

*Everything I grew up learning was a lie.
The woman who raised me murdered my mother.
Both friend and foe have tried to kill me.
But I won't give up.*

Twisting around, Maya toggled her wave gun to sonic levitation mode, pointed it down, and shrieked as the stone floor flew up to greet her. She depressed the trigger a second before slamming into the ground.

The cushion of air produced by the gun slowed her descent. As she landed, her forehead banged against the floor, shooting needle-like pain through her brain. The gun jabbed her in the abdomen.

She lay there, fading in and out, woozy and retching.

A gut feeling compelled her to roll toward and beneath what remained of the terrace. Each time she flipped over, her shoulder throbbed, her neck ached, and she almost passed out.

Stones big and small thudded against the floor space she had vacated. Particle beams rained down, blasting the stones into thousands of tiny pieces.

Too terrified to scream, Maya flung her arms up as debris buried her.

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BEYOND THE HORIZON

THE SECOND BOOK OF THE BEYOND SAGA

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One—Circuitous
Auckland, Earth, May 2265 CE

Maya Davis's eyelids fluttered and opened partway.

Centimeters above her nose, the bedroom clock floated in midair, twirling and doing backflips. Antique ringing exacerbated her pounding headache as the bells atop the clock vibrated. By the time her vision focused, the clock face read 08:01 Solar Standard Time.

"Time to get up and at 'em, Maya," the clock's cheerful voice touted. "The *New Horizons* launch ceremony starts in three hours, fifty-nine minutes."

Still half-asleep, she swatted at the hologram, but her hand passed through it. "Turn off," she mumbled while burying her head under a pillow. Curling up in the fetal position, she hugged a tattered Bio Bear, the stuffed animal her aunt had bought her when she was a kid.

Foggy thoughts of Aunt Brooke both warmed and tensed her body. Brooke had raised Maya following the death of her mother, but a recent spat hadn't left them on the best of terms.

"Disabling alarm." The clock blinked away into nothingness.

She drifted back to slumber.

Maya awoke to pitch blackness. Shivers of panic coursed through her limbs. To this day, she had yet to conquer her childhood fear of the dark.

"Blinds," she called out.

The pixels dimming the windows blinked transparent in rapid

succession. Sunlight pierced the panes, warming her face and calming her nerves. The bright light forced her to squint.

“What time is it?” she mumbled.

Maya activated the displays in her i-cite. The chronometer in the bottom corner of her vision read 10:59.

“Eleven?” Gasping, she sprung upright in bed and regretted it at once. Pain stabbed her temples. She hissed when she touched her clammy forehead.

With a thought, she ran a health scan. A simulation of her body appeared in her i-cite. Animated blood coursed through a lifelike diagram of her circulatory system.

She magnified her brain. Virtual text explained the cause of her headache. *Acetaldehyde penetration of nerve cell membranes?* She sighed. *A hangover? I must've forgotten to flush my system before I went to bed.* With another mental command, she accessed her bioware and instructed the nanotech embedded throughout her body to break down the alcohol in her bloodstream.

“Clock, where are you?”

The hologram materialized in front of her nose.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” she asked it.

“You turned me off at eight-oh-one,” it said.

“I told you to snooze.”

“Nope.” Its face showed a vidsim of Maya retreating beneath a pillow. A moan escaped her drooling mouth. “Turn off,” it quoted her muttering.

She whipped the blankets aside and slid out of bed. Her head pounded as she stood. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I’m a clock, not a mind reader.”

“Turn off,” she snapped. “And this time I mean it.”

Projecting big eyes crying oversized tears and a frown, the clock shriveled away into nothingness.

Maya rushed over to the windows, tripping over a pair of mag-skates, and gazed outside.

Stratoscrapers jutted up from the city of Auckland. Mount Eden towered above the bustling metropolis in the background. Two hundred stories below, autocars and rovers zoomed along the streets. A tangled web of sonic tubes stretched every-which-way above the roads, catapulting transport spheres filled with commuters between buildings. Boats and hovercraft skimmed across channels connecting glistening bays.

The thin clouds in the sky twisted and wavered, displaced by a hyperspace vortex. A squadron of Pulsars emerged from the wormhole

and rocketed off into the distance. The star fighters burst into shooting stars as air molecules scraped against their force fields.

She felt like a queen up in a tower, surveying her fairy tale domain. Often she daydreamed about the kinds of cities that civilizations on other worlds might build, worlds she intended to visit someday.

But she hadn't time for such indulgences at the moment.

The ceremony starts in an hour. I'll never make it to Triton in time. She plopped down on the edge of her bed, stunned by her uncharacteristic lapse in judgment. *How did I let this happen on the most important day of my life?*

Last night, she had allowed her best friend, Jo, to talk her into seeing a neurosynth band perform at a club on Callisto. Jo hadn't needed to twist her arm very hard, though. The concert had been their last outing in the solar system for the next three years.

I've never been late for anything, and I don't intend to start now.

Maya bit her lip and shot to her feet, determined to make it to the ceremony on time.

Rushing into the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her face. As she lathered her teeth, she hummed one of the songs the band had played and summoned a display cube. The three-dimensional projection materialized near the mirror, tuned to the IntraSolar News channel.

“—is the scene from the Interstellar Expeditionary Force shipyards near the Lassell colony on Triton,” an ISN anchorwoman reported live from the scene, “the site of the launch ceremony for *New Horizons*.”

Hundreds of IEF graduates, ISC Defense soldiers, politicians, benefactors, and reporters filtered into the outdoor auditorium behind the reporter. Lake Flammarion sprawled across Triton's landscape with Neptune hanging above the steep horizon.

