

EXPLORATION 2127

EXPLORATION 2127

THE FALSE FLAG WAR | BOOK 1

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CHAPTER 1

*ALPHA CENTAURI B SYSTEM | CONCORDIA | APPROACHING BRAVO
CHARLIE*

*11 MARCH 2127 (EARTH REFERENCE FRAME) | 12 MAY 2125
(CONCORDIA REFERENCE FRAME)*

CONCORDIA BACKED toward the planet on a tail of fusion fire a million miles long.

Harrison Jaeger sat at the propulsion board in the ship's control room. His gaze darted over the screens showing fuel supply, flow rates, fusion efficiency, speed, vector. His meaty hands rested on the home row of the keyboard except when his hands darted to the other controls at his station. Quick, precise motions despite the thickness of his fingers.

Years of training on Earth, plus over three subjective years in flight. He could run the prop system blindfolded.

Even so, his jaws mashed a stick of gum. Only tiny amounts of artificial sweetener and fake watermelon flavor lingered. No time to

get a new stick. Bad idea to spit out the old one. Otherwise, he'd grind down his teeth four-point-three light-years from the nearest dentist.

It didn't help his nerves that straps bound him to his chair. Not just a lap belt, but a five-point harness, like a rider on a roller coaster where your legs dangled into air. The drive would turn off within moments. Free fall would return while *Concordia's* lifesystem modules pivoted for spin gravity. Spin gravity for a year, until it was time to return to Earth.

If Earth would still be there by the time they got back.

The control room always felt cramped. Stark LED panels in the ceiling whitewashed everything. The closeness of the rows of control boards forced people to walk sideways around their seated colleagues. Now, making it worse, even more people than usual jammed the space. The climate control labored to cool them but couldn't overcome the musk of bodies and coffee. The final act of the outbound leg and all the joint mission's leadership teams, Traditionalist and Humanist alike, crowded in for the photo op.

Jaeger worked his jaws harder. Tasted nothing anymore.

Senior bureaucrats. At least he and the techs and scientists in the Humanist Alliance had a common enemy.

He gave his head a quick shake. Not the time for cynicism. He had a job to do.

The reason to do it well filled the main screen.

The feuding factions hadn't agreed on an official name for the planet Alpha Centauri Bc. The Humanist brass labeled it Four Freedoms. The Traditionalist authorities referred to it as New Eden.

Everyone on *Concordia* called it Bravo Charlie.

The planet's slow rotation now turned a hemisphere almost entirely of land to the camera. Blue sea fringed a broad continent. Based on prior observations from Earth and *Concordia*, Andrew McIlroy, the Humanist geologist Jaeger played UltraHistory with, a good guy and a fellow Texan, called the continent a pangaea.

Whatever the geologists called it, colors banded the landmass. Deep green near the ocean, dotted with white clouds. Paler and

yellower shades farther inland. Night shadowed the interior of the continent, but from prior observations, Jaeger knew how it looked. Five thousand miles from the sea, reached only by the scantest of rains. Shades of red as desolate as the surface of Mars.

Jaeger's jaws stopped working. His jaws gaped and his fingers stilled for a moment.

A new world. Full of plant life, plausibly animals too. No sign of intelligence. A treasure trove for the hundred scientists from Earth's two main factions on board the ship.

Maybe this mission would be what the politicians back home pretended to agree it was. The first step in getting Earth's warring camps to beat their swords into plowshares. Work together for the common good of all humankind.

A new world, and they would orbit it within minutes.

Sandford, the Humanist co-commander, spoke in her usual high-pitched British accent. "Propulsion?"

Jaeger tore his gaze away from the main screen to the displays on his board.

Too slowly for Sandford, apparently. "Bloody hell, Jay-ger, what's your damned status?"

He'd learned years ago not to rise to the bait of her crass language or mispronunciation of *Yay-ger*. "Propulsion green."

Even without looking over his shoulder, Jaeger knew she gave him a cold look and a toss of her white hair. Wise crew called it platinum blond, if speaking aloud, where Sandford or her cronies could hear.

Before she could throw her rank around, Varanathan, the co-commander from the Traditionalist Coalition, spoke. His voice sounded as smooth as a tub of clarified butter, and the English accent he'd learned in India sounded more plummy than Sandford's. "Navigation, status?"

"Velocity and deceleration on target," said Cardenas, the nav officer. "Updating time till end of burn."

A countdown timer appeared next to the image of the planet. Fourteen minutes to go.

Bravo Charlie grew larger and larger, overflowing the top and bottom of the screen, finally blocking out the stars on the sides.

Jaeger watched his controls. He'd scripted the end of burn commands. Manually, he'd only need to hit the enter key on the keyboard. Still, as the time ticked down, he held both hands ready to flip any switch or turn any dial. Just in case.

The timer reached 00:00:00.

"Now!" said Varanathan and Sandford in ragged unison.

Jaeger ran the script. The drive cut off. The low throb of fusing hydrogen and immense thrust had permeated the ship almost every moment for years. Now it was gone.

The silence of the stopped drive rang in Jaeger's ears. His stomach flopped and his torso floated against the straps.

Free fall.

The co-commanders took turns asking for the ship's status. Orbit safely entered. The six crew modules girdling the ship preparing to pivot for spin gravity.

Jaeger worked his way through the drive shut-down checklist. About a standard year in orbit, with the reactor fusing a trickle of stored hydrogen to power the ship's systems. A faint candle to the energies the ship had consumed getting here, when the particle spin magnets sucked hydrogen from trillions of cubic kilometers of interstellar space into the maw of the Bussard ramjet.

Do each step right. You want to power it back up when it's time to leave, don't you? Don't get distracted by the world on the main screen.

His fingers paused on the sculpted keycaps at his station. He couldn't help himself. On screen, glittering rivers meandered across a landscape of thick jungle. Clouds like cotton candy floated through the sky. The late afternoon light of Alpha Centauri B cast the shadows of low hills miles across the terrain.

Three and a half years of subjective travel time. Four-point-three light-years from Earth. Now just two hundred clicks away.

A warm glow eased his flopping stomach. He'd done everything

right to get the mission to this point. Untold discoveries to be shared with all mankind.

The presence of Sandford and Varanathan and their staffers behind him suddenly pressed on him. A shudder ran through his shoulders.

Untold discoveries for all mankind, if the senior bureaucrats on both sides wouldn't foul it up.

CHAPTER 2

ALPHA CENTAURI B SYSTEM | CONCORDIA | BRAVO CHARLIE ORBIT

11 MARCH 2127 (EARTH REFERENCE FRAME) | 12 MAY 2125
(CONCORDIA REFERENCE FRAME)

AN HOUR after his shift ended, Jaeger made his way to the lounge in Module 4 to play the next round of his UltraHistory game.

