

# Prologue

Under the gigantic, yellow and orange banded half-moon high in the sky, Thomas paced a circuit between the main building and the razor wire perimeter fence. He trod a narrow strip of sod, passing from moonlight to the glow of spotlights mounted high on the UN facility's walls. Despite it being early in their planet's three-week long night, sweat clung to his razor bumps. His guard uniform's polyester collar made his neck itch.

*You have a job*, his mother had said a week earlier in their plastic-walled living room, in the silence after the air conditioner burred to a stop. The smell of wheat mush on the boil made the modular shanty a home. His infant half-brother slept in a second-hand cradle on the far wall, under the painting of Jesus and His sacred heart. Pride sounded in his mother's voice. *You a better man than all the layabouts in our town. You a better man than the ISTZ devils what sent us here.*

The memory of his mother's voice made Thomas stand taller. He had a job, and he worked for good people. The UN people came to help everyone. Original colonist or recent resettled, it no mattered. His mother and baby brother had running water and cool air, now, thanks to the people come through the wormhole.

Thomas rounded a corner. The building's wall cast a moonshadow cut only by the low, dull lights of the shantytown a kilometer across fallow fields. His gaze darted among pockets of deeper shadow cling-

ing to the facility's recessed windows and a tall, narrow storage tank covered with corrosive and chemical warning pictograms. He found his flashlight by feel and pulled it off his belt with a scritch of hook-and-loop fabric. Tension pierced his shoulders. The noise would alert any bad fellows from the shantytown casing the facility for a burglary.

He thumbed on the flashlight, played the beam over the base of the foamed concrete wall, the underside of the storage tank, the windowsills. Nothing hid in the stark light and jumping sharp-edged shadows.

Thomas slowly exhaled. He slid the beam up the wall, to the spotlight. A jagged hole about the size of an old coin marred the round, frosted white face of the spotlight bulb.

He shook his head, disgust and disappointment dragging down his eyes. Young men from the shantytown sometimes sneaked out to the UN quarter and threw rocks from outside the fences at windows and spotlights. Young men who couldn't find anything better to do but hurt people come to help them. Young men who might be his age, known to him from the football pitch or the stiff wooden pews in church.

Nothing he could do about that, now. Log the damage for the maintenance department to fix tomorrow. He reached for a pocket on the front of his left thigh, unsnapped the flap, reached in. His eyes widened and he shoved his fingers deeper into the pocket, probing each bottom corner. How could he have lost his phone?

Thomas squeezed shut his eyes. He'd showered and changed into his uniform in the locker room before starting his patrol. His phone might be in his other pants or on the locker room floor. If it pleased God, the rubber edge would have kept the phone's screen from breaking.

He would violate his instructions if he went back for his phone now... but mixing up his patrol time could be good, too. Keep the bad fellows from predicting when he'd be in a certain spot. Thomas turned off the flashlight and retraced his steps. His feet quietly padded the sod.

After ducking under a pipe running from a container into the wall, his gaze swept up a stretch of fence obscured by another storage tank's

moonshadow. He paused. Not obscured enough. At the bottom of the fence, two strands of barbed wire coiled back from a gap.

He looked up over the storage tank at a spotlight high on the wall. Next to the spotlight, a black splotch covered a camera.

Sweat trickled down Thomas' face. A sliver of cool air chilled his cheek.

Between the tanks, a window hung half an inch above its sill. Inside, alarm wires twisted up like red and black worms.

"Have you started downloading?" asked a voice inside the facility, speaking English in the flat accent of the original colonists. A man, and from his firm tone, in charge.

"Of course I have." Another male voice, but higher and nervous. "I can't rush them, don't rush me, please."

"The Lord knows you can't rush the downloads, but the Devil might get you to slow them down."

The downloader's voice wheedled. "The guard takes ten minutes to stroll the perimeter—"

"Most times," the leader said.

Downloading. The burglars didn't want finished goods from the warehouse and loading docks. They stole plans from the computers.

No. They *tried* to steal plans. Thomas backed away from the window and went around the storage tank. He jogged, keeping his foot-falls gentle on the sod. The service door—a steel panel painted a sickly green at the top of three concrete steps—soon came into view.