“Everyone in the solar system eagerly awaits the launch of humankind's first interstellar starship,” the woman continued. “*New Horizons* will travel twenty light years to the Gliese 581 system, where it will make contact with the Penphins, the race of intelligent exobeings whose plea for help SETI detected four years ago. Afterwards, *Horizons* will seek out a habitable exoplanet on which to settle its colonists, the ship's original mission prior to the discovery of the Penphins.”

Maya bolted out of the bathroom and threw on her IEF graduate uniform. Ignoring her gurgling stomach, she scampered out the door of her apartment into the hall. As she waited for the next sonic tube sphere, she said a silent goodbye to her apartment. She wouldn't see it again for years.

When the transport sphere arrived on the 187th floor, she boarded it and strapped into one of the chairs. “Phase port,” she said.

<Destination: Auckland Intrasolar Phase Port,> the AI said. <Initiating transit. Your well-being is our top priority. Please remain seated with your safety belt fastened at all times. This transport will cease motion if it detects an unfastened belt.>

The sphere slid through a horizontal tube, picking up speed and pressing Maya back into her seat. After dropping straight down a hundred stories, it emerged from inside the apartment complex and entered into another vertical descent along the outside wall of the building.

An energetic shimmering obscured the rumbling clouds out over the ocean. Magnetic fields imposed by weather control satellites in low Earth orbit worked to dissipate the storm and redirect it away from New Zealand.

The sphere slid to a halt at the thirtieth floor and shot off along a tube parallel to the ground. The change in direction jerked her body, bringing the throbbing back to her temples. She instructed her implants to increase production of biocites. The little nanites had her feeling better but far from perfect.

Parks, people, and streets raced past below the sphere's clear exterior at hundreds of kilometers per hour. Fewer vehicles congested the roadways than this time last year. The ease with which the phase portals had allowed people to migrate across the solar system continued to thin the population of planet Earth.

The sphere decelerated and stopped at the phase port. The building resembled an arena-sized spoked wheel. She often imagined a giant man grabbing and spinning it.

Maya checked the time in her i-cite. The mental digits read 11:10 SST. *Fifty minutes to go. I can make it if I hurry.*

As she hopped out of the sphere, a blast of ocean air pummeled her in the face. Her eyes watered, and she sneezed three times. A man and woman near her on the sidewalk turned and raised their eyebrows as if she were a disease-ridden invalid.

Accessing her bioware, she pumped medites carrying antihistamines and other allergy suppressants into her system. The meds would relieve most but not all of her symptoms. Despite the wonders of twenty-third-century medicine, prenatal gene therapy provided the only cure for allergies. Maya cherished the memory of her late mother, but she wished the woman had let the doctors code them out of her genome before birth like a normal parent. Pollen, mold, dust, dogs, cats—the list had no end. Anything that could afflict her sinuses worked them into a tizzy, which was why she had grown up with robots and other gadgets as pets instead of animals.

With the irritation in her nostrils and eyes subsiding, she jogged into

the terminal, dodging the throngs of people scurrying toward their destinations. As she ran, she accessed the phase port's SolNet app, which calculated the fastest route to Triton. Her itinerary included connecting stops at Luna, Venus, Vesta, and Callisto. The more direct Earth–Mars–Callisto route wouldn't align for another few weeks. Her ancient ancestors had once believed the position of the planets affected a person's fate. *They might be right today.*

She reached the entrance to one of the spokes, which stretched out from the central hub. This particular corridor led to the phase portal to Luna. A line of over one hundred people stood at the security checkpoint to the gate.

A stocky attendant paced up and down the economy line, bellowing instructions. "Step into the DNA scanner one at a time, please. While you wait, please turn your attention to the cubes on your left. The short, instructional vidsim will explain the differences you'll encounter during your time on Luna."

Maya thanked the stars she didn't have to wait in the economy line and rushed over to the guard at the commuter fast-track checkpoint. The woman glanced at the *New Horizons* mission patch on Maya's uniform. Raising an eyebrow questioning what she was still doing on the planet, the guard waved her into the scanner arch.

Purple beams leapt from the arch, caressing her from boots to scalp.

<IntraSolar Commonality citizen identity confirmed,> the port AI said. <Enjoy your trip to Luna, Ensign Maya Davis.>

The moment the attendant on the opposite side of the arch waved her through, Maya broke into a sprint down the corridor. A four-meter-diameter wormhole with a surface like a distorted mirror hovered up ahead. The salmon-pink hue of hyperspace loomed inside the vortex. For some reason, it looked like an overgrown fishbowl to her. Scientists and engineers had done wonders to suppress the debilitating effects of hyperspace, but her eyes still crossed when looking straight at the strange shapes and distortions.

<Please keep moving.> The AI's instructions echoed from speakers embedded in the walls. <Don't stop except in an emergency. Prepare for momentary reduced visibility and a significant reduction in weight. Luna possesses one sixth of the Earth's gravity, which limits mobility.>

She dashed through the portal and emerged on the other side a second later. Crossing the 385,000 kilometers to Earth's moon was as easy as stepping through a doorway. Only a mild bout of disorientation resulted from the trip, which she shook right off.

The strain on her muscles and bones lifted. She had plenty of experience in low-gravity environments due to her IEF training, but

anyone unfamiliar with walking on Luna might have panicked, stumbled, or fallen. Travelers in the economy line had to remain seated in a sonic tube sphere during their crossing.

Reaching the end of the corridor, she emerged into the hub of the phase port in Armstrong City. Panoramic windows hung meters over the heads of the lumbering businessmen, children, and tourists in the courtyard. A half-crescent Earth reflected sunlight beyond the panes. Stars twinkled against the backdrop of space overhead.

She slowed her pace for fear of bumping into the people hurrying through the terminal. They focused their attention on the readouts in their net specs and i-cite rather than on their surroundings. Few seemed to appreciate the fact they had passed through a gateway in the heavens that had whisked them to another realm faster than the speed of light.