When he left his sleeping closet in Module 2 after changing into off-duty khaki cargo pants and a blue polo shirt with the mission logo, *Concordia* spun at its target rotation rate. Spin gravity planted his feet to the floors, at about 0.9 g near his sleeping closet. But something felt wrong. Not just less apparent gravity compared to the ship's 1.0 g thrust. He walked past the changed navigation signs and took five steps along the main corridor on Deck F before he remembered.

Airtight tubing no longer connected the F decks of neighboring modules. To get between modules, crew members now had to take the steep and narrow open stairs deck by deck up to A, climb a ladder, and go around an accessway circling the ship's spine.

He bounded along the accessway like the Apollo and Chang'e

astronauts had on Luna long ago. This close to *Concordia's* spine, the rotation rate gave about as much spin gravity as Earth's moon. The floor of the accessway curved up to meet his feet.

A pipe across the ceiling loomed in front of him. He ducked to avoid banging his head.

He took smaller bounds after that.

When he made it to Mod 4, he had to go all the way down to Deck H. He got heavier the farther down the module he went. Not like thrust gravity at all. And when he got to the lounge and asked the beverage dispenser to pour him a bock beer, he watched the stream of honey-brown liquid curve down into his cup. Coriolis force, he knew that, but the floor still seemed slanted at odds with the sensation in his inner ears. His stomach felt queasy and he had to look away until the trickle of beer into his mug stopped.

He ordered a slice of pizza from the snack oven and made his way through the lounge. Blocky couches with thick cushions and upholstered in earth tones formed half a dozen seating areas. Walls that didn't reach the ceiling, with flat screens displaying the live camera feed of the planet below, separated the seating areas.

The Coriolis force no longer bothered his stomach. Instead, the usual off-duty social dynamics of the crew soured him. Humanists sat with other Alliance members, Traditionalists with Trads. Everyone drank the same coffee drinks from the barista machine, everyone spoke English from the same palette of accents, everyone sounded excited to have finally arrived. Yet still the Humanists glanced at him and their brows clouded, while the Trads looked up and gave him smiles.

Was *us versus them* as much a law of nature as Coriolis force? Jaeger tightened his grip on his beer. With luck, the planetary scientists from the two sides would work together better than this when they got down to the surface.

He rounded the last corner and breathed easier. The UltraHistory gaming club bridged the Coalition/Alliance gap going back to the first days of the mission, when *Concordia* fused hydrogen mined from

Jupiter before it got enough speed to power up the particle spin magnets on the Bussard ramjet. That's when he'd first spoken in depth with McIlroy. A fellow Texan, he and McIlroy could talk about slow-smoked brisket, craft beer, and timeless songs by Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, and forget about the border of razor wire and armored vehicle patrols that made the hundred miles between their home towns seem like a million.

McIlroy waited with the other four players, two from each side, in their usual seating area at the back of the lounge. The couches were shades of yellow. The video screen on the wall cycled through still photos of man-made terrestrial landmarks. Someone had overridden the camera feed of the planet. The screen now showed a red sunset silhouetting the four minarets and the central dome of the Taj Mahal.

Jaeger looked at the time projected into the lower left corner of his vision by his wearable computer onto his optic nerves through the neural stim patches on his temples. 1711. They weren't scheduled to start for twenty minutes. "What are you guys doing here so early?"

"Big day," McIlroy said. He held a glass of a hazy IPA in one hand, and with the other, stroked the wiry brown beard over his jutting chin. He projected his usual benevolent uncle vibe. "Lot to talk about."

"You're not going to get approval for your side expedition." The cold male voice belonged to Amundsen, a botanist from the Humanist Alliance. He shook his head slowly enough to keep his off-duty tweed cap over his bald spot. The schools in Denmark had done a good job flattening his accent, but his voice was cooler than usual. Scandinavian reticence, or some dislike for McIlroy? Jaeger had never figured him out.

McIlroy gave a wry grin. "We'll see what Sandford and Varanathan say."

Jaeger took an empty seat next to Regina Smalley, the only woman in the group, a zoologist and a fellow Trad from a small town on the Coalition side of the inner Australian border. She pushed a

strand of brown hair behind her ear and said “G’day, Harry,” in a lilting tone.

They’d dated, briefly, early in the acceleration phase, but disentangled without any hard feelings. Jaeger set his pizza plate and beer on the coffee table next to her froth-topped coffee drink.

“Good to see you,” he told her. He might want to reentangle with her some day when they were both between relationships. He turned to McIlroy. “What side expedition?” He bit off the front corner of his pizza slice. Hot cheese burned the roof of his mouth. He opened his mouth and huffed breaths in and out while McIlroy replied.

“When we were coming in, the IR, visual, and UV scopes all picked up some odd surface formations in the deep interior of the continent.”

Jaeger swallowed. The hot bite went sluggishly down his throat. “You said something about it the other day. A lava bed someplace it shouldn’t be?” He took a sip of his bock to cool his mouth more.

“Near there, but something else. A bunch of small features spread across the surface.”

After another swallow of beer, Jaeger asked, “What’s odd about them?”

“They’re dark.” To McIlroy’s side, Amundsen shook his head again. McIlroy backhanded the air in Amundsen’s direction and kept his focus on Jaeger. “At every wavelength we looked at. They don’t trap just visible light, like soot or coal. UV rays too.”

“There will be plenty of rocks in the forested zone,” said Amundsen.

“But none like these.” McIlroy’s face lit up. “Their albedo is under 0.01. That’s practically a blackbody. Except their IR emissions are less than we’d expect for a blackbody at ambient temperatures in that part of the continent.”

“Okay,” Jaeger said, to show interest, but not understanding.

McIlroy’s hand left his beard and clawed at the air. Frustration crinkled his eyes. “They absorb almost all radiation that hits them and

emit much less than they should! No one expected that. And they're only found in one small region, about eight clicks by five."

Jaeger did the conversion in his head. Five miles by three.

"One small anomalous region isn't enough for the co-commanders to waste resources on your side expedition," Amundsen said.

Jaeger moved his head in a slow, arcing nod. *That* explained Amundsen's coldness for McIlroy's idea. A bureaucratic turf war.

One advantage of being a cynic was never being surprised at human behavior.

Much as you might hope to be.

Jaeger rubbed his eyes. Too downcast a set of thoughts for a day like this. They'd reached their destination after years. He had beer and a slice of pizza. And the next turns of their game to play.

Regina Smalley leaned forward and gave McIlroy a wrinkle of her small brown eyes. "We've got a bonzer lot of plants and animals to take a squizz at first. Your rocks won't go walkabout on us. Will they?"

"No," McIlroy grudgingly said. He glanced at Jaeger and hope sprung into his eyes. "Harrison, what do you think?"

