inside Venkdt Corp, with a decidedly unpatriotic bent.”

Audrey looked at the woman. “Believed to be?” she said. “Honey, two PAs talking shit in their lunch break does not make for a revolution.”

The woman hesitated. “We think the conversation was between a high ranking officer at Venkdt Mars and an equally high ranking Venkdt official here in the USAN.”

“I think the hazard level will be minimal. Mars is no threat to national security – it’s a hundred and forty million miles away, for one thing. And they don’t have a military.”

“They have deuterium,” the woman said. “They could harm us as much by omission as commission.”

Audrey’s temperature was rising. “Maybe we’ll leave this one to the foreign office. We’re looking for military threats, and this isn’t one. But thank you for your contribution.”

Audrey spoke to the room. “In summary, the war’s over. Get ready for change. We’re currently geared up for a large scale global conflict that has now ended. We have to prepare ourselves for smaller, maybe more widely distributed hostilities in the future, and as part of that we need to be thinking about where those might arise.

Go back to your desks, find the next potential crises and think about how we can stop them before they get started.” She stood and left.

The old barracks was a no frills operation. There were no home comforts to speak of and it comprised of what were more or less sheds. The doors were draughty, and on a cold winter’s night the windows would rattle in their frames. The living quarters were sheds with rows of double bunks down either side, with a red painted concrete floor shined to a mirror finish by generations of marines. The Commander Program, with its emphasis on the physical, embraced all that was old-school and hard and outdoors. For the commanders the air-conditioned stations of the regular soldiers, with their IVR get-ups and their well-appointed living spaces, reeked of decadence. A real soldier - a Warrior - had to be in touch with the earth. He or she had to know the pain of hunger in their belly; know the chill of the cold against their inner core; know the weakness and the tiredness of days in the unforgiving wilderness, and by that know themselves. The commanders, willing to stride onto the field of battle and kill or be killed, could live and sleep in an unheated, wind-rattled shed and know it was luxury, never once thinking of complaining.

A group of commanders was coming home. From air-conditioned hotels or the centrally heated houses of their families they returned from leave, coming back to their true home.

When Sebastian Foley reached hut thirteen Steiner and Johnson were already there. Steiner and Johnson shared a set of bunks, with Steiner in the lower bunk. 'I like to be on top,' Johnson liked to say. Foley greeted them with his customary long, 'Heeey!' and they bumped fists and slapped backs like the jocks they were. Steiner had swung his feet around, sat up and got out of his bunk the moment he saw Foley approach. Johnson, who was sat on the top bunk, took a more laconic approach. He remained seated, a huge grin on his broad face, as he reached down to grab Foley by the shoulder. "What's up, man?" he said.

"What's up?" Foley replied, grinning back and nodding at Johnson as he took Steiner's offered hand and shook it firmly, pat-slapping him on the shoulder as he let go. "Steiner, my man!" he said, "Look at you. You look different, man, all cleaned up and filled out."

"Four weeks of home cooking will do that for you," said Steiner. "How've you been, man?"

"I've been good," Foley replied, "I'm rested, recuperated and ready to go."

"That's good, man," Steiner smiled, "that's good."

"How're you doin', big fella?" Foley said to Johnson. "How was your leave?"

Johnson slid from the bunk to the floor. "It was good. Caught up with Stone, done some fishin'."

Foley pushed his kit bag into his locker and hopped up on his bunk. "So we won the war," he said, "and now we're sad, for there are no more enemy to kill." He lay on his back. "What do you think this is about?" he asked himself as much as anyone else.

"It's Dubai. It's not happening, I reckon," offered Johnson.

"Investigation," said Steiner. "I've seen footage on the bulletins of Mombasa - great stuff, I might add - and I'll bet some whiny bedroom activist has spotted something in there or in the off-line feeds and raised shit about it."

"I don't care if they do," said Foley. "My conscience is clear. I didn't see anything that wasn't Marquis of Queensberry or Geneva Convention or whatever the hell it is. We did a good job and we did it right. If anyone's complaining about anything they should be complaining about what happened to Hughes."

“That’s right,” said Johnson.

Steiner stared at the floor.

“That’s just savage,” continued Johnson, “and they should be called to account for that. That was some bad juju.” Johnson clapped one of his enormous hands on Steiner’s back.

When Commander Sam Hughes’ command drone had been taken out at Mombasa Steiner had taken his squad over to defend the wrecked drone while assistance could be organised and dispatched. He had ascertained that Hughes had survived the GRPG attack that had felled his drone but was trapped inside, badly injured. What he hadn’t ascertained was that, in the few short minutes it had taken him to reach the area, Hughes’ drone had been booby-trapped. When Steiner had used his huge mechanical arm to lift some of the wreckage from Hughes’ fallen drone the blast had knocked his own drone clear over. Hughes was killed and Steiner suffered multiple injuries. He was out cold for several minutes. His head was superficially but bloodily cut. When he was picked up the med crew at first assumed him to be dead. His vital sign monitors had all failed in the blast and he was unconscious and covered in blood. The last thing he remembered was seeing Hughes turning to look at him, struggling to mask his pain with a weak smile and his thumb raised in the time honoured gesture of thanks. That image had stayed with him.

There was a whisper from over near one of the windows, “Captain’s coming,” and commanders scattered about and leapt from their bunks.

“Captain’s coming,” Johnson echoed as he, Steiner and Foley came to the front of their bunks, standing bolt upright with their arms straight at their sides, looking forward.

Captain Brian Connor entered the hut at a fair clip and strode immediately to the front centre, equidistant from the two rows of bunks which ran away from him up the sides of the hut. Without stopping to pause or even acknowledge any of the commanders he began to talk.

“At ease people, and gather ’round me here.” The commanders moved at a quick saunter to form a semi-circle around Connor at the head of the hut.

Captain Connor was, at twenty-eight years, at least five years older than the oldest commander under his command. He was a born soldier and had jumped at the opportunity to become involved in the USAN Army Commander Program. He had finessed the original plans for the program and tested them on the training grounds.

Having been in at the very beginning he had overseen the training of the instructors and after three long years had finally, at the second request, been given command of company slated for deployment in the Asian theatre, fourteen months before the end of the war.

As captain of the company Connor, while at least not some REMF controlling drones from a shed in Kentucky, was still not quite in the thick of it like his men. His role of comcon was best fulfilled from a semi-automated aerial drone, directing missions from above. Lucky for him, then, that he had been injured in a training exercise, for the scar it left him with on the right side of his face seemed to show to the world that he was a Physical Soldier.

He had been bawling out a rookie commander who was having trouble adjusting from IVR training simulations to being in an actual command drone. Connor was stood on the tarmac in front of him, dwarfed by the four metre tower of metal and ammo in front of him, shouting up at the pilot like he was training a poodle. It said something to the quality of the man that a trained soldier, encased in the frame of a metal giant with enough firepower to level a small town, was intimidated by a five foot five inch captain wearing nothing more than the olive-drab uniform of the USANMC and a cap. The jittery would-be commander, anxious to do the right thing under the tirade from Connor, proceeded to miscontrol his mech and a sixteen tonne metal arm wooshed around, smacking Connor in the face.

Connor was intensely proud of the scar, though he affected to not give it a moment's thought. He had received it doing his duty, and that was good enough for him. His service injury had marked him for life and was there on his face for all to see. He would have been ashamed to report to the MO with RSI like some of these rear echelon drone operators, for whom a paper cut would lead to at least a day off sick, or maybe even litigation. No so for Captain Conner. He had taken one to the face in the line of duty and got up and carried on.

Conner stood with his hands behind his back and his feet about sixty centimetres apart. His head was held high and he appeared to be addressing someone floating a metre or two above the people circled about him. His speech was deliberate, measured and loud.

"You people acquitted yourselves well in the war that has just passed. The corps is proud of you. I am proud of you. That war is now ended. What does the warrior do when there is no war?" He waited. "The warrior prepares for war. You will remain here on a

training and preparedness detail, and you will remain sharp, and you will remain frosty.”

The group shuffled just a little and a commander near the front offered a very pensive, “Sir?”

Connor snapped his head in the commander’s direction. “What is it, Commander?”

“Does this mean we’re not going to Dubai?”

Connor returned his address to the floating phantom. “The end of hostilities has rendered some of our planned postings obsolete. We are no longer required in Dubai, that detail is scratched. The corps requires you here until further notice, sharp and frosty. That is all.” He turned on his heel and left.

Shoulders slumped all round and the soldiers slouched back to their bunks, the low murmur of their grumbling punctuated by a fist punching a locker.

“I knew it,” Johnson said, “I knew we’d never get to Dubai. Goddamn, why’d they have to end the damn war just when we was being sent someplace good?”

“At least we got a thank you for winning the war,” Foley offered.

“Tell that to Hughes,” said Steiner.

In the mess hall Foley was chowing down with Steiner and Johnson. Foley was a slow eater and Johnson, for all his bulk, ate as daintily as a vicar’s wife. Steiner, the smallest of the three, ate like someone was going to steal his food. Or at least he used to.

“Where’s your appetite, Steiner?” said Foley.

Steiner shrugged, “I’m just not too hungry, I guess.” He pushed some food around his plate and took a small forkful.

“You need to eat. *The corps needs you sharp and frosty*, amiright?”

Steiner rolled his eyes.

“*I need you sharp and frosty*,” Foley continued his mocking impression of Connor.

“*Mrs Connor needs you sharp and frosty*.”

Johnson laughed. “Goddamn that son of a bitch,” he said. “He thinks he’s a hard-ass with that stupid shaving cut on his face. He should have spent some time with us on the ground, getting shot at.”

“*I thank you for winning the war for me*,” Foley continued in the too loud voice. “*Mrs Connor thanks you for winning the war for me*.”

The three of them cracked up at the line.

“At least he had the good grace to thank us,” said Foley. “I wanted to thank him for taking aerial pleasure trips eight clicks back from where the action was and staying the hell out of my way while I won the war for him,” he sputtered between laughs.

Steiner pushed his plate away.

“Seriously, you need to eat, man. Are you okay?” said Johnson.

Steiner held his hands up. “I’m fine, I’m fine. Just not hungry today,” he said.

Johnson and Foley exchanged glances. “You need to eat, buddy. Your body needs it,” Johnson said, but Steiner just shrugged and shook his head.

Foley and Johnson had been concerned about Steiner since he returned to the company following the incident with Hughes. He had spent a week in a field hospital and had then been rotated back home for three weeks of rest and recuperation. When he returned he seemed to be a changed man. He wasn’t the same Steiner who had left. It was little things. He didn’t pick up on any of the running jokes they shared, and he didn’t seem to remember some of the things they had experienced together. When Foley asked him, “Hey, buddy, have you got that fifty bucks you owe me?” Steiner had paid up on the spot, rather than making the customary reply, “No, I gave it to your mum last night. I gave her the fifty bucks, too.” Foley and Johnson had been concerned that the brain injury Steiner had received had been more serious than had first been suspected, or that he was depressed or had PTSD or something similar. He had been passed fit for duty, though by the time he was back in the unit they never saw another shot fired in anger. Still, they worried about him. He was one of their own.

“So the glorious warriors of the last great war find themselves right back where they started, while the politicians and the generals take all the credit,” said Foley. “I guess some things never change.”

“I wouldn’t knock it,” said Steiner. “You’ve got a job, and a pension, and a bucketful of stories to tell the grandkids.”

“And the scars to prove it,” added Foley.

“I was sure lookin’ forward to Dubai, though,” Johnson said wistfully.

“Aw,” said Foley, “I’m sure we’ll have a great time, right here.”

The bright late afternoon sunlight streamed through the large floor to ceiling windows, framing Secretary of Defence Audrey Andrews and holding her in shadow. Her dark hair was pulled back severely and rolled into a tight bun on top of her head. She leaned into her desk, signing papers which she examined through glasses perched at the tip of her nose. There was a knock on the door and Andrews looked up. It was the timid woman.

“Ms Andrews?” the timid woman said.

“Yes?” Andrews snapped. She liked to appear officious and irritable. She thought it stopped people from bothering her unnecessarily and deterred people from asking stupid questions.

“Do you have just a moment?” the woman asked.

Audrey slipped the glasses off and gestured into the room. “Come in,” she said. “What is it?”

