

DARK IS THE HOUR

Book 1

DARK

LUNA

T A CICCARONE

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Red 1

Repo Girl

Rise of the Queens

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It was difficult for me, as a child, to read the science fiction greats like Asimov, Herbert, Clark, Heinlein, Le Guin, Wells, Bradbury, McCaffery, King, etc., and imagine that one day I would share a bookshelf with them. Still, I am no stranger to audacity, as my wife often reminds me. I learned at a young age, I think around ten or so, you can't win if you don't play. But not to digress, let's ground this charge; if I do it right, no one will get burned in the process.

If I have to blame someone, it's all Mollie's fault; she is my mother. On my twenty-first birthday, I was given everything I had written up to that point in a bound edition. Please do not ask to see these stories; it's bad enough when I look at them in the privacy of my room; that said, I have the scraps of stories and tomes encompassing the body of my charade. One would think that sixty years of scribbling should yield some fruit, but there is no guarantee; the edibility of these offerings is the question. Couple that with four children- all genius-level wisecrackers, who often remind me that I should not give up my day job. I must continually remind them that I'm retired and have no real job. Would I ever want one? But here we are.

Dark Luna, and so, Red-1, Repo Girl, and Rise of the Queens are constructs of the imaginary world

into which I flee whenever things get overwhelming, which is pretty much a lot these days. I wrote these four Chapbooks to illustrate how things today aren't so different than they were years ago. That said, things will probably be the same in a thousand years; who is to know? We, after all, will still be human, hopefully.

In the words of Roddy Hauser Sr., '*Careful what you wish for, little girl.*'

So, here goes...

To Mollie

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DARK LUNA

1

THE MEN IN THE MOON

Ralston was irritated when the cold sweat and tangle of sheets roused him in the middle of his sleep cycle. He found himself wide awake, sheets around his throat, nerves frayed, staring at the faint glow of the time hologram projected in the space next to his bed. The hour was 4:32 a.m. March 15. Even after all these years, the colony still ran on Mother Earth's date and time.

He groaned as he swung his feet to the floor. "I might as well get up," he muttered to the dim cubicle and shook his head, a low wave of annoyance fudging his voice. His wife Riki stirred and then fell back into the sweet net of her dreams. She always imagined water and swimming. Ralston, on the other hand, rarely had dreams, at least none that he could remember. The exhaustion of governing Dark Luna usually sent Ralston into a comatose state where even

the memories of dreams couldn't break the surface of his waking hours. Being the Councilman was more a way of life than a job, and there was little time at the end of the day for the frivolous luxury of dreams.

Ralston showered and donned his torsion suit. He hated the device, but the low lunar gravity mandated that he exercise continually. He immediately felt that every motion was an effort as the suit produced counterresistance. Everyone in Dark Luna wore one. Without the suit, the muscles and bones would atrophy in a year.

After checking on his daughter, Suki, Ralston padded into the dining area. "Maybe I'll make some soy waffles for breakfast." He was in the habit of talking to himself these last months ever since the intelligence operatives began to warn him of rumors concerning the Consortium. He had to put the final touches to the notes of the meeting that was to take place in less than five hours. He turned the Memorandum over in his mind as he ate. The first message from Earth surprised the other members of the Council, but Ralston had expected it for some time. Dark Luna had existed secretly without Earth being any the wiser for over twenty years? The odds that the colony could remain hidden forever were long. Ralston would not have bet on it. His father had warned him this day would come, and come it had.

It was confirmed that Dark Luna's peaceful utopian life was threatened, and it was up to Ralston to steer the community through it. He often wished he had the resolve of his father. He would have known what to do. A solution would have been evident and straightforward to Saul, and he would have taken decisive action. Ralston wanted to take a vote on the matter. He collected his notes and thoughts and entered the Vacuum tunnel to make the seventy-mile trip to the Aitken sector and Luna Hall.

"Council meeting, 649 of Dark Luna, is now in session." Councilman Ralston stood before the small group of ten council members and the one elderly gentleman who sat in the chamber's back area. The chairmen tried to garner as much authority as his legacy could muster. After all, he was the son of Saul Meyers, the designer and original settler of the far-side moon base colony. The leaders of the various sectors shifted in their seats. They all knew what was on the slate for discussion, and none of the ten council members felt prepared for it. The inevitable fact that Dark Luna would one day be exposed had been endlessly discussed. That didn't make the arrival of the dreaded pill any easier to swallow.

"It seems that Dark Luna is not as well kept a secret as it used to be. By that, I mean the Earth Consortium Commission has concrete proof of our

existence. The development of Yag-Bounce communication technology has enabled Earth to pick up our communications." Ralston glanced at the elderly men sitting in the back of the room. His eyes were closed, and Ralston wondered if he was snoozing. "To further complicate matters, a ship is en route to arrive here in less than twenty hours. That would put the arrival at 9:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Earth Time. Council members, the ultimatum we were given yesterday by Yag is that Dark Luna is to submit to Earth's collective laws or be held in violation of the ECC. I want to open the floor for discussion at this time."

Ralston delivered the opening statement with what he thought was a modicum of calmness and lucidity. His style of steering Dark Luna was a far cry from the autocratic leadership of his father. The explosion that burst forth from the council members was anything but calm. The din in the room gathered strength until the ten separate conversations were indecipherable. Ralston sighed and closed his eyes to regain his mental equilibrium.

"Please, fellow Lunarians, please calm down. This hysteria will get us nowhere. We need to all be heard, one at a time, please. I suggest that we start with council member Lucille Cartwright. Lucille, would you be so kind as to give us your thoughts on this situation?"

The Humboldtianum subdivision was the largest sector of Dark Luna, thus having the largest lunar population. The sector boasted 251 voting residents. That was over twenty-five percent of the population and more than any two other areas. This fact gave the Humboldtianum sector an unrivaled advantage over the different sectors when it came to voting clout. Wielding this club of power was rarely necessary, in as much as the problems on Dark Luna were surprisingly few. Most of the issues voted on concerned some technical point or other. Dark Luna rarely had political battles like those that had raged on Earth until government parties were outlawed. The tremendous changes swept the world's nations in 2053 and established the new "Earth Consortium" order.

The residents of Dark Luna were thoroughly screened, and only applicants of a similar ilk to the founding fathers were allowed to be recruited. That process had been used to start the small colony, in secret, over forty years ago and has been maintained to this day. The smallish councilwoman stood in relaxed attention before the assemblage. She wore the military-esque gray Dark Luna uniform. The logo of the dark moon eclipsing the Earth to only a crescent was emblazoned on the left breast. Councilmember Cartwright addressed the Chairman.

"Councilman Meyers, is this a surety?" Ralston nodded and turned towards the holo-projection that flashed in the center of the room. The members read the ultimatum.

IN MEMORANDUM

This directive is to the residents of the lunar colony that refers to itself as Dark Luna, which has illegally occupied forty-five percent of the only natural satellite that maintains orbit around Earth. Dark Luna's colonists will cease and abandon the said colony's infrastructure and immediately return to Earth for prosecution. A team of observers, auditors, and military Astro-Force personnel will arrive within twenty-four hours to facilitate this evacuation. Failure to do so will put this illegal colony in direct violation of the Colonization Act of 2062 as written in the Earth Consortium Commission mandate of all interstellar exploration and occupation. We are fully prepared to take the colony by force if necessary.

Best Regards

Tal Mahat Rhuaad

Assistant to President Eric Rappaport

Earth Consortium

"There are so many questions." The councilwoman scanned the Memorandum over

again. The population of Dark Luna highly regarded Lucille. She had been a council member, representing the Humboldtianum subdivision for over twenty years. The sector's prosperity was unrivaled, and life was good primarily due to the meticulous manner in which she governed. The residents adored her. What was good for Humboldtianum was good for Dark Luna as well. Whether or not the other sectors agreed with Humboldtianum on infrastructure issues was rarely a problem. Cartwright had the votes in her pocket.

"First: does The Earth Consortium Commission have a legal right to evict us forcibly and can this be addressed in the Consortium courts." The nine other members rolled their eyes. The Consortium courts were little more than a rubber stamp for the will of the President.

"Second: If push comes to shove, do we have the ability to defend Dark Luna?" Lucille paused and scanned the room. "Councilman Angstrom, you are in control of our defense capabilities. Can we defend Dark Luna against this flagrant power grab? What are Earth's Astro-military capabilities?"

Councilman Reins Angstrom looked around the room. The last thing he expected when he assumed control of the military defense sector was that he would have to defend Dark Luna. He had spent his life in Earth's military as a peacetime general but

never coordinated a real battle. Wars in the last hundred years were fought mostly with threats, innuendo, and fountain pens. Oh, sure, there had been talk about the inevitability of discovery when the day came that Earth found out about Dark Luna.

Reins Angstrom squirmed in his seat. It was true that Dark Luna had an Astro-force with which he felt confident. It was more extensive now than ever. Reins wasn't a fan of fighting and viewed fighting as a last resort. On the other hand, Stuart Biggs had prepared for this day for years. Reins knew that in all the battles and wars he had studied in the detailed history of Earth's violent past, none had yielded the promised results, and the cost and collateral damage of these endless conflicts were invariably catastrophically greater than the spoils they delivered. Reins would have to have a meeting with Stuart Biggs. He would insist that Biggs bring him up to speed on the military capabilities of Earth. Everything that Biggs did was always so secret. Still, he had faith that Stuart would know what to do. Biggs always knew.

There were the mining tunnels, of course, which were far deeper and more expansive than the sub-surface lunar residences. Reins knew that they could use them to shelter the populace in the event of an actual attack. What would happen after the battle was over? If the thriving but fragile colony was damaged

or even partially destroyed, what then? He didn't believe that a thousand residents could live down in the mines for any length of time. Reins would have to meet with Councilwoman Catrina Schwarzschild immediately. The mining sector of Ingenli was centrally located and certainly large enough to shelter the residents, but for how long? They would have to fortify the tunnels as soon as possible. The question of the length of time the mines could be used as a temporary shelter loomed in Reins' mind. Reins thought about the Great War in the previous century, and the studies on the population during the attacks were disturbing.

Reins didn't know what the Earth Astro-force was even capable of. He wondered how viable an army Earth had and whether it had been maintained? Now that a single government controlled the Earth, Reins questioned whether funding a military was needed. Why would Earth reinforce its defenses outward towards space when the allocation of spending could be placed better elsewhere? There were food, water, and energy shortages, not to mention the constant local skirmishes over territorial border disputes.

How large a militia could Dark Luna recruit? His mind leaped to the worst-case scenario, which didn't look good. He was not about to stand in front of the council and state that he thought Dark Luna

could defend itself against the unknown forces of the Earth Consortium. Reins Angstrom was in for a busy day.

Ralston Meyers faced off with the military director with whom he had never been overly friendly. Ralston had recruited the man because of his military expertise and the fact that he went against the core philosophy of his father, Saul Meyers. The room was silent for the first time in the meeting. Reins stood and cleared his throat.

"This is what we know. The Intel from our operatives on Earth inform us that the Earth force is viable but not overly developed. Most of the Astro Forces are directed towards satellite deployment and cleanup. There is little focus on exploration. Earth had had no real reason to fund a military fighting force for over twenty years. Who would they battle? That said, we don't know Earth's military capabilities." He opened his hands in a gesture of, hey, it's out of my control. "The one ace in the hole that Dark Luna has at its disposal is the Biggs Canon. It has not been tested, although Stuart Biggs assures me it will work." The councilmembers turned as Reins glanced at the older man sitting in the rear of the room, who opened his eyes at the reference to his name. The mere mention of the name Stuart Biggs invoked a certain awe and reverence among the council members.

Stuart Biggs was a man who had outlived his projected time. He had come to Dark Luna as a young engineering physicist at the behest of Saul Meyers. When Stuart wasn't designing Dark Luna's infrastructure, his entire life was bent toward the colony's defense. He knew that this day would come. He also knew that the settlement would be able to defend itself and that he, Stuart Biggs, had, in his hands, the ability to destroy the entire civilization of the planet Earth. This power did not rest lightly in his hands.

2

SI VIC PARA BELLUM

Stuart sat in the meeting quietly, listening to the council member's concerns. He already knew what they were, and his mind wandered to the day he had met Saul Meyers. Saul had sought him out directly from the Sanford Engineering School graduate program and made him an offer that Stuart couldn't refuse. Stuart smiled as he thought of his friend. They had grown close over the years, and Stuart thought it was a shame that his boss had to die. There would never be another Saul Meyers.

Stuart sifted the memories that filtered through his mind. He thought about Saul and the events that had led him here. Biggs recalled childhood memories of staring at the moon through his Celestron telescope and how the orb fascinated him. He drifted, thinking about his life and the fantastic things Saul had enabled him to accomplish. He knew Saul Meyers well, for the good and the bad of it.