"I'll tell Varanathan. Next time I see him."

Smalley piped up. "You won't be on the bridge much, too right."

"I got us here. My job's done for the next year. Unless we find aliens."

A chuckle went around the table. Even Amundsen showed a grin. Everyone on board had at least one secondary assignment. Jaeger's was xenology. So was McIlroy's. People on both sides had joked for years about how useless those assignments would be. A speculative science. A minuscule chance intelligent life had arisen on Bravo Charlie but not progressed enough to make its presence known to radio astronomers back at Sol System, or the telescopes mounted on *Concordia's* hull that had pivoted to watch the planet for over three years.

After the mirth died down, Jaeger hammed up a Texas accent. "But since the rest of y'all are heading down to the planet soon, and I'd like to finish our game, maybe we can get started?"

McIlroy, president of the UltraHistory club, nodded. “Teeing up tonight’s session now.”

Projected into everyone’s vision, the augmented reality game board covered the coffee table. A map of Earth, with scores of territories and dozens of marked-off oceans and seas. The board conformed to the food and drinks on the table. Regina Smalley’s coffee drink towered thousands of scale miles above northern Scandinavia, and Siberian territories lay on top of Jaeger’s pizza plate and crust.

A rainbow array of virtual playing pieces, foot soldiers, horsemen, ships, fortresses, and cities covered the board. Thirty empires large and small, old and new, growing or declining, after dozens of hours of play and four thousand years of simulated history.

A scoreboard hung above the map, showing each player’s victory point totals and control shares held in each active empire. McIlroy led by twenty points, with Jaeger and Smalley neck-and-neck for second and Amundsen five points behind them. The other two players were much farther behind and probably had no chance to win.

The scoreboard also showed the game turn. *1200 CE*.

Jaeger always wrinkled his nose that the game used *CE* instead of *AD*. Not that he was particularly religious. Twice a year, Easter and Christmas, he attended services out of habit. Just the alternative acronym, for *Common Era*, sounded stilted, like something a Humanist college professor would say. But the Trads used it too, to paper over the differences between the Coalition’s religious communities.

Instead of the acronym, he focused on the number. A grin smoothed out his face.

This turn, the game engine should generate the Mongols. A massive army of light cavalry would pop up in Mongolia, just the other side of his pizza plate. A force that could conquer most of Asia.

A lot of victory points to its primary controller.

Which meant he’d need a large victory point bid to win the control auction.

Jaeger had other plans that didn’t require him to overpay for the Mongols. He looked at his hand of event cards, projected next to the

scoreboard but privately, only onto his optic nerve, to refresh his memory of his options.

The Mongol horde would fall apart as abruptly as it would rise, simulating the death of Genghis Khan. Jaeger had a card in his hand to help seize control of one of the successor khanates.

On the other hand, a Mongol invasion of China would promote feuding Chinese factions to unify for their own survival, and he could bid for control of the Ming Dynasty in about three turns. Another card would give him a discount on that bid.

Could he do both?

The glint in McIlroy's eyes across the table told Jaeger that the Alliance geologist had similar plans.

The scoreboard winked out, replaced by a swirl of rainbow colors coalescing into a bright white point. The sign of a new empire being born. The point drifted toward Mongolia.

McIlroy's eyes danced with excitement. Was he going to try to take control?

When Regina Smalley opened the bidding for the Mongols at eighteen victory points, a shockingly high bid, Jaeger leaned back and sipped beer. He gave her a sidelong glance but couldn't gauge her plans. Yes, he would bide his time.

Other people, some of whom had played in one of the many earlier games during the mission, others who were just curious or bored, drifted over to watch. The watchers were an even mix of Alliance and Coalition, chatting among themselves, occasionally asking questions of the players.

Jaeger responded, politely but distantly. His attention stayed on the game. Regina Smalley took control of the Mongols. Surprisingly, she directed the horde away from the Great Wall and the rich territories of China behind it. Instead, she aimed west, following the Silk Road trade route and invasion paths into India and the Near East.

Mouth quirked, Jaeger cracked the knuckles on his thick fingers.

Into his vision popped an icon of an ancient phone, the wired kind with a handset and a base. The handset jumped and a low chime

sounded through his earbuds. Text across the base read *Andrew McIlroy*.

Jaeger reached for the virtual handset, curious about what private message the other wanted to share.

A word balloon appeared in the air next to McIlroy's head. A wry smile creased his brown beard. *Harrison, you know as well as I do that without Mongol pressure, the Ming Dynasty won't be worth a plugged nickel.*

Jaeger put on a poker face. He rested his hands on his thighs and moved his fingers across the denim fabric. His wearable interpreted the finger movements as touch typing. *Maybe I'll save my Soldier of God card for 1400 and play it as Joan of Arc, for France.*

McIlroy rolled his eyes. From the gesture, Jaeger could tell McIlroy thought he bluffed about having that card. Jaeger kept his poker face as McIlroy replied, *Which Mongol successor kingdom do you want?*

I'll take.... Jaeger stopped typing. His gaze landed on two spectators behind McIlroy.

Tsai, a Coalition molecular fabricator tech, had a buzz cut of black hair, plus acne that some mean-spirited Alliance crew joked he squeezed into the food extruder. In the face of the distrust through which most crew members, Trad or Humanist alike, viewed Chinese from the former superpower's balkanized successor states, he kept his voice low and his gaze on the floor. He'd played a game early in the mission, then given up after getting trounced by ruthless players like McIlroy. Yet still he watched, drawn to it.

Next to Tsai stood Biala, a Humanist on one of the life science teams, in brown trousers with a pressed crease down the front. The crease and cut of her trousers made her look taller and thinner. Broad face, blond hair in a pageboy cut, curling toward her chin. In her fist, she held a vape pen. She exhaled some flavor between banana and bubble gum. She'd never played UltraHistory. She wasn't there with Tsai, either. From her mannerisms the times she came by, Jaeger

guessed Biala had a romantic interest in Amundsen, hard as that was to believe.

The presence of spectators didn't distract Jaeger. What puzzled him was how Tsai and Biala ignored the game and shared wide-eyed, questioning glances.

"What's come up?" he asked them.

Biala snapped her head around. She glanced over all the seated players. Her eyebrows arched high and her voice bubbled. "The ship received a radio signal!"

Jaeger squinted. A message from Earth? But why would she be happy?

In his usual voice, barely above a whisper, nasal, and heavily accented, Tsai added, "Not from home. From Bravo Charlie."

CHAPTER 3

ALPHA CENTAURI B SYSTEM | CONCORDIA | BRAVO CHARLIE ORBIT

*12 MARCH 2127 (EARTH REFERENCE FRAME) | 13 MAY 2125
(CONCORDIA REFERENCE FRAME)*

THE ULTRAHISTORY GAME, and many parts of the mission timetable, paled in importance over the next days. In the lounges and labs, in the public corridors, everywhere crew members ran into one another, conversations invariably turned to the signal.

