Salaris

Salaris cringed as the high-pitched whistle echoed through the frozen corridors, signaling a call to assemble in the temple. She missed deep throb of old bells, but shivered in fear as she remembered how the walls shook and dust rained from the top of the battle-worn cavern the last time they had been used. Her friends dropped the religious tracts they were supposed to be reading.

“I bet it’s another drill.” Lomis stretched out her long limbs. “What kind of Saarkaak invasion do you think your uncle dreamed up this time?”

“When is the last time they actually attacked? I’m over these drills.” Salaris knew they needed to hurry, but she couldn’t stop from tidying her books before pulling on her parka. “I’m so tired of everything down here.”

“Yeah, Bara.” Kasil looked down at the ground below them. “You can bring back the sun and warmth. We’ve been asking you for it long enough.”

Salaris frowned at her friend’s irreverence. “Hush. You don’t want anyone hearing you say that.”

Every time Salaris entered the main chamber of the temple, she got goose bumps. Bara felt closer here. She felt the goddess’s presence in the carved stonework and brightly painted walls. Paintings and statues depicting their history filled niches throughout the room. Ornate columns peppered the room, supporting the ceiling of the excavated cavern. The room was one of the few parts of the temple that had survived the battles with the Saarkaaks, although the occasional missing column and the broken statues reminded her, even here, of the ever present danger.

Salaris squeezed in between her two seminary friends, grateful for the shared warmth. Most of her friends had abandoned her after she started dating Donoon when they were teens, assuming that her relationship with the high priest’s only surviving relative was a grab for power. Only Kasil and Lomis had been willing to give the dashing older man a chance and discover the gentle nature and keen wit that Salaris had fallen in love with.

Salaris took her normal position in the hall, near a painting of the first Barakaaks worshiping the goddess. She noticed a loose block about chest high. As Salaris leaned against the worn and cracked support, she made a mental note to the man who was as close to a father as she had.

Vaamick’s limbs trembled as he walked up to the podium. The pressures of leading their people had taken a lot out of the old man. She hoped nobody else noticed as that would make him angry. With Donoon gone, Salaris had been doing her best to take care of the cleric, but he was a difficult man to deal with. He was quick to anger and slow to forgive.

His gnarled hands grasped the podium as he stepped onto the raised dais. “Bara provides all things,” he intoned.

The crowd completed in unison, “Bara helps those who help themselves.”

“The great father Saturn works toward completing his second orbit in the time since we were betrayed. Times have seemed dark, but deliverance is at hand.” His shaking hand fumbled with a button and a view screen lowered behind him.

The image flickered to life, showing ethane snows flurrying on the surface. The bottom of the screen caught the edge of one of their few remaining super-buses. Great fleets of them had once crisscrossed the land with travelers visiting now-abandoned cities in comfort.

Salaris blushed as she remembered a gossiped story of a young couple of long ago before the smog. The couple snuck into one of the cars and made love beneath the Saturn-lit sky. Such things were not possible now. The bus’s windows had been destroyed in the war. Now instead of glass, large holes lined the sides of the vehicle, gaping holes like the wounds suffered by the rest of their society.

Lomis nudged her. “That’s the great methane sea.” She pointed at the dark pool as waves lapped at the shore. “I recognize it from my surface geography classes. It’s pretty far. Father Saturn wouldn’t be visible even if you could see through the clouds. What do you think Vaamick is up to?”

Salaris shrugged. The room was noisy as the hundreds in the room carried on their own versions of the same conversation. A flash appeared on the screen, and everyone grew silent. The flash grew into a streak as it arched through the sky.

Salaris could hardly breathe as the fireball flew closer. It burned brighter and slowed as it approached the ground. The flames died down revealing a ship. “He’s back,” she gasped. Vaamick zoomed in on the craft, and Salaris realized that it was not the shuttle that had taken her fiancé from her. This was some sort of alien technology with an odd logo of red and white bars and blue square instead of the Barakaak’s Saturn-and-moon emblem.

“My people,” Vaamick said to the now hushed crowd. “Today is a momentous occasion. This ship brings explorers from another world. Soon, they will bring another, larger ship, which we will use to take to their home world. We will be free of the cold and the Saarkaaks.”

A murmur spread through the crowd. Something felt off. As she turned towards her friends to ask their opinion, Kasil elbowed her in the ribs while removing her mask. She glared at her friend’s carelessness.

“I’m sorry!” Kasil exclaimed, her eyes cast down at her feet at injuring her friend. “I didn’t mean to. It’s just so crowded in here.”

“It’s –” Salaris started, but Kasil didn’t even pause her speech.

“The surface was pretty boring looking, don’t you think? Gray snow, gray sky. No wonder nobody goes up there anymore. There’s nothing to look at! Except for that ship! Where do you think it came from? Do you think they are going to defeat the Saarkaaks for us? That would be awesome. And a new world! How exciting. I hope it’s warmer wherever we’re going. And prettier. It definitely needs to be prettier!”

Lomis shrugged and grinned at Salaris when she started rolling her eyes. Kasil was still prattling about the virtues of an attractive sky. She tended to ramble when she got excited. As she was very excitable, she talked a lot. Others found her to be empty-headed, but Kasil simply didn’t bother to remember anything she didn’t find interesting.

Lomis was the more serious of her two friends. Salaris supposed that came from being a Lun. Life as a Lun tended to be short and bitter. Lunshad no prospects, no future outside of the military. Certainly, marriage was out. Who would marry someone who didn’t know who their parents were? Their greatest taboo was a Lun having a child. The child and parents were banished to the surface to die.

Lomis didn’t see the need to bother with frivolous things like boys and gossip when her life was decided for her. After completing her mandatory seminary training, she would be separated from her friends and turned into a warrior, sent to die fighting their enemy. A few managed to avoid death and rise in the ranks of the Barakaak’s military. But the overwhelming majority did not.

These things were a fact of life for Lomis and shaped her life. She managed not to let it drag her down. Salaris respected this attitude and loved her for it, as she loved her chattier friend’s carefree attitude. Together the two helped balance her. They had been friends ever since sharing a nook in the orphanage. After reaching adulthood, they had decided to share a living space in the quarters where unmarried women lived.

Vaamick waved his hands down and waited for the congregation to quiet again. “They will not do this willingly. Humans are little better than the Saarkaaks. They have no belief in the great goddess and seem to try to destroy their own world at every turn. They will not welcome us to show them the proper way of life. When we arrive on Earth, we will be as conquering invaders, taking what they would squander! We will use the plague the Saarkaaks unleashed on us to diminish them and vanquish their remainder.”

She looked at Lomis who seemed as transfixed by their leader’s announcement as the rest of the crowd. “We can’t use the plague. That’s wrong,” Salaris whispered.

“Hush.” Lomis waved her off, apparently not paying any attention to what she said. “I’m trying to listen.”

“They will not do this willingly,” Vaamick continued. “Humans are little better than the Saarkaaks. They have no belief in the great goddess and seemingly try to destroy their own world at every turn. They will not welcome us to show them the proper way of life. When we arrive on Earth, we will be as conquering invaders, taking what they would squander! We will use the plague the Saarkaaks unleashed on us to diminish them and vanquish their remainder.”

“Bara doesn’t condone slavery.” She tried Kasil this time.

“Are they even people?” Kasil asked and fell silent.

Salaris blinked. *Are they even people?* Usually she could make sense of the nonsense Kasil was spouting. If Kasil meant that the humans weren’t intelligent enough to qualify for Bara’s mercy, building a ship that could travel to another world should be proof enough. The Barakaaks never built a ship. Even the lone vessel that Donoon took had been built by the Saarkaaks long before the war.

Finished with his speech, Vaamick stepped down and began to leave. Salaris couldn’t believe her ears. *This plan is insane. The Saarkaaks attacked would destroy us; it is only right to fight them. But unleash the plague on a new world? The humans never did anything to us. This isn’t defense; it’s murder. This isn’t what Bara taught!*

Finally, her astonishment and rage could be contained no longer. While the time after a sermon was a time for quiet reflection and speaking aloud was taboo, Salaris could not hold her emotions in. She shouted after him, “That cannot be a plan from Bara. Her teachings are for peace.”

Vaamick turned slowly, his face scrunched into a glare. “How dare you defy me? As the high priest of our religion, Bara speaks to me personally. To deny the divine nature of my words is to deny Bara. You are a heretic. By the laws of the goddess, you must be sacrificed to appease Bara before you spread your lies and corrupt the population!” Others noticed Vaamick’s trembling; it wasn’t from weakness but from rage. He nodded to the temple guards and they began to converge upon her.

Salaris saw the guards starting towards her. She eyed the exit. The guards were between her and it; she would never escape without some sort of divine intervention.

Moments before, people crowded around her. In a blink of the eye, there was no one around her. She looked to her friends. They had backed away as well. Lomis stood next to Kasil with a look of shock on her face. Her mouth was open as if to speak but no words were coming. Kasil, for her part, was openly weeping.

*My friends won’t help me against Vaamick. But Bara helps those who help themselves, right?* She backed against the stone pillar. *I wonder…*

With all her might, she pushed at the loose stone. At first, it wouldn’t budge. The guards were getting close. Then the stone gave way. It fell with a thud to the floor.

The closest guard barked a short laugh at her. “Think you are going to throw that at us, Salaris? I doubt you can pick it up.”

If she was going to get out of here, the column needed to fall. She didn’t want to hurt anyone, she only hoped the noise would make the guards back off. She pushed again at it. The pillar wobbled, and the stonework collapsed with a roar and a cloud of dust. Salaris saw that her friends and other members of the congregation had backed away.

A block caught one guard in the shoulder but no one else seemed to be hurt. The guard lay groaning on the floor, clutching his arm, which seemed to be hanging wrong. Salaris quickly thanked the goddess that nobody had been killed.

The path to the exit was now clear, as the remaining guards had scrambled to escape the falling rock. This was her chance to escape. She stepped over the fallen man and ran for the door.

“After her!” Vaamick screamed. The guards recovered their senses and began to chase her. Out the door, Salaris had two choices. To the left, she could try to hide within the temple compound. The complex was not that big, however. Eventually, they would find and kill her.

To the right was the labyrinth of tunnels that surrounded the complex. Some were better explored than others. Several were in ruins, abandoned in the early days of the war, as the plague raged through their people. The Barakaaks concentrated the remainder for safety in numbers should the Saarkaaks attack their stronghold again.

Salaris hesitated just a second before turning right and plunging into the darkness. She didn’t stop to wait for her eyes to adjust. The guards had lights and routinely patrolled the tunnels nearest to the temple. To escape them, she would have to go deeper. There was only one direction where she felt confident she could lose the guards while not getting lost herself. She turned at the next fork and began to climb a shaft she had discovered as a little girl, memories flooding back as she headed towards the surface.

Salaris didn’t really have a plan. All she could do was keep running. It was all so unexpected. She knew that her fiancé’s uncle had a temper, but never thought that Vaamick would attack her for disagreeing with him. She had defied the high priest in public and made herself his enemy and a wanted woman. It was only by the grace of Bara that she escaped his guards the first time. The fact that the goddess helped her against the clutches of the powerful leader of their people should have been proof to him that his cause was an abomination, but she feared that the old man had become so twisted by power and hatred that logic would not deter him.

Salaris paused to catch her breath, and wiped her brow. Despite the cold, sweat dripped from her charcoal black skin. The back of her shirt was damp, making her colder. The air was thin here and difficult to breathe. She knew she wouldn’t be able to stay very long. If the sub-freezing temperatures didn’t get her first, she would lose consciousness from lack of oxygen. Her feet were sore and her legs ached from the exertion. At this point, only adrenaline kept her going.

Escaping to the tunnels leading to the surface had been a desperate move. While these tunnels were a labyrinth beneath the surface of the moon, they only lead to and from the Temple to the surface. She didn’t have her mask or surface clothes. If they found her here, she would be trapped. But she figured that her pursuers wouldn’t know these tunnels as well as she did. Hardly anyone came to this section of the catacombs anymore. It was too near the surface of Bara; too cold to be comfortable and the thin air difficult to breathe. More than that, it was too near to Saar, the homeland of their enemy.

For the better part of an hour, she turned to look behind her for the men that had been chasing her. She was pretty sure she had lost them. It was difficult to see in the dim light and the thin air wasn’t helping to sharpen her senses. She pulled one, two, three big breaths of air into her barrel chest and held her breath to listen for footsteps in the distance. There was no sound except for the beating of her heart pounding in her ears.

She let out her breath. She had escaped. Salaris had no clue what she would do from here, but the immediate danger seemed to have passed. She decided to reward herself by sitting down on a nearby rock to rest for a few minutes. “Just a short break,” she told herself. “Then I will figure out what to do.”

The logical part of her brain knew this was a bad idea. If she stopped moving, she would cool down. Freezing to death was a very real possibility here. But her head was wobbly from exertion in the thin atmosphere and she needed to rest before she could go further.

Salaris wished Donoon was here. She suspected that he had come with the alien craft that had landed earlier that day. She missed her betrothed dearly. The ringed planet had traveled nearly halfway around the sun since he had left for Earth, taking the last ship not destroyed in the war. It was a mission from the high priest of Bara himself, Donoon had said, but, though he couldn’t explain any more than that, he had promised that they would be wed once he returned.

Maybe she should try to go back and find Donoon. It would be dangerous to return, but he would never find her out here. He might figure something out, though; Donoon was a man of action. It ran in the family, she guessed. He was always making plans and doing great things. He had even participated in one of the battles against the Saarkaaks. Salaris wasn’t a big fan of fighting, but it was nice to know he could defend her from those godless heathens.

“Godless heathens,” she laughed. She didn’t really know anything about the Saarkaaks. If it weren’t for the near-constant fighting, she would believe them to be only fairy tales told by the elders. The war had started before she was born. Salaris had never even seen a Saarkaak. She remembered ridiculous childhood stories of them being ten feet tall and having two heads, and that they ate Barakaak children for breakfast. Donoon had dissuaded her of that; he insisted their enemy looked just as they did. That they were the same people, simply split by war and religious differences.

The Saarkaaks weren’t her enemy right now. Her own people were against her. And the man leading them certainly wasn’t following the dictates of the goddess. Bara-knows how he thought his plan would help them.