The mere thought of traveling to other worlds gave Maya goosebumps. As a kid, she had built toy starships out of metablocks and constructed model civilizations for them to visit. One particular colony inhabited by talking turtles had sprouted up on Aunt Brooke's bed. Her aunt had gyrated with fury when a race of evil bug creatures had attacked the colony and launched a powerful doomsday weapon into the core of the bed-planet, ripping apart the mattress.

After passing through the next portal, the pull on Maya's body increased to ninety percent standard gravity. White sunlight pierced the dome encasing the phase port on Landis, the floating city within Venus's atmosphere. Puffy yellow clouds of carbon dioxide drifted along outside the dome. The clouds buoyed up the inflatable platform on which the city rested.

She loved the idea of the veritable castle in the sky, one which hovered at the right altitude to provide one atmosphere of pressure. She imaged herself kicking back, lounging on one of the puffy clouds, and relaxing, even though the idea was silly.

The city's architects and engineers had fashioned the terminal floor out of clear nanoplastic, giving her the sense of walking on air. Every now and then, she stepped over a break in the clouds and caught a glimpse of Venus's scorching surface. A girl she passed knelt and swiped her fingers over a section of the see-through flooring, magnifying a pair of steaming rocks on the ground.

Maya darted through the farmer's market at the center of the terminal. Booths with piles of mangos, avocados, and every imaginable fruit and vegetable lined her path. The produce hyper-grown on Landis was the city's chief export. Pumps siphoned the surrounding carbon dioxide into hydroponic greenhouses, allowing plants to flourish far more than they ever could have on Earth.

Pangs of hunger stabbed her, courtesy of the smells of the market. The aroma of onions, garlic, and ginger teased her senses. She wiggled her nose to keep from sneezing.

She slowed to a jog and reached for the top pear on a cart overflowing with them. The timing of her grab proved impeccable, but removing the top pear disturbed those below it.

A landslide ensued.

The nostrils belonging to the owner of the cart flared.

Maya skidded to a halt, pivoted, and dove back toward the pile. Landing on one shoulder with a thud, she reached out to catch the falling pears. The avalanche ended with her lying on her back, holding eleven pieces of fruit. Not one struck the ground. *Whew. No casualties.*

Hopping to her feet, she accessed the credit immersive in her i-cite and paid the owner's virtual cash register for all eleven. After grabbing two for the road, she donned an apologetic smile and backpedaled toward her destination.

The owner shook his head and mouthed the words, "Good luck out there."

Maya slurped her fruit and reached the next portal without further incident.

Her chronometer read 11:36 SST during her sonic tube ride through the hollowed-out core of the second largest planetoid within the asteroid belt, Vesta. Engineers had situated Vesta's phase portals at different locations on the asteroid rather than in a centralized port, forcing her to cross from one side to the other. Maya marveled at the mining operation. Drilling rigs the size of mansions bored into the interior walls of the cavern. Smaller bots zoomed to and from the rigs, delivering fuel and carrying away chunks of ore.

The transport sphere passed the central refinery and colony complex, which resembled a gargantuan metal bee hive. Mammoth support beams jutted out from the hive and connected to the walls. The hive's diameter had increased by tens of meters since the last time she had taken this route. Maya did a quick SolNet search. At the present rate of construction, the hive would consume Vesta in fifty years.

At 11:43 SST, she set foot on Callisto.

The attendant at the end of the portal from Vesta handed her a respirator.

Donning the breather, Maya sucked in concentrated oxygen and bounded out into the open-air terminal within New Galilei.

Skyscrapers towered above the previously-domed city, reaching for a Jupiter five times as big as Luna in Earth's sky. A thin layer of breathable air shrouded the moon thanks to the hyper-terraforming effort. The

atmosphere had reached the minimum pressure levels needed to support a human body without a space suit, but the air density had a ways to go before it could provide comfortable breathing levels for visitors. Every now and then, she lunged past an acclimated resident not wearing a breather.

Jupiter blocked the sun at the moment, shrouding New Galilei in darkness. The lack of illumination raised the hairs on Maya's neck. Fortunately, the lights of the bustling colony kept things from getting too dark. Music reached her ears from the bar and casino district beyond the terminal. The neurosynth band she had seen with Jo had played in one of the clubs in the district. She had vague recollections of stumbling out of the place only hours ago.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone racing toward her.

She twisted her hips in time to stare down a teen skating at her on a pair of mag-blades.

Unable to stop, the boy drilled her in the midsection and drove her into the pavement. The impact might've dislocated one of her vertebra on Earth, but Callisto's thirteen-percent gravity saved her spine from anything more than discomfort.

His left mag-blade flew off his foot. It skidded across the pavement and struck a roving vending machine with a clank.

Wincing, Maya sat up and pulled the boy up with her. "Are you okay?" she asked, adjusting her breather.

The boy needed a minute to catch his breath. He wasn't wearing a mask, meaning he likely called one of the colonies home. "I think so." He raised his net specs, checked his body for injury, and bounded to his feet. "Gosh, I'm so sorry, lady, but—whoa, aren't you . . . ?"

She rose to her feet.

The animation on the front of his T-shirt depicted a man raising two fingers in a gesture of peace. An artist's rendition of a Penphin stood next to the man, waving eight-fingered hands beneath its flipper-wings, or flings. Its smiling snout bobbed up and down.

The boy had no doubt received the shirt from community service workers at a local revitalization center. The ISC couldn't hand out *New Horizons* merchandise fast enough.

"That's right." She smiled. "I'm IEF."

The boy fidgeted, unable to stand still. "You guys are so fused. Is it true you have scientifically-enhanced superpowers?"

"Well . . ." She bit her lip and tapped a finger against her cheek. "I do have cybernetic implants driven by the latest nanotech. They allow me to interface with SolNet, control my physiology, react faster, and live longer. I suppose you could call those superpowers."

“Too fused . . .”