In the cafeteria near the end of the lunch hour the next day, under the bright glow of Sol-spectrum LEDs, Jaeger found McIlroy and a mix of people at the long table near the back. Five Humanists. The only other Coalition members were the Finkelshteyns, Shimshon and Hannah, husband and wife. Jaeger sat down and started eating seared slices of tuna-flavored protein on a bed of hydroponic arugula with balsamic vinaigrette.

“Are we sure it’s artificial?” asked Mercy Mwengi. A young Alliance woman, dark skin, high cheekbones scarred by a chi-pox not fully eradicated after the war, lilting accent. A hydroponics tech.

“Absolutely,” Jaeger said. Nods and grunts around the table revealed most others agreed. The most palpable dissent came from Shimshon Finkelshteyn rolling his eyes.

Mwengi regarded him. “How so?”

He didn’t need to replay it through his earbuds to remember how it sounded. “It turns on or off like a switch.” He knifed his hand up and down through the air. “When it’s on, it’s always at the same strength. And when it turns on or off, it stays that way for multiples of, I don’t remember the exact duration, about three seconds.”

“3.2454 seconds,” said Finkelshteyn, the highest-ranking Trad geologist. He wore a graying beard, a long-sleeved shirt, and a yarmulke.

“How can that be natural?” piped up Robertson, a male ecologist with a soft look. Like he never lifted weights, or gave up meat years before the mission left Earth.

“How can it not be?” said Finkelshteyn. “Do you see alien cities? Factories? Power plants? Radio towers? We should assume the signal is natural.”

McIlroy waggled the synthetic cheeseburger in his hand. “Do you see a quartz oscillator? A rotating ball of neutronium?”

“The universe isn’t stranger than we suppose, it’s stranger than we can suppose.”

McIlroy grinned at Finkelshteyn’s banter. “I could quote a famous dead scientist to support my point, too.”

Finkelshteyn gave him a wry look. The two head geologists often squabbled, but worked well together.

“If the universe is so strange,” Jaeger added, “why shouldn’t there be intelligent life other than us?”

“Why are you taking his side?” Finkelshteyn said. “There might be intelligent aliens out there, but here?”

Jaeger gave a wry grin and shook his head. He jabbed his fork into his greens.

Down the table, Robertson turned to Mwengi. If he meant to

speak quietly, he failed. “Finkelshteyn’s going to say God sends the signal.”

The wry look turned to flinty eyes. “Who the hell are you to tell me what I’m going to say?”

Robertson quivered. “I—I didn’t mean—”

From flinty eyes, Finkelshteyn’s entire face turned stony. “The hell you didn’t mean! I believe in something more than living for today and that makes me a bad scientist?” He slammed his forearms on the table next to his plate.

Hannah, one of the ship’s physicians, with a long and glossy black wig, rested her palm on his arm. He brushed her off and held his glare on the ecologist.

Robertson scowled back. “I do too believe in something. Something more than ancient tribal customs dressed up as divine revel—”

“Hey now!” Jaeger leaned forward and raised his arms. His biceps hardened, visible past the sleeves of his short sleeve shirt. He’d club both of them if he had to. “Think what you want but treat each other with respect.” He glowered at Robertson and Finkelshteyn in turn. “Not just the two of you. All eight of us here. All hundred and fifty of us on board.”

Cardenas, who’d work as a meteorologist now that he’d finished his navigation duties for the next year, lifted his shaven head. “Jaeger.” From Spain, he pronounced the *J* as an *H*, *Hay-ger*. “Did you give us the key to decode it?”

“I’m sure I did.” Jaeger put on a lazy smile. “Mind telling me how?”

Laughs went around the table. A little nervous, a little forced, but the tension slackened.

“You said *eight*.” With a grin, Cardenas tapped the air with his index finger. “As you say, when the signal is on, it is a multiple of the three-point-two-four seconds your colleague said. A multiple from one to seven. And when it is off, it is off for either that duration, or three times that duration.”

“Clearly artificial,” said McIlroy.

“More than just artificial. Meaningful. After one duration off, there are between zero and seven durations on. These could be digits in octal, how does one say, base-eight?”

Shimshon Finkelshteyn leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Hmm.”

“Now you listen to them?” Hannah muttered.

Cardenas ran his hand over his smooth scalp. “A base-eight number of exactly one hundred digits? That begins three, one?” His eyes widened. “Three-point-one? Is it the first hundred digits of π ?” He pulled his hand from his scalp. His index finger tapped the number keys of what Jaeger assumed was a virtual calculator.

The extended finger closed. Cardenas fist-pumped the air. “Yes! Here, I share it with you all.”

A shared file appeared in the air above Jaeger’s salad bowl. He reached for it, then noticed his fork still in his hand.

With a gesture of his other hand, he opened the file. Three rows of data ran from side to side. At the top, the square waveform of the signal. Base-eight digits derived from the on/off durations in the middle. At the bottom, a string of digits familiar decades after middle-school math class. 3.14159...

Silence filled the room. Not even a fork clanked on a plate.

“Okay,” Finkelshteyn said. “It’s not natural.”

“A transmitter needs energy, yes?” asked Mercy Mwengi. “Where does it come from? We see no artificial structures. Yes?”

McIlroy put down the last of his plant protein burger and swallowed. “We do see some artificial structures. The extremely low albedo formations in the middle of the continent. What if those are high efficiency solar energy collectors?”

Jaeger’s mouth hung open, speared arugula and tuna slice nearby. “Powering the transmitter.”

“Exactly. And sensors, too? Watching the skies for an inbound interstellar ship and transmitting the digits of π after that ship enters Bravo Charlie orbit?” McIlroy’s eyes lit up. He turned to Cardenas. “Do we know where that signal originated?”

“We can’t get good triangulation from different sides of the ship. *Concordia* is too small—”

“Doppler shifts? The velocity differential between the ship and any spot on the planet’s surface will change throughout our orbit.”

“I shall look into this,” Cardenas said. “I will need some time.”

By late afternoon, Cardenas found the time to track tiny shifts in the incoming signal’s frequency as a function of *Concordia*’s orbits of Bravo Charlie. He posted his findings to the crew’s public forum. A 98% probability the signal came from a circle fifty kilometers across and including McIlroy’s energy-absorbing features.

When the six players gathered in the lounge for that night’s Ultra-History session, where the video screen now showed the Arc de Triomphe with all the usual cars spiraling around it photoshopped out, McIlroy settled back in his plush seat. He gave a little flick of the wrist in Jaeger’s direction, then gave Amundsen a mocking look.