The woman walked into the office and stood across from Andrews on the other side of the desk. She held a manila folder across her chest like a child might hold a favoured cuddly toy. It seemed defensive, but despite her timidity at her core she had a steely resolve. She had something she thought the secretary of defence should know about and she was going to make sure she told her.

“My name is Colleen Acevedo. I’m an analyst in intelligence.” Acevedo had always been modest. She was, in fact, a senior intelligence analyst, reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“I know who you are, Ms Acevedo,” said Andrews. She was vaguely aware of Acevedo and her work, but nothing more.

“I thought you might just want to look at the transcripts of the conversations coming out of Venkdt.”

“Leave them on my desk; I’ll have someone take a look.” Andrews went back to her next piece of paper. Acevedo stepped forward.

“I really do think it’s worthy of your time, Ms Andrews. We’ve done some further analysis on the conversations and we’re pretty sure they’re between Charles Venkdt and Michael Summers, the CEO of Venkdt Corp here on Earth. There are some other conversations within Venkdt Mars that suggest that Charles Venkdt is very serious about what he’s discussing. He’s had senior members of Venkdt making feasibility studies, costings, etcetera, and he’s gone out of his way to keep it all under the radar.”

Audrey Andrews sat back in her chair and bit gently on the arm of her glasses. She observed Acevedo, and squinted almost imperceptibly. “Feasibility of what?” she asked.

Acevedo took a second to process the question. To her, the answer was so obvious she thought she might have misunderstood the question. “Martian independence,” she said.

Andrews thought. “Do you have the feasibility studies?” she asked.

“I do,” Acevedo replied, holding up the folder.

“And what do they say?”

Acevedo took a breath. “Essentially, they say that independence is feasible, desirable and even necessary.”

“Necessary?”

“Yes, Ms Andrews. Necessary for Mars to grow, economically. The arguments are essentially the same as in the Kasugai study, of which I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Andrews. She had never heard of the Kasugai study. “So this is something they’re discussing seriously at Venkdt?”

“At Venkdt Mars, Ms Andrews, yes. Michael Summers is bitterly opposed. He gets quite angry in the transcripts.” Acevedo once again held up the manila folder.

“Show me,” said Andrews.

Acevedo made her way around the unnecessarily large desk and opened the folder, searching through it and pulling out sheets that were variously stapled or paper clipped together. She laid them out in front of Andrews, explaining as she went.

“These are the feasibility plans, called Feasibility B and Feasibility F - don’t ask what happened to A and C through E, we don’t know - and these are four message conversations between Summers and Venkdt over a period of two weeks. They get interesting here.” Acevedo pointed at one of pages. Andrews read it, turning over to the next page with deepening lines of concentration appearing on her forehead. Acevedo pointed to another sheet. “This is where Summers starts to lose his rag,” she said.

Andrews read aloud:

“Summers: The shareholders own Venkdt, and we both work for them. I’ll be bringing this up at the AGM and we’ll have your ass out of there before you even know it.

Venkdt: I feel my position here is secure.

Summers: You cannot break up Venkdt without a two-thirds majority of the board.

Venkdt: Well, that might be true, strictly, but these are exceptional circumstances. We might have to bend the rules, just this one time.

Summers: We do things legally here at Venkdt.

Venkdt: I respect the law. But sometimes what's right and what's legal stray from each other, just a little.

Summers: Don't do it Charles. I've got an army of lawyers here, just waiting to go.

Venkdt: And where is 'here' exactly? You're a long way from where I am, and you can't see what I can. This has to happen. It's our destiny.

Summers: It might be your destiny but it's sure as shit not your goddamned company. You have no right to go through with this. I'll see you rot in jail for this if you try it, you son of a bitch."

Andrews looked at Acevedo. "He's going to break up Venkdt?"

"He proposes Venkdt Mars breaks away from the rest of Venkdt Corp. Given that Mars virtually is Venkdt Mars -"

Andrews cut in, "And Hjälp Teknik."

"The Hjälp Teknik operation on Mars is less than a tenth of the size of Venkdt's. Mars belongs to Venkdt, and Charles Venkdt wants out from the rest of the company. He has the means to do it, too."

"What about the garrison?"

"Less than two hundred of them. And they're more of a police force than an army."

Andrews thought. "So what are the security implications for us?"

"Practically none, as you pointed out before. They're a hundred and forty million miles away and they don't have a military. But they do supply the bulk of our deuterium, and they are a reasonably big player economically. The biggest threat to us is political. To lose our first - the world's first - off-world colony would make us look weak, particularly in light of some of the compromises we had to make to get the peace accords to work. We're already widely perceived as having caved into our enemies' demands at the negotiation table. If we then sit by and let our colonists secede from the union against our wishes we will look weak. And that can only be destabilising."

Andrews stood up and held out a hand to Acevedo. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. This is good work, exactly the sort of thing we need to be looking at."

“Thank you, Ms Andrews,” said Acevedo.

“Can you type all this up into a full report and get it to me by the end of the day?”

“Yes, Ms Andrews.”

“Good. That’s all”

“Thank you, Ms Andrews.”

Acevedo made toward the door as Andrews returned to her seat. Just as she got there Andrews called out, “Ms Acevedo?”

Acevedo stopped and turned back toward her. “Yes, Ms Andrews?”

“Your report - let’s just keep it between us at the moment.”

“Yes, Ms Andrews.”

CHAPTER 5

A New Order

Sat plumb in the middle of its own private hundred and twenty metre dome, Charles Venkdt's house looked like something from the home planet. Surrounded by lawns and even trees, here was a little bit of Earth on Mars. The house itself was large but functional. Venkdt didn't have time for ostentation. He was about doing things, achieving goals and finding solutions. It showed in the design of his house and it showed in his work.

Venkdt was of the fifth generation of his family working at the top of the company which bore his name. His great-great-grandfather, Alexander Venkdt, had founded the company in 2094 and marshalled it into one of the great global players. His grandfather's stewardship of the family business had been awarded to him for his involvement in the company's biggest and boldest gamble; the commercial exploitation of Mars. In 2143 Venkdt Corp was the first company to send a human expedition to Mars, and within five years of that Venkdt had a permanent base on the planet which had been growing ever since. In the first few years growth was slow and interdependent with the USAN Research Center, which had been established twenty-two years before and had a permanent but rotating staff of around thirty people.

Around twenty years after the base was established expansion really started to take off. Deuterium and other precious minerals were being extracted in ever-larger amounts and sent back to the home

planet. The early camps were expanding into something much more comfortable than the original squat cylinders connected by tubes. The new buildings by that time were totally fabricated on Mars, made with Martian bricks and built largely below surface level as protection against the low atmospheric pressure and cold. All buildings had to be sealed against the exterior low pressure of seven or so millibars, not much more than an absolute vacuum for practical purposes. Being mostly underground helped with this and the extreme cold of a Martian high-time or winter. Once bricks and Plexiglas could be manufactured locally there was something of a building boom. Within twenty-five years the original Venkdt prefabs were abandoned and given the status of 'historic sight'. They had gone from being cutting edge, wave of the future habitation to museum pieces in less than a quarter of a century.

By 2180 Venkdt's Martian operation dwarfed the USAN Research Center and expansion was continuing apace. In the first few decades of operation all Venkdt personnel eventually returned to Earth after serving terms of two, four, six or eight years. Their pay was very good and there was little opportunity to spend it on a frontier planet. Business was booming and Venkdt Mars was one of Venkdt Corp's most profitable divisions. As the operation expanded in terms of people and buildings some personnel chose to stay beyond even eight years.

The first humans born on Mars had come in the early days, but they had quickly returned to Earth with their parents soon after. Mars, it seemed, was no place to raise a kid. Over time this returning to the home planet became less of an obvious choice. Starting in the 2170s, when the total population was around fifteen thousand, some families opted to stay on Mars. There were building projects for homes that, unlike the previous Venkdt billets, could be bought by their occupants. Soon the ratio of natural born Martians to transients started to shift, ever so slightly at first but accelerating over time. By the end of the century more than half of the population was Martian born, with some of them being second or third generation.

Charles Venkdt himself had shipped out to Mars at the age of eighteen in 2185, and had never been back to Earth since. He had always been fascinated with the planet and his family's interest in it. And, in truth, he had wanted to get out from the shadow of his father. This didn't, of course, extend to striking out completely on his own. Given his good fortune to have been born into one of the richest

families in the USAN, that would have just been foolish. Charles knew that he could make a name for himself working from within. If he worked hard and demonstrated competency he would soon rise up in the furthest outpost of the family firm. That he did.

Venkd't had been the managing operational director of Venkd't Mars for over thirty-five years. When he had first reached that lofty position the Martian population had been around thirty thousand; now it was close to one hundred thousand. He had overseen expansion from the exportation of raw minerals to the production of high quality finished goods. He had expanded the fledgling R&D Department to something of a fiefdom for its director. He understood that in their hostile environment Martians had to innovate, meeting every challenge with creative solutions.

Within the last thirty years or so he had seen the arrival of Hjälp Teknik, a comparatively upstart company who had arrived on Mars as a direct competitor to Venkd't. Charles viewed them with a mild contempt, but conceded that competition was good as it would drive efficiency and innovation. Despite that he couldn't help thinking, deep down, that Hjälp Teknik had it easy. The knowhow, the knowledge, the risk had all been borne by the pioneers of Venkd't, who had also supplied, latterly, much of the transport and coms infrastructure. These Johnny-come-latelies were sailing in on Venkd't's coat tails when all the hard work had been done, and taking the easy pickings.

Things were changing now, and rapidly. It wasn't just Hjälp Teknik who were the rivals any more. Mars had expanded at such a rate that, even with the exception of Hjälp Teknik, it was no longer a company town. Two Venkd't employees might get together and start a family, buying a house with their wages and becoming true stakeholders in the Martian adventure. What about their kids? Venkd't didn't necessarily owe them a living, and they didn't necessarily want to work for Venkd't. With some capital from their parents' savings, or even a loan, some of these natural born Martians could set up their own businesses. Venkd't's Martians craved entertainment and other fripperies to spend their hard-earned money on, and small businesses sprang up to provide it to them. In time, other services were provided too, leading to growth in the Martian banking sector. Initially most goods were imported - there was money to be made undercutting the official Venkd't Stores in this area - but in time demand drove local production. The Martian economy was fizzing, and the population was expanding. All of this made Charles Venkd't immensely proud.

Though in truth it was his forefathers and their associates who had put in the *really* hard graft in the early days, Charles felt, with not a total absence of justification, that Mars was an ongoing project that he had built.

From his position on the veranda Charles watched the cab arrive, slowly winding its way up his short drive before coming to a halt in front of the house. His daughter stepped from the vehicle and reached back in, collecting her bag. She closed the door and looked up. "Hi, Dad," she said.

"Hey, gorgeous," Venkdt replied, a warm and genuine smile on his face. He walked to the top of the steps and greeted her with a hug and a kiss. They walked inside.

"I hope you haven't eaten," said Venkdt.

"I thought we were eating here?" replied Christina.

"Yes, yes, we are," said Venkdt. "Go through." He gestured to the dining room.

They entered the room and sat at places laid out for them. "How've you been, Dad?" said Christina. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's just fine," said Venkdt. "Drink?"

"You know, I think I will. Do you have any wine?"

Venkdt spoke to no one, "Can we have some wine in here please? And we're ready to eat." He turned to Christina. "How're things with you?"

"They're good, Dad. Work's good, the apartment's going well,"

"Have they finished yet?"

"There's a little left to do on the bathroom, but it's looking great. Thank you for all your help."

Venkdt waved a hand, "Don't worry about it, it's nothing."

A small drone entered the room and rolled up to Venkdt. "To my daughter, please," said Venkdt and the drone moved to Christina. The top opened and a plinth rose up with a bottle of wine on it and two glasses. Christina took the bottle and a glass. She lifted the second glass, gesturing to her father, but he shook his head and she returned it to the drone, which whirred away. It stopped by the doorway to allow in a second, slightly larger drone. This one approached Venkdt and opened to reveal two plated meals, steaming and smelling good. Venkdt took a plate and the drone moved on to Christina, who had just poured her wine.

"This looks good," she said.

Venkdt had already started eating. "It is," he said. "Tuck in."

They ate and intermittently chatted about mundane day-to-day family things, and the odd little stories from their lives. Picking his time Venkdt brought the conversation round to what he really wanted to discuss. “You like the salmon?” he said.

“Is that what it is? It’s delicious,” Christina said through mouthfuls.