He padded up the steps, then aimed his thumb toward the print reader beside the door. Stopped before he touched. The print reader would buzz when it unlocked the door, unless he hit the override. He ran his left forefinger along the print reader's edge. A vibration told him he'd found the override. He pressed his fingertip there and laid his right thumb on the print reader.

The door unsealed with a faint thump. Mouth dry, he quietly turned the handle and pushed the door. The hinges turned soundlessly.

Inside, an empty hallway of long, narrow tiles formed to look like wood. Red emergency exit signs and the idle lights on equipment in lab spaces to right and left provided dim illumination. On quick, light

feet Thomas went down the hallway. The roar of his circulating blood filled his ears.

"The drive nozzle download is complete!" The higher-pitched voice broke into a fluttering laugh muffled by a door. Just two rooms ahead on the right. The small room, full of computers, air-conditioned half to freezing.

"Are we done?" The leader's tone commanded attention.

The nervous laugh abruptly ended with a clatter of fingers on computer keys. "I'm looking for airlocks right now."

How could one lock air? No matter, Thomas would keep those designs from these thieves. He pulled a baton from his belt, then crept to the computer room's door. Pressed his thumb against the reader. Tapped a four-digit code on a number pad.

A faint thump. Thomas kicked the door wide and burst into the room. "Hands up!"

In front of him, at a computer screen, a man whipped around his head of shaggy brown hair. Dark saucer eyes. A fish's mouth—

From a corner of the room came a roar. Something punched Thomas in the chest. Another roar, another punch. Again.

Thomas laid his left hand flat on his chest. Pulses of thick liquid gushed between his fingers. A moist iron smell struck his nose and he collapsed.

*The other one shot me*

From in front of the computer screen, the nervous voice fluttered. "Oh my god oh my god oh my—"

"Quiet," the leader said with a growl. He stepped out of the shadows. A white man as bald as a warlock with a long narrow nose. Eyes in deep sockets regarded Thomas in the computer screen's blue-white glow.

"My god why did you shoot a guard we have to go—"

"Keep. Downloading."

Every inch of Thomas' chest felt burned by acid. His hand clenched on the baton. His mother and baby brother in their tiny house, crying. Never to see them again. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

"God help us you shot an innocent man—"

For a moment, pity flickered in the deep-socketed eyes. "Forgive

them, Father. They know not what they do.”

“We have to call an ambulance!”

“Our mission is bigger than one man’s life. Keep downloading.”

Anger rode the waves of Thomas’ gushing blood, then melted. The pain grew distant, throbbing away from him. A bright light filled his inner sight. The light surrounded his mother and infant brother, embracing them with a vast love, vaster than he could show in an entire lifetime of hugging them with his mere arms.

*No cry, mama.*

The light expanded to embrace Thomas. Then the former things passed away.



# 1

At the end of the deep canyon of carbon-nanotube skyscrapers lining Pine Street, early evening sunlight glowed in the memorial gardens. Traffic slowed Stone Chalmers' faceted black coupe to a crawl in the right-turn lane for William Street. Five hundred feet away, across a field as green as a cemetery without headstones, the smooth onyx saddle shape of the nuclear terrorism memorial reflected dazzling light into his eyes. For a moment, the highrises at three corners of the intersection seemed ghosts ready to vanish in a second instant of blinding light.

On the coupe's rear seat next to Stone, his mother squeezed her hands together, rustling her white gold tennis bracelets. "I hate coming so far downtown."

Stone's lips parted in a lazy smile. "It only took forty minutes coming down the FDR."

"You know what I mean." The coupe turned right. On William Street, shadows enveloped the car, but the memorial's afterimage remained a green glow in Stone's retinas. His mother eased her shoulders and peered ahead to the right. "Here we are."

The coupe pulled up in the hotel's passenger dropoff lane and popped its doors. The hum of Lower Manhattan traffic and the hotels' chiller system hit Stone's ears. He climbed out, reached back for his mother. Humid air cloaked them, an extra layer on top of his gray

suit and red-and-gold rep tie, on top of his mother's evening dress and the striped, fringed shawl draped over her shoulders.

Stone's gaze darted over the frames and hardware of the hotel's glass doors and windows. Dark discs an inch across and angular cylinders half an inch long revealed themselves to his trained eye. The hotel's security system had more than miniaturized sensors; the servers identified their faces and swung the doors open for them to enter in stride. Conditioned air spilled out and dispelled the humidity like a bad dream.