Voice extra slow, McIlroy said, “I reckon we’ll get our side expedition after all.”

CHAPTER 4

ALPHA CENTAURI B SYSTEM | CONCORDIA | BRAVO CHARLIE ORBIT

*11 APRIL 2127 (EARTH REFERENCE FRAME) | 12 JUNE 2125
(CONCORDIA REFERENCE FRAME)*

IT TOOK a month to prep the expedition to the signal source. Unlike the two planned excursions, which used equipment packed by the team in Sol system, Jaeger, McIlroy, and the others had to dial up hardware from the molecular fabricator. People like Amundsen had a checklist to follow, collect this sample, gather that data. The xenology team had no checklist. Live aliens? Dead ones? Robots? They faced a thousand contingencies and couldn't prepare for them all.

Sometimes Jaeger caught himself staring at the bulkhead, grinning like a holy fool. Another intelligence had made its mark on the galaxy. And he would be among the first to learn about them.

They knew damn little so far. From the use of octal numbers in the signal, they assumed the intelligent life behind all this had eight appendages. Which could range from two hands of four fingers each

to a land octopus. And told them nothing about how the aliens might *think*.

McIlroy leaned back from the ground-penetrating radar set he demoed to Jaeger and the others. “Even if we don’t know what to expect, we’re prepared,” he said and scratched his brown beard. “Remember that UltraHistory game last year where the Celts obliterated Rome in 400 BC?”

Jaeger chuckled. He remembered instantly. Because the Roman Empire never happened, the game engine generated unexpected kingdoms and empires. All the players scrambled to reassemble strategies. By the 20th century, Jaeger’s Cherokee-Inca alliance fought Buddhist Slavs played by McIlroy for dominance of Europe. “I almost beat you.”

A grin showed through the brown beard. “Almost.”

The prep for the expedition continued every day and deep into the night. No time for UltraHistory, but Jaeger played a bigger, real game now. Which wore him out like he trained for the Olympics.

On the final night before departure, Jaeger made it back to his sleeping closet after 2200 hours. The mission specs called it a PQ-S, *Private Quarters - Single*, but that made it sound like the one-bedroom off-campus apartment in College Station he’d lived in while getting his Ph.D. in nuclear fusion.

In the hallway outside, he aimed his thumb at the scanner and tapped in his access code.

The door unlocked with a mechanical clank. He pushed it open and swore at himself under his breath. He’d left the desk down.

Yes, he had to fold the chair of aluminum rods and rubbery black webbing into its niche on the bottom of his desk, then the desk into the wall. Only then could he flip down the Murphy bed and get some shuteye. The morning would come early, with eight, maybe ten hours needed for final prep, before *Gagarin* shuttled down to a landing spot near the transmission source at the energy-absorbing rock formations on the surface.

Sixteen hours till departure, but it seemed like sixteen minutes.

Too much to think about now. Jaeger folded up his desk, then trudged into the sleeping closet.

The toe of his slip-on sneakers kicked something on the thin tan carpet.

He rubbed his eyes and looked down. Yes, a piece of paper, kicked by his sneakers toward the back wall of the closet. The paper had the mottled look of something that came out of the molecular fabricator. Folded in half, indentations of blocky handwriting bulged on the plain side facing up.

Some girlfriend, old or new, wanting a roll in the hay the last night before he went down to Bravo Charlie?

Jaeger pulled the door shut and locked it behind him. Then he picked up the paper. Tape secured the edges except for a quarter of an inch at the corners.

He pulled his pocketknife from a zippered pocket of his flight suit. He cut the tape and unfolded the paper with a snap of his wrist.

Not a request for a tryst. Unless the male writer had kept a secret from the psych reviewers on Earth and everyone on board for years.

Need to talk urgently before you leave. Mod 1, chapel, after 2100. Will wait all night. Varanathan.

Jaeger swayed from side to side. What the hell did Varanathan want? The Traditionalist Coalition co-commander had visited the docking port and inspected *Gagarin* earlier that day.

Inspected overstated it. Cursory glances at stowed equipment, a few high-level questions, shuffling his feet when the answers got too detailed. A hearty backslap here, a vague nostrum there. *We'll work together for the good of all humankind.* Exactly what Jaeger expected when Varanathan announced his impending visit to the ship on the xenology team's subforum that morning.

More than the request to talk puzzled Jaeger.

Why the chapel?

Varanathan wanted to wish him Godspeed? Krishnaspeed? Jaeger scrunched up his face. Despite his high position in the Coalition's science bureaucracy, Varanathan seemed to pay little more than

lip service to Traditionalist spiritual movements. And even if he felt a pang of piety, Varanathan could have wished him well in the control room, or one of the lounges.

Someplace around other crew members. Probably including Humanists.

The chapel should be empty at this hour of the night.

And why hadn't Varanathan send the invitation electronically?

Because it would generate signals intelligence, sigint, that *Concordia's* IT team could track.

The IT team included Humanists.

Jaeger hurriedly folded his bed down from the wall opposite the desk. He dropped Varanathan's note on the bed, then unzipped his flight suit and tossed it next to the unfolded paper. After a longing glance at the soft, ivory cotton, he changed into workout shorts and a sweat-wicking shirt. The weight room was in Mod 1, two decks below the chapel. Good cover.

He hesitated a moment, then pulled his wearable computer's chain from around his neck and dropped it on the firm memory foam mattress. Now, no one could track his location through it.

He kicked off his sneakers and pulled on thin shoes, like gloves for his toes. He reached for the door handle, but the paper caught his eye. Message received, best to recycle the paper. What were the odds that Tsai, the molecular fabrication tech, or his Alliance counterpart, might happen to read it before their machines rendered it to atoms?

Jaeger picked it up and tried tearing it into pieces. The tape around the edges resisted his meaty fingers, leaving him with partially torn paper, like an art project his nephew had done in kindergarten.

The boy would graduate high school by the time he returned. Probably done playing football, still learning how to flirt with girls. Growing into the next stage of his life. Running his leg of the relay race of their family. Their culture. The human species.

With a pang, Jaeger groped in his pocket for his multitool knife, unfolded the tiny scissors, and cut Varanathan's note into about fifty

confetti-sized squares. He mixed the tiny pieces of paper in his hands. A third of them went into the recycling bin in his sleeping closet.

In the nearest kitchenette, he dropped another third into the hopper, barely deviating from his path to the refrigerator for a bottle of water. Cameras and microphones hid in the kitchenettes' walls. The psych teams supposedly reviewed the data, though they denied the cameras even existed.

He shoved the final third into a recycling bag of thick plastic hanging on the wall of the central, curving accessway. He pulled the bag's drawstring tight and jostled the contents with a squeeze of his fingers.