“It’s local, you know.”

“Fabbed around here?”

“Not fabbed. Grown.”

Christina looked at him, impressed.

“A couple of guys that used to work for us. They’ve got a place up in Dog Sur. Imported some eggs, built a pool and now they farm salmon.”

“Amazing,” said Christina.

“The wine too. Local, I mean. There’s a dome in Eastside that’s just filled with vines, and they press their own wines there. It’s very expensive now, but as they expand costs will come down.”

“I’ve heard about them,” said Christina. “A guy at work is a wine nut. I can’t tell the difference between this and the fabbed stuff, to be honest, but he was raving about them.”

“Did you know around two new businesses are starting each month at the moment?”

Christina raised her eyebrows in acknowledgement. “I didn’t know that,” she said.

“The Martian economy is growing at a rate of four percent.”

“That’s great,” said Christina. “Isn’t it?”

“It is great,” said Venkdt. “I think we should be a bigger part of it.”

Christina looked at him, feeling a speech coming on.

“Venkdt is the biggest player in the Martian economy by far. For now. We dwarf our closest rival, Hjälp Teknik, and all the rest are just minnows. But to compete in the long term we need to be independent. And I’m not just talking about the Martian arm of Venkdt, I’m talking about Mars itself.”

Christina did not quite follow, and Venkdt read it in her face. “At the moment Venkdt Mars generates huge profits. Most of those profits go back to Venkdt Corp on Earth. Our endeavours benefit the parent company and its shareholders, and not us. I propose that Venkdt Mars breaks away from the parent company and goes its own way. We should be trading with them, not working for them. As an independent corporation we can be at the heart of the new Martian economy.”

Christina looked at him. “You’ll never get that past the board. They’re not going to sell off their biggest cash cow.”

“Well, no,” Venkdt allowed, “not if we give them the choice.” Christina raised her eyebrows again, higher this time. “But what if we don’t?”

Christina put her fork down, chewing and swallowing her remaining food. Venkdt had gone back to eating. Christina spoke cautiously. “If you don’t *what?*”

Venkdt looked up, startled. “Give them the choice. We can buy out their shares at the market rate, and that’s that. What are they going to do? Send an army?”

Christina frowned. “It would be illegal. Giving them the money for what you take from them doesn’t make it right, if they don’t want you to take it.”

“We’ve made huge profits for them over the years. We’ve earned them trillions, and we’ve been out here taking the risks and building this thing and sending all the money back to them. I say we’ve paid our dues, and we should take what’s rightfully ours. This can be a new nation here, hell, a new planet. It belongs to us.”

Venkdt was smiling. ‘Sheesh’, thought Christina, ‘he’s really going to do it.’

“So you’re going to go ahead with this?” said Christina.

“I think so. In a month or two the hundred thousandth Martian will be born. We’ll make an announcement then.”

“You’ve spoken to the board?”

“No. I’ve sounded out Mike Summers. He’s not happy.”

“You should take this to the board.”

“I know what they’d say. I’m going to take it to the people.”

Christina looked at him blank-facedly. “What?”

“I think we should run a plebiscite to ask the people of Mars what they think. I’ve got a pretty good idea what they’d say, too.”

“This is crazy. None of this is legitimate. What about the garrison? The USAN will have you thrown in a cell before you get anywhere with this.”

Venkdt lay his cutlery down. “Firstly, I don’t think they’d dare. And secondly, we have our own security division to prevent that from happening.”

Christina shook her head, her shoulders slumping. “Are you serious? People could get hurt, things could turn nasty. This is nuts.”

“A little nuts, maybe, but necessary.”

Venkdt patted his face with a napkin while Christina drained her wine glass, quickly pouring another. “Nuts,” she said again, under her breath.

Charles Venkdt was beaming. “Dessert?” he said.

There was only one non-disclosure agreement prepared. It was a silly oversight. Although only Jack Karjalainen had been invited to the meeting it was well understood that he would be too ill to attend. For a number of months his legal team of Oatridge, Strich and Philips had been acting on his behalf. Their daily briefings at his hospital bed had become something of an irritant to the hospital staff.

“I’m so sorry, could you just wait here a moment while I sort this out?” said Venkdt’s assistant.

The lawyers nodded politely as the PA left the room, embarrassedly pointing out the refreshments available and making further apologies.

“What do you think?” said Strich.

“I don’t know. A buyout, maybe?”

“No,” said Oatridge. “He’d wait for the old man’s passing before trying that trick. And there’d be no need for the NDAs.”

“It’s probably just some new tech. Maybe he’s willing to license it to us. Something to do with mining in the asteroid belt, or something like that,” offered Philips.

“Whatever it is, we just nod and smile. We take it back to the old man before we do anything else,” said Oatridge.

Philips twitched. “Can you please not call him ‘the old man’? He’s our employer and I think he deserves our respect,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Toni,” said Oatridge. “I meant it affectionately, that’s all.”

Philips pulled a quick tight smile and nodded in acknowledgement.

“Here we are,” said Venkdt’s PA, slightly breathlessly. She placed two additional sheets on her desk and, quickly moving to her side of it, she grabbed pens and offered them to the lawyers. “If you could just sign and date here,” she said, pointing.

Oatridge, Strich and Philips dutifully signed their agreement not to disclose any details of the meeting to any third parties. “Of course,” said Philips, “we will have to discuss this with Mr Karjalainen. We’re only here today as his proxies.”

“I’m sure Mr Venkdt understands your position, legally. Under any other circumstances Mr Venkdt would be meeting with Mr

Karjalainen directly. All this would be dealt with by a handshake or somesuch, but we have to protect ourselves. I hope you understand.”

“We understand,” said Oatridge.

The PA ushered them into the boardroom.

Venkdt was seated at the head of the conference table. He was working on some notes. When the delegates entered he cheerily acknowledged them. “I’ll be with you in just a minute, I’m just finishing up on this,” he said.

To Philips this was perfectly reasonable. Venkdt was just putting the finishing touches to his presentation. To Oatridge and Strich there remained the possibility of a premeditated slight. The lawyers sat down at various places either side of the conference table. They prepared their devices and note-taking equipment as Venkdt finished what he was doing. Presently, Venkdt placed his pen at the side of the document he had been working on and waited for the others to settle before he began.

“Gentlemen, Ms Philips, first of all thank you for coming. I guess you’re all aware of the upcoming hundred thousandth live birth on Mars, which we expect to take place sometime within the next two months. This is as good an occasion as any, I feel, to proceed with a plan that may have momentous impact on all of our futures, and the future of the colony that we, and our forebears, have established here at great cost and effort.”

None of the lawyers had a clue where he might be going with this, but they kept their best courtroom poker faces on.

“I intend to propose a plebiscite be held, within six months of this day, asking the people of Mars if they would like to proclaim independence from the USAN and, thereby, independence from Earth itself.”

‘What’s a plebiscite?’ Strich discreetly messaged to Oatridge.

‘An election. For plebs,’ Oatridge replied.

Venkdt continued, “If the plebiscite returns a positive vote for independence, with more than a two-thirds majority, I will propose that we secede from the USAN and adopt our own constitution, written from the ground up to serve Martian needs and ideals. I’ve had plans for such a constitution drawn up, and in the event of a vote for independence we would run further elections to our own senate and presidency which would go on to provide the governance for an independent Mars.”

Strich and Oatridges' message conversation had continued as Venkdt had been speaking.

'Is he nuts?' messaged Strich.

'Probably,' Oatridge replied.

'What do we do?'

'Nod and smile.'

"On whose authority would this plebiscite be held?" said Philips.

"It would be run under no particular authority," shrugged Venkdt.

"It would be a grand survey of opinion, nothing more. And the two-thirds majority would be absolute to the population, not to votes cast. Anyone opposed just has to get out and vote."

"But where's the legal basis?"

"As an independent planet we'd make our own laws."

"But we're not an independent planet *now*."

"Not now. But if the people vote for it we'll secede quietly and honourably and start out anew." He smiled broadly at his last remark. "Any more questions?"

Strich was receiving another message from Oatridge. It read, *'Illegal and immoral'*, and ended with a frowny face.

"What you are proposing is illegal and immoral. It just won't work," said Strich, smiling apologetically.

'Don't antagonise him!' came Oatridge's instant message, instantly. Strich couldn't help the smirking glance he shot across the table to Oatridge.

Venkdt shrugged. "Illegal, maybe. But it is moral. And it will work," he said. "Why wouldn't it?"

"Because no one is above the law, Mr Venkdt. I would strongly advise you against taking this course of action," said Philips. "You are a respected businessman of good standing. Why throw all that away? Even with the support of the Martian population the USAN could never let this stand. What you're suggesting is, after all, tantamount to treason."

Venkdt took a few seconds before replying. "Ms Philips, what I'm talking about here is bigger than the law. Out here on Mars we're way beyond the reach of the greater USAN. Of course, that doesn't give us license to act as we please. But Mars' destiny is as an independent state, and I feel the whole planet is behind me on this. We have the opportunity here and now to make a clean break. In order to do that we have to forego the niceties of law in the strictest sense, just temporarily on this one important issue. Don't get me wrong; I

appreciate that the rule of law is essential. If I lose the plebiscite I will hand myself over to the courts. But I - we - have to do this. Our destiny is calling us.”

“What does any of this have to do with Hjälp Teknik?” said Oatridge.

“I was hoping to talk with Jack Karjalainen directly. This will have a major impact on Hjälp Teknik, however it pans out. I guess in some ways I just wanted Jack to know. We’re both old. I feel a kinship with him, despite our history.”

“We’ll relay your thoughts to him. Is there anything else?”

“No,” said Venkdt. “The announcement will be soon, in the next few weeks, I hope.”

“Thank you, Mr Venkdt,” said Oatridge, standing. “I’d like to wish you good luck in your endeavours, but I’m afraid my conscience won’t allow me.”

“I understand,” said Venkdt.

The Hjälp Teknik representatives left the meeting in amused shock.

“We should go straight to the garrison,” said Oatridge, melodramatically.

“He’s insane,” said Strich.

Philips simply grimaced.

“This is treason, plain and simple,” said Oatridge. “He should be locked up for it. Hell, they could lock us up just for having been a part of that meeting,” he said, unsure if he was joking or deadly serious.

“It won’t fly,” said Strich. “It’s just some crazy stunt. No one will take it seriously. I doubt if even he takes it seriously.”

“He’s serious alright,” said Philips, “and he will do it. So we’re going to be dragged into this whether we like it or not.”

The other two thought about that. The three of them made their way from the building to the car park, where they walked the short distance to their driverless car. At the car they stopped and Philips spoke again. “Venkdt is going to run this plebiscite and he’s probably going to win. That’s going to leave us in a very difficult position.” They got in.

“I want you to look at all of our options, legal and practical, if this goes ahead,” Philips said to Strich. “And I need you to look into every damn way possible we can make it not happen,” she said to Oatridge.

The more Oatridge thought about it the less amusing it seemed. He noticed that the smiles had left Strich, too.

They sat in silence on the drive back to Hjälp Teknik.

St Joseph's Hospital was situated in the heart of Marineris. Like the majority of Martian buildings it was mostly underground. It covered three floors. The lowest was for maintenance and services. The next floor up was theatres, clinics and treatment rooms, catering and the transport hub. At the surface were the wards and private rooms. They had the luxury of daylight, which was seen as a therapeutic plus.

Jack Karjalainen was in one of the largest private rooms at the furthest end of the hospital. He had been one of the hospital's greatest benefactors and had personally paid for scholarships and bursaries to encourage bright young doctors from Earth, as well as Mars, to come to the hospital. He had used his waning influence on Earth, earned through Hjälp Teknik's respected medical division, to form solid links with one of the major teaching hospitals on the home planet at Calcutta.

Jack was proud of his philanthropic endeavours. He had always thought of himself as a moral being who had deep respect for other people and the rule of law, and he served them equally.

In his youth Jack had worked for voluntary organisations in the non-aligned countries. He had seen for himself the terrible conditions that some people lived in, and experienced at firsthand the folly of the fools who perpetuated such misery. It had forged in him a steely resolve to always do the right thing. To stand up and give a voice to the oppressed. To talk back to the pompous and the belligerent.

He had formed Hjälp Teknik on his return with the idea of developing effective and cheap solutions to problems affecting the poorest sectors of society, both at home and abroad. Nutrition, coms, education and transport were all areas where Hjälp Teknik had an interest. Products aimed at the poor had small margins but large client bases, and Hjälp Teknik worked that angle.