Salaris heard footsteps in the distance. She stood up but got dizzy and fell. The footsteps were getting closer now. She used the wall for support as she pulled herself up once again. She didn’t have any more energy to run. She hoped she was far enough away that she could manage to evade them with only a walk.

She turned a corner and stopped suddenly. A dead end. She turned back but the guards blocked the only other exit. Salaris couldn’t think of anything else to try. As they grabbed her, she didn’t struggle.

One bound her wrists behind her back while another hobbled her legs, giving her just enough length to manage a shuffle back to the temple. Only Donoon’s nook-mate, Koor, looked her in the eye.

For a brief second, Salaris thought he might help her. But instead, he looked down and shook his head. He whispered, “Oh, Salaris. Donoon would be so disappointed in you. Why did you have to defy the goddess like that?”

With less concern for her life than Donoon’s reaction when he learned of this, Salaris began to weep.

Marsil

For hundreds of Saarkaaks living in the ruins of the capital city of Saar, today was just an ordinary day. From almost the beginning of the day, Marsil knew that it was not going to be ordinary. For her, the day started bad and got worse at it progressed.

Marsil brushed her long orange hair. The tresses were her one rebellion against the masculine image that army life required of her. Shorter hair would have been easier to manage but hard living while leading her soldiers into numerous battles against the Barakaaks had stacked muscle onto her tall frame. *This is a waste of time. Who am I trying to impress?* Lun such as herself had no prospects for love.

Her brush snapped midway through her grooming. She swore to herself. Her hair was a complete mess. This was no way for Graaf to see her. Without meaning to, she blushed at the thought of the distinguished scientist. Thoughts of how he would perceive her did no good. It wasn’t as if they could form a relationship.

Graaf didn’t make it any easier on her. He was a kind and gentle man and handsome for a man approaching fifty. He had denied it but Marsil was sure that he had written the recommendation that had gotten her promotion to general. The way he always smiled at her and had a kind word to say; she could almost believe that he wished for a relationship as well. But he wouldn’t do that; to mate a Lun was a death sentence after all. She really didn’t know what to make of him. By his age, he should have already mated, but in the nearly fifteen years that Marsil had known him, Graaf had never so much as dated.

Pining for Graaf wasn't helping her mood. She had had this conversation in her mind too many times. *Why can’t I get over him and live the life that I can have? Maybe I should...* She stopped herself from continuing that line of thought. The consequences of that action were too drastic. Spilling her secret, revealing the identity of her father, could put everyone at risk. Jeef had led their people for a long time, but this could cause a revolution. With the war still raging, such a move would allow the Barakaaks to gain the upper hand. Her happiness wasn't worth that. And if something happened to Graaf, well, she just couldn't live with herself.

She forced herself to calm as she dressed in her Army uniform. All she had left were her morning prayers and then it would be time to leave for work. As she buttoned her blouse, she walked over to the shrine she had built in her nook.

Marsil scowled; her statue of Bara was lying on the floor. She leaned down to pick it up. Thankfully, it was intact. Kis needed to be more careful. As if bidden, her nook-mate stepped behind her.

“Barakaak.” Kis hissed the word as she looked down at the kneeling woman. “You’re such a traitor to your people. You should defect. I’d love the chance to shoot you as you tried to escape.”

Religion wasn't officially banned among the Saarkaaks. But as Kis and a string of previous nook-mates had shown, it wasn't exactly tolerated either.

Marsil picked herself up from the floor. She needed to keep her calm. If she let her anger get a hold of her, she was going to get in trouble again. If that happened, Jeef would demote her.

She took a deep breath. “Oh stop that. I’m not one of those mindless drones. One can believe in faith and reason."

"Keep telling yourself that," Kis snapped. "Anyone who believes that some invisible goddess is going to help us is delusional."

"Bara is not invisible. She is all around us in the ground beneath our feet and the cavern above us. I don’t know why I put up with you. If you refuse to treat my belongings with care and respect, I’m going to put in a transfer request.”

“We both know you aren’t going to do that. If you were, you would have done it already. You won’t find anyone else as tolerant as me.”

Marsil snorted at Kis’ definition of “tolerant.” The three years they had been sharing a nook had been a never-ending stream of taunts and passive-aggressive abuse. But still, she was right. Marsil wouldn’t find another nook-mate as understanding of her faith. Her last nook-mate had trashed her shrine while she was away fighting the Barakaaks. Looking closely at the small statue still in her hands, she could see the lines where she’d glued the figure back together.

“That still doesn’t give you the right to mess with my stuff. Just leave it and me alone or you’ll find yourself reassigned to the janitorial staff or something else nasty.”

Kis backed off in a huff. It wasn’t the first time they had had this argument. Sadly, it probably wouldn’t be the last.

Marsil shook her head to clear her thoughts. Worship to Bara demanded her full concentration. Head bowed towards the shrine, Marsil began her prayers, which included the standard thanksgivings for life and home and pleas for an end of the war, but also for the defeat of her enemies and the return of warmth and air to the surface. At the end, she beseeched the goddess for an answer to the great question that ruled her life. *Why did my father abandon me?*

To Marsil, being abandoned was even worse than being orphaned. Dying in defense of their people against the Barakaaks was honorable. Falling to the plague released by those zealots was unavoidable. But to abandon your own blood? Marsil held the man in contempt.

Marsil was a Lun because her parents were unknown. To the world, she was an orphan with no connections to her past. Destined to live a life alone. Her parents were probably killed in the war shortly after her birth. There were many Luns in her generation. The early days of the war had been brutal and deadly. Then came the plague. The Saarkaaks died by the thousands. The survivors were so overwhelmed with disposing of the dead and trying to rebuild while continuing the war effort that it was impossible to keep track of where all the orphaned children came from. Over two thirds of the children born within ten years of the bombing of the Temple were orphans. Nearly a quarter of those were Luns.

It was within this class of people that Marsil had been raised. It was only by accident that she had discovered that her father was still alive. It had started with one of Graaf’s projects, restoring old surveillance feeds destroyed in the war. Marsil had helped because she wanted to be able to catch Barakaaks trying to sneak into the city. It turned out that much of the old footage had been archived. A lot had been lost but when she found the feed showing the orphanage that raised her, she figured she had a chance to reclaim her ancestry and shed her Lun status. A chance to finally be with Graaf. She stole the tape and brought it back to her nook to review in private.

Sure enough, she found herself staring at the screen as her infant form was placed at the door of the orphanage. She couldn’t have been more than a day or two old at the time. The video clearly showed the man who left her behind. Marsil had found her father. And she knew who he was.

She was tempted to delete it. This information could destroy their society. Her finger hovered over the button. She couldn’t bring herself to destroy the one link to her past. That had been three years ago.

Her morning supplications done, she straightened her uniform jacket and left for work. The tunnels in this section of the city were quiet. Marsil had chosen this area because it was so sparsely populated. Officially, she had selected this quarter because it was closer to the Temple and the Barakaaks. It was only right for the General of the Army to be standing between their enemy and the people she had sworn to protect. The reality was that she preferred the peace and quiet that this area afforded. The fact people avoided it because of its proximity to their enemy’s liar simply provided her with a convenient excuse.

Too soon, she turned towards the city center where the government lay. These days everybody seemed to have a government job. Even the aquaponics farmers worked for the government. Everybody who didn’t have a job that physically required them to be somewhere else in the city made their offices in the government complexes. War destroyed several of the buildings, but there were still plenty of nooks available to their depleted numbers. As much as Marsil frowned on speaking ill of the dead, she was glad she had not been born in an earlier age when even more people crowded the tunnels and caverns that made up the capitol.

Marsil sped up her already brisk pace. Once she got into her office, she could escape the crush of people. She was one of the few people on all of Bara with a private office. While her class as a Lun had decided a military life for her, she had fought her way into a leadership role precisely for the solitude it afforded. Too bad it didn’t allow her to break from tradition and take a personal nook for herself without having to share it with a steady stream of nook-mates who didn’t understand her devotion.

As she slipped into her office, Marsil let out a sigh of relief. Perhaps it was for the best that she had been abandoned. The path that would have been laid out to her as her father’s daughter would have been unbearable to the introverted woman.

These thoughts were pushed from her head when she read her morning briefing. This was not good. Jeef wasn’t going to be happy.

\* \* \*

“Your majesty, a craft landed on the far side late yesterday,” Marsil reported to the king. She grasped her hands together behind her back, her knuckles white. Reporting to the king was always fraught with tension, but bad news such as this always made things worse. She had no clue how the ruler would respond. “Unlike the last lander they sent, this one appears to carry humans. We were unable to determine what weaponry they bought with them.”

Jeef’s nostrils flared. He was silent. That wasn’t a good sign. “Whatever happened to ‘the humans haven’t explored past the asteroid belt?’ I’m disappointed in you, Marsil. You should have caught this before they landed. Explain to me why I shouldn’t have you replaced.”

Marsil gulped. Her rank was the one thing she liked about her life. Without it, she might as well throw herself to the surface. “Sire, our observational capabilities are still limited. I can only spare so many men to stare at the sky. It’s been a low priority.”

Jeef scowled from behind his desk. “Well, apparently you should have made it a higher priority. I sense that old jackal Vaamick behind this. Unless you are even more incompetent that I’m beginning to believe, the humans shouldn’t have the technology to travel this far. We need more information.”

It was time to start their old argument. “We could try to slip a spy into the Barakaak’s camp to get an idea of their plan. With a man inside, we would have a better idea of--”

“No!” Jeef interrupted. “We are not having this discussion again. You need to know your role. Or I will find someone who will. You may observe from the outside only. Find out what Vaamick is planning and if the humans are working with him or if they are just in a new way of blind exploration. You are dismissed.”

Marsil saluted and left without saying another word. She couldn’t understand the king’s reluctance to take actual steps to end the war. Jeef had attacked the Temple without any provocation but since then had only authorized minor skirmishes and recently none at all. She had hoped that this new development would be the impetus to finally beat back the scourge of her generation. But instead, the king seemed to squander every opportunity and lead their people into ruin.

She was still stewing when she reached the offices of the Chief Science Officer. Graaf had all kinds of gadgets that he was always testing out. He might have something to help “observe” the humans and the Barakaaks.

Graaf was waiting for her when she reached his office. His greying hair still had signs of its original blue. It was a shame the grey was crowding out the blue because it had matched his eyes perfectly. Still, Marsil supposed it helped him appear more distinguished. He was tall. Tall enough that he had to stoop in some of the smaller tunnels around Saar. As usual, he was smiling. Her heart fluttered for a moment, but then she remembered their chances of a future together and she returned his smile with a scowl.

“What is wrong, Marsil?” His voice was full of concern. He put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her inside before shutting the door. He was the only one Marsil would tolerate to touch her.

“What isn’t wrong? Everything is going wrong today!” The stress of dealing with Kis, Jeef and her emotions for Graaf was getting the better of her. She expected him to step back but instead he simply stood there with his hand on her shoulder, waiting for her to finish her outburst. “I’m sorry. This hasn’t been a good day.”

“More trouble with Kis? Please tell me you didn’t put her in the infirmary like you did to Losil.” There was still the concern, but now it was mixed with mirth.

Marsil rolled her eyes. “Oh Bara. That was eight years ago. I’m never going to live that down, am I? Besides, I didn’t even do anything to her.” This brought a snort from Graaf. “Okay, I lost my temper and yelled at her. But I never touched her. She backed away from me and tripped over that chair.”

“But yes, Kis and I got into another argument today. I can’t tell if she is deliberately trying to provoke me or just is just too stupid to know I might have a breaking point.”

Graaf nodded. “Kis is young yet. She did just finish her schooling when she was assigned to your nook.”

“I wish she would grow up somewhere else. But she isn’t really the problem. I’ve had more nook-mates than anyone on Bara. I just want to live alone. Is that too much to ask?”

Graaf put his hand on hers. “You just haven’t met the right one, my dear. My current nook-mate is getting married. You could always move in with me,” his eyes twinkled.

Marsil gasped as she leaned away from him, breaking the skin-to-skin contact. “Graaf! That would be a huge scandal. People would think we were mated!” She was shocked at his words but secretly she wanted nothing more. But he couldn’t actually be suggesting that. That was unthinkable. If only she could convince herself that.

As long as he was pushing the boundaries of propriety, she decided to go for broke and ask him the question that had been bothering her so much.

“Why are you still living with a nook-mate? You should have settled down by now.”

For once, Graaf’s ever-present smile waned. “I’ve had my eye on a beautiful woman for quite some time. I believe she shares my affection but has never said anything about it. I dare not ask because she is unavailable.”

Marsil had been hopeful at his response at first. If he was pining for another woman maybe she could move on. But his answer was so open ended that he could still be talking about her. She let out a hopeful, “Do I know her?”

“Yes. Yes, you do know her.” Marsil started to interrupt but Graaf beat her to it. “No, I’m not going to say who it is. Maybe one day, but I’m not ready to reveal my great secret just yet. Have patience.”

Marsil decided it was best to change the subject. “I read your report on the human ship that landed yesterday. Jeef isn’t happy.”

“I hope he doesn’t plan to shoot the messenger!” Graaf joked. He seemed as eager and Marsil to talk about something else.

“Well, he was pretty upset, but I think he’s more likely to have me shot than you. I’ve been ordered to find out more, but of course I’m not allowed to go anywhere near it. Do you have anything that can help?”

“Well, I have been working on repairing the old satellites. After the Barakaaks shot them out of the sky, we’ve been nearly blind to what is happening on the surface. The ones we were able to recover were in pretty bad shape and I don’t think my predecessor really thought they were a priority. It’s been a lot of work, but I believe I should have one ready to launch in a few days. We could use it to at least get a visual view of what the humans are doing and figure out if they brought any of those weapons the humans are so known for.”

Alvin

"That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind." Alvin's voice was monotone. It was tough but he managed to keep a straight face as he recited the historic words. With that important task complete, he scratched the coppery stubble growing on his chin. His green eyes stared off into the distance, not seeing anything. This was an important day, not just for him but for all of humanity. Despite his joking around, he was still in awe that he had been selected for the mission. When he had chosen exo-biology for his thesis topic, he had never guessed that life on other planets would be found in his lifetime, let alone in their own solar system.

Luckily, his fiancée kept him grounded.

"Alvin, if you say that tomorrow, I will 'accidentally' delete your footage." Sandra threw a pillow at him. He dodged it and stuck out his tongue with a grin. “I mean it. Besides, you won’t even be the first person to step foot on Titan. Captain O’Brien will get the honor.”