Jaeger descended the ladder into Module 1 and made his way down steep and narrow stairs. He passed the shut doors of sleeping closets and the lingering smell of overcooked broccoli from an empty kitchenette. Saw no one. Sipped water like he really went to the weight room.

The chapel was on C deck, on a rarely-trafficked corridor. He peered through the stained glass window in the chapel door. The video wall at the front of the chapel cast a faint glow in stained glass panes of sunbeam and rainbow.

He wanted to peer left and right and make sure no one in the corridor saw him. He stiffened his neck instead. It would look more suspicious to see if someone watched him than if he went straight in.

The door was never locked. Jaeger turned the handle, pushed it open. Went in and closed the door behind him.

Dim lighting. Off-white walls with accent strips of synthetic wood running vertically. Artificial flowers, graceful leaves longer than his forearm and white petals Jaeger couldn't identify, near the front. Silent, luckily. If low organ music coming through the speakers, the chapel would remind him too much of his grandfather's funeral service.

The chapel had reconfigurable rows of theater seats on wheels. Now, the rows faced the video wall in the standard orientation, like pews in a church.

Unless one of the religious communities on board used the chapel for a worship or meditation service, the video wall at the front, flanked by the artificial flowers, usually showed a generic image of natural beauty on Earth. Now, though, it showed a sunlit slice of Bravo Charlie's continent. Winding rivers fringed by pale green meandered across yellow grasslands. Ahead on *Concordia's* line of flight, the rivers shrank and the grasslands grew duller in color.

In a few minutes, tomorrow's landing site would come into view.

"You're a lucky man, Yeggs, to walk the surface of New Eden."

Varanathan's smooth voice came from the back corner of the chapel, to Jaeger's right. He emerged from the shadows. His black hair was parted down the middle and swept back on the sides, like a boy band pop star's. Light from the video wall glinted on his low forehead, but his small eyes remained in shade.

"Thanks, but boss, can we get down to business? I've got a pillow with my name on it."

"I know it is late and you have worked hard to prepare. I don't wish to keep you long. I find it is at times helpful to come here, free of distractions—" Varanathan touched his fist to chest, then pulled it away and spread his fingers wide. "—to take another look at our higher purpose."

The gesture meant Varanathan's wearable computer was somewhere else. Or is that what the co-commander wanted him to think, so he would talk freely and get recorded?

Jaeger peered at the IIT Bangalore logo on Varanathan's off-duty, untucked polo shirt. No wearable bulge underneath. No sign Varanathan lied.

When in doubt, tell the truth. If nothing else, it's easier to remember.

"I took off my wearable computer, too," Jaeger said.

"We call our higher purpose different names, but we turn our gazes to it with the same reverence." Varanathan sounded pleased. He extended his arm toward the front row, as far from the door as possible.

Jaeger trudged that way. Every step forward meant an extra step on the journey back to his sleeping closet.

Varanathan walked behind him down the center aisle. He said over his shoulder, "What do you expect to see when you land?"

"McIlroy's energy-absorbing geological formations," Jaeger said around a nugget of sarcasm. He showed his palm in apology. "I've worked sixteen hour days getting ready for this expedition. I'd like you to get to your point so I can rack out."

He flipped down the theater seat and settled on it with a creak. The video wall now showed the red desert in the middle of the continent below.

The co-commander took the seat next to him. He put on a breezy smile. "I am getting to my point. I want your guesses as to what you might see, but I don't want to color your perceptions by telling you what I think you might see."

"You want my guess about the source of the signal? I've been too busy to speculate, but I can take a stab at it. We're going to find an automated station. No live aliens."

"What clues show you that answer?"

Jaeger ticked things off on his meaty fingers. "One, the signal is the only radio transmission we picked up. Live aliens on the planet would presumably contact each other over the radio spectrum and drop sigint all over the place."

Varanathan said smoothly, "Another explanation for the lack of signals intelligence is, they might be so advanced they stopped using radio."

Jaeger shook his head. "Two, we found no signs of settlement or agriculture anywhere around the signal source."

"On the surface."

"Three, McIlroy's formations couldn't generate enough energy to power an underground settlement—"

"You're certain of that?" Varanathan's voice quickened.

"McIlroy ran some back-of-the-envelope numbers of how much solar energy his formations could be absorbing. I know how much our

fusion reactor has to generate to keep the lights on while we're in orbit. Reasonable to guess intelligent aliens would need a comparable amount. McIlroy's formations absorb maybe one part per thousand of what a settlement of live aliens would need."

"So you expect you will see an automated station," Varanathan said. "Or a tomb. I expect this too. My next question. Where did this station's builders come from?"

Jaeger squinted at Varanathan. The red desert on the video wall tinted his face, but not enough to reveal what the co-commander drove at.

He answered truthfully. "I've been too busy prepping to think about it."

"Please think about it now. There are only two answers. Either they came from Bravo Charlie or they came from elsewhere."

"The simplest answer is they're from here."

"The simplest, yes. But if they're from here, why is there no other sign of them?"

Jaeger sucked in a breath through his teeth. The video wall showed vast desert, brushed in a palette of ten thousand shades of red and brown. Hills, mountains, plains. Rock and sand. Tiny flecks of green in the nooks and crannies where water would flow on the rare days when clouds dropped rain.

All natural.

Just like the grasslands. And the rainforests.

"Maybe they built the station to last." From the sound of his own voice he didn't believe that answer.

"I think we all see they did that," Varanathan said. "But why only one station in the middle of a desert? The terrain we're flying over now, dry as it is, is far more hospitable than the transmission location." He lifted his hand from the armrest. Greenish-black splotched the winding line of an arroyo, now arid. Maybe five inches of rain fell there in a standard year. Cardenas and the other meteorologists estimated the transmission site might get five inches in a century.

Varanathan went on. “Why not build their cities, their factories, their transport to the same standard?”

“Maybe they expected the dry climate to preserve it longer.”

Varanathan smiled. Jaeger briefly wondered how often the commander whitened his teeth. “It appears you can see they aren’t from here.”

“*I’m* keeping an open mind. I get the feeling you think they came from—where?”

“Look around the Alpha Centauri system and tell me where you can see them coming from.” The glow of the desert on the video wall glinted in Varanathan’s smile.

Jaeger leaned against the padded backrest. The hinge of his seat creaked. He barely heard.

After half a decade of training and flight, he knew the bodies orbiting Proxima and the two stars of the Alpha binary system about as well as he knew Earth and the planets of Sol. Mostly small and rocky worlds, like Mercury, orbited Alpha Centauri A and B. Icy like Pluto if they had formed far enough from their central stars to retain small volatile molecules. One gas giant, Bravo Foxtrot, orbiting B while surrounded by moons like Jupiter’s. One moon a sulfurous volcanic hellhole like Io, three moons cloaked by ice or liquid methane.