Throughout his life, Saul Meyers had been plagued by the fact that he was a man of singular vision and exceedingly low tolerance when it came to dissent from those around him. Saul believed the Earth Consortium was on a one-way track towards an end that would not be pleasant even in a best-case scenario. The socio-economic collapse projected by Earth's burgeoning twelve billion inhabitants was a sure thing. The situation had escalated and was not possible to prevent. The inevitable water and food wars would soon consume the planet. He was not about to stand idly by and watch all he had worked for being confiscated or swept away by the nouveau progressive elite hierarchy that had taken control of Earth's dwindling energy and food supplies.

Saul was only one person, but he had the most extensive multinational corporation's resources under his thumb. It was true that he arguably had been the wealthiest man on Earth and that his corporate interests touched almost every aspect of human life. This very fact prevented Saul Meyers from virtually doing anything in secret. His decision to leave the Earth was not arrived at quickly or lightly. The secret planning alone took ten years to wade through. Saul never doubted that he could accomplish it. He had the satellite business and the shuttle infrastructure to support such a monumental move. Saul had assembled a team of the most

brilliant engineers that the world had to offer. He also had one ace up his sleeve: his team leader, Stuart Biggs.

Stuart Biggs dredged up the day that Saul Aaron Meyers stood before him. Stuart was a tiny man, even when he inhaled and held his breath, but he never noticed that everyone towered over him. On the other hand, Saul felt inferior to the diminutive man even though Stuart stood at five feet four inches. Biggs was, very possibly, the most technologically savvy person that Saul had ever met. The height Stuart lacked in physical stature was more than made up when the engineer stood on his accomplishments. In Saul's mind, it was an absolute necessity to recruit Stuart as part of the lunar team, but the sheer depth of the engineer's intellect unsettled Saul, who was used to being the most intelligent person in the room.

"I guess the bottom line," Stuart mused aloud; Saul was always interested in the bottom line, "is whether you are willing to commit to a plan of this magnitude and longevity." Saul had offered Stuart a position to head the lunar colony's planning, design, and construction. That also entailed abandoning Earth and relocating to the moon permanently. There would be no return.

Stuart played the eyeball movies from twenty years ago to distract himself from the council meeting. The

memories of Soli Clovis Rhuaad sitting in the meeting with Saul Meyers made the engineer smile; Soli had to have been wondering why he was there. Usually, Soli would meet with Saul Meyers alone whenever they discussed public relations, which wasn't often. Saul didn't believe SAM Corp should even have a public relations office. He repeatedly stated that if people wanted to purchase his products, they would; public relations could go to hell in a handbasket. Finally, Saul saw a way to get a return on Rhuaad's salary that he understood.

The three men sat in Saul's office at the Vandenberg base. Soli fidgeted as he waited for Saul to speak; he stared at the holo-screen that hovered over his desk and typed on the keyboard. Stuart stared out the office window, contemplating other things. Soli was irritated by the engineer's obvious disinterest. He felt that a man of his stature should be paid attention to. The PR chief never liked being ignored, even as a child.

"Mr. Rhuaad, we have a job for you." Soli wondered if the "we" referred to Stuart Biggs, who appeared to still find life outside the window more attractive than in the office.

"But Mr. Meyers, I have a job already." Soli couldn't help himself. He hated change, and his job of managing the public opinion of SAM Corp was cushy, to say the least.

"This is something new." Soli sat frozen in his seat. He didn't like the sound of this. "It involves a job change within SAM." Saul always referred to the corporation as SAM as if it were a living, breathing person. "And it involves your son who, if I remember correctly, is just finishing his master's up at YALE in poly-sci." Soli was now agitated. He would not allow his son to be involved in this nonsense. Saul sensed Rhuaad's tension levels spike. He knew that, in the end, the manager would do his bidding; what other choice would he have. As far as Saul was concerned, he knew that his work in the meeting was over. It was now Stuart's responsibility to take the discussion over and explain things. Stuart would get the job done. Of this, Saul had no doubt. Stuart always got the job done.

Saul Meyers rose and extended his hand to Soli Clovis Rhuaad, signaling that this would be the last time they would speak, and Soli felt as if he were entering into some sort of contract that he dared not break. "I'll let Stuart, here, fill you in on all the details." Saul left the room while Biggs stared out the window.

Soli Clovis Rhuaad returned to his home and called his son Tal Mahat. This conversation would be a long one. Maybe this would not be so bad, and something could be salvaged from these unsettling changes.

The first salvo of scientists and construction engineers scheduled to leave for the lunar base was to have their deaths faked. The catastrophic hydrazine explosion at the SAM-Corp facility at Vandenberg launch base would be the ticket. The SAM Corp engineers would appear to have been vaporized, leaving no trace of their remains. The world was dismayed at the death of Saul Meyers, who had become a household icon by then. The fact that one hundred and twenty-two other SAM-Space employees had perished mainly went underreported. The massive blast was well documented, filmed on the security feeds, and shown worldwide. There could be no dispute that the explosion utterly annihilated the facility along with all the personnel employed there.

Saul would have smiled at the plan's perfection if he had been a smiling man. The satellite deployment system was obliterated, which set the Earth Consortium's space program back at least ten years. It would take the military and NASA at least that long to rebuild the facility and rocket shuttles. The technology was another matter. The NASA rocket know-how was antiquated. The destruction of Vandenberg left the Consortium stuck in the rut of reinventing the wheel; Saul had seen to that.

The tech of hydrazine fuel and the engines that ran on it were proprietary and wholly owned by SAM-Corp. After the blast debris had settled, all that remained was a few billion tons of worthless junk. It was all gone, vaporized: the hardware, the facility, and, most importantly, the technology. Saul had personally sent all the computers and records to oblivion. Other massive problems that had nothing to do with the space program would plague Earth.

Biggs had left no stone unturned in the grand plan to establish the first viable, permanent moon base. A week before the destruction of Sam-Corp, Stuart sat in his laboratory and relaxed for the first time in ten years. Undertaking the massive plan didn't faze Stuart in the least. He had Saul Meyers behind him, lock, stock, and barrel. Saul's unlimited wealth had enabled Stuart to direct Dark Luna's physical construction for a decade before the blast. When Stuart triggered the explosion by remote detonation, the entire team, and their families, save the covert intelligence group remaining on Earth, were already living large on the moon's far side.

SAM Corp had delivered the necessary construction supplies to the moon's bases in every rocket launch for years. The engineers' original team assembled the heavy construction equipment in the first manufacturing plant in the Orientale crater. From there, the crews excavated the vacuum tunnels,

built the spaceport, and developed the manufacturing system. Stuart was happy with the progress of the colony construction. He was proud of Dark Luna; after all, it was his baby.

Ten years before SAM Corp went boom, Stuart stood in his office and looked up at Saul. "Actually, Mr. Meyers, the question is: you have the where-with-all to make a move of this extent, but are you prepared to risk everything in such a commitment." In Saul's mind, he was already in for a pound and far too late to pull out.

"I have here the preliminary plans for the first stage of the facility." Stuart pointed to the book on the desk in his office. The tome was eighteen by twenty-four inches and almost a foot thick. The twenty tubes of AutoCAD printouts contained over four hundred blueprints of the facility. Saul never doubted that Stuart Biggs was the man for the job. "These should get us started, but bear in mind that this is only a rough out," Stuart said as he unrolled the vacuum tunnel schematic. Saul looked at the massive plan and wasn't the least bit intimidated.

"The last addendum is for a phase that I call *Para bellum*," Stuart said almost as an afterthought.

"*Para bellum*?" Saul opened the plan to the last unit. "Stuart, this is for a defense mechanism.

"Given the circumstances, I think this is necessary. Don't you agree?"

“Si vis pacem, para bellum.” Saul muttered. Stuart smiled at the comment. He firmly believed that if one wanted peace, one had to prepare for war. Dark Luna would be ready. "Good, Stuart, excellent. Send it over to my office, and I'll glance through it later." Saul wasn't going to 'glance' at it. He would read it line by line and memorize it. If something were to happen to Stuart, the project had to continue. If something happened to them both, well then, what the hell.

By the time Saul had rigged the blast, the colony of Dark Luna was entirely self-sufficient. The housing units would accommodate over five hundred, and that was just the beginning. Saul was sure that Dark Luna would thrive and grow if the population was planned for and kept under control.

"Stuart," Ralston turned to the old engineer, who looked like he had dozed off. "Stuart." Biggs opened his eyes and sat up. "The council members are concerned about whether Dark Luna can protect itself." Ralston used the word protect rather than the word defend. He didn't want to jump the gun.

Stuart drew a heavy breath, collecting his thoughts. The engineer knew he had to deliver this little speech just the right way. He didn't want to stampede the members into a panic. Stuart Biggs had anticipated this moment from the first day he spoke to Saul about this unbelievable venture. He knew this

moment would inevitably come. How should he phrase this? Maybe it was best to spit it out. Stuart knew that once the words were spoken, they couldn't be taken back. The council members were split, as far as Stuart could guess. About half would want to fight, and the other half would insist on negotiation. That would leave the tie-breaking vote to Ralston. Stuart didn't have an opinion on how the Chairman would vote, but it didn't matter. Stuart was nobody's patsy, and he was not about to hand over the most incredible technology and achievement to a bunch of Earth bureaucrats who couldn't manage a simple planet. Stuart stood up, reaching his full diminutive height of four feet eleven and a half inches. He scanned the members for a moment as if taking attendance.

"Council members, the question is not whether we can protect Dark Luna, our home. The question is if we can justify using the means that we have at our disposal. It seems that we are being forced to make a hasty decision due to the compressed timeline indicated in the Memorandum. That is disturbing to me. I had hoped for more time when this problem arose, but we do not have such a luxury." The council members and Ralston sat mute, waiting. Stuart's words played in their minds like a meteor shower. How could the tiny colony of less than a thousand people fight the forces of Earth?

"I know what some of you are wondering. What are the means of which I speak to you now? My labs have been actively developing weapons for thirty years. Our most recent breakthrough is a technology that is new and quite destructive. I would never condone instigating a conflict with anyone, least of all another planet. The questions that we must consider are elementary.

"1. Should Dark Luna submit to the demands of the Earth Consortium?"

"2. Does Earth have the legal right to dominate Dark Luna? We take nothing from them and have no contact with them."

"3. Should we consider this Memorandum an act of war, and if so, how should we respond?"

No one had spoken the word *War* though it was in the members' minds. These were strong words and lay at the crux of the matter. The council members knew this could not be delayed; they would have to decide soon.

Sydney Bergman raised her hand. Her sector, Landau, controlled the spaceport. The Dark Luna port now had sixty space-worthy ships capable of making trips to Earth and landing. The shuttles would also be loaded with enough fuel to return one time. They were not battleships, however.

"Yes, Councilmember Bergman." Ralston nodded.

Sydney addressed Stuart. "Are you suggesting that we use the spaceport fleet to go into battle?" Sydney viewed the mere mention of using her precious fleet in such a manner as abhorrent. Stuart smiled, waiting for her to finish. "These are emergency transport ships to be used for evacuation if some unforeseen disaster should arise. Stuart was aware of the design capabilities of the spaceport fleet. It was he who led the team that had designed them. The other members immediately interjected, and the ensuing confusion was too much for Ralston to tolerate.

"Council members, please, please. Settle down. We will all have a chance to be heard. Let's let engineer Biggs continue. Perhaps this is not as dire a situation as it first seemed." Ralston turned towards the slight man. "Mr. Biggs, what are our capabilities, precisely?" It seemed like a rational query.

Stuart knew he would have to come clean about what his team had been up to for the last thirty years. He waited until the room was silent and continued.

"We here at Dark Luna," he wanted to lay off some of the responsibility by using the word *We*, "have the first working model of the Biggs Ultra-high-frequency Magnetic Proton Canon. I like to call her," he smiled at the referral of gender, "The BUMP Canon. This device has a wide military application. It can disable and, at full power, destroy any

spacecraft. It can also be used in a harmonic amplification mode and be aimed towards the Earth. If that were the case, the BUMP Canon could wipe out all power and electronics on the entire side facing the moon. Of course, it can be charged and fired repeatedly until the entire planet is without power. Using the BUMP Canon in this fashion would destroy the entire planet's civilization. The downside is that the BUMP is stationary and, when fully activated, takes six hours to recharge. It can be fired at spacecraft in rapid succession. The good news is that we have constructed four BUMP Canons." The council members had the most unusual looks on their faces that ranged from a mélange of satisfaction to horror.

Sean Duffy raised his hand. He was the politest of all the council members and controlled the precious Astro Farms that supplied the Dark Luna population with food. "What if we reached out to Earth and opened a dialog with them? What harm could that do?" Several of the other members muttered in agreement.