Inside, a green line, pulsing with arrowheads, appeared on the marble floor in front of them. The hotel's computers negotiated with his implantable computer to induce the vision in his optic nerves through a networked mesh of magnetic stimulators weaved around his hair follicles on his scalp. He walked slowly, his mother's fingers brushing his arm as she matched his pace on chunky heels. The green line ran from the lobby across a twelve-story atrium, around planter boxes and seating alcoves. The line matched the shades of olive leaves and geneteched leather upholstery. They entered a wide corridor carpeted in deep maroon and ended at a pair of propped-open doors, next to a full-color e-ink sign announcing *North American Society for Traditional Reform Judaism Donor of the Year Banquet. Honoring the Estate of Rebekah Cohen Wentworth.*

Inside, a hotel ballroom like any other: straight tracks ran along the ceiling, ready to extrude opaque sheets of sound-baffling, quick-setting gel. The gel was a poor cousin to the materials used in Gray's interrogation facilities in suburban New Jersey, but would easily block out the blather and spectacle of a wedding reception behind the walls. The ballroom waited in banquet mode, round tables covered in smooth white linen and service for eight. Podium at the far end. Bar to the left. A quick scan by eye, confirmed by his implantable, counted nineteen people mingled between the bar and the tables.

Stone's mother did a quick scan too, with a minimal angle of her head and eyes. She disengaged from his arm. "Be a dear and get me a cosmopolitan," she said, and strode off before he could reply.

Seventy-five years old and still on the prowl. The wonders of rejuvenation tech. Stone shook his head with a wry grin and went to the



bar.

A few taps on an ordering tablet set the robot arms into motion. Ice clattered against stainless steel. Liquids poured. Seconds later, he set out, the stem of his mother's cosmopolitan in his right hand and a glass of sparkling water in his left.

"So you're Sheila Chalmers," boomed a raspy male voice. "You must be proud of your grandmother's work."

Stone drew closer. A tall man looking somewhere in middle age, with kinked black hair and a trimmed beard covering a pointed jaw. Gold threads edged the pocket square festooning his four-button silk jacket. Handsome and rich enough to get his mother's attention, now that she was between boyfriends.

"I'm deeply honored her books still speak to audiences a century later," Stone's mother said. "And I'm delighted to donate the proceeds to the Society. I don't need the money, and she would have wanted her religious community to benefit." Her voice lilted but her body language was off. She had an agenda beyond flirting with the tall man.

She took her drink, then turned and extended an arm toward a younger woman to the tall man's side. The gesture explained her body language. "Daniel and Rachel Featherington, this is my son, Rolston."

*Featherington* didn't sound like a Jewish name. But, hell, neither did *Wentworth*. A firm handshake with Daniel. "Call me Stone."

"Stone? How'd you come by a nickname like that?"

"I fall on things from a great height and crush them." Stone turned to Rachel. Strawberry blond hair rose in a fountain from her head, and her pointy chin confirmed a family resemblance, that Featherington was her father and not husband. Freckles dusted her cheeks. Her hand lingered in his while her blue eyes regarded him. A delicate floral perfume reached his nose, one of those custom formulations based on pheromones and the wearer's genomic data, designed to go through a man's nose straight to his brain.

Thanks to Gray's training, Stone could resist her perfume. If he wanted.

"I've long admired your great-grandmother's books," Rachel said. "They really empowered me to shake off patriarchy and embrace female sexual expression as a *tikkun olam*." Gaze intent, she withdrew

her hand, sliding smooth skin over his.

A ticking—? His implantable popped a subtitle into his vision. *Repair of the world.*

He put on a lazy smile and matched her gaze. “Female sexuality has certainly made my world a better place.”

Yet as he said the words, a weary feeling tugged down his mood. Yet another social event, yet another attractive woman, yet another hookup, yet another name forgotten the next morning.

Not that he had anything better to do tonight. A plan formed in his subconscious. Get her away from her father and his mother, tease her about the WASP in the woodpile who provided her family name, then—.

Rachel smiled coyly, then touched his arm. “What’s your line of work, Stone?”