Maybe life existed on those moons. Near subocean vents under the ice, or using liquid methane instead of water as a solvent for biochemistry.

Neither type likely to give rise to high tech, intelligent life as human beings might know it.

One slim possibility remained. “Alfa Echo?”

“The greenhouse world?”

“Maybe it was a garden world like Bravo Charlie until they fouled it up. A handful of survivors made it here—”

“—and only left signs of their presence in the most inhospitable desert of this planet?” Varanathan’s smile returned. “This leads us back to where we were.”

Jaeger took a deep breath. “You think the alien presence came from an interstellar mission. They built this base, in this desert, on purpose.”

“Why not? We came here on an interstellar mission. This shows it is possible.”

Possible. Another mission, like *Concordia*’s, crossing light-years of space from some other star. A thrill ran down Jaeger’s arms.

He pivoted in his seat with another creak of the hinge, then rested his forearm on the backrest. “You could have given me your guess about the aliens by text or call. What did you bring me here to tell me in person?”

“The American, the Texan, always eager to get down to brass tacks. Here is my point. If they came from another star, their technology is, or was, as advanced as ours. If not more so.”

“Obviously.”

“A technology more advanced than ours could give a huge advantage to whichever of the Traditionalist Coalition or the Humanist Alliance could monopolize it.”

Jaeger slowly drew in a breath. He dropped his gaze to the carpet, as reddish-brown as dried blood in the glow of the desert in the video wall.

For two centuries, Earth had been divided into armed camps, each with weapons that could kill billions of people and devastate vast swaths of the planet. A-bombs, H-bombs, neutron bombs, dirty bombs. Nerve gas, tailored plagues, engineered psychosis. Electromagnetic pulses to cripple all the electronics on a continent. Back doors in hardware and software to trigger power planet meltdowns or drive fifty million cars into head-on collisions. Space rocks nudged toward enemy cities.

An unstated purpose behind the *Concordia* mission had been to test new fusion power technologies. A drive powerful enough to accelerate a huge ship to 0.04 *c*, the speed at which a Bussard ramjet could kick in, could obliterate a small country, if used as a weapon.

The weapons had mutated. The armed camps had reshuffled.

Hell, the original two superpowers had long since shattered. Some of those weapons saw action, in the war that shattered the hegemony of the third superpower, China, forty years prior, and raised up the fourth and fifth, the Traditionalists and the Humanists.

But though the empires had changed, the world remained under threat. Hubris, ignorance, brinksmanship, or bad luck might disregard the likelihood of mutual assured destruction and bring about Armageddon.

A damnable set of affairs. A cloud of death hung over billions of people, while a few insiders profited, in money, prestige, and power.

Insiders like Varanathan.

All the skullduggery to set up the meeting now made sense. “You got my attention,” Jaeger said, mouth dry.

“It would be better if we were the ones to derive an advantage, rather than the Alliance. Wouldn’t it?”

Part of Jaeger recoiled. But what more might Varanathan tell him if he feigned agreement? “I am an officer in the Army Reserve of the Federated States of North America.”

Varanathan’s teeth gleamed in the reddish glow of the rusty desert passing by on the screen, as if stained by blood. “I knew I could trust you. Some of my subordinates on our leadership team don’t. They say you are too chummy with McIlroy.”

Jaeger shrugged. “He had the bad luck to grow up on the wrong side of the inner Texan border. Can’t hate a man for that.”

After a long peering look, the co-commander’s eyes eased. “Well said. If McIlroy were in charge on their side, we needn’t be having this talk.” Varanathan winced. “Sadly, you know Sandford. Vile woman. She is licking her chops at the thought of what her team might find down there. And give to her, for her to give to her masters back on Earth. She was vehement about keeping silent about the alien presence in our transmissions to Earth, you know. It is clear why.”

“Both sides have personnel at mission control,” Jaeger said.

“And don’t forget, each side has monitoring stations across the southern hemisphere and throughout Sol System. An open transmis-

sion would alert both factions to the possibility of advanced alien technology. It would deny the element of surprise to whichever of our factions might monopolize it. Hence her vehemence for silence.”

A silence Varanathan agreed to. Or was first to propose, and the only vehemence Sandford exhibited came in how quickly she agreed.

“Most personnel believe the official reason for staying silent,” Jaeger said.

“Most personnel are naïve. ‘We don’t want to panic the masses on Earth.’ ‘We need to learn more about the aliens before we report.’” Varanathan shook his head and smiled with closed lips, like an adult indulging a child’s belief in Santa Claus.

He waggled his hand at the red desert on the video wall. “Perhaps there is nothing of advantage to either side to be found down there. Then my concerns about the Alliance seizing the upper hand are merely me jumping at shadows. But if there is an item of advantage, can I rely on you to do the right thing?”

“The ‘right thing?’ Spell it out for me.”

Varanathan looked like he suffered mild heartburn. “Secure that item for us, and let me know privately.”

Jaeger drummed his fingers against the padded backrest. “If there’s any tech worth a damn down there, McIlroy and the Alliance personnel will find it too and send back their own secret messages to Sandford.”

“They might, yes.” Varanathan reached toward the small of his back and under the untucked tail of his shirt. “Unless your team discovers something dangerous and only Coalition members survive.”

Varanathan held out his flat hand. On his palm and fingers rested a pistol.

A sour feeling exploded in Jaeger’s gut. He kept it off his face.

“You are a reserve officer in the army of a Traditionalist member state. I assume you are competent with...?”

It had been years since he’d discharged a firearm. Hunting with his father and uncles. His national service year jumping out of the back of an armored personnel carrier with a rifle in his hands,

patrolling the inner Texan border. He'd gotten a passing score in pistol shooting as part of the reserve officer training program mandated for all male citizens seeking Ph.D.s in the hard sciences of a university in the FSNA.

Years, but as familiar as riding the proverbial bike.

"I can hit a target." Jaeger made no move to take the pistol.

Varanathan moved his hand with the pistol a few inches closer. "Stow it with your personal items and take it to the planet."

Jaeger studied the pistol. New Eden had its apple, didn't it? If he took the pistol from Varanathan, he would still have the power to never pull the trigger. And if he refused to take the pistol, what sort of grudge would Varanathan nurse? Not just for the next ten months in orbit, or the three-plus years returning home, but for the rest of Jaeger's career. And life.

He reached for the pistol. Gray plastic rough from the 3d printer. At least his finger wouldn't slip off the safety catch. Or the trigger. He gauged the caliber with the pad of his index finger across the barrel mouth. A 9 mm or a .357. Short barrel, low accuracy. Enough stopping power if you got close to a hostile.