Reins raised his hand, and Ralston acknowledged him. "I have a question." The room quieted as the council members waited for Reins to speak. "Are these Canons operational now? If they are, where are they located, and why are they not in the military budget?" The other members nodded.

None of them had ever heard a word of this project. The reality was that Stuart, and his team kept the Canon's development a secret. Even Ralston knew nothing about its development. Stewart Biggs had more secrets about Dark Luna than this.

"The four Canons are built on the prime meridian separating the near and far side of the moon at ninety-degree intervals. Due to the moon's oscillations during its twenty-eight-day revolution, no less than three Canons will have the capability of a synchronized blast at Earth at any given time. Each Canon has the capability to fire separately at a target or in a coordinated blast. If two of these weapons are fired at full power towards Earth simultaneously, it would mean the destruction of civilization as it exists now."

"The twelve billion inhabitants would be reduced to living in the Stone Age. Widespread starvation, disease, and death would undoubtedly quickly follow. We are in the process of designing a mobile Canon that can be mounted in a spacecraft, but that is some time off at this point." That was one of Stuart Biggs' many lies. Stuart and his team had already installed two portable units in the Dark Luna "research" ships that were under the control of the science development team. He kept that little secret in his back pocket in case things got dicey. "The reason that you have not been informed of the BUMP

Canon," Stuart glanced at Ralston, "is that it is on a need-to-know basis." He sat down.

Ralston was stunned. "Stuart, are you telling me I don't need to know what is happening right under my nose?" Stuart smiled and gave an indeterminate shrug.

Councilmember Mitchell Proffer raised his hand. The members had assumed a demeanor of politeness, and Ralston thought it was an improvement. He nodded to the member.

Mitchell Proffer's sector oversaw the hydro reservoir, and he took his position very seriously. After all, his father had been a swimming pool installer and maintenance man back on Earth, and everyone agreed that Mitchell's water was, if nothing else, perfect. "I suggest that we send a memorandum of our own back to Earth and, simultaneously, prepare for the worst-case scenario." Many of the members agreed, and the buzz increased in the group.

Councilwoman Henrietta Genaro held up her hand. Councilwoman Genaro's sector was responsible for the massive helium-3 fusion reactors that powered the colony. It was true that they had an inexhaustible supply of helium-3, but only four reactors. If anything were to happen to three of these reactors, the colony would perish in minutes. She believed that Dark Luna should shoot first and ask questions later. Stuart sat mute as the predictable

opinions of the council members surfaced. Stuart knew Genaro would lean towards a strike-first approach and agreed with her. That did not mean that he could say such a thing. The council members had to arrive at a decision on their own. He sat and watched as the kabuki played out. Either way, attack or negotiate, Stuart was ready.

"I believe that Dark Luna must act as soon as possible. Our only chance is to strike first and hard. What has Earth ever done for us?" Henrietta Genaro's tone was adamant and stressed that this was Dark Luna's only option.

Henrietta continued, "The power grid is essential for survival and should be protected at all costs. It is true that they are indeed subterranean and insulated from an electromagnetic pulse from a solar flare. There is no guarantee the reactors would survive a nuclear space detonation. Do we know what Earth's capabilities are? What has our military intelligence turned up?" The buzzing in the room increased.

Councilwoman Madeline Sutter-Rawlings stood and addressed the group. "You all know me." The other council members did indeed. Her manufacturing sector of Orientale had the most extensive square miles and the largest factories. These manufacturing stations could house the residents in an emergency if it came to that. Her vote

was essential for the other Dark Lunarians to be on board with the council's decisions.

"I am not given to rash decisions, and this is a time when we must keep our heads about us." Many members nodded in agreement. "I propose that we draft a response to this, this memorandum, and send it back as immediately as possible." Her suggestion did make sense, but Stuart didn't think it would affect the situation. A decisive first strike would end this, and Dark Luna could return to business as usual. Dealing the first offensive move would kill billions in a genocide of unprecedented proportions. Out of a vague detached curiosity, Stuart wondered how Ralston would vote. That was the only question in the engineer's mind.

Will Caruthers stood without looking at Ralston. He did, however, cast a fleeting glance at Stuart Biggs. "It could be a catastrophe for Dark Luna if Earth hits us first. We will have to prepare for this. If we had twenty-four days, maybe, but twenty-four hours, that's absurd. The medical facilities are good but certainly ill-equipped to handle hundreds of injured." Councilman Caruthers was not a believer in aggression. He dedicated his life to healing people and building a safe, stable, healthy colony on Dark Luna.

Will Caruthers loved the lunar colony and its residents and would stop at nothing to protect them.

He didn't want to eradicate ninety percent of the Earth's population either, but he would be damned if he would see all that he worked for and loved to be destroyed by a bunch of bureaucrats. That was the ethical and moral deal-breaker in Will's mind. "If Dark Luna can protect itself, there is no other option." He thought about his wife and two sons, and this talk of war terrified him.

Ralston had heard enough. This would come to a vote. The council would negotiate or do a preemptive strike, putting the blood of millions on their hands, his hands. He wished that his father was still alive.

"I believe we should vote on the matter; the sooner, the better." The members all nodded with Ralston in agreement. Stuart watched the show of hands and counted the ten votes. He was sad that the outcome was that Dark Luna would attempt to negotiate, but he had expected that. Still, he would be ready. Stuart was always prepared.

Olga Batrak was also ready. Olga maintained an iron grip on security and the Dark Luna Police. There was little to do in those respects. Most of her duties included gathering intelligence from the covert team left behind on Earth and adjusting the plan

for this day. She wondered how this fiasco had escaped her notice. Had her high-level operative been asleep at the switch? In any event, Olga would

intensify her surveillance on Earth. From Olga's perspective, it was true that you couldn't have too much information. She decided to contact her leading Consortium operative as soon as possible. She voted to attack immediately. Stuart predicted correctly.

The eleven leaders finished the document that would be sent along the same Yag-bounce stream directly to the President of the Earth Consortium. Copies of the response would also be sent to the Prime Ministers of the six continents.

3

THE CONSORTIUM

Eric Rappaport, the President of Earth Consortium, sat staring at the screen with Tal Mahat, Bradley Boyer, and General David Jason. The reply to the Memorandum appearing on the comm-screen disturbed Eric, but he did his best to hide his anxiety. The four men were the first to read the response from Dark Luna. Eric knew that he would have to act. Wheels, unstoppable wheels, had been set in motion. Eric looked over at the leader of the Consortium's military, General Jason. Eric believed that the General would never stand for a pullback now.

General Jason wanted to mount a full-scale attack as soon as Dark Luna's presence was known. He believed that the moon's vast supply of Helium-3 and the technology of building a fusion-powered colony on the moon might very well save the Earth from the impending doom of overpopulation. It mattered not to David that the Earth Space Force was, in reality, a Space Farce. The ships the

Consortium had salvaged from SAM Corp's disaster were little more than functioning antiques. They mainly used them to retrieve space junk in an attempt to recover the technology and clear the orbital paths before the orbits decayed and the debris broke the atmosphere. They had had some success over the last few years, but it was slow going.

The General believed that a nuclear warhead, one of those salvaged from the Russian stockpile, would do the trick of rendering the colony inoperative. It didn't matter to him if, in the process, he destroyed a handful of colonists. General Jason didn't concern himself with such mundane thoughts as innocent lives. People die every day, right? The inexperienced General believed all it would take was one strategic detonation, and the colony would fail in minutes. What did they have, three shuttles that had not gone up in the SAM Corp blast fifty years ago? That would be enough. David Jason wanted to be on the shuttle and be the person who would release the nuke. How dare they defy the Earth? How dare they defy him?

Eric turned to Brad Boyer. "What are the moon's capabilities to defend themselves?" Boyer headed the Earth Consortium Science and Engineering (ECSC) division. He was one of the scientists employed by SAM Corp, who was left behind. Up to the time that he read the lunar colony's response, he had

considered himself lucky to be alive. The signatures at the bottom of the Memorandum changed this belief completely.

Bradly knew Stuart Biggs and never liked the man. Where Stewart was short, Bradly stood at over six feet. Where Stewart was thin to the point of skin stretched over bone, Bradly carried an extra sixty pounds of brains. Where Stewart was brilliant beyond compare, Bradly was, at best, a mediocre technician. Bradly Boyer was one of the few employees of SAM Corp to have been left behind. A directive from Stuart himself dictated this exclusion. There would be no mediocrity tolerated on Dark Luna.

Eric Rappaport looked back at the screen and reread the words, memorizing them.

In response

This communication attempts to open a dialogue with the Earth Consortium in response to the injunction issued on June 21, 2069, at 3 p.m. Earth Eastern Standard Time.

The colony, known as Dark Luna, is a free planet and does not fall under The Earth Consortium's jurisdiction. We recognize no governing body other than that of Dark Luna. We will not respond to the demand to cease the occupation of Dark Luna and return to Earth to be prosecuted. Any attempt to take,

attack, or interfere with Dark Luna by any force whatsoever will be met with greater response.

We, the citizens of Dark Luna, have no wish to interact with the Earth Consortium politically, economically, or militarily. This transmission is our last communication with the Earth Consortium. We urge President Eric Rappaport of Earth Consortium to consider this action carefully. An attack, once done, cannot be undone.

Respectfully,

Stuart Biggs

Saul Meyers

In an alarming epiphany, Bradley Boyer understood how Saul Meyers and that pompous fool Stuart Biggs had duped the world. He never liked Stuart. It wasn't as if they had disagreements or arguments. Stuart merely ignored Bradley, and that irritated the man. Brad remembered how he felt an elusive satisfaction when the news report announced that the entire SAM Corp staff had been incinerated. Serves them all right, Brad thought to himself. He had never really fit in at SAM. The fact that he was the last technician of the largest corporation in the world immediately propelled him into the lofty nitch as Head of Science. Bradley Boyer would float there, accomplishing little while enjoying the fruits of his privileged position.

Had it not been for his second-in-line director, Robert Cohen, the science division would have been an abysmal failure. Robert was the brains that had kept the shuttles running and directed most of the programs for the past twenty years. After the hydrazine blast, they had to convert the shuttles to the solid ammonium perchlorate system. This conversion to solid fuel had apparent drawbacks in the speed and duration of shuttle flights, and the expense of the fuel was no bargain, but there was no other alternative in Cohen's mind. Meyers destroyed the hydrazine stockpile, along with the technology to produce and use it, in the explosion.

Rappaport turned to the three men. "Well?" The single word carried a volume of questions.

"Well, what?" Bradley Boyer said. Eric dismissed him and looked at the General, ignoring Boyer.

"It is clear to me that we should attack as soon as we are able." The General said.

"Maybe we shouldn't be so hasty." Bradley wondered what the capabilities of the colony were. He didn't want to get caught with his knickers down and no space force.

"They're bluffing. We're ready to go now. The shuttle is fueled, and the nuke is onboard." David Jason didn't believe a word of the veiled threat. In his mind, the Memorandum was nothing more than

smoke and mirrors designed to intimidate the Earth. Jason didn't believe the moon could be stronger than the Earth Consortium. "We should strike now while the iron is hot!"

Eric raised his hand. "Hold on there, David. We need to get the Prime Ministers into the loop. I can't order a strike on a moon colony without them in agreement, especially when we are unsure of their military strengths. Our Intel is good on this, but it's not perfect. This Memorandum may be all posturing and lies to intimidate us." He turned to Bradley. "Can we find out more to be sure whether or not the colony has a viable defense force?" Bradley wasn't sure how to accomplish this, but he nodded in agreement. Anything was better than admitting his mediocrity.

"It will, most likely, come to a vote." Eric Rappaport felt tired lately. The constant strain of guiding a failing planet in crisis was taking its toll. Now, he was considering a war-mongering General's suggestion that they attack another planet. He longed for his youth when a person could go to a store and buy a piece of fruit. Those were the good old days.

4

SHADOW LEADER

Dark Luna was immediately catapulted into a state of frenetic activity upon sending the response. The ten council members raced back to their sectors to prepare for battle if Earth didn't heed their warning.

Ralston sat alone in the room with Stuart. He would have to have one of those inconvenient conversation with the engineer. What else had Stuart kept in the dark? Stuart waited for the inevitable questions.

"Stuart, what else don't I know about?"

"About what?" Stuart was not going to be helpful."

"About what?" Ralston spat. "About everything. I want to know everything, and I want to know it now." Ralston sounded to himself as if he was throwing a childish tantrum.

"Well, Ralston," it sounded odd to the Chairman for Stuart to address him by name. Stuart never called him anything. "Everything is a big word. Are you

sure that you want to know?" No, Ralston wasn't sure, not even a little sure, but what choice did he have.

"Yes, please." He answered, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

"Let's start with Para bellum, shall we?"

Ralston sat there as Stuart described Para Bellum and the developments his team had made. It wasn't just about the BUMP Canon, which was only a tiny portion of the science team's progress. The team had been at it for decades. The BUMP Canon was only one facet of the work.