He gestured with his sparkling water, aiming toward the Upper East Side. “I’m a consultant for a UN agency.”

“Consultant? That means you travel to exotic places?”

And kill people. He shrugged. “You transit one wormhole, you’ve transited them all.”

Stone took a sip of sparkling water when a ding sounded in his ear. Between him and Rachel’s pale, freckled cheeks, bright green text appeared in midair. *Come to office immediately. A 487 on Trinity. Out.*

Gray. No one else could force messages through his wearable.

Stone let out a breath. “Speaking of which, duty calls.”

“You have to leave?” Rachel asked. Her lips formed a faint pout. “Surely it can wait till tomorrow?”

“Wish it could. Pardon me.” He withdrew a step and faced his mother.

After a moment, she broke away from Featherington. A scowl formed on her face. “You’re leaving?”

“A problem at work. I’ll tell my car to come back for you.”

His mother shook her head, eyelids heavy with disapproval. “Stone—”

“Don’t worry about it, Sheila,” said Featherington. “I’ll make sure you get home after the banquet. He needs to go. Taking care of UN business is a *tikkun olam* of its own.”

Featherington's words hung around Stone's mind as he strode through the hotel's atrium. Repair the world? Stone lashed humankind's parts together to keep them from flying off—or bulleting into the engine that kept the world turning. The saddle-shaped after-image of the memorial came to his mind's eye. Seventy years ago, the terrorists almost succeeded in crippling that engine. Never again.

Five minutes later, Stone nestled in the back seat and his coupe accelerated through the nest of ramps from Pearl onto the FDR northbound. "Override code," he said.

On the highway, Stone's coupe accelerated further, slipped around cars driving the speed limit. He shut his eyes and mulled the call. 487. Grand theft. Grand theft? What item stolen on some backwater world could be important enough for Gray to summon him?

UN headquarters soon came into view, its straight lines and flat faces of white marble and blue-green glass distinctive against the curved, nanotube black residential highrises behind it. The setting sun threw gray shadows interspersed with slivers of daylight halfway across the East River.

Minutes later, UN headquarters loomed above the FDR, as large as it looked in a million worldforum posts describing the tireless work of the Secretary-General and the ambassador corps in maintaining harmony between the teeming billions on Earth and the colony worlds. Stone raised the back of his hand to cover a yawn. His coupe took the 42nd Street exit for the UN's real center of power.

UNICA headquarters looked like any other of the thousand office buildings housing the government of mankind. The eighty-story building occupied half a block in the mid 50's east of Lexington Avenue. Pedestrians in the costume of a dozen UN member states weaved between the concrete bollards and angled steel bolted to the sidewalk and securing the facility from truck bombs. The sign between the parking garage's entrance and exit showed four multiracial hands clasped together over the UN flag, with subtle text reading *United Nations Interagency Coordination Authority*.

Stone's coupe pulled into the garage and stopped near the elevator lobby. He climbed out and his coupe drove away even before the lobby swung its doors open for him.

Minutes later he emerged from the elevator on the 27th floor, and crossed plush tan carpet to Gray's office.

Gray sat near the window at a round table holding a tablet computer and a glass of whisky. Late in the evening on a hot summer day, he still looked cool and crisp, hair swept back and holding its place, the knot in his blue silk tie tight against his collar. He glanced up from the tablet, his eyes like polished granite, meeting Stone's gaze before looking toward the drink table in the far corner. "Pour yourself a sparkling water and take a seat." He nodded toward the other chair at the round table.

Stone cracked open a bottle. He carried a fizzing glass by his fingertips around the rim toward Gray. With a faint hum of its electric motor, the empty chair rolled a foot away from the table to give him room to sit.

"I trust your mother wasn't offended I called away her date to the banquet," Gray said.

Stone waved his fingers. "There were rich and single men there."

"No doubt rich and single women, as well." Gray lifted his glass. His whisky smelled of sea air and damp earth. He peered down his long, narrow nose and said, "I suspect the answer will be 'not much,' but what can you tell me about the planet Trinity?"

"I assume the founders were Christians, probably from the USA."

Gray raised an eyebrow.

"Don't be so shocked. I may not have a god, but there's a church with Trinity in its name a few blocks from my apartment."

"Not that. What makes you say the founders were from the US?"