A reminder blinked within her i-cite. *Ten minutes left. Crap! I'll never get to the Triton portal before noon, unless . . .* “Hey, I'll make you a deal. If you let me borrow your blades, I'll bring you back a souvenir from the mission.”

The boy nodded like a bobblehead doll.

“Great,” she said. “What's your name?”

“It's Caden. Caden Fisher.”

She mind-linked with his specs and sent him her virtual address.

“Wow, thanks, Maya.” Caden pulled the mag-blade off his right foot and handed it to her.

“Don't mention it.” She rushed over to the left blade. Picking it up, she took a seat on a bench near a fountain.

As she stuffed her feet into each boot, they conformed to the contours of her feet. Childhood memories of Aunt Brooke taking her mag-skating flooded her mind. Her aunt had flashed one of her rare smiles when Maya had first learned to keep her balance.

The memory warmed her heart.

When she thought of the “C” her aunt had given her in her flight simulation class, the warmth ignited and burned in her chest. Maya tensed in anger. The grade had bumped her down to IEF salutatorian.

She shoved thoughts of the unfair transgression aside and focused on getting to the ceremony on time.

In one fluid motion, Maya hopped to her feet while interfacing with the blades. Hyper-conducting magnets pushed against the pavement, keeping her centimeters above it. Her knees wobbled, but years of experience helped her keep her balance.

She pushed off and zipped along through the phase port. The crowds limited her speed, but she made much better time than she would have on foot.

“Hey, watch where you're going,” a woman shouted.

A man pointed at a floating PEDESTRIANS ONLY sign. “They don't allow blading in the terminal.”

Ten meters from the checkpoint to the Triton portal, a disgruntled mass of travelers stood huddled together, elbow to elbow.

I should've realized the gate would be backed up with people trying to get to the ceremony. Still, most everyone should be there by now. It shouldn't be this bad.

<The Phase Port Association apologizes for the inconvenience caused by the malfunction.> The port AI's voice echoed throughout the concourse. <We anticipate the technical difficulties will be corrected momentarily. Please be patient.>

“Excuse me,” she said, pushing through the crowd. “IEF coming through.” She shoved her way to the guard at the fast-track gate. “What’s the problem?”

“There’s a glitch in the hyperspace navigation software.” The man yawned. “They installed longer range generators last week, new-fangled models capable of reaching all the way to Earth. Apparently, Einstein has yet to work out all the bugs.”

Maya bit her lip at the reference to her uncle, Professor Kevin Sommerfield. Uncle Kevin had invented the faster-than-light phase drive almost two decades ago, a feat that had earned him the nickname “Modern Einstein.” Now, as director of the Solar Science Society, final responsibility for the vast network of intrasolar phase portals fell to him.

“Let me through,” she said.

“There’s nowhere to go until it’s fixed.”

She noticed a man entering an open service hatch in the corridor beyond the scanner arch. “I might be able to help the repair technicians.”

The guard scratched his hairless dome. “What can you do?”

Pointing to a patch on her uniform, she said, “I have an engineering degree in starship operations. I know a thing or two about wormhole theory and phase drives.”

“I’m not supposed to let unauthorized personnel enter the generator control room.”

Her mental clock read 11:55 SST. *Five minutes to go. So close!*

She played her trump card, the one she loathed using. “You know who my uncle is, right?” Mind-linking with the guard’s earpiece, she transmitted her ISC citizen profile. The profile proved her relation to her aunt’s husband, Director Sommerfield. “I’d hate to tell him one of his port officials—badge number 80352—was responsible for delaying the launch of humankind’s first interstellar starship.”

The guard swallowed. “I guess it couldn’t hurt to let you lend a hand.”

“I appreciate it.” Pulse racing, Maya leapt into the scanner arch, submitted to the violet light, and rushed into the control room.

A technician sat at a control station, swiping her fingers through one of a dozen angry red cubes. A second tech stood behind the first with his arms folded. Both of their brows remained creased.

“Have you tried reinstalling the OS?” Maya blurted out.

Both techs flinched at her intrusion.

The first tech stared at her. “Who the hell are you?”

“IEF engineer.” She left out the recent-graduate-with-little-to-no-practical-experience disclaimer, a trivial distinction. “I thought I’d see if I could lend a hand.”

After glancing at her colleague, the first tech answered her question. “An OS restore would take hours. We’re trying to pinpoint the issue, resolve it, and get the system back online sooner rather than later.”

“It could take a long time to manually track down the problem. Performing a non-destructive restore of the OS should bring the system back up in thirty seconds, tops.”

“True,” the second tech said, “but when the system comes back up, it’ll spend a couple hours running the preliminary startup sequence.”

“Right, so bypass startup and jump straight into operational mode.”

The first tech shook her head. “I wouldn’t advise skipping the safety and endpoint calibration checks.”

Maya tapped her foot. Three minutes remained. “Yes, but if you skip the standard startup protocol and bring the system back online, the main AI becomes available. It can retroactively identify the issue and perform the startup checks in a matter of seconds.” *That’s how I aced my academy training sim, at least.*

Sticking out his lower lip, the second tech said, “I think she’s right.”

The first tech swayed her head back and forth in contemplation. “You may be on to something, but if we skip endpoint calibration, we’ll need to run diagnostics to verify the expected destination. Otherwise, people could end up walking into solid rock or adrift in space.”

Maya’s knees bounced as if she needed to use the restroom—and now that she thought about it, she did. “No need. The Lassell colony phase port should be programmed as the default endpoint, and a restart will default to the default endpoint.”

The techs blinked at one another and nodded.

“Bypass startup calibration and restore the OS,” the first tech ordered the auxiliary AI.

<That procedure is not recommended,> the backup AI said. <Are you certain you wish to proceed?>

The techs looked at Maya.

“Yes!” she yelled.

“Do it,” the first tech said.

<Restoring operating system,> the backup AI said.

