

## EXCERPT FROM ALIEN WHISPERS: CONFLICT AND COMMUNION

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Laura stood there for a full minute, her flashlight catching dust motes in the air. What she really wanted was some evidence of Nomi's long-ago presence; some unwritten signature that she may have unwittingly left behind. Nomi was, after all, the keeper of the secrets of Milijun. Had no doubt used them to push for alien collaboration on Mars. And she had succeeded, for the Martian base was named after her.

Laura recalled her remembrance plaque on Mars:

*In commemoration of the founding of Millison  
Colonel Norma Millison, known as Nomi  
Gracious founder and leader  
May she find peace among the stars  
Came to us: 2160 Left us: 2256*

She estimated that Nomi would have reached the rank of colonel over a period of twenty years or more, somewhere around 2200, and that would likely have been around the time she had been given the authority to plan for Mars. But from Eucla or elsewhere?

The more Laura thought about it, the more she realized that Nomi had probably left here long before the base's closure. But where had she gone to?

Laura pursed her lips. She didn't want to spend much longer in this dismal, old military bastion, but she thought a survey of the officers' headquarters was worth undertaking. If she found nothing, then nothing was lost.

Returning to the corridor, she trained her torch to the right—and heard a noise. She immediately switched off the beam, kept perfectly still, and listened intently. There it was again. Voices, echoing eerily down the corridors, and not too far away. Her hand instinctively went for her laser.

Silence ensued, just as frightening now that she knew of another presence in the building.

The sound of approaching footsteps broke the momentary quiet; more than one person, she was sure. She stepped back inside Ord's old office, pocketed the torch, and held the gun in front of her with both hands. Men conversing, and coming her way. *Who are they? What on Earth are they doing here?*

Through the half-open door, Laura could see torchlight dancing on the floor of the corridor. Was the door ajar before? Relief flooded her mind as she recalled that it was, but maybe not as much as it was now. *Will they notice? Shall I close it more?*

It was too late. She went behind the door and held her breath.

The footsteps stopped. Light played into the office, swept across the floor. She looked down. *Jesus aid me.* Footsteps in the dust, her footsteps.

Laura moved back from the door. *If they push it hard, I will be crushed.*

They had gone silent, and she knew they were about to enter the office. She retrieved the torch, holding the laser pistol in her right hand. Then she swept the door fully open and yelled: "I'm armed! Stay where you are!"

She switched on her torch and played it over the two figures in the corridor. Two figures, but not two men. One was a serv, seemingly a modern version of the human-sized robots she had seen at Milijun.

"Who the hell are you?" the man grated.

"Turn your friend off," Laura replied, waving the pistol.

The man shrugged and touched his wristband. The serv's head and shoulders slumped, but it remained on its feet. Laura gave it a quick glance, one wary eye still focused on the stranger. A century ago, the servs had not possessed human features, but this one did, right down to the eyebrows. Below the waist, its legs carried both knee and ankle joints; the thighs and calves were around the same diameter as a well-developed upper human arm. The torso was different to what she recalled—leaner and much more humanlike, with realistic arms, hands, and fingers. The whole body was silver, shining brightly under her torchlight.

She turned her attention to the man. To her surprise, he was dressed in an army uniform, dirty, dishevelled, torn in places, but still recognizable.

“Who the hell are you?” the man asked again. “Why are you here?”

Laura leveled the laser directly at the man's face. “I've got the gun. I'll ask the questions.”

“Can we sit down somewhere?” he responded. “I get tired easily.”

She hadn't expected that. She studied him for a moment, sizing him up. Unshaven, somewhere between forty and fifty, some grey in the hair, slim, not really filling the uniform. He didn't appear to be armed. She waved the laser at Ord's door. “Inside. Leave your serv here.” Then quickly added: “Wait. Give me your wristband.”

There was no resistance. He really did look tired. She pocketed his wristband and gestured with the laser. “Inside.”

They both entered the office, Laura closed the door, and they sat facing each other on the two chairs. “Give me your torch,” she commanded, beginning to feel more in charge of the situation.

Again, no resistance. She placed both torches on the desk, pointing at the man's face. He looked haggard, as if he hadn't slept for a month.

“What's your name?” she asked, keeping the laser trained on the man's midriff.

“Matthew Cabella.” He shifted in his seat, and Laura's grip on the pistol tightened. “Second lieutenant.” He gave her a loose grin. “At your service.”