Stone shrugged. "During the Time of Troubles, only the USA had enough Christians who could afford the price of transit with the rogue warpdrive ships. Am I wrong?"

"You guessed well. What's happened on Trinity since its founding?"

"It was the twelfth or so, maybe fifteenth, colony to accede to the Dubai Convention. Twenty-five years ago. The terrestrial end of the wormhole is in the Republic of Sarawak."

Gray raised his eyebrows. "I hadn't expected you to remember that."

"Maybe I overheard a conversation when I changed planes in Singapore a few years ago."

"I see. Anything more?"

Stone sipped water tasting thickly of minerals. "Trinity acceded long enough ago for resettled from Earth to outnumber the founding population by, what, ten-to-one?"

"In fact, the ratio is now about sixteen-to-one, with most resettled coming from the Free State of Shenzen and a smattering of African countries."

A million Chinese and Africans, undesired by their home governments, dumped on sixty thousand colonists who'd forgotten why their ancestors fled Earth in the first place. "Any more background I need?"

"You'll probably forget this before you transit the wormhole. Trinity is a tidally-locked moon of a gas giant named Bethany. Trinity has an extremely dense, breathable atmosphere. The native photosynthetic lifeforms have emerged from the oceans within the past hundred million years and are slowly spreading like moss and fungus across Trinity's lower altitudes. The colony settled on and is limited to a plateau about eight thousand meters above Trinity's sea level."

"I almost never say you're wrong, but here's one time."

"Oh?"

"I'll forget all that before I leave for the wormhole." Stone shook his head, then swept his smirk off his face. "Your call said a 487. Who stole what from whom?"

"We don't know who. The whom is the UN Office of Advanced Industrial and Manufacturing Assistance Services."

Stone squinted. The UN agency name meant nothing. Ten thousand bureaucrats in a skyscraper a few blocks away, touching files and lobbying for bigger budgets. "Refresh my memory on UN-O-A-I—"

"Its preferred acronym is UNAIM. 'Advanced industry and manufacturing' means molecular fabrication—nanoscale 3d printing and the like."

"And the what?" Stone loosened his necktie's knot. The answer hit him. "Someone hacked into UNAIM's servers on Trinity and copied over weapons plans." Stone imagined the harm Teresa Benavides could have worked on New Moravia with better weapons, and shiv-

ered. Ice cubes clinked against his glass. He set down his drink. "Why would UNAIM store weapons plans on a colony world? We wouldn't allow the locals to fab weap—"

"UNAIM doesn't do that." More disapproval than usual laced Gray's voice.

"Officially."

"Our field office on Trinity report no evidence that UNAIM—or rogue UNAIM employees—have done it unofficially, either."

"Okay, not weapons.... What plans could be worth copying over, then?"

Gray lifted his whisky glass halfway to his mouth. "UNAIM's servers on Trinity contain plans for fusion reactors, drive nozzles, and pressurized hulls."

"Spaceship parts."

"Precisely."

Stone pressed his lips together. "But not warpdrive ship tech. The most the thieves could build is a slower-than-light spaceship. Even if the thieves build one, they would need a decade to reach even a nearby system. A century, more, probably, to reach Earth." He drank sparkling water, smiled. "Look, I'm glad you called me away from that banquet, but sending me to investigate the theft of plans for an interplanetary ship is overkill."

Gray sipped whisky, then turned his cold eyes on Stone. "This mission requires your talents. Our partners will explain why."

## 2

The restaurant filled the uppermost floor of a skyscraper in the mid-40's with shades of black and white. Waiters in dark jackets and bow ties paced silently around tables draped by starched and ironed linen, pouring deep red wine and setting out plates of vat-grown ivory. Women wore black dresses and dangling pearl earrings, and shades of gray suited the men. In a corner, a dark cylindrical hologram surrounded a table like a thick curtain, rippling and shimmering. Outside the windows, office and residential lights glowed in the surrounding highrises against the gray, light-polluted evening.

The restaurant's brightest splash of color came from Caitlyn Fredriksen's hazel eyes.

Stone kept his stride between tables steady and his usual look of detached amusement on his face. *Why her?* he subvoked to Gray through his implantable.