"There are many other levels of subterranean tunnels and rooms that had been excavated and turned into labs. What you know of is but a small portion of Dark Luna. We have provided enough space for the entire population to live and survive if an attack from Earth comes to pass." Stuart mentioned this as if it was no big deal. Stuart described an entire shadow facility under the main colony, which the lunar city could immediately use in an emergency.

"How could you have secretly accomplished this in a closed colony like Dark Luna?" Ralston's voice squeaked, sounding like a young boy's.

Again, Stuart smiled, "You can thank your father for that." Saul had not been idle in his last years. Furthermore, Saul had never been in the habit

of explaining anything to his son. Ralston always accepted this fact about his father. He was beginning to see the wisdom of Saul Meyer's plan.

Stuart also withheld these facts from the council, not wanting to influence their vote. Ultimately, it mattered little; if Earth attacked, it would collapse from a pulse of the BUMP Canon; if Earth failed to attack, it would collapse under its bloated inertia and gravitas. The members voted to negotiate. Ralston listened to the details and was astounded, but it was nothing compared to how he would soon feel.

"You are aware we have a fleet of sixty space-worthy ships." Ralston nodded. Everyone on Dark Luna knew of the regalia of ships. That was common knowledge. Ralston always questioned the necessity of having such a fleet. It made more sense after the Memorandum had arrived.

"What you do not know is that we are constructing ten more ships in the mare Chi plains past the mountains on the outskirts of Orientale. An entirely new form of propulsion will power these ships." Ralston felt his anxiety levels rise as Stuart continued. Wasn't it Ralston's legacy that had put him in control of the Dark Luna as the Councilman? He now wondered if that was the case. He looked at the engineer and asked himself if he had ever been in control of Dark Luna. "This engine will extend our reach to Mars and beyond." Stuart softened his tone.

"Surely, Councilman, you know that Dark Luna is only a temporary colony, a waystation, if you will. According to my calculations, this colony will collapse in under seventy years."

"What do you mean, collapse in seventy years?" Ralston had never asked himself the problematic question of how long Dark Luna would last. He just assumed, as all the colonists assumed, that Dark Luna would go on forever. The reality of a thousand-person population was already stretching the limits of food and water production. It was true that they had ample resources and limitless energy, but one couldn't eat helium-3. The colony would starve without a steady influx of supplies.

Stuart knew the colonists could never return to Earth; the planet had already reached the breaking point. That left onward and outward. Stuart Biggs had his sights set on Mars long before he had trenched the first lunar tunnels. His only regret was that he would never survive long enough to realize his dream of living on the red planet.

"I am referring to Mars. It is the most logical step. The moons of Jupiter and Saturn will come much later, but Mars will be the second step on our journey." Stuart paused and watched Ralston think.

Ralston was now sure that he didn't want to hear more. Mars? Gas giants? Moons? This conversation was insane. Ralston calmed his mind

and thought about the little man sitting before him. In a flash of lucidity, he understood Biggs and his plan. The goal had never been to merely leave Earth. It was to populate the solar system, and for the first time, he appreciated Stuart Biggs's intellect. His father had made a superlative choice when he hired the little man.

"So, how are we going to get there?" Ralston realized that to buck fate would be foolish and that this fate rested upon Stuart Biggs's shoulders as humankind spread through the solar system like a fungus.

"We have a new drive system that we will be testing within the year. It's very similar to the BUMP Canon with some design changes. The projection array is de-weaponized and diffused to push over a prolonged period rather than emit in a single burst. The Mag Proton emitter was the key to unlocking the technology." Ralston looked confused. He was not a scientist by any stretch of the imagination, and Stuart's explanation left him mystified. "Think of a hydro jet; it can be directed into a weapon of sorts and can also be used for propulsion." Ralston nodded his head. He didn't understand any of this and wanted the crash course tutelage and the ache in his head to stop. "The long and the short of it is the BUMP Canon can destroy a world or accelerate a spacecraft to near-light speed. That puts Mars, when its orbit is

at perihelic opposition, only four weeks journey away. In a worst-case scenario, the trip would last eight to twelve weeks. In any case, interplanetary space flight is here." Ralston sagged in his seat as Biggs's plan inflated his mind.

"So, what's next?" Ralston wasn't sure he wanted an answer.

"Why war, of course." Stuart's answer was so clammy and cold that it chilled Ralston's soul.

Stuart looked at the room clock. I have to get going; there's a lot to prepare. I predict that the Earth Consortium will attack on schedule. We are charging the Canons as we speak. With a bit of luck, we can take out the ship that carries the warhead before it rounds the prime meridian."

"How can you know what Earth is planning?" There was so much that Ralston didn't understand, and it irked him that Stuart sounded so sure in his prediction.

"That's simple. We have a spy at the highest levels. He has just contacted us with the details. Three ships have left Earth and will attempt to detonate a nuclear warhead in a bit over eighteen hours. Don't let that concern you. We have hardened the entire facility to withstand a ten-megaton EMP blast. Get some rest; everything is under control. The war should be a short one." Stuart smiled and left the room.

5

SPACE FARCE

"Is the man crazy?" The two men sat alone in the presidential office as Eric Rappaport ranted to Tal Mahat. Tal Mahat shot back a look of agreement. He always sided with the President, whether he concurred with him or not. This situation was one of those cases. Tal Mahat was of the mind that, in the immediate future, an attack on the lunar colony would not go well for Earth. He had reason to think this. He also believed that an attack was as it should be and, in the end, would be better for both Dark Luna and Earth.

"Very possibly, Mr. President."

"What is he thinking? Attack the moon! We can't keep the ships flying, let alone take the three we have left and use them to attack an outpost that poses no threat to Earth." Eric was going off the deep end as his trusted advisor, Tal Mahat, spoke in low tones.

"Sir, try to calm yourself. The meeting with the Prime Ministers is scheduled for thirty minutes from now. Try to prepare yourself. A vote is imminent,

and how it goes will affect the future of Earth considerably.

The fact that Tal Mahat Rhuaad was the advisor to the President was no accident. His father, Soli Clovis Rhuaad, had trained him to think lucidly, questioning everything, which was the opposite model of the current educational system on Earth. The boy was as quick as a whip and took to the rigid training of swimming in the river of Consortium intrigue like a fish to water. When Soli passed away at seventy-two, Tal Mahat was already indispensable to the President. Tal Mahat always seemed to foresee every obstacle before it happened. He was ahead of every major problem, and the number of avoided disasters resulting from his accurate advice was uncountable.

"Your father trained you well, Tal." Eric mused and took a deep breath as he forced himself to appear presidential.

"Thank you, Mr. President." Tal Mahat always acted unpretentious and humble, as his father had taught him to be. Yes, Soli Clovis Rhuaad did an exceptional job as he groomed his son for this all-important position; how could it be otherwise? Saul Meyers and Stuart Biggs had personally trained Soli Clovis Rhuaad.

The six Prime Ministers of the Earth Consortium shared the screen with the President, the head of the

science division, and Tal Mahat. General David Jason, the head of the space force, was not in attendance.

The Prime Ministers were more than a bit shocked when Tal Mahat laid the situation out for them. They were, of course, not in the loop when the Memorandum had been sent. General Jason had insisted on this. None of the six leaders were even aware that a colony on the moon existed, and Tal Mahat let the ensuing pandemonium bubble over and waited for it to run its course.

"Why have we not been kept up to speed on this?" Robert Pudelko, the Minister of North America-Canada, almost shouted into his microphone.

"Why are we always the last to know everything?" Umberto Shoeps of South America-Mexico was in a constant state of agitation. He believed that the President and the other Prime Ministers were briefed, as usual, before he was.

"We are attacking the moon?" The Asian Prime Minister, Zin Zhang Song, couldn't believe what he was hearing. People were starving in Asia. Rumors surfaced about cannibalism in the mountains and bush, and Zin Zhang Song did not discount them.

"Can we please speak about important matters?" The entire continent of Europe had been without power for over a week, and Lilith Dunham wanted

some help, and she wanted it now. This absurd discussion of attacking the moon infuriated her.

Uvedera Rondante pleaded, "Please listen to me. Africa is experiencing the worst drought in over a hundred years. My people are drinking seawater. Please, you must help us. There are insufficient food stores, and now this situation. Millions potentially will die if we do not address this problem immediately!" Rondante began to weep as the magnitude of the crisis flowed through her. Her beloved Africa was dying, and it had, at this moment, become painfully evident that there was no help coming.

Stan Krakow, the Australian Prime Minister, sat there mute. His continent was at least stable, but it wouldn't stay that way for long. The President and the other Prime Ministers tended to ignore Stan. Australia was like a stubbed toe. It was bothersome and down there somewhere, but who really cared? The other Prime Ministers tried to ignore Australia, and Tal Mahat watched the meeting explode off-topic as the Prime Ministers pleaded with the President for help.

"Please, Ministers, please. Calm down. These problems are the reason that this meeting is taking place."

Tal Mahat wasn't fond of group tele-meetings. They were too hard to control. They always veered

off-topic to the emergency requests of the individual Prime Ministers. Try as he would, the leaders of the Earth Consortium were usually implacable. Tal Mahat would have to address today's crises. He had to explain it in a way that would force the Prime Ministers to make a decision unilaterally. It didn't matter whether they chose to attack or not. Either vote would herd the Earth straight into the corral of Stuart Biggs's plan.

"The reason that we have called this meeting is to solve our catastrophic problems. The lunar colony will give us the energy and technology needed to survive. It should be no surprise when I tell you that Earth has reached the tipping point. The Earth has passed the point of no return. Without this energy and technology, collapse is imminent." Tal Mahat paused, and the group was silent, pondering.

Eric Rappaport quietly observed the group. He wished that General Jason were present to explain the details of the attack. The President wondered why the General hadn't attended this all-important meeting. Eric couldn't think about that now; he had more significant problems to deal with.

Tal Mahat wanted to stitch this meeting up. Precious seconds were ticking, and he had another appointment he could not afford to miss.

"The reason for this meeting is to take a vote. Should we attack the moon or negotiate with them

for help?" A vote to attack was absurd. Diverting precious meager resources to a lunar attack didn't seem logical, but on the other hand, there was the energy. Even if an attack was successful, there were so many questions. Could Earth even mount an attack? Could Earth get this energy and transport it to Earth? How would they build the reactors necessary to convert the helium-3 into energy? How would the moon respond to a request for aid? There were too many issues, but Tal Mahat pushed the Ministers toward a vote despite these concerns.

"We will start by taking a vote. The question is whether to attack the moon or negotiate with the colony for aid." Tal Mahat looked up at the screen. The Prime Ministers were at the end of their rope. Tal Mahat had no feeling about how the group would vote because it didn't matter to him. He believed that Earth would fall into the dovetail of Stuart Biggs's scheme either way.

Eric Rappaport watched this vote play out. In the end, the vote was evenly split as three voted to attack and three voted to negotiate. He had hoped to avoid this situation. That meant he would have to cast the tiebreaker, which was not good. That also meant that the Prime Ministers and the world would hold him responsible if things were to go awry. Due to his particular brand of mediocrity, Eric was never a fan

of accepting responsibility for situations, let alone ones as serious as this.

Eric Rappaport cast his vote to negotiate. Half of the group was in disagreement, but he would deal with them later. The Earth Consortium would reach out one more time.

The moment Rappaport cast his vote, the telecom signaled that an urgent emergency call was coming through, and the diode on the screen began to flash red. Eric had never received one of these calls and stared at the light, terrified. The briefings stated they were invariably a precursor to disaster. He stared at the strobing light diode for ten blips before picking the receiver up. Tal Mahat has stopped the video feed. The President touched the handset as if it would give him an electric shock.

Tal Mahat stared at the President's face as he listened; his complexion blanched almost white, and he was thankful that the Prime Ministers would not notice the change. The trusted advisor didn't have to hear the conversation. Not only did he surmise what had just happened, but he also anticipated this scenario when he noticed the General was not present.

Yes, the Earth Consortium Space Farce had launched under General David Jason's control, and the die was cast.

6

REALITY CHECK

Stuart Biggs sat at the BUMP Canon's controls as he watched the telemetry of the three Earth ships approach. He had to smile. These were the very shuttles Stuart had designed more than four decades ago. He had to give Brad Boyer credit where it was due; it was a miracle that those old suds-buckets were still flying. Stuart knew nothing about Robert Cohen and how the engineer had run the space program from the shadows. Had Stuart known about Cohen's talent, he would have already recruited this star into Dark Luna's constellation of brilliance.

The fleet of three shuttles was more than halfway to Dark Luna, and it would be a few hours before they would be in range to deploy the nuke.