Every display cube fizzled into nothingness. The plasma strips on the ceiling dimmed. Thirty excruciating seconds passed.

Green cubes popped into existence. The distant whir of the portal generator shook the room with mild vibrations.

Maya popped her head out into the corridor. The wormhole had returned. *Yes!* Her chronometer showed less than a minute to go.

Propelled by pride and giddiness, she sprinted toward the portal. *Another impossible feat accomplished!*

Behind her, she heard one of the techs yell, “Hey, wait—”

Hyperspace consumed her.

Lunging out of the portal, she bolted through the corridor and out onto the phase port concourse.

She collided with a startled woman.

The woman fell backwards. Maya recoiled but kept her balance. Cold liquid splashed her in the face and chest, soaking her uniform and chilling her.

The woman dropped her soda cup, which hit the ground at the same instant as her. The animated label on the cup read L&P, short for Lemon and Paeroa, the national soft drink of New Zealand.

Twirling around, Maya saw the wormhole in the corridor behind her shrink and disappear.

Her knees buckled. Both her shoulders drooped.

She collapsed onto her butt and stared at the overturned cup, not knowing whether to laugh at the irony, weep in defeat, or kick and scream at the stars.

Picking up the cup, she refastened the lid and handed it to the disheveled woman on the ground next to her.

Maya lay back on the floor of the Auckland phase port and tuned out the commuters gathering around her.

Two—Malcontent

Mars, May 2265 CE

Frowning, Brooke Davis-Sommerfield studied a simulated construct of the planet Uranus within her fighter's augmented reality. The gas giant's aquamarine clouds of methane, split down the middle by a vertical ring system, gave the celestial sphere the look of polished marble. She couldn't distinguish the virtual setting from reality, a fact that both impressed and depressed her. As lifelike as the sim appeared, she yearned for the actual experience.

Seventeen years ago, UN Secretary-General Danuwa Ajunwa, now the ISC chancellor, had revoked her commission and pilot's license for taking the phase fighter prototype to save her niece. Brooke hadn't flown a real spacecraft since crash-landing on Europa, and the loss of her dream continued to gnaw away at her.

With a sigh, she resigned herself to another day as a civilian flight instructor.

Brooke ordered her support AI to open a channel to the squadron of Pulsars holding formation behind her. "On the first day of each semester, I observe the same time-honored tradition. I want each of you to attack me, all at once."

"She's not serious," Mackenzie stammered. Every class Brooke taught seemed to have a student who stammered. "Is she?"

“You got me,” Owen said, his voice cracking.

Declan snorted. “It’s ten against one. We’ll blank her, no problem.”

Brooke cracked a hint of a smile at her pupils’ reactions.

With a mental command, she engaged the afterburners on her PF-5C Pulsar and dove toward Uranus. Signals sent from her headset to her nervous system tricked her body into experiencing the acceleration. Holographic gravgel immersed her virtual flight armor in the rendered cockpit, offering only aesthetic protection against the artificial g-force. Most people couldn’t distinguish the state-of-the-art sim from reality, but it insulted Brooke’s senses and only heightened her nostalgia for the old days. “Any pilot who blanks me gets an automatic ‘A’ for the course.”

“Have you ever given an automatic ‘A,’ Instructor Davis?” Mackenzie asked.

Brooke chuckled. The imitation environment may not have compared to the real thing, but it would suffice for her latest massacre.

Three Pulsars rocketed toward her craft from behind. They entered into a pincer formation, surrounding her fighter. Violet particle beams leapt from each assailant. She dodged the blasts with minimal zigzagging and yawned, maintaining her course toward the gas giant.

“She’s so damn fast,” Owen said. “I’m having trouble tracking her movements.” He slowed his fighter and altered course away from Uranus.

Right before the icy clouds of the troposphere swallowed Brooke’s Pulsar, she upshifted her craft to hyperspace. The space in front of her fighter tore away and a spherical vortex no bigger than her Pulsar opened, allowing it to slip out of normal space-time. Her phase drive’s sensory suppression systems reduced the incomprehensible higher dimension to perceptible but still mind-bending kaleidoscopic distortions. Nebulae, stars, and the planet stretched and twisted as if seen in an array of shattered funhouse mirrors.

She tracked the positions of her prey back in reality. With the help of her support AI, she calculated their trajectories and her point of egress.

Her Pulsar emerged back in real space on the tail of Declan’s fighter.

She launched a relativistic seeker at the flare of his craft’s exhaust. In the time it took her to blink, the student’s fighter exploded and depixelated into nothingness.

Launching her Pulsar away from the planet, she chased after Mackenzie and Owen as their craft fled into the rings. She weaved through rocks of water-ice, each meters in diameter.

Both fleeing Pulsars disappeared off her mental scope, having upshifted to hyperspace. Rocks flew away from the points at which the spacecraft had exited reality.

Brooke shook her head and checked her phase drive’s charge timer.

The ten-second recharge time had elapsed, meaning she could execute another shift at any time.

Reducing speed, she fired her particle cannons, blasting the ice boulders all around her into smaller chunks. Then she reversed course and waited outside the rocky debris field she had created, weapons ready.

Owen's phase fighter reentered normal space in the six o'clock position behind her craft but failed to avoid the shards of ice littering local space. His Pulsar's force field glowed purple and flickered red, overloading on its way to a fiery demise.

Mackenzie's craft materialized in front of Brooke's fighter, clear of the debris field.

More than ready for her, Brooke fired her cannons and launched a pair of seekers. Her ordnance struck the trainee's Pulsar before the girl could react—and passed right through it.

After recalibrating her remote sensors, Brooke identified the Pulsar she had failed to destroy as a false image. *A classic decoy maneuver.* She grinned, knowing Mackenzie could only remain in hyperspace for a matter of seconds or risk draining her craft's antimatter supply.