*You worked well with her on New Moravia,* Gray subvoked back. *Yes?* The flesh-colored sensor pad on the side of his adam's apple flexed with the faint motions of his throat muscles. An archaic interface, but who could command him to upgrade?

*I did.* Young, a little squeamish at up-close wetwork, but competent—for a keyhole kop. *But I work better alone.*

Gray ignored him and leaned toward the only other person seated at Caitlyn's table, to her right. "Mr. Holbrook, how do you do?" Gray

extended his hand.

Stone took note of Holbrook with a single glance. A bald scalp jutted above a crown of reddish-brown hair. His shoulders and torso, wide and soft, suggested he'd been muscular in his younger days. A frosted mug of dark beer sat in front of him, a sign he would get wider and softer. No telling his formal rank inside the UN's Interstellar Transport Bureau—ITB—but, informally at least, he might be almost as powerful as Gray.

"Just fine, Mr. Gray. Glad to match a face to the name and voice." Holbrook spoke from a narrow mouth buried behind a mustache and gray-flecked beard. He turned pale blue eyes at Stone. "Mr. Chalmers?"

"Stone will do."

"Oh, I'm sure it will. Caitlyn tells me you did good work on New Moravia."

"Most of it with her help." Stone smirked at her.

Caitlyn folded her arms and arched an eyebrow at Holbrook. "Sit, please," Holbrook said.

Stone sat to Caitlyn's left. For a moment, he took in her blond waterfall of hair spilling over her shoulders. Their mission together had been purely professional, and he never mixed business with pleasure—but she was easy on the eyes and old habits died hard. "You didn't get enough of me on New Moravia?" he asked.

"This isn't my idea. I don't want a partner in this. Do you?"

"No. But you're one up on me."

She quirked an eyebrow. "How so?"

"You know what *this* is."

She took her hand from the stem of her white wine glass, raised one slender finger to her lips. Her hazel gaze darted to Holbrook.

Holbrook minimally dipped his chin. A dark, incurving wall snapped into view behind them. The holocurtain would prevent anyone outside their table from reading lips, but it wouldn't stop sound waves. Time to subvoke.

Stone sat up straighter and nodded, his face set in a businesslike expression. Unlike Gray's briefings, Holbrook might say something that could help Stone stay alive on this mission.



Holbrook subvoked, *Stone, I'm now going to tell you something highly classified and extremely secret. I greatly deviated from ITB policy in making Mr. Gray aware of it. The Secretary-General himself doesn't even know it.*

*I'm listening.*

Holbrook's pale blue gaze drilled into Stone's eyes. *One of the rogue warpdrive ships from the Time of Troubles is unaccounted for.*

Stone blinked, once. From the corner of his eye, Caitlyn's gaze on his face was a hot, live thing.

A thousand disasters had struck Earth in the Time of Troubles, the middle decades of the twenty-first century. The atomic bomb that killed Stone's great-grandmother and a quarter-million other people in lower Manhattan had been just one. Reestablishing order occupied the power brokers in New York, Washington, Silicon Valley, London, Tokyo, and Berlin for twenty years. While they glued the bottle together and shoved the genie back in, a libertarian billionaire and a team of aspergery physicists and semi-autonomous robots escaped the UN's reach. The billionaire's team built a factory at the Sun-Venus L4 point, where a million square kilometers of solar panels powered the production of space-warping exotic matter.

Worse, the billionaire sold his exotic matter to anyone with an airtight can and a fusion reactor open at one end. The rogue ships then offered transit to any group of fanatics who wanted to flee Earth and spend weeks or months accelerating down a tunnel of warped space to an interstellar planet inhabitable by humans.

Turning the galaxy into the breeding ground for a second Time of Troubles.

After the power brokers restored stability on Earth, at the price of a thousand destroyed cities and five billion dead, they turned their sights on the libertarian billionaire. From time to time, after a third glass of Scotch, Gray hinted he knew the full story. Whatever the truth, the billionaire was dead. ITB administered the exotic matter factory—renamed Hawking Station—and monopolized its products. First, a fleet of warships, built for the hunt. All the rogue pilots lay dead in spaceport bars or floated bug-eyed and blood-boiled in warpdrive ships holed and vented to vacuum. ITB's salvage crews melted down the alloys and carved up the hull plates of the last rogue warpdrive

ship decades ago.