"There are approximately four hours and twenty-three minutes until the attack." The other science team members sat at their consoles, each controlling one of the four BUMP Canons. Stuart would fire the first shot. If the skirmish went as he

anticipated, there would be only one pulse, and he wanted whatever resulting blame to fall on his head.

Stuart had located the BUMP Canons on the lunar meridian in the periphery sectors of Tau, Eta, Nu, and Iota. This placement would enable the Science techs to fire the Canons at any incoming target, including the Earth.

The scientists that comprised Stuart's science team thought of him as a god and would die to protect him. Stuart had hand-chosen each of them and personally trained them. The sheer power of the technology they wielded would have been terrifying to Eric Rappaport had he been aware. The twenty-three scientists watched the clock tick down. The BUMP Canons were fully charged.

"Get that lunatic on the com!" Eric was practically screaming. "I want to talk to him, personally!"

Tal Mahat had already tried to raise the General's ship but received no answer.

"The General's ship is not responding." Tal Mahat knew that the attack had gone dark, which was standard military protocol, not that there had been an attack in his memory. Tal Mahat killed the telecom broadcast, ending the minister's meeting without further explanation. Tal Mahat knew that what the prime ministers didn't know would hurt them most definitely, and he smiled as he left the President's

office. Tal Mahat had to make his way to the pickup point. He would not stay on Earth and witness the demise of an entire civilization, thus perishing along with it. Tal Mahat had to remain focused and believe in Stuart Biggs's plan. The guaranteed Armageddon wouldn't be the end of the race of Homo sapiens, but merely a transition as humankind finally achieved their destiny and became children of the stars. The prospect of seeing Dark Luna for the first time thrilled him as he made his way to the pickup location. He believed it would be farewell to Earth forever. He believed wrong.

Eric Rappaport called for his trusty advisor, and the silence in the room made his insecurity spike. There would be no Tal Mahat to prevent Eric from being caught with his pants down.

General David Jason never quite recovered from his electoral loss to be President of the Earth Consortium. He ran against Eric Rappaport in the Earth's single-party system and lost in a landslide. David found it difficult to fathom how a candidate as blasé as Eric Rappaport could have beaten him. David never stopped to consider that the political deck had previously been well stacked, and the election outcome was cast in stone long before the vote.

David believed that he was the most suitable and logical choice, the best choice for Earth's future. He mounted his campaign on the precepts of military organization and survival. David knew there would have to be drastic changes, military changes if the world would survive. From this standpoint, the General believed he was the only viable candidate. The planet's current state was teetering on the precipice of collapse as it consumed itself in a final insane attempt to survive. He never considered that the voting electorate could be swayed to vote for the lesser of two evils. The electorate believed Eric Rappaport to be the choice that would do the least amount of damage to the planet.

General Jason watched the screen from his command seat on the most space-worthy ship, the Galaxy. The Galaxy and the two accompanying ships, Endeavor, and the Challenger, flew towards the moon in a classic V formation.

The shuttle payload was a five-megaton neutron bomb requisitioned from the Russian armaments' stockpiles, which the army had maintained for unclear reasons. Eric Rappaport wanted to dispose of these devices years ago and now realized the price of his procrastination. It was clear to Rappaport that the General was unhinged. He was also in control of the Earth's Space Force. Eric wanted to speak with Tal Mahat, but the assistant was nowhere to be found.

This crisis wasn't a time for his advisor to make himself scarce. *Where the hell was he?*

The three ships sped towards Dark Luna at over five thousand feet per second. The General couldn't feel the motion, but he did experience a palpable excitement. This moment was why he had been born. The General envisioned his return to Earth as a hero. The Prime Ministers would unanimously declare him the Consortium leader, and a new age of military order would ensue. Eric Rappaport would have no choice other than to resign, thus making way for the neo-military regime and a New World Order.

David thought about the great leaders of Earth's history, Genghis Kahn, Timur, Attila the Hun, Vlad the Impaler, Idi Amin, Pol Pott, and Joseph Stalin; Adolph Hitler was his personal favorite. He would take his rightful pre-destined place in the annals of history as he saved the world from itself by living up to his idol's legacies. Nothing could go wrong. The moon would not; could not defy the forces of Earth. The three ships were less than an hour away from the payload drop.

Stuart Biggs watched the approach of the three ships on the screen and yawned. He felt like he needed a nap but shook himself awake. There would be time

to sleep later when he took the long space nap. He spoke into his comm-set, "One hour until arrival."

Tal Mahat rode the elevator down into the depths of the launch pad. The last SAM Corp space shuttle had peacefully slept in its silo for years in the underground launch bunker. Stuart designed it to be ready when the inevitable bug-out would take place. The underground launch pad was placed just outside Washington DC, conveniently affording someone in the Oval Office a ring-side seat to view the launch. The shuttle, SAM-1, would carry the last of the members of the Earth team in a final terrestrial departure to Dark Luna. Stuart Biggs had thought of everything.

The President's advisor sat in his seat as eighty-four of the final Dark Lunarians, who had never actually seen the colony, watched the countdown. They were going into space, and the prospect exhilarated them. This last flight was the promised reward for remaining behind on Earth to finish Biggs's plan's covert execution.

The clock showed thirty seconds to launch. When Tal Mahat's com-phone vibrated. The calls had been coming in every few minutes. They were all from Eric Rappaport, and he ignored them. Tal Mahat answered what would be his last call on Earth.

"Tal, where are you?" Eric demanded. Tal Mahat noticed that the President sounded shaken; his voice carried the familiar twang of panic. Things weren't going well with Eric's plan at all. This attack was never supposed to happen. Eric Rappaport was alone in a crisis for the first time in his tenure as President and was utterly lost. He needed his faithful advisor to inform him, to guide him, to show him the way.

"I'm on the last shuttle to the moon." At this point, Tal Mahat saw no reason to manufacture a story. He loathed fabricating even the smallest fibs. He had always believed in his father's advice that it was much easier to be truthful. You couldn't get caught in a lie.

"Excuse me. What did you say?" The cresting tone of panic made Tal Mahat smile. The President had good reason to panic. Tal Mahat wouldn't excuse the President this last time.

"The shuttle, the last shuttle embarking for the moon. We're set to launch, right about," Tal Mahat blithely informed the President as he glanced at the countdown timer (three, two, one) "now." Eric could hear the roar of the hydrazine engines in his earpiece, and he knew that Tal Mahat, the loyal and trusted advisor to the President, was neither.

"Oh, I have to hang up; there is an announcement. Goodbye, Eric." Tal Mahat settled

into the flight and thought of the days when his father had tutored him in government ways. Earth's mass educational system was an utter joke, and the latest generation could barely feed themselves. Tal Mahat knew how they would fare as Earth's resources imploded in the play's final act, entitled *Humanities' Follies*. He remembered his father's words, *Remember Tal, always think for yourself; never be led astray*. He would heed his father's advice.

Eric Rappaport stared out of his office window as the last SAM Corp ship launched, wishing he could be on it.

Stuart typed in the three ships' coordinates as they rounded the moon's prime meridian. He would take no chances that Tal Mahat's report had been in error. The ship's velocities had decreased, and they drifted in a lazy formation over the Bay of Dew, making a direct pass into the Iota sector. Stuart poised his finger over the fire button on the console. *Wait*, he cautioned himself, *just a little longer*. He could see all three of the ships and pressed the fire command.

General David Jason was in a state of almost uncontrollable excitement. This skirmish would be his first and only battle, and he felt stimulated as never before. Nothing happened as the ships cruised over Dark Luna; so far, so good. David planned to drop the nuke and hit the shuttle's engines. *I knew*

they were bluffing; he smiled to himself. He would then detonate the device when the Earth fleet was safely out of the blast radius. David Jason peered out of the shuttle view window. "The place doesn't look like much," he mused to the flight commander. The undecorated general was about to drop the payload when the pulse from the BUMP blast hit the Galaxy head-on.

The beauty of the BUMP Canon was the iron nitride magnetar proton pulse that operated at 137.3269 Teslas. The intense magnetic surge excited the protons in every atom in the blast path, thus fragmenting them and forming infinitesimally tiny sub-atomic particles of matter and antimatter. Before reassembling back into a proton, these particles remained in existence as the strong and the weak forces acted like atomic rubber bands. The duration of the fragmentation was less than a plank in real-time. That was enough of an interval for one of the antimatter particles to find a positively charged speck of matter and collide. The two tiny foes of nature would mate and annihilate each other in a blast that would make General David Jason's five-kiloton nuke look like the pop of a cap gun.

David Jason's glee was wiped from existence as the two particles collided. The blast took the three shuttles and the BUMP Canon, located directly below the ships, out instantly. It didn't matter to

Stuart. He had two more in inventory but doubted that he would need them. Stuart would see that they were retooled to become the first BUMP drives in the great interplanetary cruisers slated to be built. The small engineer stood up at his console and stretched his back. *Yes, now would be a good time for a nap.*

Eric Rappaport held the silent telecom and wondered how the moon had gotten the best of Earth. He needed closure and an explanation of how this could have happened to him. The reality was that Saul Meyers and Stuart Biggs had been planning for this moment for forty years.

The Presidential offices had food and emergency supplies for at least a year. By then, it would be too late for the rest of the world. There would be riots, mass disease, and famine-scale food and water shortages. The President watched through the remote monitors as Earth tore itself to shreds. Eric had always imagined how the overpopulated world would react to society's collapse. His predictions paled in comparison to the reality of the breakdown.

Eighteen months later, Eric emerged from the Presidential bunker when the power failed. The food and water stores were all consumed. He could withstand many hardships, but the thought of starving to death in the darkness eventually drove

him out of his Presidential lair. As a child, Eric had always been afraid of the dark. Even as an adult, it triggered an irrational, claustrophobic reaction, and when the lights failed, he decided to go outside for a stroll.

He emerged from the shelter under the President's offices on Pennsylvania Avenue. The scene that greeted him was one of catastrophic dystopian destruction.

Rioters had demolished the entire city. The vehicles and rubble that choked the streets looked like a war had occurred. The empty streets made Eric long for the abhorrent crowds of a mere year and a half ago. After eighteen months without power, food, water, or services, the Earth's population had been reduced from seven billion people to under five hundred million. These modern-day nomads spread across the globe, searching for food that was not there. These stragglers would learn the meaning of the term, a good education.

Eric was unaware that the only remaining food supply in Washington DC's city limits were other humans. Three marauding food scavenger gang members eyeballed Eric from behind a derelict car as he wandered the Avenue. Earth Consortium's President rambled up the street and leaned on the exact vehicle that the scavengers crouched behind. Eric couldn't hold back the fear and sadness, and he

started to cry. Eric Rappaport wept for all humankind; he wept for the fact that he was alone; being left alone was his greatest fear. He wondered what the next meal would be. The three scavengers pounced on Eric; it would be him.

Robert Cole Cohen was an intelligent man. He would often quip that his mother had drowned all the stupid ones. Bob Cohen had foreseen the demise of the Earth Consortium and the imminent collapse of civilization years ago. Being second in command of the EC Science Division, he controlled considerable resources that afforded him the wherewithal to feather a safety-nest for himself and his family.

Bob Cohen had moved into the science lab's basement, creating ample living space for his loved ones. He slowly, over time, requisitioned the supplies necessary to ensure their survival for at least a year. What would come after that would be anyone's guess.

When the scientist would sneak out of the building at night, he always carried weapons. Bob knew that he was no more than a walking meal ticket. Somehow, he had to get the lay of the land. The forays confirmed that society had indeed digressed to a sputtering kettle of violence and worse. Bob bided his time. He would have to plan for the day that his family would emerge into

the new day. He had no idea if other people had planned as he did. After more than a year of hiding, Bob knew there was only one way to find out.

When Robert Cole Cohen emerged from his sequestered life, he was armed to the teeth.

7

NEW LUNA

Tal Mahat loved life on Dark Luna, which had been renamed New Luna after the Earth's collapse. The irony of the old name was not lost on Tal Mahat; the colony was anything but dark. It was the Earth that had its lights extinguished decades ago. This new life was a dream come true for the most trusted advisor. Tal Mahat had become the right hand of Ralston Meyers or was it the other way around. Tal Mahat had planned the advancement of New Luna beyond Ralston's concepts and meager plans. It was tricky, to be sure, as Tal Mahat adjusted the scheme of New Luna, which would encompass far more than governing the tiny satellite. There was one thing he was sure of: Ralston Meyers must never suspect he was not in control of the future.

The shipyards constructing the massive interplanetary vessels operated in low orbit around the moon. Stuart Biggs had insisted on this as his

final project before he retired at age ninety-five. Many council members objected to the plan, but Stuart's insistence made all the difference in the end. What was a mere budget compared to the exploration of the Solar System and the migration of humanity? The fuel savings alone would be fantastic. The engineered fragility in the great interplanetary cruiser ships' design could never have withstood the g-forces of a launch from even the moon's lowered gravity wells, let alone the Earth's. The titanic Mars-bound vessels rested in various stages of completion, slumbering in orbit like enormous hibernating brutes, as Oliver and Nova prepared for the first expedition to Mars.