Alvin sighed. *Is she ever going to get over that shyness and formality?* He loved nearly everything about the petite African-American geologist, from her long braids that barely fit in her helmet to her bright mind and wry sense of humor. But she could be timid to the point of aggravation. It had taken him four tries to get her to agree to go on a date, not because she wasn't interested in him but because she simply didn't believe that he could be interested in her.

“Sandra, we’ve been cooped up in this tin can with Tom and Lana for seven months. I think we can call him by his first name when we aren’t on duty. Besides, Lana may have started as my thesis advisor, but she is like family at this point.”

“I know. But unlike a certain Irish rogue I know, I was raised with manners. I was raised a Southern lady.”

Alvin laughed. “Girl, you are from South Philly, not the South! I’m well aware of your over-blown manners. Remember when you called me ‘Dr. Smith’ on our first date?”

“Hey!” Sandra huffed. She acted offended, but they had played this game enough times before for Alvin to know it was just an act. “Just because your manners are completely lacking doesn’t mean mine are overblown. You’re never going to let me live that down, are you? I was so nervous that night. I was just a grad student. I never thought I’d have one of the lecturing professors hit on me! Besides, you weren’t exactly Mr. Suave at that restaurant either.”

Now it was Alvin’s turn to act offended. “That waiter hit me in the back while I was sipping my wine. I am the epitome of class and sophistication. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

“Puh-lease. The only time Alvin Smith and class belong in the same sentence is when you are talking about school!”

“And yet, here I am, engaged to a classy broad like you.” Alvin smiled as she rolled her eyes at his choice of words. “Speaking of school, have you finished your report for that elementary school? What was it, Sally Ride?”

“Yeah, Sally Ride Charter School back home in Philly. I think I’ve got it all ready. Want to hear it?”

Alvin nodded. They had each been assigned a school from their hometowns to interact with on their trek through the solar system. Alvin was working with the AP Bio class at Longmont High back in Colorado. Sandra had gotten a fifth grade science class at a charter school a few blocks from her mother’s apartment. The kids had even designed science experiments for the crew to perform while they were in space and on Titan. They were silly compared to the level of research Alvin was used to, but he knew they were important for getting the next generation interested in the sciences. Besides, they hadn’t had much else to do on the flight out.

As Sandra pulled out her tablet and thumbed through the files to find her speech, Alvin leaned back against the bulkhead that separated their cabin from the O’Brien’s. Thin metal was all that separated the two cabins. When they had first boarded the Atlas in Florida, the bunks in both cabins had been against the same wall. The two couples had quickly realized that they needed to rearrange the rooms to maintain the illusion of privacy in the cramped quarters. It had taken all day for the four of them to figure it out, but with some help from ground control, they had finally managed to fashion brackets to allow them to secure the bunks to the opposite wall. Of course, ground control had only agreed to the reconfiguration after the crew had made it clear it was going to happen whether NASA approved of it or not.

The Atlas had originally been designed for shorter trips to the Moon and Mars. The furthest it had gone out prior to this mission was Ceres. They were now more than 5 times further from Earth than the ship had ever traveled and the cramped quarters were beginning to wear on the crew. They were all glad that their supplies included an inflatable habitat to extend their living space.

Sandra cleared her throat to signal she was ready to read her report. “To Ms. Griffin’s fifth grade science class at Sally Ride Charter School, Greetings from Titan! Captain O’Brien, Dr. O’Brien, Dr. Smith, and I landed on the surface of Saturn’s largest moon last night at seven thirty-four pm EST. In other words, just after the start of the Simpsons! Too bad we missed it, I’m sure it was a great episode.”

“It’s been a long seven months and we are glad to be on the ground. Today, we will start to inflate the habitat that will be our home for the next two years. The habitat is kind of like a giant tent, but insulated and with life support. It’s a chilly negative two hundred ninety degrees outside so we will need the habitat to keep us warm whenever we aren’t in our groundsuits.”

“In Twenty Twenty-Three, the European Space Agency sent the first ever rover to the outer solar system. What it discovered was amazing. The first ever signs of life outside of the Earth! But it wasn’t just any signs of life that the probe found. No, instead of boring microbes, it found actual plants. Small moss-like ground cover was found on rocks near one of the methane seas. Not only did live evolve on other planets, but it evolved into complex multi-cellular organisms. Some believe there may even be simple animals scurrying around somewhere.”

“So NASA put together a crew that included some of the best experts in the world on the field of exo-biology, or the study of life outside of Earth. Once we are settled into the habitat, Drs. Smith and O’Brien will collect samples and analyze them in a laboratory here on the ship. Meanwhile, I will be using my knowledge of geology to learn more about the interior of the second-largest moon in the solar system.”

“After spending two years exploring as much of the moon as we can, we will pack all of our samples up and Captain O’Brien will fly us back home. When I get back, we’ll have to make sure we all have lunch together! Well, that’s it for now, class. This is Dr. Sandra Torrance, signing off.”

“So what did you think, dear?”

“That was great, hun!” Alvin gave her a hug. “You are a natural at this.”

“Thanks.” Sandra yawned. “We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Why don’t we turn in for the night?”

\* \* \*

The next day Alvin woke early. He couldn't help it. How often do you step onto a new world? Sure, he wasn't going to be the first. But Buzz Aldrin didn't get to be the first man on the moon either. And Alvin always thought that Buzz was a much cooler astronaut that Neil Armstrong. After all, it didn’t get much cooler than a guy who punched someone who claimed the moon landing had been staged.

The second person to step foot on a new world was still a pretty good accomplishment. And the research. Wow. He may only be the second person to step foot outside, but he got to be the first person in all of history to study botany on another world. Alvin carefully climbed over the soundly sleeping Sandra and pulled on his jumpsuit and slippers. The others wouldn't be up for another hour at least. Alvin wasn't willing to wait that long for some coffee.

When Alvin reached the galley, he was surprised to find that he wasn't the first one to rise. Lana was already sitting at the small table with her mug.

Alvin grunted out a "g' mornin" as he squeezed past Lana. Getting the "giant tent" set up couldn't come fast enough. As much as he enjoyed the O’Brien’s company, they were all tired of tripping over each other in the cramped quarters. He dumped his customary four spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and joined Lana at the table.

He took a swallow of the hot liquid and his eyes bugged open. If he had been more awake, he would have remembered that after years of living in Houston with Tom, she made her coffee strong. Fully awake now, he turned to her, "Couldn't sleep either, Lana?"

"This mission is just as much the culmination of my life's work as it is yours. This is our chance at a Nobel." She pushed a stray blonde lock from her face, hooking it back over her ear. Lana had been a looker in her day. If Alvin was honest with himself, she was still a looker at 54. She was the opposite of Sandra in almost every way, tall and pale with eyes so blue they seemed to glow. One time while drunk, he had admitted to her that she reminded him of an elf from Lord of the Rings.

While Sandra would have blushed at the comment, his thesis advisor had simply laughed and winked at him that she was part elf on her mother’s side. Alvin was glad she had met Tom well before he had started grad school or else he probably would have made a complete fool of himself at some point.

"A Nobel would be pretty awesome," Alvin replied. "I'm just glad that our field is finally getting recognition. I'm still upset that Nature called that one paper 'science-fiction.' Well, I've shown them! None of their editors are sitting on a new world to study the proof that my theories were correct!" Alvin banged his fist on the table. His voice had gotten loud in the rant. Lana gave him a look and he shrank back in his seat. "I hope I didn't wake Tom or Sandra. You would think I'd be used to it by now, but it still bothers me."

Lana's look softened. "Dear, I've been dealing with the criticism and lack of respect for as long as you've been alive. I get it. And don't worry about Tom; he should be getting up soon anyway."

As if on cue, the captain stuck his shaved head in the galley. "I hope y'all left me some coffee." Tom O'Brien may have been approaching fifty, but he still had the enthusiasm and energy of a man half his age. His dimples and being only a couple inches taller than Sandra completed the boyish image.

Alvin laughed. "Yes, and don't worry. Lana made it just the way you like it. Strong enough to melt the spoon!"

Tom squeezed in between Lana and the wall to get to the counter. As he poured the hot liquid into his mug, he smiled at his wife's former student. He opened his mouth, but Alvin beat him to his favorite line.

"I know, it'll put hair on your chest! Why do you think Sandy won't drink it? I don't think a hairy chest would be a very good look on her."

Tom guffawed and went back to his coffee. After a few minutes, Sandra padded into the room. Unlike the others who had only dressed enough to be decent for their quest for caffeine, she had taken her time to look her best and ready to take on the day. She sat next to Alvin who turned and kissed her as they murmured their good mornings to each other.

Tom sat up in his chair. "So now that everyone is up, I wanted to go over the plan for today. Sandra, you have camera time in forty minutes to give your school telecast. Houston has us doing the flags and footprints at ten hundred hours. I'll be first, followed by Alvin, Sandra, and Lana will be last. We start setting up the hab at ten thirty and it should be livable by lunch."

"At fourteen hundred hours, Alvin and Lana will have the first sortie to search for and collect samples. Mission protocol requires that you stay within sight of camp. Remember, that's only about three hundred fifty feet out here. You are to return by sixteen hundred and then I will accompany Sandra while she collects geologic samples. Same rules apply and we have to be back at eighteen hundred. We'll have dinner and then we are to remain inside for the duration of the night. Any questions?"

When everybody shook their head, he continued, "Okay, with that settled, I believe it's Lana's turn to cook breakfast."

\* \* \*

After the dishes had been cleared and Sandra had broadcast her speech, it was finally time to step outside. Alvin felt like a kid on Christmas morning. He missed a rung on the ladder outside the hatch. Only the low gravity saved him from falling as he was broadcast on live television to viewers around the Earth.

He glanced at Tom and then at Sandra up at the hatch. Neither of them did anything to indicate that they had seen it. *Thank god. I’d never hear the end of that*.

He surveyed the landscape. They had landed on a plain near the terminus between the side facing Saturn and the side facing the vast abyss of space. Tom was right; the horizon was so close if felt as if you were about to fall off. He silently reminded himself to be careful not to wander too far while exploring.

The air was filled with a thick brownish haze. Even the sun was barely visible as a lighter patch in the sky. Looking down, large, flat-ish rocks were strewn about in the sand. Plants would have trouble growing in a similar environment on Earth. It was amazing that they ever developed here.

Alvin shook himself from his reverie. It wouldn’t do to have the camera film him standing there catching flies. He opened his mouth to talk about the experience.

“Alvin!” Sandra’s voice screeched inside his helmet, loud enough to make the speaker crackle. He looked up at her standing near the lander, pointing at him.

“Relax, Sandra. I wasn’t going to say that speech. I –”

“No.” Her voice quivered. “Behind you. There is somebody behind you.” With each word, her already high voice rose in pitch and volume.

“What? There is no one here but us.” Alvin turned to look behind him. There was nobody there. Wait. Something moved near the horizon.

“I see him.” Lana shouted from the lander hatch.

“Lana, grab the med kit. Alvin, you are with me.” Tom barked while taking off in a sprint.

Alvin followed him. There was no denying it now. There was a person struggling on the ground. They appeared to be covered head to toe in pale white clothing with a shock of cobalt blue hair sticking out. No. That wasn’t clothing; he was naked. As they got closer, there was no doubting that this was a male. Alvin had idea how clue how the man was alive without any protective clothing. But he obviously wasn’t human. *Maybe he could breathe methane?*

Wherever this man was from, breathing methane wasn’t a skill he processed. In the short time it took Alvin and Tom to bounce their way across the football-field length, he had fallen and gasped for air in short breaths.

“He’s going into shock, Tom. We need to do something.” He tried to check the man’s pulse but couldn’t find it. Did this guy even have a circulatory system?

“We have to do something,” Tom agreed. “But what do we do? He’s not human. Our first aid could kill him instead of saving his life.”

“He’s going to die if we don’t do anything.” Alvin shook his head. “I say we do our best with what we know. I doubt we can do worse than what is happening to him now.”

Lana reached them with the medical kit and opened it up on the ground. “I agree. Let’s get him some oxygen and try to warm him up. If his metabolism is remotely like ours, those will help. Even if he doesn’t breathe it, respiration systems where oxygen is toxic can’t support multicellular life.” She handed the space blanket to Alvin while she pulled out an oxygen bottle and mask.

Alvin unfolded the blanket and laid it on the ground. He grabbed the legs as Tom grabbed the arms and lifted him onto the blanket and folded it back over him. Lana started placed the mask over the head and opened the valve on the cylinder. The gasping stopped within seconds and color seemed to be returning to his skin.

Tom stood over them. “It appears to be working. Let’s give him a few minutes to see if he returns to consciousness and he can show us where he came from. If not, we will carry him back to the ship and set him up in the infirmary.”

Alvin

Lana stayed with the unconscious alien while the rest of the crew proceeded to set up the habitat. They all felt a sense of urgency; the ship was too small for five people. Despite their need for haste, the habitat went up slowly. A four-man habitat took four people to set up. Alvin had some choice words for whoever designed this setup and failed to account for contingencies. That kind of thinking got people killed.

Every so often, Alvin heard Tom mutter over the suit intercom. Somebody was getting an earful back in Houston tonight.

Alvin swore as the corner support fell out again. As he ran over to fix it, he hoped that the side he left behind wouldn’t collapse as well. The three of them had been playing that back and forth game for over an hour.

The sun had barely moved when they had finished but they were all exhausted. They decided to eat in the cramped ship’s galley one last time. Nobody wanted to move the kitchen stores that night.

As they sat down to a dinner of reconstituted stew, Alvin brought up the elephant in the room. “What are we going to do about Sam?”

“Sam?” The other three replied in unison.

“Well, I figured we had to call him something other than ‘the naked alien we found freezing to death.’”

Sandra shook her head. “But Sam?” How did you come up with that?”

“We’re near Saturn, aren’t we?” Alvin smirked as he picked a potato out of his bowl using a pair of breadsticks like chopsticks. “I figured some alliteration would be nice. Sam, the Saturnite. Would you have preferred Tito the Titan?”

Tom choked as he held back a laugh with his mouth full. Carefully, he swallowed. “Only you would come up with somethin’ like that. We are definitely not namin’ our visitor Tito. And you can’t keep him. You’ll lose interest in a few days and then Lana and I’ll have to care for him.”