Karjalainen moved the entire operation to Mars based on one simple idea. The idea was this: to make the new world on Mars better than the old world of Earth. Earth was riven with factions and irrational belief systems, ingrained over centuries or even millennia, and these caused untold misery and unnecessary problems. On the new world

these issues could be headed off at the pass, snuffed out at the very beginning, before they grew into something dark and destructive.

The move was funded by selling off the parts of the company that wouldn't work off-Earth, with the remainder being moved or torn down and replaced at the new location. Hjälp Teknik's most valuable assets were intellectual property and personnel, more than a quarter of whom signed up for the move.

Karjalainen had headed to the new world with his young family and re-established Hjälp Teknik there partly as a business decision. More importantly it was a mission, in every sense, to make sure that humankind, in that most unforgiving place, could be all that it could be. That it could rise above the petty squabbles of the old world and look forward to the new world in which people cooperated, interacted rationally and forged a bright new chapter in the history of mankind.

The business had faired so-so. It was not a resounding success due mainly to its dependence on manufactured goods. The real money (just ask Venkdt) was in raw exports. Mars was rich in minerals like silver, iridium, palladium and most importantly deuterium. Venkdt extracted these and shipped them off to Earth, making huge profits. Over time it became clear that Hjälp Teknik, despite its reticence, had to get into the minerals game if it was going to survive, but it found it difficult to compete with the mighty Venkdt Mars Corp.

Hjälp Teknik had gone into the deuterium market. Deuterium was five times more abundant on Mars than it was on Earth, and far more than five times easier to extract. Deuterium, a heavy isotope of hydrogen, was essential fuel for the nuclear fusion reactors which generated the great bulk of the power used on Earth, particularly in the USAN. It underpinned the whole of USAN society and was essential to it. As such it was literally worth more than gold and had been a key driver in the early settlement of Mars.

Hjälp Teknik diversified, moved into minerals and expanded a little, but was always in the shadow of Venkdt. Venkdt had been the only game in town for almost a hundred years and, despite some jitters when Hjälp Teknik first arrived, happily remained so. The research station, latterly the garrison, had not been in competition with Venkdt and benefited greatly from the improved facilities that came in their wake. Once it was clear that Hjälp Teknik was not a major threat Charles Venkdt was happy to affect a collegiate stance, proclaiming that everyone had to stand together in the great adventure of the new frontier. In private, he was more reticent. Venkdt was a little

rattled that there was competition in his backyard and, although he was always very polite in public, deep in his heart he knew that he hated Jack Karjalainen. He hated the hippy-drippy attitude. He hated the lofty high moral stance, which he thought was a sham, and he hated the way Jack Karjalainen just knew he was right. Right, with moral certainty, about his beliefs. Right about his business decisions. Right about every damn thing he ever did. It rankled with Venkdt, who knew that he himself was filled with flaws. That was true honesty; looking in the mirror and knowing what an ass you could be. Looking at your customers, and knowing what asses they could be. And standing back, looking at the whole goddamned big picture and knowing that it was all a huge, juddering, wrong-headed mess. To see the world as it is, faults and all, and to make practical steps at working with all the inefficiencies, the greed, the malice and the sheer stupidity, and get it to somehow work - that, to Charles Venkdt, was truly noble. Pretending that everything was perfectible and that the good people were being held back by the bad people, who just needed to be understood and helped to become all they could be, seemed naive and irritating.

Karjalainen, with his unshakeable belief in his own rightness, had always seemed taller than he was. No longer. He was now a shrunken husk of the man he used to be. If he had been able to stand he would have appeared even shorter than his hundred and seventy six centimetres. He was propped up in his bed with pillows, and the bed was surrounded by monitoring machinery, some of which was connected to him by thin cables but others of which were working remotely. He was sleepy, by this late afternoon, and his eyelids hung heavily over his slow moving eyes. A breathing tube was taped to his face, running from his nostril over an ear and out of sight. A shaft of light from the Plexiglas skylight lay on the lower half of the bed and the reflection from the stark white sheets filled the room with a low glow. Distantly, Karjalainen heard a muffled discussion between two voices coming from outside the room. One voice was a nurse. The other was one of his legal advisers. He couldn't make out the words, but the rhythms and tone were clear. His rep was asking and becoming insistent while the nurse was denying, but her resolve was fading away. There were two final syllables from the adviser character, delivered staccato like a one-two punch, followed by short pause and one syllable from the nurse. After that, the door opened and three figures quietly and slowly slipped into the room.

Oatridge came to the head of the bed while the other two remained at the foot. They stood in silence, heads slightly bowed, as if Karjalainen were already dead and they had come to pay their respects. Oatridge coughed, very quietly and deliberately. Karjalainen lifted his heavy eyelids and swivelled his eyes toward Oatridge without moving his head. He swallowed, using a great deal of concentration to do so, and spoke.

“Well?”

“Mr Venkdt informed the meeting that he was going to hold a plebiscite, asking the entire Martian population whether they would like to secede from the USAN,” replied Oatridge.

Karjalainen frowned and turned his head away to the side. “On whose authority does he think he’s acting?”

“No one’s. He’s decided to do it independently.”

Karjalainen thought. “And what are we going to do about it? Have you informed the garrison?”

“I’m not sure what the garrison would be able to do, sir. Venkdt’s own security division more than outmatches them.”

“So he holds his election, gets his result. What then?”

Oatridge took a breath. “I guess he would announce the secession and that would be that.”

“Where would that leave us?”

Philips piped up. “That would leave us in a very tricky position indeed. We’d be forced to join a - I don’t think I’m being melodramatic here - a revolution that we want no part of, or we’d be left sharing an inhospitable planet with an opposing force - I’m sorry about the language, but . . .” she shrugged and pulled a ‘what can you do?’ face, “. . . an opposing force who, frankly, we are no match for.”

Karjalainen thought. “Venkdt wouldn’t give us any trouble. But our position would be very difficult.” His remark hung in the air. “What are we going to do about it?”

“We’re already looking into what we can do to stop the plebiscite ever happening. Legal, practical, those sorts of things,” said Oatridge. “And if we can’t stop it we’ll campaign rigorously for a ‘no’ vote.”

Even at his advanced age, and at the extreme end of his ill health, it was still possible to pick up the ‘what am I paying these people for’ vibe that was flowing from Karjalainen into the room. With great effort he moved his head again to look at Oatridge. He shaped his words deliberately. “If you campaign, you legitimise the election. And you make us look like damned fools, because the result will be

‘yes’ and anyone can see that. I’ll ask again: what are we going to do about it?”

Strich and Philips exchanged glances, glad that Karjalainen was locked onto Oatridge and wouldn’t have the energy to turn his head toward them. Oatridge was too professional to panic but he did not have an answer. He looked into Karjalainen’s old and watery eyes. “I don’t know, sir. I think we’ll have to play this one by ear.”

Karjalainen closed his eyes. Whether it was tiredness or exasperation the three did not know, but after a quick and wordless conference they took it as their cue and left the room in silence.

Maya Foveaux was watching the sunset from her window. Unusually for a Martian building the headquarters of Venkdt Security was mostly above ground. It had been expensive to build and was difficult to maintain but the architect thought, and persuaded her client, that it was important that a security division should be able to literally oversee that which it was protecting, and that the protected be able to look up to see their protector.

The window in Foveaux’s office was short but very wide, and it framed the Martian sunsets beautifully. When her workload allowed it Foveaux would take a few minutes to stand and watch. It calmed her and gave her some time to think and reflect.

With the light fading she turned away from the window and returned to her desk. Glancing at her terminal she noticed three new emails had arrived in the short time she had been away. One was an addition to a tedious chain that had been going back and forth all day. She didn’t really know why she was copied into that one. Some officious type probably thought their dubious argument would somehow carry more weight if the boss was copied in. They were wrong. At the back of her mind Foveaux had marked them down sycophantic, indecisive and unconfident. The other two emails were from her ex-partner and Charles Venkdt.

Maya opened the one from the ex first, partly to get it out of the way and partly because it would be trivial, where the one from Venkdt was more likely to be important. Venkdt had only contacted her directly a handful of times before. At the moment the ex, despite her best efforts, was contacting her daily.

She glanced over the salutation and the first line and immediately got a sense of what the email was about. It was the same self-pitying,

pleading begging for forgiveness and reconciliation that she had seen in previous emails. She stopped reading and quickly composed her reply:

“Please do not contact me again.”

She hit ‘Send’ and immediately forgot about it as she opened the last email, the one from Venkdt.

“Ms Foveaux

I would like to meet at the earliest opportunity to discuss matters arising from a proposed plebiscite taking place within the next few months. The plebiscite exists in something of a legal grey area, which may lead to some unrest. I would like to brief you in full on our plans, and provide you with any additional resources you may need to ensure that the operation runs smoothly and with any disruptions held to a minimum.

Please liaise with my assistant to arrange a time. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Charles Venkdt”

Maya closed the email and fired off one to her assistant, asking that the meeting be set up as soon as possible. Any prior arrangements were to be shifted to make way for the meeting with Venkdt. That was to be the number one priority.

Maya shot a look back over her shoulder. The sun had disappeared below the horizon.

CHAPTER 6

The Old Order

It was early evening at the hospital. The outpatients and admin staff had left for the day and the clinics were over. It was calmer and quieter than the bustling day shift. Bobby had come through the transport bay, where he'd left his cab, and he was approaching reception. When he got there no one was at the desk, though he could hear a voice coming from the back office talking on a comdev.

As he waited he looked around. The reception area was clean and mostly white. The lighting was tastefully subdued and he could hear, just around the corner, a machine busily polishing the floor. He looked at the floor in reception; spotlessly clean. He wondered if this area was deliberately kept to a high standard in order to create a good impression on people just like him, or if it genuinely reflected a commitment to high standards throughout the hospital.

The receptionist appeared. "Hello, sorry about that, can I help you?" she said.

"I'm here to see Jack Karjalainen," said Bobby.

The receptionist scanned her terminal. "Is he expecting you?" she asked as her eyes moved down the screen.

"I don't have an appointment, if that's what you mean," said Bobby.

The receptionist looked up. "Mr Karjalainen only takes visitors by appointment, I'm afraid. If you want to leave your details I can let his people know, and we can maybe arrange something for another day?"

"I'm his son."

The receptionist took a closer look at Bobby's face. She half-recalled him from somewhere but couldn't quite place him. "Is this the first time you've visited?"

"Yes, it is. I've been away."

She gestured to an area on the reception desk. "Could you just hold your comdev over here for me, please?"

Bobby complied and the receptionist read from her screen. "Robert Harvey Karjalainen." She scanned further down the screen. "And you are indeed Mr Karjalainen's son." She let out a low hum as she thought to herself. "Well, Mr Karjalainen's other son Anthony, your brother, is the only person allowed to visit Mr Karjalainen unannounced so," she thought, "I guess it would be alright for you, too?" It was phrased like a question, but Bobby decided to hear it as a statement.

"That's great," he said. "Thank you so much. Which way is it?"

The receptionist hesitated, then pressed a key on her terminal. "Your comdev will take you right to it." Bobby thanked her and started to walk away. The receptionist muttered 'Robert Harvey Karjalainen' to herself, and only then did the connection click into place. "Are you Bobby Karjalainen; *the* Bobby Karjalainen? The commander?" she excitedly called after him.

Bobby turned and shrugged with an easy smile. "I guess I am," he said.

"Very pleased to meet you, sir," the receptionist said as he turned back and continued walking.

Jack Karjalainen was sleeping when Bobby entered the room. He approached his father taking slow, measured steps and took a seat by the head of the bed. He listened to his father's slow and shallow breathing as he looked at the man he had for so long despised. Beneath his hatred there remained the stubborn stump of love. He was saddened to see his father reduced to this. As a teenager he had often fantasized about his father being in this sort of position; weak and helpless, and close to death. In those fantasies he would tell his father what he really thought of him. He would use the most cutting words he could, and he would attack at what he thought were the weakest points in his father's emotional armour. He would *hurt* the man, the way he felt he had been hurt by him. Now he just felt sorry. Sorry that he was old, sorry that he was suffering and sorry that he was going to die. Most of all, he was sorry that the old man had been such an asshole that he had managed to alienate his own son

in the last few years of his life. He was sorry, too, that due simply to his intransigent personality he had not been able to allow for his son being of a radically different disposition to his own. They were very dissimilar people. He should have just accepted that. Instead, he clashed with Bobby at every turn and made things miserable for both of them.