Stone covered a yawn with a sip of sparkling water. The powers that be lied. So what?

Enough to lead Gray to collaborate with the head keyhole kop. *Maybe I'm missing the big picture, Stone said. How much harm could one warpdrive ship cause?*

Under his balding pate, Holbrook's blue eyes peered at Stone. *You know about the meteor impact that annihilated the dinosaurs? Left a crater a hundred miles across under the present-day Yucatan peninsula?*

*I'll take your word for it.*

*A warpdrive ship at high speed could strike Earth with ten times more energy than that. If the pilot aimed at Central Park, his ship's impact would vaporize everything from Philadelphia to Boston. The shockwave would crumble every building in the US and Canada. Then airborne dust would blot out sunlight for a decade. Worldwide.*

A heavy silence settled on them, broken when Gray rested his whisky glass on the pale linen. *Even if no pilot were suicidal enough to implement Holbrook's doomsday scenario, a warpdrive ship in the wrong hands could cause vast damage to the UN's position in the galaxy. A colony could use it to attack an ITB mission towing a wormhole out from Earth, or to shuttle soldiers or military equipment to interfere with UN activities on a Dubai Convention world. A sufficiently advanced colony could even reverse engineer the warpdrive in a bid to understand exotic matter technology and build a fleet of such ships. In that circumstance, such a colony could conceivably attack and conquer Earth.*

Behind Stone, a man cleared his throat. Holbrook raised his hand. Stone and the others nodded. The rippling holographic wall vanished, revealing a waiter with a long, narrow nose and fleshy earlobes. The lines of his face mapped out a decades-long career spent catering to the rich and powerful in this room. "Lady, gentlemen, your orders?"

While Caitlyn ordered a second glass of wine and a spinach salad with seared tuna, a lazy smile formed on Stone's lips. The world could be devastated tomorrow and this waiter—all the business and government leaders around them—hell, all the city's twenty million people—had no idea. Only the four of them at the table had any clue. "Tonic with lime. T-bone, medium rare. Roasted brussels sprouts. Baked

potato, all the way." A fitting meal before going off to save the world.

After the waiter took Gray and Holbrook's orders, the holocurtain blinked back into place.

Stone subvoked first. *Mr. Holbrook, my guess is you think the missing warpdrive ship is somewhere in Trinity system.*

Holbrook slid his beer mug to the side, then focused on Stone. *My researchers have narrowed down its location to a short list of candidates, and Trinity's stellar system is high on it.*

*Except ITB hasn't detected it in the twenty-five years you've been on Trinity.*

*On is the keyword. Our initial scout mission and the subsequent wormhole transport expedition were the only times we've had assets above Trinity's atmosphere. Both the scouts and the wormhole tugs followed standard procedures. As they approached and departed Trinity, they looked for gravitational distortions caused by a warpdrive in action. They also scanned for metallic objects orbiting the suns, planets, or moons, as well as the waste heat signatures of a fusion reactor. If a ship shut down its warpdrive and reactor, and rocky or icy material camouflaged it, the scanners wouldn't find it.*

A brief, wry smile flexed Holbrook's red mustache and beard. *Turns out the tugs' scans did pick up a slight heat anomaly, which my predecessors overlooked at the time. Consistent with a fusion reactor operating in a caretaker mode. Powering a ship's internal systems, but not enough for interplanetary travel or warpdrive.*

Stone frowned. He glanced at Gray, who in response raised an eyebrow two millimeters. Go ahead and ask, Stone read. To Holbrook, Stone asked, *Why do you need us? Haven't you already sent a scout ship to investigate the anomaly?*

*If it were up to me, I would have sent a scout to Trinity a year ago. Unfortunately, there are bureaucrats above me on ITB's org chart whom I haven't politicked into approving the mission. Holbrook tossed back a long swallow of beer. And if you're wondering why I won't wait, the risks of a rogue warpdrive ship are too immense for me to go it alone.*

Gray enveloped his whisky glass with long fingers. *Holbrook came to me four months ago and impressed me with the need to cooperate in this matter. I promised him I would share with him any intel indicating the unaccounted warpdrive ship might be brought into play.*

*And we agreed to joint action if he did,* Holbrook added.

Stone glanced at Caitlyn. Shrugged.