“Oh please, dad? I swear I’ll walk him every day.” Alvin replied with a mock pout.

Sandra put down her spoon. “I’m not really comfortable talking about a person like they are a pet.”

Alvin turned in his seat to face Sandra, taking her hands in his. “Sandy, I’m sorry. That was insensitive. But we don’t really know that he is a person. Maybe Titan had an evolution where cats look like people. Intelligent life may never have developed here. Or, who knows, maybe there is a sentient kangaroo-like species here?”

Lana groaned. “That’s an interesting theory, Dr. Smith. Would you care to write a paper describing the evolutionary process to bring about human-shaped cats and sentient kangaroos?”

“That’s a capitol idea, Dr. O’Brien. I think I will,” Alvin’s eyes sparkled at the challenge.

“Oh, dear God. I should have known better to suggest that. Please tell me you won’t publish that.” Alvin said nothing, so Lana continued. “Getting back to Alvin’s original question, our options are limited. There isn’t enough room in here or in the hab for all five of us. Until he wakes up, ‘Sam’ shouldn’t be left alone. One couple can stay on the ship and keep an eye on our guest and the other couple will live in the Hab. How does that sound?”

“That’s a good idea, dear. Alvin and Sandra, you can take the hab and Lana and I will stay here. Lana’s the one with medical training so she should be the one keeping an eye on Sam. I guess we are in agreement in the name?” Tom looked at each of the others in turn. Nobody disagreed. “Okay then. I guess I get to move my bags back to the ship.”

\* \* \*

Sam woke the next day. He seemed healthy enough aside his eyes clouded over with cataracts despite appearing young. If Sam aged at the same rates as humans, Alvin guessed his age to be about his own. Long, skinny limbs protruded from a barrel chest but otherwise he appeared human enough.

Nobody had any clothing that would fit him. Lana was closest in height, but clothing for her slim build wouldn’t reach around his wide torso. Finally, they settled on fashioning a toga from one of the bed sheets.

He quickly left the crew with no doubt that he was in fact intelligent. He spoke, although the language was unlike anything they’d ever heard, full of hard consonants and long vowels.

Food was a problem at first. They didn’t know if Sam would be able to eat their food. After several hours of discussion and Sam becoming more and more distressed with hunger, they finally prepared a small buffet of raw and prepared foods and trusted in his instincts and sense of smell to determine if it was edible. For the second time in as many days, the crew found themselves fretting that their aid could wind up lethal.

Alvin led Sam to the galley and up to the counter where the food was laid out. Alvin had no way of explaining to him what was happening, but Sam’s nose picked up the scents. After a few minutes of fumbling around and sniffing at the foods, Sam grabbed several raw vegetables with both hands and started forcing food into his mouth with wild movements. Either he had a faster metabolism than the humans, or his last meal had been much earlier than when they found him the previous morning.

While the crew attended to Sam’s immediate needs, NASA assembled a team of linguists and programmers to attempt to decode the language. Real-time communication was impossible with an hour-long delay for transmissions to cross the vast distance between the two worlds. Lana was the only bilingual member of the crew. As such, she was pushed into the role of helping to decipher Sam’s words. Apparently, Alvin’s dozen or so words of Gaelic, most of which were swears, didn’t qualify him for that particular job.

Alvin didn’t particularly want that job, but he didn’t like how unhappy his mentor seemed, forced to stay about the ship while the others continued the research they had traveled so far to perform. He discussed the issue with Tom, but neither could find a solution. As much as Alvin joked that Texan was an unfathomable language, Tom possessed even less foreign language skills than him.

After being in such close proximity for so long, it took some getting used to having actual privacy again. But Alvin wasn’t going to complain about that. The crew quickly fell into a routine of sample collection for a week while the dim sun was overhead and analyzing them in their field laboratory during the equally long night.

Alvin tried to include Lana in his research as much as possible. He even began bringing problems to her that he had already solved to let her feel involved.

“Alvin, you will not treat me as a child to be pacified. I was a researcher while you were still a baby trying to figure out what your arms did.” Lana glowered at him. She uncrossed her arms and put them on her hips while staring down at the younger researcher. “Don’t you dare insult my intelligence that you need my help solve this photosynthesis problem.”

“I’m sorry, Lana. You’ve been so unhappy and I wanted to help.” Alvin shrank back. He’d only seen Lana angry a few times and it was not a pretty sight. His only option was full surrender. “I didn’t mean to patronize you. I’m sorry. It was a stupid idea.” He kept his eyes glued to his shoes, unable to meet her gaze.

“Oh, I know, dear.” Her features softened. “I’m angrier at NASA than I am at you. I appreciate that you want to help. Just don’t do… that.”

Alvin let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Message received. Would you prefer I dump the research I don’t want to do on your desk, like a mouse that a cat gives to its owner?”

Lana stared at him for a few moments, her lips pursed. Then she let out a laugh with such force that she bent in half. “I get it. Cats don’t give us the kills they don’t want, but I think your motivation would be the same. But don’t leave it on my pillow while I’m sleeping.”

Alvin snorted. “Okay, you’ve convinced me. But I will give you some of my findings to analyze on your own –”

The communications terminal buzzed loudly, signaling an incoming transmission from Earth. Lana sighed. “Let’s go see what hoop they want their dancing monkey to jump through this time.”

“We believe we’ve made a breakthrough. Grammar and syntax are all a jumble, but the simulations are showing forty percent of words translated.” The image of Dr. Farnsworth, a linguist that NASA had selected to lead the team to translate the alien language, shook his hands with emphasis on every other word. This was the man that had been driving Lana crazy for the past month. Despite this, Alvin had trouble being angry at the older man babbling like a young child. “A lot of work left to be done, and we may never get colors with only a blind subject, but this is truly marvelous. Attached you’ll find the lexicon and notes. We are all eagerly awaiting your report on how well it helps you to communicate with the subject.”

As the video stopped, Alvin shook his head. “Great, we have half of an alien-to-English dictionary. Forty percent? You are going to sound like an undergrad on his first trip to Cancun on spring break. ‘I drinking… the water. Where… um, where is bathroom?’”

Lana laughed at him. “You do know how to make light of a bad situation. Tom and Sandra should be back soon. They’ll need to see the video and then we all need to try to learn this language. Maybe then I can offload babysitting duty onto you.”

After dinner that night, Lana spread out the flash cards she created from the file Farnsworth had sent. After several hours, none of them felt that they had any command over the language. Tom broke first.

“Dammit, Lana. I’m too old to be learnin’ another language.” He banged his fist on the table and stood up to leave. “If I couldn’t learn Spanish livin’ so close to Mexico, what makes you think that I can learn this gobley-gook? This is egghead stuff. I’m only here to fly the ship.”

Lana stood as well and blocked him. “Thomas Padraig O’Brien. You. Will. Not. Speak to me in that tone of voice. I am two years older than you. So shove it.”

Lana glared at him, supporting herself with her hands pressed firmly onto the table. He held her stare and the two stayed like that for a full minute before Alvin and Sandra started to get uncomfortable. Alvin opened his mouth to try to break the tension. To his surprise, Sandra beat him to it.

“Captain, Doctor. We are all frazzled right now and this is well outside of any of our expertise. Maybe we should rest for tonight. We all want to know more about Sam, but this is like studying for an exam. Going too long is simply counter-productive.”

Lana sighed. “Sandra, you’re probably right. Let’s break for tonight and we can study this mess in half hour chunks after each meal going forward.” She turned back to her husband. “Tom, go to bed. I’ll be sleeping in the habitat tonight. You can apologize in the morning once you’ve realized that you are acting like a fool.” With that, she turned and walked off to the closets where the pressure suits were kept.

Tom shoved his fists into his pockets. “That woman drives me crazy sometimes. I love her, but, dammit, why does she have to be so stubborn about things?”

Alvin reached out to the older man. “Come on, Tom. I think she learned that from you.” Tom let out a chuckle, so Alvin continued. “You know how much she’s hated being stuck in here all day taking care of Sam. This is our chance to be able to help her with that.”

Tom dropped his head. “Suppose so. Boy, when did you get so smart about women?”

Alvin clapped him on the back. “Why, I learned from the best of course. Remember the number one rule you taught me after I proposed to Sandra?”

“Number one rule: she’s always right,” they said in unison. Sandra rolled her eyes as she shook her head.

Tom continued, “Alright, guess I’ll eat me some crow in the morning. Goodnight, you two.”

As they walked over to the hatch, Alvin look and Sandra. “Hun, I’m very proud of you. I know you don’t like to speak out in those kinds of situations.” They paused so he could give her a brief hug and then continued to get their suits. Lana had already left for the Hab.

They reached the habitat hoping to speak to Lana, but she had already gone to bed. As they removed their suits, Alvin faced Sandra. “I’m a little worried about Lana. I’ve known those two for a decade and never seen her react like that.”

Sandra paused and put her hand on his arm. “I know, hun. This mission has been difficult for all of us, but at least we have been able to do the research we were sent to do. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but we probably should have all been taking turns with Sam in the first place. We can talk to her in the morning. I think the Captain will agree to a change in schedule where we all take turns.”

Alvin tossed and turned all night long. Two years remained of their mission, and Lana seemed ready to crack. If Lana couldn’t complete the mission, her legacy would be shattered. She’d be the laughing stock of the scientific community. All of her research would be reduced to a footnote beneath a Wikipedia entry stating that NASA replaced her mid-mission.

When he awoke, Sandra was gone. Alvin tried to remember a time when she had risen before him, but this was a new one for him. *Could the stress be getting to her as well? Have I been so caught up in Lana’s trouble that I haven’t paid attention to how Sandy was doing?* Sandra was his rock. If she cracked, his entire world wouldn’t make sense any longer. He threw on his coveralls to search for her.

He yanked the door to their quarters open and paused. He heard voices.

“Good morning, Dr. O’Brien.” Sandra’s quiet greeting could barely be heard over the hum of the life support equipment.

“Good morning, Sandra. Please, I’m not really in the mood for talking this morning. Let me get my suit on and report back to my prison.” Alvin imagined Lana’s shoulders slumping. He sighed and headed over towards them.

“Well, if you don’t want to talk, then you had better listen.” Sandra’s spoke louder this time. The anger in her voice made Alvin pause.

“That’s no way to speak to me, young lady. I’m not accustomed to being treated like a child.”

“Maybe you should stop acting like a child then.” Sandra hissed. “This isn’t about you. This is about all of us. This is about all of humanity. This mission may not be going the way you wanted, but it’s not going the way any of us expected. You and Alvin talked of the Nobel Prize. Working with Sam, you’ll get a Nobel for *that*.”

Sandra paused but Lana remained silent. “I’m not doing this for you. I like you and all, but if you want to waste an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, go ahead. But Alvin looks up to you. Seeing you acting like this is tearing him apart. You need to get your act together or I’ll personally report to Houston that you are unfit for duty.”

Lana’s head dropped. She replied in a low voice, “I don’t know that I can. Dealing with this has taken every bit of me. There is nothing left to give.”

Sandra took the older woman’s hand. “You won’t do it alone. The language has been cracked, and we can all take turns caring for Sam and we will all study the language without trying to master it in one evening.”

“I’ll try if all of you are there to help.”

“That’s all we can ask of anyone. Now, I believe that the Captain has something he’d like to say to you as well. Go, I’ll deal with Alvin.” Sandra gently pushed her towards the cabinet where the suits were stored. After Lana cycled through the airlock, Sandra turned around. “Alvin, you can come out, I know you were eavesdropping.”

Alvin stepped out from behind the corner. “How did you know?”

“You aren’t as quiet as you think.” She grinned for a moment but then it faded. “You’re not upset about what I told Dr. O’Brien, are you?”

“No, I think you’re right. I’ve tried being supportive but she kept on withdrawing. Tough love is probably exactly what she needed. Let’s get dressed and eat here to give Tom and Lana some privacy. Then we can work on learning that language.”

\* \* \*

Little by little, they learned the language that the NASA team had worked out. Alvin taught Sam English as well. Sam’s grasp on their language grew faster than theirs did on his. The rest of the crew felt nothing but relief at the prospect of being able to communicate in their native language.

Alvin shared the sentiment to a degree but felt that something was up. Unless this species was unusually gifted at linguistics, Sam’s progress seemed unnatural. *I’d swear that he knew English before we ever met him, but that’s ridiculous. Where could he have learned a human language?*

As comfort in understanding one another increased, Sam told his story in halting sentences.

“I am Donoon. I come from… city of Barakaaks. We live in great cave under surface. Food. Warm. Air. Is rough life. Everyone is helping. No enough help. People dying. I am… lose… my sight. Cannot see. Cannot work. I am throwing to surface to die. You save my life.”

Sandra leaned forward and patted Sam – Donoon’s hand. “That’s horrible. Is there anything we can do to help?”

Donoon shook his head. “Donoon no help Barakaaks. Barakaaks leave Donoon die. Donoon leave Barakaaks die.”

*How does a blind man learn an alien body language?* Alvin grimaced.

“Die? Why would your people be dying?” Tom broke in.

“Sickness long time. Sickness gone but not great people left. Not people to keep warm, Bara cold.” In fits and starts, Donoon painted a picture of a dying moon made survivable by a society-wide effort to create and store the requirements of life. He described thousands dying of a plague that came after the collapse of a temple built over an ancient hot spring.

When pressed, he admitted that the Barakaaks would welcome help from humans and accept a diplomatic mission. But he refused to show the entrance to the subterranean society or help the humans reach out to the Barakaaks.

Despite this, the White House began a flurry of activity. The President brought Sonia Mendez out of retirement. Mendez reopened diplomatic relations with Cuba a generation before; the international community agreed that if anyone had the wherewithal to establish an embassy with an alien race, it was her. NASA recalled an asteroid mining ship so they could refit it to carry supplies for an extended diplomatic mission.

A year later, the population of Titan would grow with over a hundred diplomats, marines, and support personnel. Alvin suspected it was going to be a mess.

Salaris

Salaris woke slowly. Phosphorescent lichen illuminated the room in a dim glow. She looked around but didn't see anything she recognized. She thought she had explored every inch of the Barakaak territory in her youth, but wherever she was now, Vaamick had kept hidden.