Her student's Pulsar reappeared in real space on her six.

Squeezing her auxiliary control grips out of habit, Brooke flipped her fighter backwards and barreled straight toward the student fighter at max thrust.

Mackenzie launched an r-seeker at her fighter.

Brooke disabled her craft's wake-limiter and upshifted. Massive gravitational distortions propagated out from the point where she had entered hyperspace.

Mackenzie's r-seeker detonated against the gravimetric wake. The swelling blast consumed her Pulsar and destroyed it.

The trainee shrieked as she met her virtual maker.

Brooke dispatched the other seven students with similar ease.

The combat sim terminated with the explosion of the tenth fighter. The gravgel, cockpit, and stars surrounding her faded away, leaving her sitting at the front of a virtual classroom. The flickering personas of her disheveled pupils sat facing her, each one attending from elsewhere in the solar system.

Standing up from her desk at the front of the room, Brooke paced the aisles between the seats. "I hope each of you learned something from your first flirt with modern space warfare. I throw you into the fire on the first day to give you a sense of reality. It's not all guts and glory. During wartime, combat pilots have an average life expectancy measured in months." She locked stares with Owen. "The lucky ones, anyway."

The skinny eighteen-year-old sank in his seat. If a shell had grown on

his back, he would have surely retreated inside it.

They get younger every year.

The whites and blues of Owen's IEF candidate uniform differed from the black and navy outfits of the ISC Defense officers, attire she had worn once upon a time. The class consisted of an even mix of IEF and ISC students—exploratory and military, new and old blood. Supposedly, the lighter colors in the IEF apparel represented the greater purity the human race had achieved in its unification.

Brooke swallowed a disgusted gag at the thought of how the IntraSolar Commonality had formed. She dared not let slip that subversive elements had duped the human race into their blissful but ignorant utopia.

"I'll be blunt," she said. "I'm a tough instructor, and not all of you are cut out to be fighter pilots. It's my job to determine who can operate a Pulsar without killing themselves and destroying trillions' worth of government property."

Returning to the front of the classroom, she whirled on Declan, the first newbie she had killed. "Tell me one thing you did wrong."

"Um . . ." Declan's virtual Adam's Apple gulped. "I guess if I knew, I might not have gotten blanked."

"Well, at least you're honest. And being honest with yourself is critical to staying alive. If you let your ego get in the way—if you believe you're invincible—you're as good as dead."

Wide eyes and twisted frowns met her gaze.

How many times have I ignored my own advice? She kept the thought to herself and plopped down in the seat behind her desk. "Tomorrow, we'll hold an after-action review to analyze what happened, why it happened, and how we can improve. I want each of you to go over today's sim and note three tactical errors you made before next session. Class dismissed."

One by one, her students blinked away into nothingness.

After the last one disappeared, she reached up with her real finger and tapped her headset. The classroom faded from sight, replaced by the extravagant bedroom within the overindulgent mansion she shared with her husband, Kevin Sommerfield, on the outskirts of Red Rock City on Mars. The early morning glare of the sun bathed the room in crimson light.

Brooke whipped off the headset and sank beneath the covers in bed.

Just when she had achieved a semblance of comfort, a sharp pain undulated through one arm, and her body convulsed. She gritted her teeth and fumbled for the auto-syringe on the nightstand. Grabbing hold of it, she stuck her arm and fell back onto the bed. Medicinal nanites raced

through her bloodstream, patching the damage to her nervous system caused by former narcotics use—sparking, the junkie gamers had called it back in her day. The injected medites quelled the spasms and hot flashes, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Charged with raising Maya and barred from flying, she had given up the sparks seventeen years ago. Modern medicine had advanced considerably thanks to the technology the so-called Greys had left behind on Triton and their Kuiper Belt colonies. The meds she now injected prevented the relapses from occurring very often. Most of the time, she didn't experience symptoms. But as she grew older, she knew the meds would stop suppressing the pain. Someday, she would pay the price for the choices she had made in her youth.

All she could do for now was shrug and live her life. She couldn't change the past. If she had to do it all over again, she would do it the same. *For Maya.*

An icon blinked in her i-cite, signaling an incoming comm from her ever-attentive husband. She loved Kevin dearly. He was the only non-blood relative she had ever cared about. He had helped her rescue and raise Maya. He had stuck with her through good times and bad. He was a great man, having invented faster-than-light comm and space travel.

Still, sometimes a woman needed her alone time.

She answered his comm.

"How was class today?" Kevin asked from a screen in her eyesight. No matter how often he shaved, the stubble never seemed to leave his face.

"Same as always," she droned. "Any hope for humanity diminishes with each passing semester."

Her husband ran a hand through brown hair with flecks of gray. "Give it up already, grumpy girl. We both know it's an act."

"But being grumpy gives me such great pleasure." Despite her best efforts, she cracked a slight smile.

"Well, not all of us are like that." He sounded forlorn.

For once, she gave up brooding about her own problems. It wasn't like Kevin to get down—introspective or contemplative, yes, but not depressed. She had the patent on that emotional state.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, it's nothing." He scratched his head. "Actually, how I'm feeling is pretty stupid considering what she did to me."

"What who did?"

An icon for a news feed from him popped up in her i-cite. She accessed the feed, which contained an obituary. "Dr. Christine Yeager, co-inventor of phase technology and convicted of treason in 2248, dies in

prison stabbing,” she read. “Your former colleague.”

“I know she sided with Collins and tried to sabotage and steal my work, but . . .”

“But you cared about her.”

“Up until I met you, I was certain I’d end up with her. Maybe I’m too big of a softie, but she deserved better.”

Brooke shuddered when she thought of how badly—and repeatedly—one individual had to stab another to kill them in an age where medicine could reconstruct someone from no more than a brain and spinal column.