And now here they were.

Karjalainen's head was facing Bobby. He coughed and rolled his tongue around his dry mouth like he was searching for something. After a few minutes he opened his eyes and fixed them on Bobby. Bobby stared back, and smiled.

"How did you get in here?" said Karjalainen.

"I'm family," Bobby replied.

Karjalainen closed his eyes. "You shouldn't be here," he said.

"I am here, Dad. I couldn't not come. You know that."

Karjalainen waited. "I know that, do I? So you still know what I think?"

Bobby let it go. "How've you been? You're not looking so good."

"I've been better. I'm comfortable."

Bobby nodded.

"You've seen Anthony?"

"Yes. I'm staying at the house."

"He's happy with that?"

"I don't know about happy, but that's where I am."

Karjalainen grunted and opened his eyes again. "You shouldn't have gone over there, Bobby," he said.

"To the house?"

"You know what I mean. Always the wise guy. You shouldn't have gone to war. You let us all down."

Bobby nodded. It was what he had expected. "It's done now. Didn't you do a few things you shouldn't have, in your time?"

"Not the same."

"It's all over now. I'm back, and I wanted to see you."

"You're not in the will if that's what you mean."

Bobby shrugged. "That's not what I mean. You know it, too."

Karjalainen stared at him, then closed his eyes again.

"I just wanted to see you again, Dad. That's all."

Bobby couldn't tell if his father had heard the last remark, or if he had drifted off to sleep. Maybe he was just faking it to avoid dealing with the situation. The truth was that Karjalainen, in spite of

everything, loved his son and Bobby, in spite of everything, loved his father. They were both too bloody minded to admit it.

Eventually it seemed that Jack Karjalainen actually was asleep. His breathing was once again slow and shallow and his mouth hung open, his dry old tongue lolling out of it. Bobby sat with him for another hour, and kissed him on the forehead before leaving.

Bobby had never liked the Hjälp Teknik Building, even when he was a child. As he strolled down the over-lit corridors he remembered countless occasions when he had come to work with his father and had to wait around in bright, airless rooms while the adult world went about its occult business.

He found the conference room easily, though it had been more than ten years since he had last been there. It seemed much smaller than he remembered it. On entering he saw Anthony seated at the far corner of the tables that were pushed together in the centre of the room. He was deep in conversation with a late middle-aged woman. As they noticed Bobby they immediately stopped talking and drew slightly apart, and a ripple of paranoia planed across Bobby's consciousness. As if to cover, the woman quickly stood and held out a hand. "Bobby!" she said. "It's so good to meet you again!" She was full of smiles and firm handshakes.

Bobby looked to Anthony and said, "Hello," then back to the woman, who was finally letting go of his hand.

"I'm sure you don't remember me," the woman continued. "The last time we met you were about," she gestured, "this high!"

Bobby tilted his head quizzically.

"My name's Toni Philips, Toni with an 'I'," she said. "I'm one of your father's legal team. Well, I'm the head of your father's legal team." She glanced at Anthony. "It still feels weird saying that! You used to play in my office, from time to time, when you were little. Do you remember?"

Bobby thought. "I don't think I do," he said, "but it sounds like a lot of fun." He didn't remember ever having fun at Hjälp Teknik.

"I used to take you to the refectory and get you ice-cream. Look at you now!"

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you," said Bobby, "again."

Bobby took a seat across the tables from Anthony and Toni. Anthony affected to be busily studying some of the papers in front

of him. Toni sat with her elbows on the table, her hands together, fingers interlocked with her chin resting on them. “Okay. Down to business, then,” she said. She addressed her spiel to Bobby. He assumed that she had already gone through a lot of it with Anthony, or that Anthony was so close to the operation that he didn’t need to be briefed. “Your father, Jack Karjalainen, is nearing the end of his life. The nature of his illness has afforded him time to consider his legacy, and to formulate a plan for Hjälp Teknik moving into the future. As his representative, he has asked me to explain that plan to you.” She paused, and moved some papers. She found her place on the next sheet and continued. “On his death, Mr Karjalainen’s entire portfolio, including his majority shares in Hjälp Teknik, will pass to Anthony. The house in Allentown will also pass to Anthony. Mr Karjalainen’s secondary residence in Dog Sur,” she leant into Bobby, explaining unnecessarily, “*the flat*,” before continuing, “shall pass to Robert.” She paused for breath. “The position of Chief Executive Officer of Hjälp Teknik shall be given to Anthony, subject to ratification by the board.” This last point was academic, Bobby noted. With a controlling interest in the company Anthony would be able to overrule any decisions made by the board.

Toni Philips quickly looked up at the two men. “Your father writes,

‘It is my hope and belief that, under Anthony’s stewardship, Hjälp Teknik will prosper and continue to build upon the good works started in my lifetime. Hjälp Teknik was founded on the belief that things can, and should, be better. We have always sought to provide goods and services that help the maximum number of people for the minimum cost. The bright new frontiers of Mars and the asteroid belt beyond can provide potentially limitless resources to a forward-looking organisation with faith in the people it serves. It can allow them to look toward a future filled with hope, and away from a past too often filled with despair. My son, Anthony Karjalainen, will guide Hjälp Teknik toward this future.’”

Bobby thought about clapping, but knew sarcasm wouldn’t go down too well. “Congratulations, Anthony,” he said.

“I’ve been working very closely with Dad for the past few years,” Anthony replied. “He wants the change to be as seamless as possible. I’m running most of the day to day stuff now anyway.”

Bobby nodded.

“You understand -” Toni started, but Bobby cut in.

“I understand. Anthony gets the business, I get an apartment.” He shrugged. “It’s about what I expected.”

Toni turned to Anthony. “Your father is placing a great deal of trust in you. He believes in you, Anthony.” She reached out and patted Anthony’s arm, her brow furrowed in pity. “I know these are difficult times, difficult for us all, but we have to think about the future. Your father is being very brave about all this.”

Bobby shifted in his seat. “Is there anything we should be doing?”

“For your father?” asked Toni.

“For anyone.”

Toni thought. “There is nothing that needs to be done at this time. If I were you two I would be spending as much time as I could with my father. There isn’t long to go now, and,” she caught herself before continuing, “the time we have with our loved ones is so precious.” Toni, for the first time, looked sad.

Anthony looked across the table at Bobby. “Stay at the house for now. If you want to move out to the apartment you can. It needs remodelling, really. Stay at the house while we sort the apartment out for you. Stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you,” said Bobby. It rankled that Anthony made giving him comparatively nothing sound like a grand gesture, but Bobby knew this was not the time to get into that. He did not mind being largely frozen out of the will. He had expected it. Maybe he was being paranoid but the line ‘My son, Anthony’ had really stuck in his craw. He felt his dad was, even at this late stage, having a pop at him.

Bobby stood and shook Toni’s hand again. “Thank you very much,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Toni. “If there’s anything you need, either of you, just get in touch. Your father is a wonderful man. I’m so sorry for both of you.”

Earlier in the week Toni Philips had visited Jack Karjalainen at the hospital. He had been very specific. “Anthony gets Hjälp Teknik. The board will have to ratify, but they will, if they know what’s good for them. He knows it already, we’ve been through it a thousand times. I need you to write it all up and make it proper. Tie it all up legally, and don’t leave any holes. Make sure Anthony’s tied in. Lock

his shares down for two years. Have letters written up to the board informing them of my decision. I'll sign them."

As an afterthought he added, "I've got an apartment in Dog Sur. It's Bobby's."

Toni had hesitated. "Nothing for Bobby but the apartment?" It was a nice apartment, to be sure, but in light of Karjalainen's accumulated wealth it was as nothing compared the share of the empire left to Anthony.

"My first born son has been a grave disappointment. I came here to get away from the bullshit and the squalor and the fighting. We were looking to the future. He always wanted to spite me. Even when he was a kid. And the first chance he got he went back there. To fight in their wars, to kill people. He made me ashamed to be his father. He deserves a place to live. Nothing more."

He had waved her away after that.

Toni felt that at this point, at the end of his life, Jack Karjalainen should be thinking about forgiveness.

Jack disagreed.

Leaving the room Bobby heard Toni calling after him. He paused as she caught up. "Bobby, I'm sorry your father feels this way. I tried to talk with him, but . . ."

"It's okay. I know what my dad's like. Stubborn as a mule. I don't need the money, anyways."

They walked together.

"It's so sad when families fight," Toni said. "No good ever comes of it."

"Hey," said Bobby, "my dad is my dad. He achieved everything he did by being a stubborn asshole. Why would he stop now? Admitting he was wrong about anything would kill him as surely as any cancer."

"I'll speak to him again."

They walked on.

"I've been to see him," said Bobby.

"You have?"

"He was okay with it."

"That's great."

CHAPTER 7

The Rumour

Audrey Andrews read Colleen Acevedo's report in bed the night she received it. There was a case there, and everyone had overlooked it. The crux of it was this: Mars was a long, long way away. It had been assumed, to the degree that no one had ever considered otherwise, that the colony on Mars was wholly dependent on Earth. Why wouldn't it be? It was so small and so distant that it seemed it had to be constantly looking back to the bountiful mother for support and reassurance. For these reasons, no one had ever considered Mars as a separate entity. For many years the Martians had held the same view from the reverse perspective. Like an old habit, they had routinely assumed that Mars was second best, out on a limb, dangerous and desolate.

It had been a slow realisation that once the Martian colony had developed beyond a certain point the relationship ceased to make sense. Venkdt Corp made huge profits on Martian deuterium and other minerals that went to its shareholders on Earth. What did Venkdt Mars get in return? It didn't need the protection of an army; it had no enemies. It didn't need any other services from Earth; it was too costly in time and money to go back there for anything. In short, it got nothing in return that it couldn't, with some minor development, provide for itself. Why wasn't Venkdt Mars trading *with* Earth rather than mining *for* it?

Once this idea had been grasped it was impossible to see things the old way. Mars needed Earth solely as a trading partner. But Earth absolutely relied on Mars as a source of increasingly scarce minerals, and would have to trade for them come what may. In this new paradigm Mars held the upper hand.

Despite not having or needing a military Mars held a strategic advantage, too. It was just too far away to threaten with a big stick. If they wanted to pull away, who was going to stop them?

Laying down to sleep Audrey mulled these ideas through her mind. As she sunk into progressively lower levels of consciousness something occurred to her. It was bold and radical, but it just might work. She slept like a baby.

Peter Brennan disliked having his routine disturbed.

“This better be about something. I’ve cancelled two meetings and a teleconference. The president can’t make it, but he wants me to report back to him directly. We’ve got twenty minutes. What is it?”

Andrews spoke. “We have reliable intelligence coming out of Mars that Charles Venkdt is going to run a plebiscite asking the entire population of Mars whether Venkdt Mars should break away from the parent company. Since more than eighty-five percent of the Martian population work for Venkdt this would be tantamount to Mars declaring independence from Earth.”

Brennan grunted, and noted something down.

“Should this come to pass it would present us with a number of problems. First, it would be a criminal act on a huge scale. Venkdt Mars is worth vast sums and would be, in effect, ‘stolen’ from its rightful owners. And that would be happening on the other side of the solar system, where we cannot police it.

“Secondly, it would damage us strategically and economically. Our whole society is underpinned by the power provided by nuclear fusion reactors and they run on deuterium which comes, in large part, from Mars. An independent Mars would mean the USAN were no longer energy independent. We would be hostage to the prices Mars could set for deuterium as well as other minerals which, at present, are more cost-efficiently gathered and transported from Mars than they are gathered here on Earth. We could see energy prices double, triple, quadruple; who knows?

“Thirdly, we would look weak politically. A major source of our energy and a major technical and social achievement in its own right - a source of national pride, no less - would be seen to walk away from us with utter impunity.

“And fourthly, we would lose our frontier outpost. Mars is our forward base, right out near the asteroid belt, which is ripe for exploitation. Ten, twenty years down the line we want to be out there mining those asteroids and looking out to the further reaches of the solar system. If we lose Mars, we’re pushed a hundred and forty million miles backward, and that can’t happen.”

Brennan turned to Farrell. “What do you say?”