It was Nova Biggs who laid out the initial scheduling and designed the first settlement on Mars.

"Why should we wait, Ollie? The ships are almost ready. We should establish Red-1 as soon as possible." Nova sat with her brother at her command console in the military spaceport center. The term military had no application now that her father had destroyed the Earth Consortium's meager fleet. Still, Nova kept the name, and Oliver agreed. The label made her feel in control, in a back-handed sort of way. The recent changes to the Biggs plan lent new respect to the term military when weighed against the possibility of action by House Rhuaad.

“Red-1?” Oliver smiled at his sister. It was a good name. Her smartness edged her cuteness out, and he often overlooked how pretty the woman was. "I want to be sure that we can do this flawlessly. The first two trips are make-it or break-it deals. We also have to keep the defense capabilities quiet. Tal Mahat must not be aware of our firepower. Hopefully, it won't ever come to it, but still."

Oliver Biggs studied his sister's schematics. Her design concept was that the first two interplanetary vessels would never return to New Luna. They were unique because they could execute a landing. All of the following vessels would be incapable of a touchdown and spend the duration of their lives in space. Smaller shuttles would ferry people and goods to the surface. The landing of the two great ships would establish the permanent base on Mer Opportunity along the Martian equator. They could accomplish this jump-start only if the colonists could cannibalize the first two vessels to form the colony's infrastructure.

Nova designed the parts to be deconstructed and assembled into the first permanent living quarters. The basic design of each vessel was radically different and specific. Some components would be shelters, while others would be used as construction equipment. The massive BUMP drives that propelled the spacecrafts would be the power sources that

supplied the colony with energy. After the colony's initial landings and implantation, it would be merely a matter of feeding the base, Red-1, until it could attain self-sufficiency. Oliver left the design of Red-1 to Nova. It had been the right decision. He had other problems to deal with, and they were growing worse each year.

Cassiopeia Aries Taylor, or Cat as her parents referred to her, thought it was the best day of her life when she was admitted to the science program on New Luna at ten years of age. It was as it should have been. After all, her parents were descendants of the original Biggs's departure from Earth, with both parents having been engineers cherry-picked by Stuart himself. They had seen to it that the child's technical education was second to none. Her father, Diff Taylor (short for Differential), and Penny Harwich, his wife, were responsible for setting up the hydrazine explosion that obliterated SAM Corp over a half-century ago. They had excelled in the task.

Each day of their lives on the moon colony was busier than the one before it. That did not deter them from having a daughter, and Cat thrived in the science curriculum that threaded everything from school to her home life.

Yes, admission into the science program was the best day in the young girl's life until she met Oliver

Biggs for the first time at sixteen. She couldn't take her eyes off Oliver in math telemetry class, and in the time it took an electron to orbit a hydrogen proton, Cat made up her mind. The young man's china-blue eyes mesmerized the girl, and she knew that she would marry Oliver Biggs and no other. Oliver and Cat were perfectly matched, which made sense to the girl from a biological standpoint; they were over six feet tall, had blonde hair, and were ahead of the science program's curve. It was definitely a match made by the stars.

Stuart Biggs and Diff Taylor would have been pleased with their children's union if they were still alive. Their interment pods were jetting to the outer reaches of the solar system. The only family members to attend Oliver and Cat's wedding ceremony were Nova and the mothers, Rachel and Penny. The ceremony was quiet, as most on the lunar colony were wont to be, and the newlyweds swore undying devotion to each other with the stars as a witness.

As a trusted advisor and friend to Ralston Meyers, Tal Mahat had clandestinely planned for the day House Rhuaad could restore the Earth to its former glory. The Councilman had difficulty remembering a time when Tal Mahat had not been at his side. It wasn't long ago that Ralston carried the entire weight

of governing Dark Luna on his shoulders. Now that he was approaching seventy, he found the advice of Tal Mahat, the master advisor, indispensable.

Tal Mahat believed that the acorn never fell far from the tree. He observed this over the long years of his life when he remembered how his father had trained him and how he now trained his son. Tal Mahat wasn't the least bit amazed when Stuart's son, Oliver Biggs, was assigned control of the science and development sector. What Tal Mahat knew about the applied sciences wouldn't fill a soy basket. To Tal Mahat, science was a lot like art; he didn't understand it, but he knew the goods when he saw them, and Oliver Biggs had the goods. By the time Stuart Biggs's burial pod was jettisoned into space past the orbit of Mars, the Biggs family dynasty was established, and nothing on the Earth or moon could usurp it.

If knowledge was power, the Biggs children's specialized tutelage was a mental muscle on steroids. As brilliant as Oliver was, his younger sister, Nova, was more so. When Oliver routinely used calculus at ten, Nova was proficient at seven. When Oliver understood telemetry and interplanetary launch science at thirteen, Nova grasped it at eleven. There seemed no limit to the two sibling's abilities.

Stuart had chosen his wife carefully. Rachel Corwin was the top scientist in Stuart's team and had

been so since before the blast at SAM Corp. It was only logical that the two should become mates. If the Rhuaad family were to control the political landscape, it seemed only right that the Biggs family would own the sciences as knowledge and data were selectively passed down through the subsequent generations. Passing the torch in this manner would guarantee that the gene pool would be magnified, and the two acorns, Oliver and Nova, as well as their descendants, would remain close to the tree of knowledge as Stuart and Rachel had deemed.

"Tor, you are now twenty years old. You are one of our finest pilots and have a good head on your shoulders." Tal Mahat looked up at his son. The young man loomed over the father at almost seven feet tall. The low lunar gravity and good diet produced excessive bone growth patterns in the children. The torsion suit that Tor wore daily had exercised his physique to compensate for the low lunar gravity. Tal Mahat stood at an average of five foot ten inches tall, but his son towered over him. Tor Bleil placed his hand on his father's shoulder, and Tal Mahat felt like a small child. He believed his son was the new generation of Humans that would seed humanity among the planets, and he was magnificent.

Tor Bleil stood before his father, listening. The young man knew his father was about to set him to a task. His father would always start with a compliment when he was about to do this. Tor thought he would have a bit of fun with his dad.

"So, what do you want me to do?" Tal Mahat smiled at his son. The young man was always ahead of him. Tor Bleil was reasonably sure that it involved the Earth. Hadn't all his training led up to this? His training as a pilot, knowledge of the sciences, and schooling in diplomatic ways had added up to one possible outcome. He would spearhead the redevelopment of the Earth. If Tal Mahat's plans came to fruition, Earth would be the center of the solar system. After that, who knew?

"I have a mission for you. It is, perhaps, the most important thing I will ever ask you to do." Tal Mahat paused. It almost broke his heart to send his son away, but he was the New Luna Fleet's cream of the crop. "You will make the first contact with Earth." Tal waited for some response. Tal Mahat saw his son, Tor Bleil, as a vicarious extension of himself. Tal knew he couldn't last forever, but if he was bold, the legacy of House Rhuaad would continue into the future. If things went according to Tal Mahat's plans, his son would be Earth's leader and take his rightful place in the annals of history. Tal's father, Soli Clovis Rhuaad, had spoken of the house of Rhuaad and the

greatness that sequestered there, waiting for the right moment to emerge. In Tal's mind, this moment was upon them for good or ill.

"This first encounter will be of critical importance. Your reconnaissance will determine if the time is right for New Luna to integrate with Earth again. I can't stress enough that you must bond with the people you meet." Tal Mahat thought about the lessons in diplomacy that his father had passed on to him. These lessons had shaped his life in uncountable ways. Saul Meyers's choice of Soli Clovis Rhuaad was no accident. Tal Mahat marveled that a plan as complicated as this could remain viable as long as it had. He had done everything in his power to ensure that the plan would continue as he trained Tor Bleil.

Tor's understanding of his father's request was not precisely correct. Tal Mahat's plans encompassed more than resettling the Earth. Tal Mahat's vision was of a future Dynasty extending its reach over more than a mere planet and its moon. Tal Mahat not only had the temerity to dream, but he had the natural tenacity to hold onto those dreams until he achieved his goals. The trusted advisor had done so for his entire life. Tal Mahat supposed that he felt as all conquerors who came before him had felt; it would be a shame that he could not live long enough to see the plan come to fruition.

8

NEW EARTH

The hatch of the great ship opened, and three individuals emerged in the afternoon light. They were smiling, and that calmed Jeb considerably. Everyone in his clan understood that facial expressions from a stranger were the first indicator of friend or foe. These unusually tall, silver-clad people seemed god-like to Jeb. The boy stood up and faced the men.

Thirty years had elapsed since the shuttle bearing Tal Mahat to the moon had left Earth. This new vessel descended vertically on Dulles airport's runway, differing from the horizontal approach in shuttles of years ago, but Jeb Cohen was suitably amazed, never having seen any flying object before. He peered over the rusted, abandoned baggage cart; this was something so new that it overwrote his normal feelings of fear, replacing them with a profound sense of wonder. The brilliant silver ship reflected the afternoon sun in a burst of light, making

the boy squint. Jeb Cohen knew this was no bird and wondered if the ship was from the heaven that his grandmother ranted about on her deathbed before she had passed away. The woman died of old age at fifty-three, and her disjointed ravings often rambled on of heaven and hell. When his mother passed away, Jeb's father abandoned Jeb and the small colony one night, and the only thing that the boy could now view as a parent was his grandfather Bobba-cool.

What appeared to be three gods approached the young boy slowly so as not to frighten him. The first in the triad raised his hand. "Hello, my name is Tor Bleil Rhuaad. Do you understand me?" It had been only slightly over thirty years, and Tor Bliel assumed they still used English as a vernacular. The boy nodded. Tor assessed the child to be no more than eleven or twelve. He asked the boy. "Do you live near here?" Again, the boy nodded. Tor Bleil was excited. They had just arrived and encountered someone who understood them. "Would you take us to your home?" Tor Bleil turned and looked at the ship; the steps retracted, and the door sealed itself. Jeb's mind was in turmoil. Yes, he would have to take these gods to his grandfather, Bobba-cool. The old one would know what to do. Jeb Cohen motioned for the men to follow and, turning, headed into the woods.

The survivors set up the small village on Dulles airport's outskirts in the burb of Herndon, Virginia.

The Dulles Center apartments had been used to establish the base of the small clan that carried on with the daily business of survival. They tended the meager plots of gardens and flocks of livestock, which kept the tribe alive for thirty years after the collapse of society.

That extraordinary incident was merely a passing footnote in the clan's verbally recounted tales. The world's collapse left few schools or libraries to tell the story of the year when humankind had ground to a halt and all but perished. Oh sure, books still shivered, untouched, in the old buildings, but few younger residents could read any longer. Stories of the great before were passed down as oral lore from elder to elder. The younger clan members discounted them as little more than made-up legends and here-say. The fantastic yarns were the primary form of entertainment, and the children knew them well. Bobba-cool had taught Jeb Cohen to read, and his forays into the library left questions in the boy's mind. He saw pictures in the books that he couldn't believe to be true until he saw the tremendous flying ship and the silver-clad giants that emerged from it with his own eyes.

The boy led the three visitors into the apartment courtyard and past the empty swimming pool with a collapsed wall. The pool served the clan as a pig-sty. The passel of grunting pigs pressed together as they

milled around the pool bottom. Tor Bleil peered down at the beasts, inhaling the aroma of manure. He had never seen a pig, much less smelled an animal, before. The diet of Dark Luna's inhabitants was comprised of plant-based protein and vitamins. Animals were too tricky to maintain because the colony's air and hydro resources had to be strictly conserved for the residents.

Ryan Larkin jerked his knee forward, glancing behind him. Something stabbed his calf. The creature was the strangest thing Ryan had ever seen; a large-foot-tall, brown bird of some odd variety had pecked his leg. Ryan had seen pictures of birds in the New Luna school library. The reality of witnessing a live chicken was absurd to him. He began to chuckle. An older woman shooed the hen away; "Penelope, stop bothering the man!" Many of the birds were freely roaming around the pool deck.

The boy led the trio to an older man in front of the apartment complex swimming pool who basked in the afternoon sun. Jeb approached the elder and silently stood waiting to be noticed, as was the clan's custom.

Tor Bleil Rhuaad, his mate Alice Baxter-Rhuaad, and the ship co-pilot Ryan Larkin stood before the older man. The tribe elder looked ancient in a way that years could not have produced. The hard life, irregular diet, lack of medicine, and dental

care made the elder appear in his late seventies. Bobba-cool Cohen was fifty-eight years old. The man opened his eyes, and Tor Bleil noticed opaque Cataracts on his corneas.