After a moment of silence, she decided to change the subject. “I suppose I should start getting ready, huh? The launch ceremony starts in a few hours, and Maya will disown me if I don’t show up to see her off.”

“She’s still not speaking to you?” Kevin asked.

“Not since our last fight. Ever since she took my class, things haven’t been the same.” She pounded the mattress. “Our relationship improved when she left for the IEF academy. A little space between us went a long way. Why’d I have to go and ruin a good thing?”

“Did our little prodigy really deserve an average grade?”

“I tell you.” Brooke closed her eyes and pictured star fighters locked in combat. The imagery quickened her pulse. “That girl can watch from a distance and tell you what’s going to happen ten moves ahead. But when she jumps into a cockpit, she’s lost. She understands orbital mechanics better than anyone, but she doesn’t have the intuitive feel for maneuvers. A pilot doesn’t have time to think—let alone overthink—which is all she does.”

“You didn’t have an ulterior motive for keeping her out of a fighter?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” When Brooke saw Kevin’s raised eyebrows, she disarmed her snarl. “I won’t deny wanting to keep my niece out of harm’s way, but average pilots shouldn’t be fighter pilots.”

“It sounds like your conscience should be clear.”

“So why do I feel like garbage?” She rolled onto her stomach. “And now she’s leaving to explore interstellar space for three years. Not only will I miss her, but I’m jealous as hell. I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“You’ll have to live vicariously—like most parents.”

“I guess so.” A message icon blinked in her i-cite. “Anyway, I’d better get going if I want to make it to Triton on time. I’ll see you there?”

“We’ve got two front row seats together. Maya reserved them weeks ago and sent you—”

“Yeah, I’ve got my ticket somewhere in memory. Okay, I’m signing off. Love you.”

“Always and forever.”

Brooke grinned. “Barf.” She terminated the channel.

With her beloved solitude restored, she retreated back underneath the covers and viewed the annoying message. “Again?” she murmured, rolling her eyes. “The imbecile never gives up.”

The persistent author had sent her fifty messages in the last few months. She had dismissed the first few as spam, but the individual had dropped enough subtle hints about things few people knew—details regarding the true history of the quaint little farce known as the IntraSolar Commonality—to keep Brooke from outright ignoring them. Still, it didn’t matter what the idiot had to say. As much as the burden of truth suffocated her on a daily basis, she knew she could never mess with the status quo. To do so would turn her niece’s world upside-down, not to mention throw the human race into anarchy. Brooke refused to be that selfish.

The message read, I’VE BEEN PATIENT, BUT I CAN’T WAIT ANY LONGER. IT’S IMPERATIVE WE SPEAK BEFORE THE CEREMONY. YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHAT THEY’VE DONE—OR WHAT THEY’RE PLANNING? IF YOU WON’T COME TO ME, I’LL COME TO YOU.

“Whatever.” *And . . . delete.*

Following a much-needed stretch, she buried her face in a pillow and decided to rest for five more minutes. She faded in and out but didn’t allow herself to fall sleep.

A whirring noise accompanied by a rush of air perked her up.

She reached into a hidden compartment in the headboard and pulled out a particle handgun. She kept the weapon around in case members of the Vril or any of Ajunwa’s henchmen decided to pay her a visit.

Springing up on her knees, she twirled and aimed the gun at the sound.

A man knelt at the foot of the bed, placing a device the size of a sugar cube on the floor.

“Who the hell are you and what’re you doing in my home?” she yelled.

The intruder took his time rising to his feet. “Unless you plan to torch your room, I suggest you put that away.”

Keeping her gun sighted between his eyes, she hopped down off the bed and scrutinized him. He didn’t appear to be armed, although one could never tell for certain in an age of embedded bioweapons and micro-explosives. A half-head taller than her, the thirtyish young man of Asian descent sported a tweed flat cap, collared shirt under a sweater vest, and jeans.

She pulled the strap of her tank top back up over her shoulder and

straightened her boxer shorts, suddenly self-conscious. “I’m late for one of the most important moments in my niece’s life, so you’d better have a damn good reason for barging in here.”

He tipped back his cap and folded his arms. “You refused to respond to any of my messages. That forced me to resort to more drastic measures.”

“Sometimes, no communication is a form of communication, too.”

“This is bigger than your selfish need to withdraw. I need your help.”

“Then out with it already.” She gripped the gun with both hands. “You’ve got ten seconds to convince me not to blow your head off.”

He swung his gaze around the room. Shaking his head, he mouthed the words, “They’re listening.”

“I’ve had this place checked and rechecked for bugs. There’s nothing to worry about.”

The trespasser pointed at the tiny cube on the floor.

She narrowed her eyes. “If you think I’m going to trust you to activate that thing, forget it. For all I know, it’s some sort of explosive.”

He raised his brow and mouthed, “If I wanted to kill you, there’re easier ways to do it.”

I’m such a sucker. Grumbling, she said, “Okay, do it slowly. But the moment I suspect the slightest hint of deception, you’re dead. Got it?”

Nodding, he knelt and touched a finger to the cube. The device flashed.

Squinting, she wrapped her index finger around the trigger.

The man threw a palm up in a stopping motion.

The flickering ceased. Brooke relaxed her finger.

Standing up again, he spoke without holding back. “The Vrils aren’t careless enough to plant a physical device you could find. They don’t need to resort to anything so crude. You can thank your husband for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me ask you this. How do you communicate with people elsewhere in the solar system—in real time?”

Before she could say, “I’m not in the mood to play guessing games,” Brooke had realized the answer. “Wormhole surveillance.” The implications twisted into her gut.

“That’s right.” The man formed a circle with his thumb and forefinger. “They’re able to spy through tiny, unseen windows in space-time, from anywhere to anywhere and on anyone. The very notion of privacy is extinct—at least, not without one of these bad boys.” He directed the toe of a loafer at the cube. “This device distorts space-time in a localized area enough to prevent the formation of wormholes.”