She noticed a door on the far wall. Salaris attempted to stand but realized that she was bound. As her senses slowly returned, she realized that she was lying in something wet and sticky. Her head throbbed.

Salaris tried to turn but her binding were too tight. As she struggled, she felt a drip on her ear. The tangy scent of blood entered her nostrils. She gasped. She was lying in a pool of her own blood.

The thought sickened her. With renewed effort, she fought her bindings. As she kicked a wave of pain and nausea washed over her. More tentative, she flexed her leg. It was broken.

She remembered Vaamick's guards beating her until she lost consciousness. They must have brought her hear while she was out.

With a groan, the door opened. Lomis stood at the entry carrying a bag. Salaris glanced downward with a prayer of thanks to Bara. Lomis would help her.

"Lomis, Vaamick has gone mad. Help me get out of these restraints. Did anyone come with you? I think my leg is broken."

"I'm not here to help you," Lomis responded. "How could you? I thought you were devoted to Bara."

"I am devoted to Bara," Salaris cried. "How could you believe that I am not? But I follow all of her teachings, not just the ones that are convenient. The humans don't deserve this."

"Humans don't worship Bara. That makes them allies of the Saarkaaks. That makes their lives forfeit. If you can't see that, then yours is too. I'm not going to argue this with you."

"If you aren't here to argue and you're not here to help, why are you here?" Salaris spat. Worse than her throbbing head or broken leg, Salaris' heart ached that Lomis had been twisted by Vaamick's lies.

"I came to get you washed up and make you presentable for when Vaamick questions you today." Lomis shifted her weight. Her eyes roamed the room, looking everywhere but at Salaris. "He wants to know what other Saarkaak spies are in the temple. Oh, Salaris. How did you get messed up with the Saarkaaks? When they contacted you, you should have told someone. I could have helped you."

Salaris shook her head. “What are you talking about? I’ve never met a Saarkaak. Surely you don’t believe that anyone who disagrees with Vaamick is a spy.”

Lomis unpacked her bag. She knelt next to Salaris and opened a pouch of wipes. As she cleaned the blood and the grime from her friend, she continued the conversation. “Our only chance to win the war is to stick together. Vaamick sat down with Kasil and me to talk about your betrayal. He was genuinely concerned about how we were acting to your betrayal. He even promoted me. Instead of starting as a cadet, I’m now the leader of a unit.”

“My betrayal? Lomis, listen to me. I’ve known Vaamick for years now. He isn’t concerned about your feelings. He only wanted to turn you against me. I see it worked. You talk about betrayal. How about the fact that my best friend took a position with the man who is going to kill me?”

“I’m not dealing with this. I’m just going to wash you and get out of here. This place gives me the creeps. I didn’t even know this tunnel existed.” Lomis reached Salaris’ head. She gasped at the blood. “You shouldn’t have fought. It would have gone easier on you.”

Salaris winced as the antiseptic stung the cut on her skull. “I didn’t fight. They beat me anyway. From the looks of my leg, they kept beating me after I was out of it.”

Lomis finished her cleaning duties and began to pack up. “Vaamick wouldn’t allow that. You are lying. I can’t trust anything you say anymore.”

“Hey, before you leave, can you get the skin under the shackles? It itches and I’m sure it smells bad.” Salaris watched her former friend consider it.

“Okay. It’s not like you can escape.” Lomis unlocked the shackles and set them aside.

“I’m sorry, Lomis.” Salaris whispered.

“Sorry?” Lomis asked, confused. “Are you admitting that you committed treason?”

Salaris kicked her in the chest with her good leg. Lomis back peddled and then fell. Her head made a hollow sound as it bounced against the stone floor.

“I’m sorry for that.” Salaris spoke to the prone body as she fished for the keys with her toes. Seconds ticked by as she maneuvered the keys towards her hands. She only had one chance at this. Lomis wasn’t going to stay unconscious forever.

Salaris swung her good leg and let go of the key bring mid arch. For a few, terrifying heartbeats, she thought that the keys wouldn’t reach her hands. But then – the ring caught her finger. She strained against the handcuffs. Pain radiated through her shoulder and down her arm. She almost dropped the keys.

With a grunt and a tear in her eye, she got the key to the lock. It didn’t fit. She turned to the next key and stretched again. This time it slid into the keyhole. *Just a little bit further*. Just when she thought that there was no more slack in her body, the lock clicked open. She spent next few moments stretching her tortured muscles.

Salaris sat up. The other guards expected Lomis back soon. She hopped on one leg across the room, steadying herself against the wall. She looked for something, anything that could be used as a crutch. But the room was empty save for the bed and Lomis’ bucket. Instead, she dragged herself against the wall towards the door. The rough stone grated against her arm. After a painstaking minute, she reached the door.

Salaris poked her head out. The hallway was clear of people. Leaning against the wall was a mop. No doubt, Lomis had been instructed to clean up the blood spilled on the floor as well. She turned the mop upside down and rested her armpit on the mop head. It lacked the cushioning and support of a real crutch, but at least it would allow her to move faster than she could with the wall as support.

She hobbled down the hall. Her heart raced as she kept an eye out for guard. The path terminated at a single door. She tried to open it but it was locked. She sighed. *Lomis probably had the key on that ring.* She turned around and made her way back to the room.

The keys lay on the floor by the bed where she had dropped them. She tried to lean down to pick them up but couldn’t reach without losing her balance. She eyed the bed. *This is going to hurt.* She turned her back to the bed and fell back. Her broken leg bounced at the impact. A cry escaped her lips before she covered her mouth with her hand.

She didn’t think anybody could have heard it, but it was enough to cause Lomis to stir. Quickly, she grabbed the keys and used the crutch to stand.

“Salaris,” Lomis groaned.

“May Bara forgive us both, Lomis.” Salaris cried as she crutch walked past her friend to the door. Now that Lomis was waking, she had no choice but to lock the door behind her.

She reached the end of the hallway again and tried the key that hadn’t fit the handcuffs. The click echoed in the room. Salaris paused. If there was anyone on the other side, they now knew somebody was coming. *Well, it’s not like I’m not conspicuous enough*. She pulled open the door.

It opened into another tunnel. This one looked more familiar. She had played here as a child. *How did I not know about that prison?* As the door closed behind her, she realized the answer. This side of the door was covered in a stone façade to blend with the surrounding wall. Looking closely, she saw the small keyhole hidden in a shadow. *What other secrets does Vaamick have?*

Footsteps shook her from her reverie. After her public outburst, everybody knew Vaamick wanted her dead. Detection meant death.

She turned away from the sound of the footsteps and hurried as fast as her makeshift crutch would allow. At the next junction, she had to make a choice. She needed to escape but her previous attempt reminded her that, without surface gear, survival was about as likely as if she handed herself back to the priest.

She kept to the shadows and the less used tunnels as she worked her way towards the storeroom. Kasil worked there, but she would wait until it was empty. She didn’t want another confrontation like with Lomis. A few times, she heard people approaching and she ducked into the next room until the tunnel was quiet again.

Bells chimed in the distance announcing the mid-day prayers. *Thank you Bara. This is just the break I need*. The goddess would understand if she didn’t recite the full litany.

After a few more agonizing minutes, she reached the storeroom. Peeking around the corner, she saw that it was indeed unoccupied. She dressed in the surface clothing she had worn earlier and found a real crutch. Her shoulder ached from where the mop pressed against it. She searched for some rations when she read a voice behind her.

“Salaris,” Kasil squealed. “What are you doing here? You can’t be here. Vaamick said you were a traitor and a spy for the Saarkaaks. Why did you become a spy? Why didn’t you become a spy for us?” Kasil paused as the last question brought back a flood of pain as memories of a little girl when her father’s body had been returned after a failed attempt to gather intelligence from the other side.

“Kasil,” Salaris replied. Her face scrunched in a frown as she reached for Kasil’s hand. “I’m not a spy. Vaamick lied to you. He’s gone mad.”

“You mean you aren’t going to die like daddy?” Kasil’s voice quivered as tears welled in her eyes.

“If Vaamick gets a hold of me, I will, but I’m not a spy.” Salaris’ anger at the accusation washed away as she soothed her. She brought the other woman into a hug as Kasil fought to maintain her composure. “He’s not following Bara. I need to find that ship and warn the humans.”

Salaris pulled away from her friend and looked her in the eye. “Look, you can’t tell anyone you found me. Wait half an hour for me to get to the surface before you let anyone know that gear is missing.”

“Can’t I go with you?” Kasil asked. She squinted to try to keep the tears from falling again. “Maybe we can convince Lomis to come, too. She has been acting funny since you left. She was saying mean things about you.”

Salaris shook her head. “Lomis won’t do it. She believes Vaamick. I had to trick her to escape the prison he put me in.” She placed her hands on Kasil’s shoulders, balancing precariously on her good leg. She wobbled for a second but maintained upright. “I wish you could come with me, but it is too dangerous. I don’t know how the humans will react, if I will even make it there. And if I get caught, I want you safe.”

Kasil pouted and looked down. She sighed and looked back at Salaris. “Just… be safe.”

Salaris nodded. She opened her mouth but Kasil cut her off.

“And let me get you a cast for that leg. It won’t heal if we don’t set it. Kaarg showed me how.” Kasil smiled as she mentioned the doctor she dated.

“I bet that’s not the only thing he showed you.” Salaris teased.

Kasil blushed and turned around. Salaris eased herself onto a chair to wait. Kasil reached the medical section and grabbed the supplies she needed.

“Let’s get you onto the floor for this.” Kasil helped her onto the floor and handed her a cloth. “Here, put this in your mouth. This is going to hurt.”

Salaris pushed the gag into her mouth and bit down. Kasil felt for the break and then twisted the leg. Salaris screamed into the gag and her entire body tensed as the bone snapped into place. Tears filled her eyes. She struggled to maintain consciousness. But the pain subsided to a dull ache and Kasil wrapped the cast around the leg.

“Here, these pills should help with the pain.” Kasil handed her a small bottle. “I’d say take it easy, but I know you can’t. Be careful out there. If the humans have a doctor, get them to look at it. I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

Salaris nodded. “Thanks. Now get out of here and go home. You can come back in a while to discover the missing gear.” They hugged again and Kasil left.

Salaris gathered the rest of the items she needed and headed for the exit. The door opened. “Kasil, I—”

It wasn’t Kasil. Guards flanked Vaamick. “I thought I would find you here when we found Lomis.” He shook his head as the guards grabbed her arms. “Such a shame. She could have died when she hit her head. Just another way to show that you don’t really care about the welfare of others.”

Salaris spit at him. “I cared before you twisted her with your lies and false caring.” That earned her an elbow to the gut from one of the guards.

“Roogar, that was uncalled for,” Vaamick admonished.

Roogar lowered his head. “Sorry, sir.”

Vaamick leaned towards the man and whispered, “We save that for when we are in less public areas.” Roogar nodded and Vaamick returned his attention to their prisoner. “Now, let us return you to your new home. I still hope we can talk some sense into you.”

They walked in silence until they reached the hidden door. “I will find a way to stop you, Vaamick. When Donoon returns and sees what you’ve done, he’ll make you repent to Bara.” Salaris huffed.

“Why he already knows everything,” Vaamick laughed. “He’s the one that brought the humans here.”

Salaris’ lip quivered. Her worst fear in this whole mess. “No, he wouldn’t. Donoon wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t agree to the plague. He follows the true Bara, not the false one built of your lies.”

Vaamick shook his head. “No, my dear. Only you disagree with the plan. Everybody else has sense.”

They reached her cell, and Roogar pushed her inside. Salaris stared at the cot. The mattress was still stained and wet from her blood. “You aren’t really going to make me lay on that, are you?”

Roogar pushed her onto the bed. “It’s better than you deserve, traitor.” He leered at her. For the first time since waking, Salaris was conscious of how the blood soaked shirt stuck to her chest. “Of course, I could chain you to my bed instead.”

Her face reddened. She broke her arm free and slapped him. He grabbed the free arm and twisted it behind her back, pushing her face down into the sticky mess. “I’ll make you pay for that, bitch.” He reached for the clasp of her pants.

“Roogar,” Vaamick shouted. His fists clenched and unclenched. “I tolerate your viciousness because it suits me. But this girl was to be my niece. You will not defile her. If you attempt that again, I will surface you.”

“I was just having a little fun, boss.” Roogar stood up but wouldn’t look at the priest.

“Try it again and I’ll tell Donoon that you killed her instead of the Saarkaaks. I’m sure that will be fun as well.” Vaamick smirked. “Leave. Fiimit can secure the prisoner.”

Salaris turned onto her side and curled into a ball as much as the cast would allow. She shivered at the thought of what almost happened.

Fiimit fidgeted by the door. When Salaris looked at him, he looked down. She remembered him as a timid man. *How did he get mixed up as one of Vaamick’s secret police?* Roogar huffed and pushed passed him.

Vaamick nodded to Fiimit and he approached Salaris. He still avoided her gaze. She flinched when he touched her arm.

“Please, Salaris, don’t fight me on this,” Fiimit said in a low voice. “I don’t want to do this either but Vaamick found out that I have cousins on the Saarkaak side and will kill me if I don’t cooperate.”

Salaris sucked in her breath. She glared at him, tried to be angry. Then she deflated. She rolled over onto her back and allowed Fiimit to guide her back into the restraints.

Fiimit finished his task and shuffled back to the door. He turned to Vaamick, “What time do you want me to bring her dinner, sir?”

Vaamick shook his head. He looked at Salaris and sighed (FIX). “I’m sorry for that unpleasantness, dear. But unfortunately you must be punished for your little escape.” He turned back to Fiimit. “No dinner tonight. We will see if a day without food will adjust her attitude. Now, I have other matters to attend.”

Vaamick walked out the door. Fiimit looked at Salaris one last time and shut the door behind them. Footsteps receded into the distance, and then it was quiet.

Salaris

Salaris twisted in the bindings. Either Fiimit had shown her some mercy or he didn’t know how to tie them properly because they were loose. Salaris tugged at the cuff. It slid down her wrist. She sucked in her breath. *I think I can get loose*. It caught at her thumb. *Almost.*

Her leg ached. The pain medication Kasil gave her was wearing off. *Even if there was someone to ask, Vaamick isn’t going to let me have more. He didn’t even have my leg set*.