“Our analysis is largely the same, senator,” said Farrell.

“What do we do?” said Brennan.

“Well,” started Farrell, “certain actions are being prepared already. We can’t move yet because Venkdt hasn’t made a formal announcement, but we’re expecting that soon. When he does, we’ll be ready. We have a statement ready for the president, condemning the action in the strongest terms, and we have a team working now on all diplomatic avenues that we might want to pursue.”

“Which are?”

Farrell shuffled his notes. “We can assure the Venkdt Mars hierarchy that we will pursue all legal means to prevent this from happening. We can pressure them into seeing the folly of taking this path. We can co-opt the Venkdt shareholders on Earth, and other stakeholders, to bring pressure on them to see sense. And we’re looking at the practicalities of freezing their assets, should it come to it.”

“Would any of that have any effect?”

Farrell seemed momentarily startled. “I would hope so, senator.”

Brennan turned back to Andrews. “What have you got? There’s a garrison up there, isn’t there?”

“There is senator, but its role is very limited. Venkdt have their own security service and mostly police themselves. In terms of physical force they outnumber us ten to one. We couldn’t jump to that at this stage, anyway.”

“So we have an inadequate and outnumbered force that we can’t afford to use, and persuasion? That’s it?”

“At the present time that’s it, sir,” said Farrell. “I have a team working on this right now, and we hope to have something much firmer in the next few days. We have until Venkdt announces, too.”

“What would we do if this was, say, Sri Lanka?” Brennan said to Andrews. It was what she had been waiting for.

“We’d do just what we’re doing now, sir. Monitor communications, pursue diplomatic channels, play the media. But if it was Sri Lanka, sir, we’d park a carrier group off-shore, just for emphasis.”

Brennan raised an eyebrow. “Ms Andrews, I take it we don’t have any carriers in the vicinity of Mars?”

“No, sir, we don’t.”

“Nor do we have any such vessels in space at all, do we?”

Andrews didn’t hesitate. “That’s not quite true, sir. We do have the two LEO carriers. They’re the most expensive ships ever commissioned by the USAN, and they’re brand new and ready for service.”

“LEO. That’s Low Earth Orbit, isn’t it, Ms Andrews?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“So that’s not going to help with Mars, is it?”

“Well, sir, if we could get them to Mars they would be exactly the thing to show we mean business. Their strike capability is enormous and highly configurable. They were made for policing the world. They could just as easily police another world.”

Brennan thought. “Could we get them to Mars?”

“I don’t know. The hard work was getting them built in the first place. If we could refit them in some way for interplanetary flight we could police our frontier.”

“Is that even feasible?”

“I’ll talk to Helios.”

“Financially feasible?”

“I’ll talk to Helios. Time is the issue. Even if it can be done it will take time, then we have to wait for a launch window. It’ll take two years at a bare minimum.”

Brennan shook his head. “It’ll all be over by then. Too late.”

“It’s all we have. And it won’t be over, legally. And they’ll know we’re coming from the minute we make the announcement.”

Farrell called ahead from his car and had his people waiting for him on his return. He entered the room at pace, walking to his desk and planting his briefcase down on it as he said, “What have we got, people?” A handful of his top advisers were seated on plastic chairs in front of his desk. As he took his seat he looked at them expectantly.

“A special envoy is out,” one of them offered. “The next launch window isn’t for eighteen months.”

“Who do we have on the ground?”

“No one,” another adviser answered.

“Who’s senior at the garrison?”

“That would be Colonel Katrina Shaw,” another said. “I’m squaring it with defence that she can assume diplomatic responsibility for us.”

“That’s good. As soon as that’s cleared I want her fully briefed on the situation and ready to meet with Venkdt the moment he announces.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about legal?”

“Without the specifics of the plan we’re guessing against certain likely scenarios. For each scenario we’re working through the legal issues; which laws are being broken, who by, potential remedies etcetera,” said an adviser.

“That’s good,” said Farrell. “As soon as Venkdt goes public I want to know what laws he’s breaking and what laws he’s proposing to break. And I want a warrant for his arrest in Colonel Shaw’s hands five minutes after that.”

“You want to arrest him?”

Farrell shook his head, “No, we can’t arrest him. But I want him to know there’s a warrant.”

Audrey Andrews had already scheduled a call to Lewis J Rawls before the meeting with Brennan had begun. As her car pulled away she barked instructions to it. “Get me Rawls, put it on the wall.”

Presently, the chest and head of Lewis Rawls appeared opposite Andrews. The image was slightly distorted initially, as it fell over the opposing cream white seats. The projector quickly recalibrated the image to allow for the uneven surface so what Andrews saw resembled the man in the flesh. A subtle but definite 3D effect helped, too.

“Make him smaller,” said Andrews.

“Make him what?” came muffledly over Andrews’ speakers. The image shrank a little.

“That’s good,” said Andrews. “I was just resizing you, Lewis. You were bearing down on me like some huge ape.”

Rawls laughed. “That’s just how I like it. What can I do for you Audrey?”

Audrey looked at the image of Rawls. Approximately life-sized now it felt disconcertingly like he was sat there in the car with her. She looked into his eyes as she spoke. "You've done a lot of work for us over the years, Lewis. Right now we need you to really pull something special out of the bag."

Rawls leaned into the camera. "I'm intrigued. And I'm excited, on behalf of billing."

"We're in the process of taking delivery of the second carrier. As you know, they're arriving too late for the war. We may have another use for them, but they would need some modifications. Is this all sounding plausible?"

"It sounds great so far, but you haven't got to the modifications yet."

"Well, it's this Lewis. We need the carriers to do exactly what they're designed to do, but we need them to do it someplace else."

Rawls didn't have a comeback for that. "Go on," he said.

"We need to get them to Mars," said Andrews. "Can that be done?"

Rawls sat back in his chair and was silent for a moment. "It," he paused for a long time, ". . . could be done, yes."

Audrey waited for more but there was none. "Talk to me Rawls. How could we do it?"

Rawls pushed the tips of his fingers together, with his elbows rested on the arms of his chair, and looked at them in concentration as he spoke.

"The carriers have ion drives for manoeuvrability. Their main engines are standard chemical rocket engines. They're for pushing them quickly around the world. There's not enough power in those for interplanetary flight, and there's not enough space for the necessary fuel."

Andrews pursed her lips.

"But. If we could replace the main chemical engines with nuclear fusion jet engines that would give us the necessary thrust, within the limited space available, to kick off into the void. So theoretically, yes, it could be done."

"How fast?"

"You're really talking seriously about doing this?"

"How fast could you do it, how much would it cost?"

Rawls thought. "I can't give you a price, but not cheap. And fast will at least double the price, whatever it is. In all of our projects we try to keep to standardised specifications, and we keep everything as

modular as possible to simplify maintenance. That would mean that ripping out the current engines would be relatively painless. We could do that in, say, a week or less. The difficulty would come with the NFJ engines.”

“What difficulty?”

“They don’t exist.”

“Goddammit, why didn’t you just say that!”

“Hold on. They don’t exist *yet*, but one of my top engineers is working on NFJs right now. She has three prototypes, two full-sized, and is nearing the end of the testing phase as we speak.”

“She has two? One for each carrier, that’s great,” Audrey was saying when Rawls cut back in.

“They are two *prototypes*. The work is extremely promising, but putting two untried engines in what I believe to be the most expensive vessels ever commissioned by the USAN would come with a high degree of uncertainty and risk.”

“I know that Rawls. But this is a national emergency.”

“It is? I haven’t seen anything on the bulletins.”

“Not yet. This is going to blow up in the next few days and we need to be ready for it.” As an afterthought she added, “You understand this all falls under your confidentiality agreement?”

“Of course.”

“These engines; if we sign off on the risk, you just fit them in and that’s that?”

Rawls laughed. “Not quite that simple. As mentioned, we make all our stuff modular. Saves on costs, saves on headaches, keeps things simple. The prototype engines are the same form factor as the class of chemical engine that is currently in the carriers. Obviously, the NFJs don’t need the huge fuel capacity of the chemical engines, but it’s not a like-for-like swap. We’d have to look at that. And the control software would need to be overhauled, and we’d need to look at ramping up the power of the ion drives. Navigation and coms would need to be looked at, too. It could take months.”

“We don’t have months. If you had to do it fast, how fast could you do it?”

Rawls looked off to the side. “Audrey, bear this in mind. Everything takes at least four times as long as you think it will. That said, if everything goes without one single little hitch, and it won’t, then I would say, maybe, six months?”

Audrey thought. "I need to take this to the president. I will strongly advise him that we should proceed with this course of action. We'll need the nod from him, and he'll have to find the money. Until then, can you proceed, with haste, to get this thing rolling?"

"I can start. You're confident the president will buy it?"

"He has to. There's no other course open to us."

"Okay. I'll put things in motion."

"Who's working on the engines?"

"You know her. She was second lead designer on the *Alodaæ*, for a couple of years, anyway."

"I know her?"

"Sure, you must have seen her in design briefings and the like. Tall blonde woman, short hair."

Audrey thought, scanning through her internal archive but unable to locate an image of the tall, blonde engineer. "What's her name?" she said.

"Askel Lund."

Madeline Zelman patronised the arts. She could often be found floating through a private viewing, or holding court at the interval of a much anticipated première. She supported many prominent charities and occasionally travelled overseas to see firsthand the work that was being done with the monies she helped to raise. For a number of big-name NGOs she acted as a roving ambassador, hugging the poor here, opening a hydroelectric plant there. She smiled graciously for the cameras, gave good interview, looked good in pictures and was utterly unshakeable. A desperately ill (but still, give-or-take, photogenic) Haitian boy vomiting blood onto her virginal white designer dress couldn't phase her. She looked genuinely concerned for the boy and later shrugged a self-deprecating smile at the cameras as aides fussed over the bloody clothing.

She had had the colossal misfortune of having been born immensely rich. Her childhood had been happy and she had wanted for nothing. All of this had left her with a gnawing feeling that she should be doing something. What was she *for*? If she wasn't for patronising the arts and raising money and awareness for charity, at least it kept her busy.

As the majority owner of Helios Matériel Corporation she would often be met by protesters when she attended events. Chants, placards, eggs. But she was resolute. She knew that peace wasn't the

natural state between people. She knew that not all people were good. And she believed, wholeheartedly, that the advanced weaponry that Helios made and sold was making the world a safer place.

She had met Gerard White through her fund-raising activities way back when he was just starting out in politics. She had contributed to his campaigns all the way through to when he was seeking the presidential candidacy. He hadn't quite made it that time, but he managed to get on the ticket as VP candidate. He balanced out Cortes. Cortes was swarthy, he was a WASP. Cortes was a hawk, he was a dove. Cortes was a hot-head, he was level-headed, always taking the long view.

Zelman hadn't contribute to their presidential campaign. She didn't trust Cortes. She'd been around the world, to the non-aligned countries, and had seen leaders like him there - generalissimos and tin-pots. There was something of that about him and she didn't like it.

When White's wife had died four years earlier he had drifted into a relationship with Zelman which, looking back, had always seemed inevitable. The relationship wasn't secret, as such, but it wasn't public either. They would meet for the occasional meal, or night, or weekend, and that suited them both. They were busy people.

On this occasion Zelman had booked a suite at a swanky downtown hotel. It was one they had used before and had been pre-approved by the Secret Service. They had additionally booked the entire floor, and strategic rooms above and below, and were in a position to maintain security from a discreet and low-key distance.

White arrived late. He closed the door behind him and crossed the large and minimally opulent living area to where Zelman was lounging on a sofa, reading a magazine. He lofted a bottle of champagne up in front of him and smiled. Zelman smiled back and nodded to the small table next the sofa. There was a bottle of the same champagne, their favourite Perrier-Jouët Belle Epoque, on ice in a bucket. White's face fell to mock sadness. "I wanted to surprise you. Well, I've had a two bottle kind of day, I guess." He took the chilled bottle and replaced it with his own. He poured two glasses, offering one to Zelman. He took a sip and sat at the other end of the sofa, Zelman lifting her legs to make space for him then laying them back on his lap. He stroked her calf and took another drink.

"I'm just finishing this article," said Zelman, distractedly.

White looked around the room. He could feel himself relaxing. It felt good.

“There!” Zelman exclaimed, half-dropping, half-throwing the magazine to the floor. “How are you, darling? A two bottle day, you say?”