“I see.”

“Will you please put the gun down now?”

Brooke scrunched her nose in thought. “It’s an interesting story, but so far all you’ve done is put on a half-assed light show. You’ve still got a lot more convincing to do.”

“But now, at least, you’re listening.” He bowed. “My name is Shin, Shin Saito. It’s an honor to meet the greatest pilot who ever—”

“If you want a hole blown through your chest, keep up the hero worship.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Sorry. I should’ve known how you’d react, given how closely I’ve studied your profile, and—”

“What profile? My ISC citizen account?”

“No, the Vril have an extensive identity matrix on each and every human being—all forty billion, not counting the deceased. Yours is so detailed, they could simulate another you.”

“And you know this how?”

“I used to be a Vril agent—well, I still am, but that requires a bit more explanation.”

“More explanation starts now.” Brooke checked the time in her i-cite. “I’ve got places to be, so make it quick.”

“Here’s the abridged version. There’s disagreement amongst the Vril about how to direct the future of the human race. I’m the head of an anonymous splinter group that’s rejected the way in which the leadership plans to usher in a better tomorrow.”

“An anonymous splinter group? You mean, a secret group within a secret group.” She shook her head at the irony. For some reason, her mind pictured Russian nesting dolls.

“My father and grandmother were members of the Vril. They taught me that drastic measures needed to be taken to save mankind from the threat lurking out there. I stand by the invasion we staged to unite the solar system seventeen years ago, but what we’re doing now goes beyond a simple ruse.”

“A simple ruse?” She snorted. “That’s what you call tricking people into a war against a fake extrasolar threat and killing thousands of people in the process?”

Shin frowned. “I’ll admit to a poor choice of words, but I’m serious. The point is, the methods the Vril are using to maintain the human race’s unity and accelerate their master agenda cross a line an increasing number of members aren’t willing to step over.”

“So now all of a sudden there’s a line?”

“Did you ever stop to wonder how the ISC has managed to eliminate poverty, hunger, and crime in just seventeen years?” he asked with a

stomp of his foot. “Some of the progress is due to our newfound cohesion after defeating a common foe, but there’s no way the disappearance of hate, greed, and differences of opinion in such a short timeframe has come about naturally. Behind the scenes, the Vril have manipulated the media, reprogrammed the neural structures of thousands of people, staged disasters by Mother Nature, and rooted out dissenters with assassinations—and that’s not the half of it.”

Keeping her gun trained on Shin, Brooke shuffled over to the picture windows overlooking Valles Marineris, one of the largest canyons in the solar system. With the terraforming of Mars in its final stages, olive green grass and tall trees grew beneath an azure sky. Flocks of birds flew over the chasm. On the other side of the canyon, construction bots worked to tear down the transparent domes that had once enclosed the metropolis of Red Rock City.

“I’ve had my suspicions,” she said, “but it’s not like I can do anything about them.”

“What if I told you there was a way to expose the Vril without bringing civilization crashing down around us? And by the end, you’d be reinstated into the military and get back the pilot’s license Ajunwa revoked.”

Brooke flared her nostrils. “If you think you can waltz in here, tell me what I want to hear, and expect me to believe you, you’re dumber than all the people you’ve ever conned. This is what the Vril do. Lies on top of lies on top of more lies. How naïve do you think I am?”

“I don’t expect you to believe my story without proof, which is why I’ve arranged to show it to you. There’s something you need to see at the bottom of the Martian south polar ocean. The Vril plan to bury it when the solar system’s attention is focused on the launch ceremony, so we need to go right away.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Brooke yelled, “Right away? As in now? Forget it. I won’t miss saying goodbye to my niece based on this load of crap.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. “Besides, I’m just a washed up fighter pilot. What can I do?”

“If my plan is going to succeed, I need the best pilot in the solar system. Plus, you already know the truth, so you’re the logical choice. There’re one or two places I need to blast my way inside. With you doing the flying, they won’t be able to keep us out.”

“One pilot can’t fight a war for you. The only way to take down the Vril is to out-con the con artists—but good luck with that. I’m out.”

“Have it your way.” Shin turned and stepped toward the bedroom door. “I hope when you say goodbye to Maya, it isn’t the last time you

ever see her.”

Brooke sprinted over to him, leveling her gun at the back of his head. “What the hell does that mean? Is something going to happen to her or *New Horizons*?”

He turned around and shifted his stare between her and the gun.

“Answer the question,” she shouted.

Pulling down his cap, he said, “Let’s just say if the Vril have their way, humankind’s first interstellar mission won’t end well for the crew or the race they plan to visit.” He took a step toward her, his face tensed. “You still don’t get it. The Vril’s agenda goes way beyond you, me, or the human race—beyond the past, present, and future.”

“Care to be a little less cryptic?”

“South polar ocean. One hour. I’ll be waiting.” Shin whirled and headed for the door.

“Stop!” She fired at his leg. The low-yield particle burst passed through him like he wasn’t there, scorching the hardwood floor.

His body wavered. The pixels comprising it destabilized and disintegrated. All that remained of his persona was the cube—the holographic emitter—on the floor.

Growling, Brooke shot and vaporized the cube.

She kicked the side of the bed, stubbed her toe on the frame, and cursed in pain.

The mattress knocked into her dresser. One of the vidpics sitting on top of it—the one playing a scene with Brooke and Maya embracing at the girl’s high school graduation—toppled over the side of the dresser and struck the floor, shattering.

Brooke picked up the vidpic, wondering whether she should contact Maya or Kevin.

After weighing the consequences, she decided against it. She refused to tell her niece about the Vril but didn’t know how else to justify her absence from the ceremony. As for her husband, he would try to talk her out of doing anything rash.

I’m so sorry, Maya, she said to the vidpic, but if there’s even the slimmest chance Shin is telling the truth . . .