"Bobba-cool, these men came from the sky today. I saw the great shining ship land with my eyes." The boy paused and pointed to his eye. He wanted to describe his amazement more but couldn't fabricate the words into coherent sentences. Bobba-cool often spoke of the day when the moon gods would come to save the clan. Jeb usually listened to these stories with indifference, writing them off to an old blind man's ravings about the visions only he could see. This day changed everything; he now looked at Bobba-cool with a new reverence.

"Ah, so you have come at last. I wondered if I would live to see this day." Bobba-cool laughed. "I am Bobba-cool Cohen, and I welcome you to our tribe." The older man opened his arms in a gesture of welcoming as he stared off into space, searching for something beyond his blindness.

Tor Bleil Rhuaad noticed that the man's speech was eloquent and more fluent in English than the boy's. Perhaps the language skills were lessening in each generation.

"Thank you, Bobba-cool." Tor Bleil bowed, wanting to show proper respect. "I must talk to you

soon. We have returned to your home to help rebuild your world."

"Enough talk for now," Bobba-cool barked and waved his hand. "We will speak again tomorrow; tonight, we feast on pork and melon." Tor Bleil's curiosity was peaked. He had never eaten meat before.

The clan had a great feast that night. Tor Bleil counted perhaps a hundred people who all had a hand cooking the meal. Tor Bleil, Alice, and Ryan watched as the meal appeared. The ritual preparation of the feast took an absurdly long time. It was close to seven o'clock when the food was ready. The clan sat in the waning summer sun, waiting. No one would eat until Bobba-cool sat on his throne, which consisted of a large deck lounge. A plate of meat and vegetables was brought to him, and, using his fingers, he picked up a piece of the pork and took a bite. The man smiled and grunted in approval as he chewed the pork. That was the signal for the feast to begin officially.

Jeb sat on Tor Bleil's left side as the feast wound on. Tor sat to the left of Bobba-cool in the place of honor reserved for favored guests. Tor ate the succulent meat as plate after plate of food drifted in and out of his reach. Plates of potatoes and carrots passed him, and he couldn't stop eating. At the end of the feast came the sweetest melon for dessert,

washed down with thick, rich tomato juice. The boy ate but seemed as if he didn't want to leave the silver-clad man's side.

"Jeb, how old are you?" Tor Bleil was curious. Jeb shrugged as if the question had no meaning.

"He has just turned sixteen," Bobba-cool explained as he took a bite of melon. The boy was small for his age, and Tor looked around at the other children, noticing their height was all somewhat stunted, and he wondered if the diet had impacted their growth and maturity.

The feast ended, and the three colonists stood up to return to the shuttle. Tor addressed Bobba-cool.

"We must return to our ship for the night. We will speak about the future with you tomorrow." Tor Bleil thanked Bobba-cool and turned to leave. He wanted to make the four-mile trek back to the ship before night came. The three walked to the edge of the pool area, and Tor Bleil turned to have one more look at the remnants of what was once a magnificent civilization. There stood Jeb, who had followed them to the courtyard's edge.

Tor Bleil stooped to speak with the boy. "Jeb, you will have to stay here. You cannot come back with us." The boy frowned.

"But I want to go with you. There is nobody here for me." The sadness that laced Jeb's tone softened Tor Bleil's heart.

"Not tonight. We will return tomorrow, and I will speak to Bobba-cool about this." He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, and Jeb Cohen emitted a sigh. It was so rare for someone to touch him, and it made a sadness well up in Jeb's heart for an undefinable reason.

"Good night, Jeb."

When the colonists reached the ship, it was almost pitch dark. "It's a good thing we left when we did." Ryan sealed the door, and the three sat in the crew area, lost in their thoughts. They mulled the same question over. How could the civilization of the Earth have come to this?

It was Alice who first broke the silence. "We have to do something to help them." The state of the clan upset her so.

"We will, my love, we will." I will discuss this with the Councilman and my father when we return to New Luna. Yes, we will help them." Tor Bleil lay on his cot and thought about the events of the day and Jeb's request. The boy knew nothing about other realities but was willing to abandon his world to experience them. He had courage, if nothing else.

"The first order of business will be to establish electricity. Safety and food will come next. After that, we can discuss the details of a technical education plan." Tal Mahat was reciting the plan that he had drawn up years ago. "A fusion reactor will

have to be set up. That will take considerable effort. We can then deploy one of the ships and use the onboard reactor to get the colony up and running until a permanent reactor is operational."

"After power is up and running, education and government come next. We will have to make these changes quickly. Order and education will take a back seat to the problem of the neighboring tribes. There will have to be ample security as we assimilate the clans."

New Luna had little knowledge about these clans. The sparse details that Bobba-cool provided were little more than guesses. There hadn't been anything close to a feud in years. The fact that Bobba-cool had several guns had presented a deterrent to other clans. No clan would dare to attack Bobba-cool's tribe.

Tal Mahat sat thinking as Tor Bleil finished his report. When he spoke, his tone was one of absolute surety. "The next excursion to Earth must happen as soon as possible. I cannot stress this strongly enough. The control of the clan must be passed to you by Bobba-cool himself. Only then will you be accepted as leader by all." Tor Bleil listened politely as his father droned on. He was in the habit of repeating himself as he waded knee-deep in old age. What was he now, seventy-eight?

"Tor, you understand that you and Alice will live on Earth and rule the planet. This charge is no small task. I will always be only a Yag bounce away when you need me." Tor wondered how many cards were left in his father's deck. There was the card of years, the card of brilliance, the card of the plan itself, and the card of Tal Mahat's unbreakable will. Tor Bleil knew that he must be dealt all of these if he was to proceed.

Tor Bleil had something to tell his father. It had nothing to do with the Earth's recolonization, yet it had everything to do with it.

"Dad, Alice is pregnant. We're going to have a baby." Tears filled Tal Mahat's eyes as he embraced his son. Yes, the grand plan would continue, but it was no longer Biggs's secret plan, of which he knew almost nothing; it would be his, Tal Mahat's.

9

THE BEST LAID PLANS

Oliver sat in the cramped science lab with his sister, Nova. They had spent the day working on the telemetry plan for an unmanned exploration voyage to Jupiter's frozen moon, Europa. It was late in the work cycle, and the siblings sat discussing the current state of New Luna politics.

"So, what you are telling me is that the Rhuaads are not to be trusted?" Nova was brilliant in the field of the sciences. She was equally versed in physics, chemistry, and biology. When it came to the trappings of politics, she had never devoted any real-time to its study and fell a wee bit short. It wasn't that the woman was ignorant. Nova Biggs saw politics as a distraction to the process of advancing New Luna forward in her father's plan. Talking about the lunar colony's ruling classes made her feel like she had an itch in her brain that she couldn't scratch.

"I'm not saying that yet. I am saying that the Rhuaads have established first contact with the Earth

colony in Herndon. That is not a major problem for us at this point." Oliver was referring to which family dynasty would control everything. That "everything" wasn't just the moon and Earth. Sure, these problems were significant and would come first, but in Oliver's mind, far more critical issues were at stake. The question was whether the Machiavellian tendencies of the Rhuaad family or the logic and powerful science of Stuart Biggs would eventually win out as humankind rolled over the solar system.

"The Rhuaads are interesting," Nova said as if they were pets and a minor issue not to be taken seriously.

"Well, little sister," Nova hated it when her brother referred to her as such. He intentionally used the term when he explained something obvious to the woman. The phrase demeaned her and made her question her intelligence. Wasn't she faster at math than Oliver? "The problem is here and getting more serious. The Rhuaads are in control of Earth, and from there, they see the solar system as the logical next step." Oliver didn't want to overplay the hand and disturb his sister.

Nova sat silent and pensive. "What if they could not achieve this step without our technology?"

"That is the question at the bottom of this. The only viable solution to this situation is to protect our technology at all costs. That includes the knowledge

of the Helium reactors, the BUMP Canon, and the BUMP drive. We already control the orbital factory, ship production, and subterranean labs. We must sequester this knowledge in a way that is not obvious and threatening to House Rhuaad. They must never be aware that the technology even exists." Oliver waited as Nova processed this critical information. "Then, if nothing comes of it, so much the better."

In a wide-eyed epiphany, Nova stated, "We will have to keep all but our most trusted scientists out of the loop. We can only rely on ourselves. I'll encrypt the data concerning the BUMP technology today for our eyes only. We will have to install every cruiser and Canon with a remote control emergency shutdown that we alone can access. We will also have to feed a sub-command into the comm-grid in order to monitor all communication." she glanced at her brother; her mind was warping, "do we call ourselves House Biggs now?" Nova smirked. "I will start rewriting the coursework for the tech training tomorrow. The core technology will also be on a need-to-know basis."

Oliver knew his sister would agree to this plan. He did not doubt that Nova would see the obvious logic in this solution as he did. Her brilliance and determination were the perfect lasers to fire at the job. Oliver knew this wasn't a game and some little dalliance in the field of politics; it would be a battle,

and he was prepared to go all in. The grab for power would start innocuously, sure enough. Still, in the end, whenever end battle would happen, it would come down to the classic struggle between political military might pitted against the lucidity and logic of science. He would covertly, bit by bit, take the ability to do warfare away from his rivals. As his father had done before him, Oliver Biggs placed his bets on science and logic, where he believed he held the winning hand

There were two flies in the ointment; the first was that neither he nor his sister had children. There would have to be heirs for the plan to work. The pairing of his sister had to be accomplished as soon as possible. As far as having a child of his own, Oliver knew that he had better get busy. The second fly in the goo was what they were to do concerning Jeb Cole. The Earthling had aced the most challenging training that New Luna had to offer and was now one of the program's top researchers. Jeb knew far too much to be allowed to swear allegiance to House Rhuaad. The young man's friendship with his first contact, Tor Bleil, concerned Oliver; he had to know on which side of the fence Jeb's loyalties would fall.

Tal Mahat felt unsettled as he and Ralston Meyers sat before Oliver Biggs. He knew what he wanted to

accomplish; he just wasn't sure how to go about doing it. Oliver had already been warned of Tal Mahat's request by the microphone he embedded in Ralston Meyer's office. In Oliver's mind, it was paramount that there be no surprises in this game of interplanetary chess. Oliver thought Ralston's presence in the meeting was troublesome, but conversely, getting this unpleasantness out of the way all at once seemed better. Because of Tal Mahat's sway over Ralston, Oliver saw the two men as one unified adversary. Oliver had never been what anyone would call close to Ralston, and Tal Mahat was indeed the Councilman's trusty advisor. Stuart Biggs had frequently warned his son to keep his distance from politics in general. As Oliver stared at the two men on the screen, he realized that Tal Mahat had brought the Councilman along for emotional support and a small degree of clout.

What Tal Mahat was about to request could never be allowed. Oliver was not overly concerned that Councilman Meyers was technically his superior. Sure, Ralston had retained his position as head honcho of New Luna, and Tal Mahat had his following, which was gaining traction, to be sure, but Oliver Biggs's power came from a different source.

Ralston had assumed the role of Councilman and leader of New Luna since Saul Meyer's burial in space. That didn't instill a lot of faith in the other

council members, who rarely consulted Ralston on technical issues. What would have been the point? Everyone on New Luna came to Oliver with any infrastructure problems and concerns, as they had done with his father, Stuart. The issues were invariably technical, and Ralston would have to turn to Oliver anyway. The Council members saw this as merely omitting an unnecessary step and going directly to the source. It was true that someone had to be in charge; however, that wasn't the same person who brought the New Luna meetings to order. That person was Oliver Biggs.

"First contact shows that the colony is viable. The remnants of society have survived all these years without our help." Tal Mahat said. He didn't want to say too much and overstate his hand. In this instance, he felt that less would be more. Oliver quietly assessed the pair. He wouldn't make this easy on Tal Mahat. Why should he? After all, Oliver Biggs held every card.

"We feel," Tal Mahat glanced at Meyers, "that the Science Division will have to assign a ship or two to assist with the recolonization effort. We will also need a helium-3 reactor that can be permanently operational as soon as possible."

"I see no problem with this. All our readings indicate that Earth is ready to be repopulated." Oliver shrugged. "This sounds fine to me."

"There is a bit more, however." Tal Mahat was on high alert now. Oliver Biggs's compliance was going a bit too easy, and the man's indifference confused him. He expected the man to dig in and argue more than this. Oliver listened while his thoughts were of the ships approaching Mars while the meeting took place; these were vessels about which Ralston and Tal Mahat knew nothing.

"We will need all technical data for the reactor. We will furthermore need the capability to operate, repair, and upgrade the reactors if something malfunctions." Tal Mahat believed that once the government got its foot in the door with reactor technology, it would be a hop, skip, and jump to space travel. The request sounded more like a demand and didn't seem to come out correctly. Tal Mahat wished he could take the proposal back and temper it, but what was said was said, as his father used to say.