White perked up. “Oh, maybe not that bad, I guess. Things are hotting up at foreign and defence. We’re meeting with Cortes tomorrow.”

Zelman was intrigued. “The Asian Bloc? Are they getting antsy again?”

“No, no. That’s all going great. Bizarrely enough, there are storm clouds gathering over Mars.”

“Mars?”

“Yup,” White sighed. “With any luck it’ll just be a storm in tea cup but we have some intel - I shouldn’t be telling you this - that Charles Venkdt is going to poll the Martian population on independence.”

Zelman was genuinely baffled. “What do you mean, independence?”

“From Earth. Well, technically from the parent company but it amounts to the same thing.”

“Ha!” Zelman couldn’t help herself. The very idea seemed so ridiculous. “Is he mad? It’s just some internal spat at Venkdt then, isn’t it?”

“That’s what we’re all hoping. Because if anything crazy does go on up there there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.”

“What about the garrison?”

White snorted. “Two hundred guys gone soft. And what use would they be? Firepower is only useful if you have overwhelming superiority. The last seven years have taught us that. The greater your superiority the less likely your need to use it. Anyway, we can’t be seen to be turning the military on USAN citizens. That could get *really* messy.”

“Well,” said Zelman, “let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“I don’t think it will. But, you know, in our line we have to think the unthinkable.”

Zelman smiled. “These things always seem important at the time. In two weeks this will all be over and forgotten about. Let’s go to bed.”

“You know, there could be a silver lining in this for you.”

Zelman looked at him quizzically.

“Andrews is talking about refitting the carriers. Sending them to Mars, like some old colonial warships, to give the natives something to think about. Your stocks will go through the roof.”

Zelman laughed. “That sounds like a grand idea! I’ve tried to tell you before, *peace through superior firepower*. That’s the only foreign policy you need. They wouldn’t really go through with it though, would they? The Martians?”

White rose from the sofa, reaching out for the champagne.

“Who knows what the hell they might do.”

Rawls got off the phone to Andrews and lay back in his white chair, kicking his feet up on the desk. He closed his eyes and thought. Was what he had just told Andrews feasible? Probably. Realistic? Maybe. He felt a little scared. It was an exciting - as well as lucrative - project, and it was the risk of failure that made it exciting. His mind was racing a little. Had he oversold what Helios was capable of delivering? Even with twenty-third century production methods, refitting the two giant carriers was going to be a massive task. Intellectually, he reasoned that it could be done. But the fear was still there. It was good. And anyway, now they were committed.

He sat the chair back up and spoke to his terminal, “Get me Lund.”

“Ms Lund is busy right now,” the terminal replied.

“Can you let Ms Lund know it’s me and that it’s urgent,” said Rawls.

He brought up some documents on his terminal and scanned through them. He looked at the plans for the carriers and at some of Askel’s recent work on the engines. He looked at budgets and the project management records for the carriers’ construction. He was sinking into the details of the engine fitting procedure when his terminal spoke again.

“Askel Lund for you.”

“Great, put her on the wall.”

The wall of his office sprang to life with the huge image of Askel’s head and shoulders projected two metres high, and in incredible detail. Her face was clean, honest and open, and her crystal blue eyes looked out vividly from the projection. “You wanted me?” she said.

“Hi, Askel. Got some ideas I want to run past you.”

Askel’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. She couldn’t say ‘Can’t you see I’m busy’ to the boss, but her expression hinted at it. “Go on,” she said.

“You worked on the carriers. The NFJs you’re working on now, would they work in them?”

“No.”

“Why not? They’re the same form factor, aren’t they?”

“They’re not ready.”

“No, but if they were ready they could be made to work in the carriers, right?”

Askel paused. “I guess. But there’d be no point. They’d be overkill for ships that just roam about the planet.”

“I’m coming on to that. If you could get the NFJ engines into the carriers, there’s no reason we couldn’t get them to Mars, is there?”

Askel paused. “Well . . .”

“Could you do it?”

“It could be done, when the engines are ready, which they aren’t, but it would take a lot of time and money and wouldn’t be as effective as building ships from the ground up for interplanetary flight. That’s where I’d start - with a new design.”

“Askel, we don’t have time for that. If we started right now, how long would this take?”

Askel shook her head gently in thought. “Six months, eight. If the engines were ready, which they aren’t.”

“If I gave you everything you needed, if we went at this day and night, could we do it in six months?”

Silence.

“Maybe. But the engines -”

Rawls cut her off. “I’m reading the test data right now. It all looks good to me. These engines are ready, aren’t they? Really?”

“I’d like to do further tests. We’re doing very advanced stuff here and I’d like to proceed with an abundance of caution.”

“Can you think of a better test than putting them in working spacecraft?”

“Lewis, I . . .” Askel’s voice trailed off.

“We can do this, can’t we? And you said six months? That’s great. I’ll let the secretary of defence know.”

Askel was already reluctantly thinking of the problems ahead. “I’ll need more money. And I want it in writing that you’re proceeding over my objections.” Her mind was racing now. “And we’ll need more production drones and an orbital laser lathe.”

“You’ve got it, Askel. It’s all billable. The client wants it and they want it fast.”

“The client? The USAN? Why do they want to send the carriers to Mars?”

“They have their reasons. It’s political, as far as I can tell. If you ask me it’s a huge fuss over nothing, but they’re asking for it and they’re going to pay for it, so I say let’s give it to them. Customer’s always right, eh?”

“How much are we going to bill them for this?”

“Shitloads.”

“Do I get a bonus?”

“Write your own cheque, Askel. Uncle Sam’s paying.”

Askel Lund, twenty-eight, pulled her chair up to her desk and prepared to concentrate. She sat in front of her terminal and grim-facedly set to work. She pulled files on the carriers; designs, redesigns and construction records. She pulled the project management data, where she could compare the plans for the builds, including projected milestones, against actual milestones. She looked at all the delays, their reasons and impacts. She hunted for short cuts; safety inspections that could be sped up; systems that could be worked in parallel. She maximised man and drone power to the point beyond which they would get in each other’s way, which cut the time for some crucial tasks by as much as fifty percent.

She looked at the engines. Rawls had been right; they had been tested to exhaustion and Lund, ever thorough, had been delaying the sign off to make further tweaks and tests. Rawls had been right, too, in that the ultimate test would be to set the engines in spacecraft and put them to work. The engines were currently housed in a test facility in Winfrith, Dorset. They would have to be prepared for transport - five days - and then shipped by special lorries - need to organise that - to the spaceport at Foulness Island near Southend in Essex.

Lund was making lists as she went. There was a whole load of things that would have to be organised to make this thing move fast. Rawls would need to organise an HLV or two to get the engines into orbit. There were various tools and drones that would have to be in position against specific dates. There were work schedules and a huge shopping list of necessary supplies. Lund hammered away at the task without stopping, like a machine. The more she worked the clearer the whole project became in her mind, and she could see

it as a reality. Initially, it had seemed something of a pipe dream but as she worked the numbers came clearer into view, and it did indeed seem like a plausible thing. A few hours later and in Askel's mind it was not only plausible, or possible, it was going to happen. Lund was gripped by the project. Every problem solved, every hour saved, every unnecessary system discarded was like a huge victory in service of the ultimate goal; to make this thing happen as soon - or even sooner - than she said she would. Rawls may balk at some of the prices on her shopping list, but fast was never going to be cheap. And anyway, the bills would be passed on to the client with a twenty percent mark-up.

It was two hours after midnight when Lund finished. She had generated or copied, modified and amended a vast amount of documents and schematics by then. She kicked her chair back as she spoke to the terminal. "Check all of the documents I've produced in the last twelve hours. Check them for spelling, grammar, logical consistency. Check them with the highest grade AI for logic, and produce a report for any inconsistencies. Also, generate a report suggesting any improvements. Priorities are speed and efficiency. Let me know when you're done."

"Yes, Ms Lund," the terminal replied.

Askel rose from her desk and walked to the window. It was dark outside but looking up and to the west she could see what looked like a bright, slightly orange star.

Rawls picked Askel up early next morning. She had slept soundly and dreamlessly after finishing her work. The terminal had found a few minor inconsistencies and had made some very useful suggestions. She had quickly worked these into her documentation over breakfast and then showered. Her hair was still wet when Rawls combed through to tell her he was waiting downstairs. She buzzed him up.

"Good morning," said Rawls. "How's it going?"

"It's going great," said Askel, closing the door behind her.

"Everything's looking good?"

"I went through everything yesterday. I've got a full report, I just sent you a copy."

"I saw. I haven't had chance to look at it yet. We've got something to take to the secretary, though?"

“Yes, we have. It’s all doable, provided they’re willing to pick up the bill.”

“That’s great, Askel. I knew you could do it. Can you get it down to four months?”

“It’s down to three. And of course, as I’m sure you’re aware, there’s a massive bonus with the NFJs.”

“I thought so,” Rawls grinned. “The poor defence secretary. She’s just a dumb civilian. I bet she hasn’t even thought about launch windows, which is a shame. She won’t realise what an incredible thing it is that we will be providing to her. But maybe for the best. If she had known, she might never have come to us in the first place.”

Askel looked out of the window as London slid by. “I wish they were going into a civilian transport. Rather than this.”

“In the fullness of time, Askel. This is a major coup for us. This will be a news story around the world. You can’t buy publicity like that. The whole world will be watching our ships, our engines.”

Askel shook her head. “This is a hell of a job, Lewis. This only comes off if everything goes exactly to plan.”

“I know. That’s why I want you to oversee it personally. Lead designer and project manager. How’s that sound?”

Askel turned away from the window. It sounded good and terrifying. “It sounds great. When do I start?”

“You already have.”

They pulled into the Ministry of Defence local HQ at Whitehall, London and drove through the security checks down into the underground car park. They were escorted under military guard to the lifts, and were then whisked up to one of the higher floors. As the lift doors opened they were greeted by a huge bear of a man. He thrust a paw in their direction, beaming brightly. “General Terrence Cain, just call me Terry. Great to meet you, Mr Rawls, and you must be Ms Lund. Very excited to meet you, come this way. The teleconference will start in just over ten minutes. If there’s anything you need just let me know.”

They nodded their ‘thank yous’ and, after the handshaking and pleasantries, followed General Cain down a series of corridors until they came to a room labelled ‘Conference Room A’. There were two armed soldiers guarding either side of the door. They snapped to attention and saluted General Cain as he approached. Cain returned

the salute as automatically as he put one foot in front of the other when he walked. He held the door open and Rawls and Lund entered.

The room was large and low-lit with no windows. It was air-conditioned cool and there was bottled water and glasses on the large table that dominated the room. The far wall was blank white. That was where the images would be shown when the teleconference started, Askel guessed.

"Please, take a seat," said Cain. "We should have the feed from Dallas up in the next few minutes." He seemed genuinely excited, like he had never done this sort of thing before. Maybe he hadn't.

Lund and Rawls took seats at the far end of the table near the screening wall. They sat on opposite sides. Cain took up a seat one down from Rawls.

"This line is fully secure, is it?" asked Lund.

"Oh, yes," replied Cain. "Military grade. Literally. We're sorry we couldn't do this over standard coms; the secretary requested the highest levels of security."

"Can you patch my comdev in? There are some files I'll need to show."

"Yes," said Cain. "Can you just pass it here?" He took the comdev and held it under his own, slid his fingers about the screen and handed it back.

"It's Conference Room A, Screen 1," he said.

"Thank you," said Lund. She fiddled with her comdev, her brow furrowed. Rawls seemed relaxed. He took a bottle of water and poured himself a glass. He took a few sips. He might have been sipping a G&T in some Mediterranean resort for all the stress he displayed.

"Ah!" said Cain as the screen flickered to life. The head and shoulders of a woman appeared, three metres high, filling the screen. "Hello, London," she said in a southern drawl.

"This is London," said Cain.

"Hi, there. I have the secretary of defence here for you, we'll be patching her through in just a few moments."

"Very good." Cain winked at Askel.

The screen cut to a conference room similar to the one they were seated in. The resolution was extremely high, and the three dimensional effect made it appear almost as an extension of the room they were in. Audrey Andrews was seated to the front and side of a similar conference table. About her were five or six senior

staffers and assistants. A young, suited man was half leant over saying something to Andrews. She seemed to thank him as he left, walking across the screen and out of shot. Andrews looked at them. "Hello, Lewis. I see you have General Cain there."