As the adrenaline from the past hour wore off, she felt every ache from her earlier beating. *Vaamick is an animal. Donoon won’t stand for this*. His name triggered Vaamick’s earlier words. *He already knows Vaamick’s plan. He is in on this. What happened to the man I fell in love with?*

Alone, tears fell. She made no effort to hold them back. Heaving sobs wracked her body. The full weight of what she was up against weighed her down. Salaris cried herself to sleep.

*Roogar lay on top of her. “I’ll make you pay for that, bitch.” Salaris cried out as he twisted her arm further behind her back. A rough hand pawed at her pants. The clasp popped free.*

Salaris awoke, panting heavily. She tried to focus on something else as the scene of the near-rape kept playing through her mind.

She looked around for any sign of the time. But the cell was the same as she remembered it. She sighed. *This is going to be a long night.*

Salaris was unwilling to sleep and subject herself to the nightmare again. She twisted her head and started counting the stones on the wall. Somewhere around fifty, she lost track and started over again.

She resisted sleep as long as she was able but dozed after several hours of her fruitless activity.

*Donoon entered the cell. He was as tall and muscular as she remembered. “Oh, Donoon. Thank Bara you are here! Vaamick is crazy. He’s going to kill innocent people. We have to stop him!” She strained against the bindings.*

*Donoon shook his head. “My uncle explained everything to me. You are the one who is crazy. I regret ever wanting to marry you.” He turned and left. The door clanged behind him.*

“Donoon! Noooo!” Salaris shouted at the empty room. It took her a moment to realize that it was only a dream. She shivered. The dream felt even more horrible than the last.

Her stomach growled. It felt forever since her last meal. She laughed. *If Vaamick thinks he can turn me by skipping a meal, he was never an underfed orphan.*

Hours passed. She slept in short bursts, each time waking from more nightmares. Far off, the bells chimed for morning prayers. Breakfast usually came before then. Her last meal became a distant memory as lunchtime came and went without food. Evening prayers marked another missed meal.

Sleep became even harder as her stomach complained about its mistreatment.

Finally, she heard the door open, revealing Fiimit with a tray. The aroma of fruit and hot grains filled the room.

“I’m not allowed to free your arm, so I’m going to have to feed you, Salaris.” Fiimit set the tray down on the floor beside the bed. He knelt down beside her. “If you fight me on this, I don’t know when Vaamick will feed you again.”

Too hungry to argue, she just nodded and opened her mouth as Fiimit fed her.

Salaris devoured the food, barely stopping to chew. When the plate was finished, Salaris tried to thank him. “Fiimit, you are the first person to show me kindness since this happened.” She couldn’t reveal Kasil’s help the day before.

“Hush, Salaris.” Fiimit frowned. “I can’t talk to you; Vaamick won’t allow it. And I don’t think I could hold my opinion back if I did.” Without another word, he picked up the tray and left the room.

The door closed, leaving Salaris to her own devices once again. Lunch and dinner passed without any return of Fiimit. She hoped that he hadn’t gotten in trouble for the few words he had said. Morning came and Fiimit brought more fruit.

“I’m sorry if I got you in trouble yesterday,” Salaris said. “I promise to be a model prisoner for you, but only for you.”

Fiimit looked down and didn’t respond. Throughout the meal, he wouldn’t look at her except to guide the food to her mouth. When finished, he left her again.

Weeks passed without anyone coming to see her except Fiimit with her one meal each day. The room began to stink. She still wore the clothes she had the morning the humans had landed. She’d been given no opportunity to use a bathroom. Somehow, the worst of all was the itching under the cast. Salaris wondered how long Vaamick would keep this up. A month passed when Vaamick came to see her. The door opened, and he retched and backed away.

“Oh sweet Bara. Get me out of here. Somebody wash her. I can’t deal with that smell.”

A few hours later, Lomis returned. She glared at Salaris as she set. “I’m going to release those cuffs. If you attack me again, I’ll… I’ll...”

“What? You’ll chain me to a bed to stew in my own filth for a month?” Salaris spit the words out. Her whole body shook. “Only give me one meal a day? Try to rape me like Roogar?”

“What?” Lomis screeched. Her body softened. “Oh, Salaris. I didn’t know. Nobody deserves that.”

Salaris hadn’t cried in weeks, but the tears came anew. Lomis held her one-time friend and cried with her.

Lomis grabbed her keys and unlocked the cuffs. Salaris rubbed her wrists where a month of yanking at the chains had rubbed them raw. The shackles came next. She tried to reach her ankles but was too weak to move.

Lomis stripped the ruined clothes from her and used a sponge to wash away the grime. When the water became too dirty to use, Lomis left and returned with fresh, hot water. It took three buckets to finally get Salaris clean. She took scissors to cut the cast loose. Finally, Lomis fetched new clothing and a clean mattress for the bed.

“I’m not going to chain you back. But, please Salaris. Don’t try anything. Vaamick has worse punishments than this if you try to escape again.”

Salaris nodded. She wasn’t sure what to say. Lomis picked up the bucket and left.

In the morning, Fiimit brought her breakfast. He looked at the open cuffs and then at her. Then he sat down and fed her. She ate in silence and he left with the empty tray. After a week, Lomis returned to give Salaris another sponge bath and clean clothes. This routine lasted another month.

One day, Salaris knew something was up when Fiimit put chains back on her after breakfast. A few hours later, Vaamick appeared in her cell.

“Yes, that’s much better. I can tolerate to be around you now.”

Salaris glared at him as he crossed the room and sat beside her on the cot.

“Are you feeling more docile, yet, my dear?” Vaamick caressed her check. She flinched at his touch. “Please, we were almost family once. We still can be if you recant and publically support my plan. Donoon will be reporting in soon. Wouldn’t you like to see him?”

“If he is really cooperating with you, I never want to see him again,” Salaris hissed.

Vaamick straightened. He took a deep breath and held it before releasing it slowly. “Very well. I should warn you, my dear, that things will get a lot less pleasant from here on out.” He stood and walked to the door. He glanced at Fiimit. “Tell Roogar I’m in further need of his services here.”

The nightmares had subsided but tonight they came with renewed vigor. She willed morning not to arrive but time marched forward without regard for fears.

Fiimit brought her morning meal as usual. For once, he broke his silence. “Salaris, I don’t know what to do. Roogar is going to torture you. He’s been practicing on Saarkaak spies that we’ve captured. Not all of them survived. Things are really getting out of hand.” He shook as he relayed the information.

“Bara, protect me,” Salaris cried. Her faith waivered; the goddess didn’t seem very present these days.

“I hope so. I want to help but I can’t. May Bara protect us all.” A tear fell from his eye. He blinked it away and left the room.

Sometime in the afternoon, Roogar opened her cell. “What’s happening hot stuff?” He leaned against the doorway and leered at her. He scrunched his face. “On second thought, don’t worry about a repeat performance. You look starved to death. I like a little meat on the bones.”

“Charming as always, Roogar,” Salaris replied. It took all of her self-control to keep from shaking.

He closed the cell door behind him and unrolled a satchel, revealing an assortment of scalpels, razors, tweezers, and pokers. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

He turned his attention the case. He picked a tool, examined it, and put it back. He tried this three times before selecting a razor blade. “Oh, yes. This is going to be fun.”

Salaris screamed as the blade bit into her skin at her wrist. She struggled against the bindings, but this time Fiimit had made sure they were secure.

Roogar made another cut an inch from the first. “The trick is to cut across the wrist instead of down it. Otherwise, you bleed out. I’ve been practicing, you know. Spies we captured. The first one died in minutes. That’s how I learned. But with each one, I imagined they were you.”

She spit in his face. He sneered at her as he wiped it away and spit back at her. Then he pressed his finger into the wound, making Salaris scream again.

“There’s no version of this game where you come away on top.” A third slit appeared on her wrist. He continued cutting her up to her elbow until she passed out from the pain. Roogar slapped her awake. “Oh, no. You don’t get away from it that easy.”

He switched to the other arm and cut her until it matched the first. Her screams and flinching only seemed to encourage him. When he finished, he wrapped up his tools and sauntered out of the room. He stopped to admire his handwork, bandages covering her arms already stained with her blood. “Oh, I was supposed to ask you about your plan to stop Vaamick. Guess I’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

This routine continued for months. Fiimit brought her meals and Lomis bathed her and cleaned her cell. They only secured her to the bed for Roogar’s visits, otherwise she was free to wander her little confine. Vaamick kept his distance. Time lost all meaning to Salaris. The days, weeks, and months bled together.

One day, Fiimit carved an elaborate design into her skin. She struggled against the bindings. Her screams echoed off the stone walls. Fiimit continued ignoring her pain. Her body couldn’t handle any more. Salaris’ heart stopped.

Fiimit noticed her struggles stop. He pounded on her chest to jumpstart her heart. When she was breathing again, he looked at her. “I told you before, you don’t get away from it that easy.”

He called to Fiimit at the door, “Call the doctor. Vaamick doesn’t want her dead yet.” Then he was gone.

Fiimit raced away and Salaris wavered on the edge of consciousness in her cell. She barely registered the fact that Kaarg arrived and he dressed her wounds.

Kaarg spoke to her but she didn’t hear. She wanted nothing more than to wallow in her pain and misery. He continued with his examination, stopping his hand at the lump on her thigh where the bone had healed unevenly.

“Kasil did a good job setting that leg.” Kaarg’s voice sounded distant to her, but the words broke through her shield.

“No, I set it myself,” she said with a thin voice. “No one helped me.”

“Salaris, there is no way you could have set that fracture by yourself. You couldn’t reach it on your own. Besides, how would you have known what to do? This was done exactly how I showed her.” Kaarg smiled at his patient. “Don’t worry, I have no more interest in reporting her than you do.”

Salaris breathed out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Thank you.”

Fiimit spoke up. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t stand by and watch Salaris get tortured. One of these days, Roogar is going to succeed in killing her. We have to help her escape.”

Salaris shook her head. “I can’t have you risk your life for me. Let’s face it. I’m not getting out of here alive.”

Kaarg’s face lit up. “Then we will simply have to kill you ourselves.”

“What?” Fiimit and Salaris replied in unison.

“There used to be a drug that put people into a very deep sleep and make you appear dead. Some of this drug still exists. Salaris, if I give it to you, Vaamick will have your body sent to the surface for Bara to take. Meanwhile, I’ll convince Kasil to give me surface equipment which, Fiimit, you can hide up there for Salaris to put on when she wakes.”

Fiimit looked at Salaris and back to Kaarg. “But she’s so weak. How do we know the drug won’t kill her?”

Kaarg considered the question. “She is too weak. But I’ll tell Vaamick that you can’t take any more. If he wants you alive, he will hold back for a few weeks while you regain your strength.”

Salaris looked up at the two men. “I can’t ask you to risk your lives to help me, but if you are willing to help, I’ll take it.”

Kaarg held her hand. “I probably won’t see you again. I’ll give the drug to Fiimit when all the other preparations are completed. He will slip it into your food and when you wake up, you’ll be on the surface.”

With the planning complete, Fiimit escorted Kaarg out of the prison. Salaris let out a whoop. She winced as the movement stretched her stitches. But she didn't care. She was getting out. Salaris was going to warn the humans about Vaamick's plot and find out the truth about Donoon. She smiled for the first time months.

Fiimit wouldn't talk about their plot to free her, but Roogar didn't return the following week. Salaris figured that the things were going as planned. Three days later, Fiimit gave the only clue that anything was afoot.

"Vaamick wants Roogar to return soon, so Kaarg had a special supplement added to your food." A slight grin crept on Fiimit's face before he controlled his features once more.

"Well, tell the doctor I appreciate anything that helps me with that butcher." Salaris responded as she dug into her food. She could taste something off. The bitter taste made it difficult to swallow but she forced herself to eat as much as possible.

Halfway through the meal, her eyes began to unfocus. Her limbs felt heavy. She couldn't manage to feed herself any more. Fiimit took over.

He got a few more bites into her before even the ability to swallow fell victim to the drug next. Salaris heard him put the tray down. She fought to stay awake but succumbed to a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

Salaris heard soft voices as she roused. Her eyelids felt too heavy to lift. Her body rocked from side to side as if she was being carried. Then cold seeped into her skin. She was on the surface.

The voices seemed clearer now as the fog lifted from her mind. One belonged to Fiimit. She stiffened when she realized the other was Roogar. She kept her eyes closed to avoid detection.

Salaris' legs dropped to the ground as Roogar shouted, "Saarkaaks!" She heard footsteps running away.

Fiimit gently placed her upper half on the ground. He crouched beside her. "Salaris, I don't know if you can hear this, but Saarkaaks are coming. I have to leave. I wanted to get you closer to where I hid your surface gear, but I can't risk getting caught. Good luck."

Adrenalin pushed away the last effects of the drug. She opened her eyes to find herself alone on the surface. Salaris couldn't see or hear the Saarkaaks. She shivered from the cold. *I need to find that surface equipment soon or my fake death will be a real one*.

Salaris shoved her hands in her pockets to try to warm them. A scrap of paper crumpled against her fingers. She pulled it out to discover a map.

Her gear appeared to be just over the next ridge. The top of the hill poked over the horizon. She took off in that direction. She didn't have a second to spare. She needed every bit of oxygen in her lungs to pull this off.

Keeping her eyes on the horizon, Salaris dashed across the plain towards her goal. The ground beneath her sped by, ignored. Her foot caught the edge of a flat rock, sending her tumbling to the ground. Something snapped, and a scream escaped her lips, ignoring her desire to avoid the Saarkaak’s attention. She brushed the pebbles off of her clothes and hair before standing. She rose but winced as she put weight on her left leg. Her ankle was already swelling.

She moved slower as she limped across the surface of the moon. She shivered uncontrollably. A few more steps. Her head was woozy; there wasn't much oxygen left.

The ridge loomed in front of her. A few more steps. Each one was more difficult than the last.

Salaris heard a female voice behind her. She turned her head and lost her balance again. She tried to get back up but her limbs wouldn't respond. She wasn't shivering anymore. Salaris knew that was a bad sign.

She heard the voice again but it was too late for her. Her last thought before slipping out of consciousness was *I failed again*.

Marsil

Marsil felt like banging her head against the monitor. She needed answers, and Graaf’s satellites weren’t giving them. It flew overhead of the human ship only once every few hours. If the Barakaaks were meeting with the humans, they timed their meetings well.