*I still don't see the need for Stone and I to work together.* Caitlyn's voice rang in his mind's ear like an ambulance siren a few blocks away. She leaned toward Holbrook. *You know I'm capable—*

*And I'm more capable,* Stone added, giving Holbrook a lazy smile.

In the corner of Stone's eye, Gray minimally shook his head. *Not capable enough.*

*Damned right,* Holbrook said. He glanced at Caitlyn. *That goes for both of you. This project lies beyond your individual skill sets.* His blue eyes blazed from his ruddy face. *Stone, I'll cover your dinner out of my own pocket, forget the expense account, if you can prove to me you're Caitlyn's equal in exotic matter physics.*

Stone matched Holbrook's gaze. *I can speedlearn it.*

Holbrook shook his head and sloshed from side to side his mug of dark beer. *It would take too long to get you to the level of warpdrive engineering we need on this team. Caitlyn's starting from a higher base. She'll speedlearn it.*

*You'll be too occupied,* Gray said to Stone, *hypnogoguing the skills to pilot an interplanetary fusion-propulsion vessel.*

Holbrook raised russet eyebrows at Caitlyn. *Because he's starting from a higher base.*

She sniffed in a breath. Holbrook went on. *I read your report, and his, about New Moravia, as well as his dossier from Gray. He's a better driver and pilot than you are. We need each of you to set aside your egos and maximize your strengths.*

*You left out firearms,* Stone said.

Caitlyn pressed her lips together. Her large hazel eyes glinted. *I can certainly set aside my ego. Stone's ego speaks for itself.*

Stone chuckled, then turned his shoulders away from her, toward Gray. *I'm going to speedlearn interplanetary piloting skills? The idea being I find the thieves, get accepted into their group, and offer to fly a ship they cobbled together out of stolen plans to the missing warpdrive ship?*

*Precisely. Fly the ship to Earth if possible; otherwise, destroy its warpdrive capability.*

Only one problem. *And the thieves are—?*

Gray's lips compressed for a moment. *We have several separatist groups on Trinity under surveillance, but no hard evidence that any of them were behind this. I'll transmit the reports to you. Read them. When you arrive on Trinity, visit our field office for an update. In case the perpetrators or Trinity's government know about our field office and keep it under surveillance, you can enter unseen from a UN cultural affairs office on a different floor of the building.*

An icy sensation sliced down behind Stone's right eye. He drank sparkling water to mask any tell, then switched to a private connection. *Sneaking in won't help us if a UN employee—or a UNICA employee—provides intel to the thieves or Trinity's government.* He looked intently at a spot on the tablecloth in front of him.

*We have no evidence of espionage against us, in contrast to New Moravia. And none of the UN employees on the list of potential security risks from New Moravia are employed on Trinity. Enough, our collaborators want—*

Back on the connection shared by the four of them, Holbrook said, *You should also mention....*

*Indeed,* Gray said. *In addition to your skills, you two will also both hypnogogue personas for your cover stories.*

Stone shrugged. Caitlyn angled her head toward Holbrook. *What? His people are better at generating cover stories than we are.* Holbrook drank from his mug, his blue eyes fixed on her face.

*On New Moravia I saw through Stone's—*

Holbrook's mug thumped on the table. *Because you knew who he really was. His cover story fooled Lukas and Theresa Benavides, didn't it? Our usual trick of pretending you're a harmless UN employee won't cut it.*

From nearby came the aromas of a sizzling steak and the pungent, garlicky scent of brussels sprouts. The waiter cleared his throat again. Holbrook raised his eyebrow and looked a question to each of the others. Gray nodded. An instant later, the holocurtain vanished.

Stone's eyes needed a fraction of a second to refocus on the view out the windows. Not as young as he once was. Bah, a trip to the rejuvenation clinic would fix him.

The waiter placed Stone's plate. A seared brown steak, reddish-pink inside, and shredded shades of green interspersed with translucent slivers of garlic. He reached for his fork and knife. His stomach

rumbled with anticipation.

"Bon appetit," Gray said. It seemed odd to hear his voice coming from his mouth after the recent minutes of subvoking and transcranial stim hitting their auditory nerves.

Holbrook nodded. "Enjoy your meals." *You're booked on the six a.m. suborbital from Kennedy to Singapore.*