"Hello, Ms Andrews!" said Cain.

"And this must be Askel Lund."

"Good morning, secretary," said Askel.

Andrews cut straight to it. "Ms Lund, Lewis has assured me that Helios can refit our two orbiting carriers, with engines and other necessary equipment such that we can transport them to Mars, within six months. Is that reasonable, in your opinion?"

Askel glanced at Rawls. "I've looked at the figures and have come up with a preliminary plan. The plan is dependent on many factors - I'm sending you all the documentation now - but if we get all those in place I think we can deliver the modifications in three months."

"*Three months!?*"

Askel beamed, just a little. "Yes, I think so. As mentioned, that would depend on many things. We would need some assistance cutting through some red tape and it would not be cheap. I mean, it would not be cheap anyway, but to do it quickly and safely will require a big financial commitment."

Andrews looked invigorated. "But in three months' time we could set our two carriers off to Mars, if we had the will and the money to do it?"

"That's correct. And that's only possible with NFJ engines."

"I'm sorry, what's only possible with these engines?"

"There are a number of papers in the tranche of documents I've sent over explaining it in detail, but with these engines we don't have to wait for a launch window. As you know, with conventional chemical engines we can only launch about once every two years, during a very specific launch window." Andrews nodded. "That is because the cost, in terms of weight of fuel, is too high at any other time. When the orbits of Earth and Mars are at just the right relative positions we can jump off the Earth, which is already moving around the Sun at about 108,000km/h, and accelerate up to a speed where we can travel to Mars within six months. We're limited in how fast we can go by two factors. One is the weight of necessary chemical fuel and the other is our speed at arrival. If we're going too fast the gravity of Mars won't be strong enough to catch us when we get there. For every kilo of fuel we need to accelerate we need the same amount to

brake at the other end. With conventional fuels the cost is just too high. To go fast *and* stop at the other end, or rather slow down to the speed necessary for orbital capture, the fuel tanks would have to be enormous - far beyond what is practical.”

Andrews was nodding her head in all the right places, her brow furrowed with concentration. Rawls was looking content, like a proud father, and Cain was beaming like he'd just received the best birthday present ever. Lund continued. “The ratio of thrust to fuel weight with a nuclear fusion jet engine is simply enormous. That means that for a trip to Mars we can accelerate to a speed far beyond what has been used up to now, because the cost in fuel weight is so low. It also means we don't have to wait for a window when Earth and Mars are at their closest. We can go whenever we want, because we'll have more than enough fuel left to decelerate to the necessary speed when we arrive at Mars.”

“So three months from now, we could send the carriers off?”

“Yes.”

“And how long would it take them to reach Mars?”

Askel frowned. “I think, given the current positions of the two planets, if we launched in three months' time it would take approximately six to eight weeks to arrive in Mars orbit.”

Andrews looked impressed. She leaned back and spoke to one of the men behind her, nodding at him as she turned back to the screen. “If we can get the funds and other resources, smooth out some of the paperwork, you can get us two carriers in orbit around Mars within five months. I've understood you correctly, Ms Lund?”

“Yes, secretary. If we start now.”

“Thank you. And thank you for the documentation. I assume the costings are in there?”

Rawls cut in, “Audrey, that's the one on top of the pile.”

Andrews smiled. “I'll be taking this to the president. In the meantime, can you assume you have approval? Get things going?”

Rawls puffed his cheeks.

“If for any reason this doesn't come off we'll reimburse you for any losses. But we need to hit the ground running.”

“I wouldn't do this for anyone other than you, Audrey,” Rawls said, and chuckled to himself.

“That's great. Thank you for your time, we'll speak again soon.” Andrews stood up and the screen cut back to the head and shoulders

of the woman. “Dallas here, were finishing the conference at 08.47, London time, is there anything else?”

“We’re all fine here,” said Cain. “Good morning to you, Dallas!”

“Good morning to you too, sir, have a great day, Dallas out.” The image cut and the wall was a wall once again.

Rawls turned to Lund. “Need a ride home?”

“Sure. There’s a million things I need to do.”

Rawls nodded. “And you’ll need to pack, too.”

Askel gave him her quizzical glance.

“Your new position. It’s based on *Ephialtes*.”

Askel didn’t like spaceflight. The prospect of spending the next few months on *Ephialtes* filled her with a mild dread. Still, at least she would be busy. She’d hurriedly packed some things and had asked a neighbour to keep an eye on the apartment; she would be gone about three months. She’d made a few calls to a few people, letting them know she’d be gone, cancelling the odd arrangement. Then she’d taken the ride out of town in one of Rawls’ cars, which he’d sent over for her. She’d left London at dusk and now found herself heading out to Foulness Island in the growing darkness. She could see the port on the distant horizon, all glimmering lights and wisps of propellant venting off into the night.

She was met at the port by a no-nonsense sergeant, briefed to see her aboard the bone-shaker taking her up to orbit. He was thorough and impersonal, which suited Askel just fine. She was in no mood for small talk and pleasantries. Her mind was occupied with the low-level fear of launch, overlaid with the million and one things she needed to do, check or delegate at the next opportunity.

She had never been to *Ephialtes* before but it was practically the same ship as *Otus*, where she had spent some months soon after its float-out. She had contributed to the design of both ships, particularly in terms of their accommodation of dropships and drones. She knew the Commander Program well and she knew the dropship carrier system probably as well as anyone on the original design teams. Her AIs had done most of the design work and she had overseen the linking together of the two systems, carrier and dropship. The two great carrier ships, known together as the *Aloadae*, were the pinnacle of the Commander Program system. They could dispatch a fearsome

fighting force anywhere in the world within hours, and with minimal notice.

She had been moved to the NFJ project just before *Ephialtes* began fitting-out. It was a great opportunity to raise her stock even higher within Helios. She knew she had impressed Rawls and that he had great faith in her. She had been determined to prove him right.

As well as the technical challenges of the NFJ project (designated *Aphrodite*) there were personal ones too. The project was based in Dorset, England and took Askel away from her settled home life in Kentucky. It took her away from Bobby Karjalainen. Initially, a long distance relationship seemed doable. Bobby was often posted overseas anyway. But it had put a huge strain on the relationship from the very moment Bobby had meekly responded 'Okay' to the proposal, rather than being taken aback like Askel had expected. Suborbital flight meant that the UK and North America were less than forty-five minutes apart, but the connecting journeys either end increased the length of the trip by a factor of ten. Over time the relationship faded and crumbled. Askel missed Bobby but she had no idea if he felt the same way. She'd noted that he hadn't mentioned her in his book. Whether that was due to his respect for her privacy or whether he had airbrushed her from history she did not know. But he was gone. The last she heard he was truly gone - headed back to Mars.

She checked her baggage with the sergeant and was fitted for a flight suit. She was given a medical scan, signed some papers and was then put on a bus with some other Helios personnel. She recognised some faces - many of the *Aphrodite* team were there, but there were some from other divisions who she did not know. One way or another they were there at her behest. She had detailed all the personnel she would need by skill and ability and here, less than forty-eight hours later, some of them were. Frantic dealing was still going on in the Helios HR and purchasing departments. It was an overtime bonanza as favours were called in, deals were struck and backs were scratched. There would be more flights like this, freight flights, too, over the coming weeks but, appropriately, Askel was at the vanguard.

The bus ferried them to the launchpad where they got out and ascended the tower by elevator. Askel attempted some small talk with her team members but, with her mind racing from the fear of the launch and the enormity of the task at hand, she kept falling back to talking shop. She was constantly making lists in her mind and

delegating tasks here and there. They got out of the elevator and were ushered across a gangway into the craft itself.

The Heavy Lift Vehicle was a large SLSVII class rocket, the fundamental design of which had not changed in more than two hundred years, though it had been hugely refined. The cabin of the cylindrical spacecraft on top was divided into two floors. Each had around thirty seats, set out in rows and aisles like some sort of futuristic bus tipped up on its rear. The seats were large, with harnesses and ports for various life support, monitoring and coms systems. The passengers had to climb up a retractable ladder mounted in the aisle and then work their way along a small gantry above the rows to their seats. Askel worked her way to her seat in the front row on the top deck, plugged herself in, and waited.

Coms crackled over Askel's headset informing her that conditions were good and that launch was on schedule to proceed within fifty minutes. She was informed that a countdown was available should she wish to patch it through, but she declined. As she lay back into her chair she could feel it adjusting to accommodate every curve of her body. She absentmindedly thought about getting one for home - surely she could swing it with Rawls - but then her mind was racing again with a controlled anxiety about the project and about the flight.

The last five minutes were the longest. She kept trying to distract herself but it didn't work. She told herself it would be over in ten or fifteen minutes. She would be in orbit, and it would be over. Her colleague next to her tapped her on the arm and told her when it was T-1 minutes. She nodded and smiled weakly at him, closing her eyes.

When it began the first thing she felt was the rumble, which started powerfully and grew ever stronger. It felt and sounded like she was in a collapsing building, then there was a sudden kick in her back. It felt like one of those awful falling nightmares, except instead of falling she was rising ever faster and she didn't wake suddenly, as much as she longed to. The incredible force and roar could hardly fail to impress, but Askel's mind was in a place far away from such things. She was in a zone somewhere between serenity and panic, knowing that there was nothing she could do. She was committed to this and all she could do now was just *be*, until it was over.

Very soon - Askel couldn't tell if it was minutes or seconds - the violent shaking smoothed out and the incredible pressure she had felt on her body eased off. She felt the tension in her body relax a little

and she started to feel light. She turned to her colleague and nodded a smile at him. He smiled back and gave her the thumbs-up signal. A voice came over the com. "All passengers, following a successful launch we are now in orbit around the Earth and are due to dock with *Ephialtes* in approximately two hours. Please remain seated for the rest of the journey, if you have any problems we are right here for you. Thanks."

Askel let herself relax. It was going to be a tough three months and she thought she'd earned it.

It was dark when Andrews reached the New Oval Office. She spoke briefly to Cortes' personal assistant and let herself in. The lighting was low and Cortes was in his chair, turned away from the great desk of office, facing the window. At first she thought he might be asleep and she approached cautiously.

"Thanks for coming, Audrey," he said without turning. "Take a seat over on one of the sofas. I'll be over in a minute."

"Yes, Mr President," Andrews said, and she walked over to one of the sofas and sat down. She felt a little awkward, like she was intruding on some intensely personal moment. She was surprised when Cortes spoke again.

"You know, it's been quite a day," he said. "I got the intelligence briefing this morning. I guess that's what you're here to talk about."

"It is, Mr President."

"I thought so. You know, this job never ends. It's just one damn thing after another."

"I guess so, Mr President. I guess that's what our jobs are; dealing with issues, one after another."

Cortes chuckled. "Well, that's true enough," he said. He turned in the chair and stood up. As he walked over to Andrews he asked the question she had been preparing for all week. "What have you got for me, Audrey?" he said.

"Well, sir," Audrey replied, "I've spoken to Helios. They can refit the *Aloadae* for interplanetary flight. They have experimental nuclear fusion engines they can use. We can have the *Aloadae* in orbit around Mars within six months if we need it."

Cortes nodded, impressed. "I guess that wouldn't be cheap," he said.

“Well,” said Andrews, “not financially, of course not. But it might be cheaper than losing a planet.”

Cortes thought for a moment. “They can really do that? In six months?”

“They’ve assured me they can,” said Andrews, “and I’ve no reason to disbelieve them.”

Cortes paced. “How would that look, politically? Is it overkill?”

“Not at all,” said Andrews. “We have these ships, more-or-less redundant now over Earth. Think how powerful we look if we can send them to Mars. Not just to the Martians but to the Asian Bloc, the non-aligned countries, even to our own country. It would be a great demonstration of our power. Reassuring to those at home and impressive and intimidating to those abroad.”

Cortes stopped pacing. “What do you need from me?”

“I just need the executive order authorising the expenditure. You still have the elevated powers from the war. If you want to go ahead, let me know now and I’ll tell Helios to proceed immediately.”

“How much will this cost again?”

“I sent you the costings. It’s a lot, but we can afford it.”

Cortes paused. “Okay. Go ahead. The bigger the stick the less likely you’ll need to use it, right? That’s the principle we’re following here, isn’t it?”

“Of course, Mr President. We’ll stop this thing before it’s started.”

“I like that,” said Cortes. “The last thing we need right now is another war.”

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