"I don't think you will have to worry about breakdowns. We haven't had a reactor malfunction in over thirty years. We will dispatch a team to monitor and operate the unit. As far as dedicating ships to Earth, I see no reason to do so. They are on call whenever you need one. Just say the word."

Tal Mahat looked askew at Ralston. He was searching for a bit of support. Ralston cleared his throat to remind Oliver that he was there.

"Are you saying that you are withholding this information from us?" Ralston peppered his tone with sub-surface indignation. Oliver smiled, staring directly into the Councilman's eyes, making him look down.

"I am saying that you can have whatever you wish. I agree that the time is right to repopulate and rebuild Earth. Your requests are nice to bandy about, but the reality is very complex. It takes six years of training to prepare a child to be a reactor technician."

Tal Mahat interjected. "But they are children. An adult would train differently, right?"

"We tried that, and the average time to train an adult takes ten years," Oliver smirked and continued. "The aspects of Helium-3 mining and processing are also technically difficult. We will have to increase the helium harvesting to accommodate the increased level that repopulation would require. We will also have to do a projection model and assess if the moon's reserves can even supply this much raw fuel for a project as large as Earth's. We don't know at this point." Oliver threw that last statement in as a deterrent to buy time. The lunar surface had an inexhaustible supply of Helium-3. "Piloting a spacecraft, on the other hand, is easy by comparison. Most of the flight programming is performed by auto-vector. Your son is proof of that." Tal Mahat felt as if he had been directly insulted as Oliver smiled.

The advisor chafed at the insult by inference of his son's intelligence.

"So, will you give us the information or not." Ralston was becoming agitated, and the question carried the tone of an ultimatum.

"You already have it. I noticed that you downloaded the mainframe database yesterday. So, what's the issue here, gentlemen?" Oliver knew what the problem was. Not only was the data incomplete and worthless, but they would never be able to understand even a smidgeon of it. Nova had removed everything from the schematics and construction protocols in the theoretical science files. Oliver wished them luck understanding the data even if they got their hands on a real technician.

"I suggest that you spend your time assembling your first wave team. Send your plan over to Nova, and we can assist you in whatever you need." Oliver's hologram ring vibrated, and he activated it. A message from Nova interrupted the meeting. Tal Mahat and Ralston stared at the hologram hovering above the back of Oliver's hand. They had never seen this tiny device, and it shocked them.

"Nova, What is it?" His tone was urgent as he spoke to the face that appeared in the space above his hand. He knew that there were no issues and that this was Nova extricating him from this tedious meeting. Nova had monitored the meeting using Oliver's ring

and felt that there was little more to be accomplished by dragging it out any longer. Oliver fully agreed with his sister.

"Will you be through soon? We have a full day and are already behind schedule." Oliver looked at the two men and smiled.

"Well, gentlemen, duty calls. Feel free to send me your requests at any time. Goodbye." Oliver terminated the YAG communication and left the men to their confusion.

"What does this mean? He just dismissed us. He can't do this." Ralston Meyers was beside himself as he fumed. Tal Mahat wished that he would be quiet; he had to think. This situation that he had spent so much time planning just got serious. Yes, the question was, what does this mean. Tal Mahat realized that being New Luna's leader and controlling New Luna were completely different things. In addition to all these revelations, Tal Mahat wanted one of those holo-rings.

10

THE MISTS OF OBLIVION

New Luna was prospering as never before. The interplanetary ships left for Red-1 every six months and carried eighteen passengers. A burgeoning population of over six hundred colonists was building the new Martian world. The progress reports that Oliver Biggs received from the Martian colony were nothing short of spectacular.

The return trips segued to the asteroid fields between Mars and Jupiter. The asteroid mining projects had also gone well as minerals and precious water were harvested. Water was the lifeblood of survival, not only on New Luna but on Mars as well. There could be no life without water. Oliver knew this. He saw the Earth's vast oceans as the perfect and more plentiful solution to the lunar water problem but not the most efficient. First, the mining capabilities had to be developed if the gas giant moons were to be settled. The frozen asteroid's ice reservoirs could be harvested easily. It used

comparatively little energy when weighed against the launching and landing of cargo-laden cruisers. The increased water stores enabled food production to skyrocket. Life was good on New Luna for everyone except Tal Mahat.

Tal Mahat sat in the anteroom outside of Ralston Meyer's cubical, meditating on the state of his life. How had he come to this sorry pass? Tal Mahat, the trusted and indispensable advisor to the First Councilman of New Luna, was now completely in command of the lunar colonies, encompassing the entire colony on the moon. He was utterly in control of his son Tor Bleil, which meant that he controlled the Earth as well. This dominion over the vast planet amounted to no more than that of a feudal lord.

Tal Mahat had ships he could not use without permission from the Biggs dynasty; he had weapons of unfathomable destructive potential he would never be allowed to fire. He was in charge of the most advanced scientific developments in humankind's history, which he had little understanding of. It was now clear to Tal Mahat that he had complete control of nothing. House Rhuaad was a house of straw, and there was nothing to be done about it other than accept defeat and assume his place in the long slog as House Rhuaad trekked toward the mists of oblivion. He longed for the days when he could ask

his father for advice. He sat brooding, and a thought formed in his mind.

Tal Mahat had to blame someone for this debacle. It couldn't be allowed to appear as his fault. Hadn't he planned the way his father had taught him? This terrible situation arose not from what anyone did and mistakes made but rather from omission of action. Yes, that was the more significant error when it came to strategy. It was the thing one failed to do that was the unstringing of the plot. Someone other than Tal Mahat had to be responsible for the slipshod scheme. There could only be one person who Tal Mahat could blame, and of course, that person was Ralston Meyers.

Tal Mahat stewed in the juices of his failure, and a thought dawned on him. The idea snuck up upon him slowly, so slowly that he didn't recognize it for the evil that it was. There could be only one solution to this catastrophic collapse of his venerable house. His father had spoken of the answer only once, but Tal Mahat understood the concept in its entirety. It was a single word, but it was centuries old. It spoke of the old way, the way of struggle, the way of blood. The term that loomed in Tal Mahat's mind, crowding out all else, was *Jihad*.

"Tor Bleil, it is important that you listen to me carefully and follow my orders exactly. Do you

understand?" Tor sat at the Yag-bounce console, listening to his father. He was concerned at the tone that carried through the transmission. He had never known his father to exhibit anything other than calm lucidity. His father's voice's tone was tinged with a not-so-low-grade hysteria, and the immediacy made him sound like a raving lunatic.

"Father, what has happened?" Tor Bleil was concerned. He could hear the stress in Tal Mahat's voice and knew something was wrong; something had pushed his father to the edge of his wits. He couldn't imagine how such a thing had come to pass to the sanest man he had ever known.

"Listen to me," Tal Mahat hissed. "A shuttle will come for you within twenty-four hours. Gather your men and weapons and return to New Luna on that ship. I cannot tell you more now. I will meet you at the spaceport upon landing. I can have no further communication with you until I see you tomorrow. I will see you soon, my son." The transmission went dead.

Tor Bleil played the recording of the transmission over a few times. It was all so confusing. How many men did he have at his disposal, thirty? They had even fewer weapons. Tor Bleil pondered what his father hoped to accomplish against New Luna's forces, which were only God knew how developed.

He thought about his life on Earth. He now had two children that would carry on the name Rhuaad. It was true that things on Earth were not how Tal Mahat had painted them, but they weren't terrible either. The family wanted for nothing, and civilization was taking hold little by little. Tor Bleil had slowly realized that the House Rhuaad dynasty would return several lifetimes after he was to pass out of the grand scheme of things, if at all. What was this that his father, whom he loved, was asking of him now? There was no way that he could fathom the situation.

The next day, Tor Bleil, always the obedient son, assembled his men and weapons and waited for the shuttle, which was due to arrive within the hour.

Jeb Cohen stared at the Yag-bounce diode as it flashed. They had messages before, but lately, they were few and far between. The young engineer sat at the command console, his finger poised, and waited for it to stop flashing. He tapped the key to eavesdrop on the conversation that would forever change his life. Jeb listened to the conversation between Tal Mahat and his son. It was disturbing to the young flyer that it seemed to point to something nefarious, if not downright insurrectionary. That was not the thing that worried Jeb. He didn't care if Tal Mahat survived or not. It didn't bother him that in less than

twenty-four hours, he might be under the control of House Rhuaad. None of these things affected him in the least. What bothered him deep down inside was that he would have to take a stand. For the first time in Jeb Cohen's life, he would have to choose where his allegiances lie.

On one side, there were the Rhuaad's. Tor Bleil had always been his friend, his first friend. Tor brought him to Dark Luna and enrolled him in the tech training program. His life had been irrevocably changed for the better. On Earth, Jeb had no prospects, and, at best, an existence limited to a life of misery and an early death. Here on the moon, everything had changed. Vistas had been opened to him that were not even possible for him to conceive back on Earth.

On the other side of the equation was the science program that had opened his eyes. Jeb had carved out a place he felt would sustain him throughout his life. In addition to this, there was Nova. Nova was the conundrum. He was spending more and more time with the woman as he waded deeper into the technology of New Luna and had to admit to his deepest self that he harbored feelings for the beautiful woman. Jeb dreamed of the night when Nova Biggs would whisper that she loved him. He had never even dared to pursue such a thought before. Who could ever love Jeb Cohen? He was

small and nothing without New Luna and his feelings for Nova. He felt ten feet tall when he thought of her.

It had come down to a choice between friendship and love. Jeb was unwilling to give up either of these important things. Maybe there was a way to avoid this insanity. He knew Tor Bleil well. They had kept in touch over the years. At first, it had been Tor checking in with Jeb to see how things were going. The conversations had developed further as a true friendship blossomed, and the men spoke regularly. Jeb didn't care a wit about Tal Mahat, but he knew that Tor Bleil loved his father, so attention had to be paid to this. There would be no way that Jeb Cohen would allow harm to come to either of these people.

Tor Bleil terminated the Yag-bounce transmission. He had a lot to mull over. The red light from an incoming communication strobed again, and Tor stared at it. He hoped that maybe it was his father; he had so many questions.

"This is New Luna calling for Tor Bleil. This is Jeb Cohen on New Luna Calling for Tor Bleil." Tor punched the answer button.

"This is Tor Bleil Rhuaad, over."

"Tor, this is Jeb. Are you receiving this? Over."

"What's going on? I monitored a very strange transmission. Can you explain it?" Jeb's question had the odd effect of turning the tables on his friend and putting him in an inferior position.

"I'm not sure if I can. I will tell you what I know." Tor Bliel thought about the sketchy details that his father offered.

Jeb was shocked and felt he had no other choice other than to lay out what he knew about the defense capabilities of New Luna, of which he knew only a fraction. He also told his friend that protocol dictated he would have to inform Oliver and Nova as soon as this transmission was over. Jeb couldn't be a hundred percent sure an attack was imminent, but precautions would have to be taken. He advised his friend to take no aggressive actions toward New Luna. When Tor Bleil signed off, he knew he would have to act; however, it would not be the action that his father had envisioned.

Tal Mahat stood at the viewport window inside the airlock of the spaceport hanger as the door to the shuttle opened. Seven handpicked security guards stood behind him. He would add these to the forces his son recruited. He expected to see thirty or so armed men emerge from the ship. That wasn't what Tal Mahat saw. A lone pressure-suited man made his way across the flight deck to the hanger airlock.

They must still be on the ship awaiting instructions, Tal Mahat thought to himself. Very clever. The airlock automatically opened as soon as the pressure reached eighteen pounds psi.

Tal Mahat embraced his son as soon as he removed the helmet. "Call for the others. We must not delay. Surprise is of the essence." Tor held his father as his heart was breaking. Tor Bleil understood the depth of the dreams his father had inherited from his father. Tor had no such ambitions. He didn't want to lead a dynasty with all its trappings. All he ever wanted to be was a pilot.

Tor Bleil held the man and said. "Father, we need to talk."

Tal Mahat sagged and, realizing that there would be no troops from the Earth, turned to go. He faced the security forces that were his handpicked and trained troops. Seven pulse rifles were aimed at his chest.

The first thing Tal Mahat noticed as he stood on Earth was the air. It was fragrant and clean in a way that he had not remembered. It was as if the Earth had been reborn and greeted him with a freshness he had never experienced. Tal Mahat breathed deeply, savoring the smell of flowers, earth, and rain clouds. Maybe this wouldn't be so terrible.

True, the great dream of House Rhuaad was no more. Tal Mahat would have to settle merely ruling the planet Earth. In the end, Tal Mahat would be a good leader. The years of tutelage from his father and decades in the government's service had taught him

well. He would not make the mistakes that his predecessors had made, nor would he repeat his own mistakes.

Tor Bliel walked towards the presidential mansion, his arm around his father's shoulder. There would be room enough for him on Earth.



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