Something got the humans excited right before the satellites launched, but her and Graaf never discovered the source. After a few weeks, they settled into a routine that bored Marsil to tears. She continued watching because Jeef still banned more proactive measures. Only Graaf’s banter kept it bearable.

They’d always been close and worked closely for years, but they spent most of their days together at this point, watching the satellite footage. Something changed between them. Marsil had a harder time denying her feelings for him and Graaf always seemed to be putting a hand on her shoulder or sometimes even her leg.

*Get your head together*, Marsil thought. *He’s not going to go after a Lun.* She sighed and returned her concentration to the screen in front of her.

On the screen, the taller human male examined some brewberry moss near the lakeshore. Marsil made a face at a memory of eating the moss. It was edible, but bitter. That moss kept her alive when she had been stranded in the deserts to the south but if she ever ate it again it would be too soon.

*The deserts.* The thought welled up to the surface of her mind like a spring breaking free of the ground. Something had been bothering her on a subconscious level for weeks but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Now she knew. Brewberry moss only grew in the desert. You shouldn’t find it near a body of methane. Barakaaks must have planted it somehow.

*Could the Barakaaks be sending messages in the moss?* Marsil rejected that thought immediately as preposterous. . But the moss was a clue.

“Graaf, do we have any footage of the probe the humans sent a Saturn-year ago?”

Graaf looked at her. “I think so, but why do you want that? The humans haven’t gone to visit it and it’s probably rusted to pieces by now.” He tapped a few keys at his computer and brought up the images on a separate screen.

Marsil walked over to the screen. She tapped at an image. “Blow this one up, I want to look closer.” The image ballooned on the screen. “Wait, there. The Barakaaks lured the humans here. What is the one thing the humans wanted to find more than anything else?”

Graaf shook his head. “Resources?”

Marsil pointed at the tuft of moss growing in the leeward side of the decrepit lander. “Life. And the Barakaaks made sure they found it.”

Graaf nodded. “But that is a good thing, right? That means the humans sent scientists not soldiers. Scientists don’t wield weapons.”

“Well, if human scientists are anything like you were when I took you to the firing range, we are pretty safe.” Marsil grinned as she sat back down next to him.

Graaf glared at her for a second and then broke into laughter. “Hey, I hit the target once. That can’t be too bad for my first time.” He leaned closer to her. His hand was on her leg again.

Marsil laughed with him. “The edge of the hologram doesn’t count, and you used an entire battery pack. It was the worst performance I’ve ever seen, and I’ve trained a lot of green recruits.” Without realizing it, she moved closer to him. He gave off a slightly spicy scent.

Graaf took her hands into his. They were inches apart. “I guess I made the right choice becoming a scientist instead of a soldier, then. Didn’t I?”

“That you did.” She was close enough that she could feel a wisp of his breath on her neck. Hands calloused from working on his inventions rubbed her equally rough skin.

Marsil acted before she even realized what she was doing. She closed the small gap between them and kissed him. It started as a peck. As she backed away, he leaned closer to her. He dropped her hands and reached around her, pulling her closer to him. He kissed her back.

Marsil wasn’t sure at first how to act. All she knew of intimacy was from seeing the public displays of affection from others. But as Graaf continued to kiss her, instinctual response took over. They pulled each other tighter as they poured out years of frustrated passion into that kiss.

After several breathless minutes, they pulled apart. Her heart beat harder than it had in years. They sat there in silence for a moment as they caught their breath. His gaze was too intense; she looked away. Marsil dropped her hands from his shoulders but he still held on to her. Graaf started speaking, “Marsil, I…”

“No.” She pried herself from his grasp. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry. That shouldn’t have happened.” She stood and started picking up some items that had been knocked off the desk in their passion.

“But it did.”

“No, it didn’t.” She looked at him for the first time since the kiss ended. “Nothing happened. Nothing can have happened. I… I need to go report these findings to Jeef.” She grabbed the data chip from the computer terminal and fled the room.

She heard him start to follow her, but he couldn’t keep up with her years of physical training. She exited the building and ducked down an alley. Marsil looked around to make sure she was alone. It was still hours until the mid-day meal and the streets were quiet. She crumpled to the dusty ground.

Alone, she stopped fighting the tears and let them fall while heaving sobs wracked her body. Thoughts raced around her head. *Why did I kiss him? I've ruined everything now*. Marsil wanted nothing more than to go hide in her nook. Graaf would distance himself from her, of course. His only chance at surviving a one-way trip to the surface came at accusing her of breaking the ancient laws on her own. Thinking back, she couldn’t be sure that wasn’t the case anyway.

She shook her head. Jeef needed to know what they had learned. This could be the news she needed to get the king to authorize a surface trip. Marsil itched for a battle, but Jeef hadn't authorized one in ages. As she thought back, she realized that the Saarkaaks last offensive dated to before her promotion. *Is Jeef keeping me from battle? He can't care about me that much, can he?*

The Barakaaks were equally quiet. Normally she could count on one or two clashes a year. Close to half a Saturn-year passed since her enemy attacked. Even then, the attack seemed half-hearted, like they were going through the motions. At the times, he feared that the war was grinding to a stalemate. With her new knowledge about their lure for the humans, she suspected the battle was a diversion to keep her attention away from their real plan.

\* \* \*

The bliss Marsil felt in the shower quickly evaporated as she ventured back into the world. Back among people, her fears and uncertainties about her affair with Graaf returned. She stopped and turned around. *No.* She shouted at herself. *My job and the welfare of the people are more important than my feelings*. She turned around again and made her way to see the king.

Marsil fidgeted in the antechamber to Jeef's office. Normally she was admitted right away but today he kept her waiting. Nearly half an hour had passed since his secretary, Rilin, told her that the king was busy. *Did Graaf report me?* She didn't think that he would do something like that. *He kissed me back, didn't he? That means he is interested in me too*.

A few more minutes passed. She looked up at the sound of laughter as the door opened. Kis looked back at the king and blew him a kiss. Her hair was disheveled and the buttons of her blouse were in the wrong holes.

Rilin shrugged and an embarrassed smile as if to say, "Men, huh?"

Kis stopped when she noticed Marsil but then smirked at her nook-mate. She walked up to Marsil and grabbed her arm. Marsil grimaced at the touch. Kis only smiled wider and dug her fingers into the older woman's arm. Kis leaned close and whispered to her, "Looks like you won't have control over my assignment much longer." She let go of Marsil's arm and sauntered away.

Marsil's eyes followed Kis out of the room. *I didn't know the old man still had it in him. But Kis, really? This is probably her plan to try to put me in my place.*

Rilin cleared her throat, shaking Marsil free of her thoughts. She looked up... Rilin met her eye for a moment and then looked down. "Um, the king will see you now."

Marsil took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She entered as Rilin held the door for her. Her nostrils flared at the musky scent of the king's dalliance hit her. Jeef glanced at her as she entered then looked back down to his computer console. She waited to speak until her and Jeef were alone.

"I'm sure you can do better than Kis," she spat.

He pushed the input device away as he looked at her. "Jealousy is unbecoming of you, Marsil."

"Jealous?” Marsil asked, shocked. "Of Kis? Of THAT? That's disgusting." Her breath came raged through clenched teeth. Her hands balled into fists. She forced her hands to relax.

Jeef grinned at her. The expression unsettled her. "No, there is someone else you'd like to do 'that' with, I'm sure."

His words unsettled her more. *What does he know? "*Whatever. But I won't be surprised if you catch the plague from her."

"Remember you are talking to the king," Jeef said in a low voice. They glared each other for a moment. Jeef shook his head. "I'm sure you are here for some other reason to express your displeasure at my personal choices."

"Err, yes." Marsil swallowed. "We believe we've figured out why the humans are here."

Jeef sat up. "Really?"

"The Barakaaks lured them here by planting evidence of life where the humans would find it. Between this discovery and observing the humans actions, we believe this is a scientific mission, not a military one. There is no sign that the humans even know about the Barakaaks."

Jeef cocked his head to one side. "Why would the Barakaaks bring them all the way out here?"

Marsil shook her head. "That we don't know yet. More information is needed. We are at the limits of our intelligence ability. I suggest a surface mission to get closer. We could--"

"No surface missions." Jeef cut her off.

"Why?" Marsil beseeched. "There hasn't been a single surface mission since I became general. Are you trying to keep me out of the field?"

Jeef blanched. "Why would I do that?" Marsil didn't know why he bothered denying it; the answer was written across his face.

"Because you're my father," Marsil shouted. The words came out before she could think about what she was saying. She’d agonized over whether or not to confront him for so long. She wanted to approach this calmly, to make a logical argument for why he should acknowledge her. But all that was gone now. She’d dug herself a hole and the only way to get out was to dig deeper.

"You abandoned me and hid the fact. You left me to a life of hardship and solitude. And maybe there is some small part of you that is a decent person and you're trying to protect me."

Jeef's pale face darkened. "You have no clue what you are getting yourself into." He pounded his fist against the desk. He stood, pushing his heavy chair backward with a force knocking it over.

They stared at each other as the seconds ticked off. All of Marsil's fear and uncertainty transformed into rage. She couldn’t deny the years of hurt and anger any longer.

"I saw the footage of you leaving me at the orphanage. You tried to disguise yourself, but I recognized you. I was a helpless infant and you threw me away like trash. You disgust me, father."

"I am not your father," Jeef screamed at her. Veins bulged at his neck. He lowered his voice. "The queen bore me no child. Don't you dare try to repeat that treasonous lie again. Get out of here."

Marsil didn't move.

"Out. Now."

Marsil held her ground. Jeef walked around the desk and to the door. He opened it. "Leave with your position, or be escorted without it. Your choice."

Marsil dropped her head. Jeef wouldn't back down. She slumped her shoulders and shuffled out the door.

The door slammed behind her. Marsil jumped at the sound. Rilin crossed the room and said in a soft voice, "That's a pretty heavy claim. Do you have evidence?"

Marsil nodded.

"Destroy it," Rilin recommended.

\* \* \*

Marsil wandered the tunnels for hours. . She didn't realize where she was heading until she found herself outside Graaf's door. She hesitated. Marsil wasn't sure she was ready to deal with what happened between them. She wanted to talk to someone about her confrontation with the king, but she couldn't burden him with that either.

She sighed. No, she was alone and would deal with her emotions as she always had, by herself.

She took a step in the direction of the tunnels leading to her neighborhood. She heard the door open behind her. Marsil looked over her shoulder.

"I thought I heard somebody outside," Graaf said.

Marsil faced him. "I shouldn't bother you. I'll go."

He reached out to her. "Nonsense. It's late. Come in."

She flinched at his touch. He looked hurt but said nothing. "We will cause a scene. Your nook-mate will say something."

Graaf shook his head. "Koorgin completed his mating ceremony and moved out this morning. I'm alone. Frankly, I'm a little nervous. I've never spent a night alone before."

Despite herself, Marsil laughed. She'd spent years wishing for the chance to have her own space. Graaf took that as a sign and reached out to her again, putting his hand on her shoulder. He pulled her towards the door. "Come on. Stand out here and people will talk."

She allowed Graaf to pull her inside. He gently closed the door behind her.

Marsil looked about the room. She knew where he lived but had never been inside. The bare space showed only one decoration, a hologram on the wall. Marsil gasped. It was her graduation.

Graaf followed her gaze. "I fell in love with you the moment I met you. You were so serious back then, so afraid to feel anything. You wrapped yourself in your status like an armor to protect you from having to deal with your emotions. But I knew from that moment that everyone else would pale in comparison."

Marsil studied the picture. "I didn't even know you were there. You're right, I was full of myself. I knew I needed to make a name for myself. Nobody cared about me. I was just one more piece of laser fodder."

Graaf pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "I cared about you. I was afraid myself. I remember the Lun riots. I spoke against them. Said it was against nature. And then I went fell for a Lun myself."

Marsil looked up at him. "I'm not a Lun," she whispered.

Graaf pulled away from her and looked her in the eye. "What do you mean?"

"The cameras we restored. I found my father. I confronted him, but he denies it." She choked back a sob.

He stroked her back. "Have you told anyone? I'm sure Jeef wouldn't allow the coward to get away with that."

She wiped a tear away as she shook her head. "He knows. No one else does. Just you and the king."

Graaf looked puzzled. "Plus your father, right? Why wouldn't Jeef right that?" Marsil opened her mouth but then he sucked in his breath. "Jeef is your father."

"He told me that my mother bore him no children. But he was at the orphanage that night." Marsil grit her teeth.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You are the first person I've spoken to since it happened."

He pulled her closer. "No wonder you are so upset."

"My world is falling apart. After this morning, I can't deny my feelings for you any longer. My only chance for happiness was Jeef recognizing me. But now I'm stuck."

He kissed her. "I know you aren't a Lun. I don't care what anyone else thinks they know. I want you, Marsil. If you will have me."

She kissed him back. "If you can live like this, there is no one else I'd rather have in my life."

Marsil woke slowly the next morning. The room looked unfamiliar until she remembered the night before. Graaf stirred beside her. He smiled when he opened his eyes.

Graaf sat up. "I could get used to this. If it weren't for Kis, we could wake up together every morning."

"Kis," Marsil gasped. "I forgot all about her."

"Relax," Graaf responded. "You can tell her you were on patrol. Besides, who would people believe, the general protecting us from the Barakaaks, or a kid with nothing more than the fact her nook-mate didn't return last night?"

Marsil started at him. "Jeef. Jeef will listen to her. They are sleeping together.

Marsil

“I still don’t like this plan, Graff.” Marsil peeked her head outside his door. The coast was clear. She opened the door and hurried down the hall.

Graff shouldered a bag and closed the door behind him. “I’m open to suggestions. Things are going to get pretty hostile for the both of us here before too long. The Barakaaks aren’t an option. We warn the humans about the plot against them and seek asylum.”

“But we don’t actually know what the plot against them is. Their primitive technology will be no match for what Vaamick throws at them. They probably don’t have anywhere to put us either,” she complained.

“As I said, we don’t have a lot of options here. Do you really want to leave the humans to their fate?” Graff shifted the bag to his other side.

“Here,” she said impatiently. “Let me take that. We need to hurry. I don’t know how much longer my access code will get us into the storeroom.” She took his pack put it over top of her own. She had rushed to her nook that morning to find it empty of Kis. She didn’t wait to find out where her nookmate was. She’d packed her few precious belongings and reported back to Graff. They’d formulated their plan and wasted no time in implementing it.