Hostile? A fellow scientist from the other side of a demilitarized zone.

"You'll need these, too." From the back of his waistband Varanathan pulled out four magazines. "Fifteen rounds each. The pistol is rated for two hundred rounds before the barrel melts into uselessness. That should be enough."

Jaeger swiped his hand over the magazines and shoved them in his pocket. The pistol lay across his other hand. The video wall showed thin yellow grassland now and gave a sickly tint to the weapon's barrel and handgrip. He stared at the pistol, hoping for an objection to come to mind. And finding one.

"It would look suspicious if an accident killed only Humanists."

Varanathan nodded. "I'm sure some number of Traditionalists might die too. Tragic, but affairs of state, yes?"

Jaeger's gaze met the co-commander's small dark eyes. Then he

filled his voice with all the agreement he could fake. “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” He closed his hand around the hunk of plastic.

“I’m glad you see what we must be prepared to do.”

The heft of the pistol in his hand sent a thought fleeting through his mind. Slot home a magazine and shoot the co-commander now. Two rounds in the chest, point blank. The man would be dead within ten seconds.

And security would arrest him, the psych techs would rewire his brain, and the Trad number two would deny Varanathan had any plans to steal alien tech for the Coalition. Then the Trad number two would send someone else down to the planet. Someone willing to steal valuable tech and kill anyone in the way.

“How do I get you a message? Especially if the biotelemetry coming up here from the other expedition members tips everyone off that *affairs of state* happened?”

“Before you act, send me a text with the word *chakra* in it.”

“*Chakra*.” A grad school girlfriend had used the word when talking about her yoga class. “Like I’m balancing my *qi* or something?”

Varanathan’s heartburn face looked more sour than before. “The alignment of *chakras* is ancient Hindu science, completely different from the Chinese folk magic about energy flows and whatnot. I’m sure they stole the concept of *qi* from ancient India, in fact.”

Jaeger drew in a long, slow breath. His culture had its blind spots and hobby horses too, didn’t it? “I’ll text that I could use a *chakra* alignment. Then what?”

“I will reply with the word *karma*. Within minutes, at most an hour. This is your signal that our people have taken control of the data feed from the surface. Then you will do what you must.” Varanathan’s smile failed to reach his eyes. “I trust you grasp the great autonomy you have?”

With a word, Jaeger could play a *Palace Revolution* card. He swallowed thickly. Varanathan’s plan wasn’t a stratagem in an Ultra-History game. He plotted a coup, with violence, and God knew how

much spilled blood and how many dead bodies. Of their fellow crew.

Jaeger relaxed his grip on the pistol. "Great power, great responsibility."

"You Americans and your comic books," Varanathan said in a light tone. He rose from his seat. "I wish you and the entire expedition the best of luck."

"I can tell."

Varanathan gave a last gleaming grin. The red glow from the screen glistened on his teeth. The memory of crimson stuck with Jaeger long after the co-commander left the chapel.

Jaeger waited. He had to. It wouldn't do to be seen leaving the chapel minutes after Varanathan did the same. He tried to ease into the seat, but the cushions seemed less plush and the curve of the rigid backrest kept his back and shoulders from relaxing. Uncomfortable, he sipped water and watched the planet scroll by beneath the ship.

He prayed, too, though no higher power answered.

Srinivas Varanathan strode at comfortable pace down the corridors from the chapel. Out of habit, the muscles in his face held an expression of calm, confident leadership.

But as he climbed the stairs to lighter levels near the ship's spine, it sank in that no one stirred. He stalked forward, brow creased, as he mulled over Jaeger's words.

Not the bit about *chakras* and *qi*, infuriatingly ignorant though it was. Yeggs couldn't help himself. American civilization had shallow roots. A mere five centuries on its continent. During the five decades of Chinese hegemony, the occupiers had ripped out large swathes of American culture and planted their own. Inevitable, for any civilization lacking five thousand years of transcendent Hindu wisdom.

He had lied to Jaeger, of course. A leader who never lied did his job incorrectly. Two lies of omission. The first was mandatory, for need-to-know reasons.

The code phrase had been worked out months before *Concordia's* departure. A simple and innocuous phrase, in line with his casual statements to Earth about all the old books he would supposedly read on the journey. *I finally started reading the Raj Quartet.* So innocuous, the ship transmitted it in the clear back to Earth. Only a handful of senior officials at Coalition headquarters in St. Petersburg would understand it to mean they'd found signs of intelligent life. He would select from further sets of code phrases, relating to some novels about India written by an Englishman nearly two centuries prior, as his people learned more.

Sandford had no such code phrase. His people monitoring her transmissions back to Earth confirmed she'd said used no new words or odd phrasings since she had officially agreed with him to hold off on informing Earth about the signal from the surface. Coarse and domineering woman, but her handlers back home had failed to prepare for every possibility.

He smiled with self-satisfaction. Pictured himself in a corner office overlooking a research park leafy with red cotton and jackfruit trees, where technicians would exploit alien discoveries and politicians would offer him plum positions at higher and higher ranks in the Coalition's science bureaucracy....

The grin faded. Much as the image pleased him, it at best lay five years away. And required Yeggs to do the right thing, here, now.

The second lie was that only his subordinates harbored misgivings about Jaeger's chumminess with the Humanist, McIlroy.

Varanathan did too.

Yes, Yeggs had said the right things. He had no quarrel with rank and file Humanists, but if conflict broke out, his unreserved loyalties lay with the Traditionalist Alliance.

Though come to think of it, he'd only spoken of his duties as a reserve officer for FSNA. Did he carve out some mental space for himself, that he would follow only lawful orders issued by his superiors in that chain of command over three subjective years ago?

Varanathan climbed the ladder to the inter-module accessway.

Despite the low spin-gravity this close to the ship's spine, he paused to catch his breath.

At least Yeggs took the pistol. Recognized that affairs of state sometimes required extralegal action.

Varanathan loped along. He asked his wearable for his notes and it projected them onto a virtual screen in front of him. Pasted excerpts from reports by the Trad psych officer, and a member of his command staff, scrolled along, matching his reading speed.

Harrison Jaeger affects a cynical demeanor, which masks an idealistic streak that sees little difference at the highest levels between the Alliance and our Coalition.

His UltraHistory opponents tell me he is quite good at pretending to ally with them, only to pursue his own agenda.

Bright red paint, touched up a month ago in preparation for spin gravity, caught his eye on the wall ahead, near an alcove where a ladder came out of a hole in the floor. *Mod 5*. His spacious quarters, where he could leave both desk and bed open and have room to sidle around them, lay five decks down.

He scowled at the painted sign, then nodded to himself.

He had a contingency plan. Time to activate it.

Varanathan moved past the ladder to Module 5. Calm confidence formed in the muscles behind his face.