Despite her protestations, they had no problem breaking into the storeroom and helping themselves to the surface gear they needed to make the trek to the human camp.

Inside, they debated just how much they needed to take.

“I don’t want a lot of gear,” Marsil argued. “We don’t have a vehicle and all this stuff will weigh us down.”

“Exactly,” Graaf responded. “We don’t have a vehicle. This isn’t going to be a fast or easy trip. We should have spares of everything.”

“Okay, we will pack an extra respirator and more rations. But I draw the line at the inflatable boat. If the Barakaaks spot us on the lake, we will have nowhere to hide.”

Graaf started packing the equipment in their bags. Marsil wandered off to another part of the storeroom. She returned with her arms full.

“Now look who wants to pack extra stuff.” Graaf laughed.

Marsil set the stunner batons on the workbench. “We both know you’re garbage with a laser rifle. You need something to protect yourself."

"I'm not sure I can handle seven batons at once."

"Oh." Marsil looked down at her bounty as if seeing them for the first time. "Maybe I went overboard. But I couldn't bear if something happened to you out there."

"We’ll be fine. But I’m not sure how warmly we will be received if we show ourselves to the humans armed to the teeth."

"Okay, we’ll take three. One for each of us and a spare." Marsil put the discarded equipment away as Graaf finished packing. As they fastened the bags to their backs, Marsil grabbed the heavier one. They headed to the door but she stopped them. She turned to face Graaf.

"I don't know what the future is going to bring us. Bara may bless us or she may smite us for breaking the old laws. But either way, I wouldn't trade the chance to spend my life with you for all peace and security I could have had without falling for you.” She leaned forward and kissed him.

He held her in his arms as the kiss lasted longer than they really had time for. They broke apart but still he held her. "I wouldn't either. I love you."

"I never thought I would hear somebody say those words to me." She pulled herself from his arms. "Now let's go so we can make sure we can tell each other those words many more times."

They took their time to reach the surface. Even if the king wasn’t actively looking for them yet, they were conspicuous with their packs. They skipped the major tunnels of the city for the quieter alleys and back paths. Whenever they heard voices, they would quickly turn down the next path.

Marsil, a lifetime of avoiding crowds coming to good use, led them through abandoned buildings. The orphanage of her childhood had long been abandoned but a balcony on the third floor led directly to a slumped rock face.

They were at the far end of Saar now. After another turn, they met a dead end.

“What are we doing over here,” Graaf asked. “The entrance to the city is on the other side of the government house.”

“There is another exit over here. It leads almost directly to the surface,” Marsil said. She started running her hands over the rock face.

“If there was, it doesn’t exist anymore,” Graaf responded. “It must have collapsed in one of the bombings.”

“No, it’s hidden.” She pulled a loose rock from a crevice. The entire wall seemed to shake. A section of the wall shifted leaving a small gap. Marsil smirked at the open-mouthed Graaf.

“It used to be open to the air. I had it covered because multiple exits create more opportunities for the enemy to sneak in. But I still wanted it accessible because, otherwise the Barakaaks could block us in.” She removed her pack and threw it through the opening. She pulled Graaf’s pack off his pack and put it through as well.

“The opening is a little tight. Go first in case I need to give you a push.” Marsil watched as Graaf climbed through the hole. He got half way through before he stopped. “Are you okay,” she called out.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I just have to move my shoulder.” His muffled voice came through. Marsil watched as his body rocked in the opening. She heard a grunt and he pulled himself the rest of the way through the secret entrance. “I’m okay,” he called out.

“Alright. I’m heading through now,” she called back. Marsil pulled herself up to the opening and shimmied through. Her smaller frame had little trouble squeezing through the small gap. Once through, she pulled the rock back into place, plunging the cave into darkness.

Graaf was already fishing through the bags for a light. “I’ve never seen a tunnel that wasn’t lit before. How did the lichens die off?”

“One of the Barakaak bombs went off in here. It didn’t shake the structure, but it was coated in the plague and killed off everything alive that was nearby. Luckily, this section of the city had already been evacuated by that point. Hey, watch where you’re pointing that thing.” She put her arm over her face to block the beam. He quickly lowered it to the floor and muttered an apology.

“Let’s go. The easy part of this trip is over. It gets harder from here.” She waved her hand at a set of steep, stone stairs winding up the cliff face.

They climbed the stairs in silence. Marsil contemplated their future and all of Graaf’s focus on the climb. At the top, they rested. A sluggish stream ran through one side and into an opening in the wall.

“Let’s fill our canteens. We probably won’t see liquid water again,” Marsil explained. This chore done, Marsil led them through the maze of tunnels. As they climbed upward, the air began to chill. Soon, they were watching their breath escape them.

Another bend and they saw a dull orange glow at the end of the tunnel. They paused again to don their surface gear. Soon, the tunnel opened up to the dim daylight.

Graaf stopped. “The sky. It’s so high.”

“Yeah,” Marsil said. “It’s a little disconcerting at first. You’ll get used to it.”

Graaf sighed. “If we are going to live with the humans, I guess we will get used to it. They live like this all the time, don’t they?”

“I’ve never really bothered with Earth studies. Never seemed relevant before. But I guess they do.”

They stood in silence for a moment as the weight of what they were planning finally began to sink in. “Well, come on,” Marsil said. “The humans are on the other side of the Barakaaks and I don’t plan on taking a direct trip.”

They trekked across the surface, talking about what their life would be like on Earth, punctuated by long bouts of silence. When Marsil had judged they had made appropriate progress, they made camp.

“At this rate, it should take us about three rest periods to get the human camp,” she said as she began setting up their tent.

“That’s not too bad. Don’t worry about the humans. Vaamick hasn’t sprung whatever trap he has set yet. It’s unlikely that he will in the next few days,” Graaf offered. He took one end of the thermal tarp and brought it over the top. He fastened the hooks around the circumference.

“True. And the Festival of Peace is coming up. It’s unlikely that he could rally believers to fight so close to it.” The tent finished, she stowed their bags inside. She stood.

“Well, I guess we should eat and get to bed,” he said.

“True, we should get some sleep. I want to get an early start tomorrow,” Marsil agreed.

“Oh, I wasn’t planning on sleeping any time soon.” He grinned and winked at her. Marsil laughed and entered the tent.

Marsil was up before Graaf and had breakfast ready when he woke. “Breakfast in bed, I could get used to this,” he joked.

“Don’t. Tomorrow, I’m pushing you out of the tent when the alarm goes off and then sleep for another hour.” She smiled. The banter stayed light through the meal and as they packed up their camp.

Marsil enjoyed herself. The journey reminded her of missions with her unit in her younger days before she began climbing the ranks and the other soldiers becoming distrustful and censoring themselves around their commanding officer. What she enjoyed even more was the lack of sexual tension. There was the fear of exposure and sadness of leaving their old lives behind forever, but otherwise Marsil was content to let their trip last forever.

Marsil should have kept better track of their progress. She intended to go several miles around the entrance of the Barakaak’s home. She realized her mistake when she saw the entrance to one of the tunnels. That tunnel had long since been collapsed, but it showed her that she had allowed herself to get complacent and let them wander within the possibility of being spotted by a patrol.

“We have to turn around. We’re too close,” Marsil whispered.

Graff saw the tunnel and understood what it meant. He scanned the horizon. A confused look flashed across his face. “Um, which way do we need to go? Every direction looks the same to me.”

“We need to go…” Marsil’s ears perked at a sound carried by the thin winds.

“What is it?” Graaf asked.

“Shh,” she hissed. “Get down now.” She dropped to her knees and pulled on his arm. Graaf continued to stand, looking around for the threat Marsil had heard. She pulled again, harder. Graaf got the message and got down.

“What do we do now? We’re still pretty exposed,” Graaf said.

“We need to get to the mouth of that tunnel,” Marsil explained. “Very carefully and very slowly. We will creep as low to the ground as we can stay and stop every few seconds to listen.”

Seconds felt like eons as they crawled across the surface to their hiding spot.

Once they reached the tunnel, Marsil whispered, "Stay towards the back. If it's not a patrol, they will never notice us here. If it is, we'll have cover to shoot from."

She watched Graaf head towards a boulder several feet away and turned her attention towards the opening. Two men carrying a body passed by without glancing in her direction. It was just a funeral detail. They'd be gone before too long and would never think to check for anyone in here. She relaxed and watched them pass by.

"Saarkaaks," shouted one of the men. He dropped his end of the young woman they were carrying. Marsil looked to where he was pointing. She cursed herself. There, by the dune where they had originally detected the Barakaak party, was Marsil's pack emblazoned with the Saturn rings of the Saarkaak military.

She cursed again. That was such a new recruit kind of mistake. She'd let her concern for Graaf's safety distract her from actually keeping Graaf safe.

The second man's eyes followed the pointing finger and froze. The first said something she couldn't hear and started running. The second man lowered his end of the body gently to the ground. At least one of them had respect for the dead.

The man bent down to the woman’s head and whispered something. *Maybe he was her mate?* He looked around one last time and ran off in the direction of his partner, towards the main tunnel leading to the Barakaak’s home.

Marsil waited a few moments to make sure they wouldn’t return. Graaf returned to her side. She turned to admonish him for not waiting but he let out a strangled gasp. She turned and let out her own gasp. The dead woman rose to her feet.

The woman put her hands in her pockets and pulled out a piece of paper. Marsil couldn’t make anything out, but it seemed to give the other woman a sense of purpose. She ran towards a dune near the horizon.

Something was wrong with this woman, aside from being so recently dead. Maybe she didn’t have a lot of experience with the surface, but she wasn’t paying any attention to the treacherous path before her. The woman stumbled and fell.

Marsil and Graaf watched, scarcely able to breathe, as the young woman struggled to her feet. She hobbled a few more feet.

Marsil could see it. Graaf could see it. This mystery woman, however, didn’t seem to notice the crevice she was about to step in to.

Thoughts ran through Marsil’s head. This woman obviously wasn’t dead, but had been carried up to the surface as if she were. She had no surface gear. She would either asphyxiate or freeze to death in the next few minutes. Whoever she was, the Barakaaks wanted her dead. That was good enough for Marsil.

“Watch out,” Marsil shouted. The woman turned towards the tunnel but didn’t stop her limping run. Her foot caught the crevice and she fell again.

“Grab the respirator out of my pack,” Marsil yelled to Graaf as she shot towards the fallen woman. As she ran, she struggled out of her heavy surface coat. Reaching the woman, she tossed the coat over top of the rapidly cooling body. She yanked her own respirator off of her face and slid it over the other woman’s face.

She counted the seconds. The woman’s chest heaved in spasming breaths as it replenished its depleted oxygen stores and then settled into regular, deep breaths. Color seemed to be returning to her face. Marsil, however, was getting cold. She hoped that Graaf was bringing more than just the respirator she had requested.

Graaf crested the hill. He gripped their spare respirator in one hand and dragged Marsil’s pack with the other. When he reached her, he leaned down to give her a kiss and then slipped the respirator over her head.

Cool, fresh oxygen filled her burning lungs. She kept one eye trained on the unconscious woman and another on Graaf as he rummaged through the pack for another coat.

He pulled the garment out and helped her shivering body into it. He put his arms around her and drew her close to share his body heat with her.

"We should get her somewhere warmer. How deep does that tunnel go before it gets blocked?" Graaf asked, looking over Marsil's shoulder at their guest.

"Not deep enough." Marsil shook her head. "But we can put her in the tent and crank up the heat until she thaws out." She fastened her pack to her shoulder and reached down and grabbed the ankles. "Wait," she said. She let go of the body and leaned over to the woman's pockets. She pulled out the map the woman had consulted before. "Wherever this leads is probably important to her and important to Vaamick."

She picked up her side of the body again and Graaf raised his half. Back in the cave, they set up the tent. It took some doing to get the unconscious woman into the tent. The designers hadn't anticipated the need for carrying a limp body inside and the opening was only waist high. She smaller Marsil climbed in and hoisted the upper half from a squat and crouch-walked backwards while Graaf stood holding the legs. Once the body was mostly inside, Marsil carefully dragged the body the rest of the way in.

"Keep an eye on her in case she wakes up. I'm going to check out this map," Marsil said.

"Do you think that's a good idea? What if it's a trap?"

Marsil rolled her eyes. "I doubt the Barakaaks set up guards and a map leading to an ambush in case a Saarkaak happened upon the body of a woman pretending to be dead."

"You know what I mean. Maybe she was going to meet somebody."

"You saw them. They were doing a funeral detail. The one looked like he may have known she was alive, but if the other did, why go through the show? They weren't expecting anyone out here."

"Well, be careful. And hurry back. I don't want to make the trip to the human camp on my own."

"I will." She kissed him and climbed back into the tunnel.

Marsil didn’t take Graaf’s warning seriously. The laser riffle in one hand and stunner in the other was an ordinary precaution. She reached for the map in her pocket and realized that it would be impossible with her hands full. She frowned as she realized that the incident had spooked her more than she’d thought. It had been too long since she had been on a surface mission.

She slipped the stunner back into its pouch on her jacket. The laser riffle was a more useful weapon in these situations. She reached for the map again. Whatever the strange, undead woman’s destination was, it was just over that next ridge.

Marsil hesitated. She hated how nervous the thought of real action was making her. Figuring there was nothing more that she could do to prepare herself, she pushed forward.

Her head poked over the ridge to find… nothing. Maybe it was a rendezvous point and the other person hadn’t arrived yet or had already left. That didn’t make sense. Without surface gear on, the woman who’d faked her death would have needed a tight window for a meeting. The person meeting her would have needed to bring her surface gear.

Wait, there it was. One of the rocks in the formation to her left wasn’t real. Closer inspection revealed a pack under a Bara-colored tarp. The pack carried surface gear for the petite woman sleeping in her tent.

She made her way back to the tunnel. She opened the tent and stuck her head in. “It was just provisions for her,” she said to Graaf.

The sleeping woman roused. “Donoon,” she whimpered. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and noticed the other two residents of the tent. Her eyes went wide when she saw their insignia.

“Saarkaaks! Don’t eat me,” she screamed.

Marsil

Marsil's jaw dropped. She and Graaf stared at her for a moment. Then Graaf started laughing. Marsil chuckled, but Graaf continued laughing.

The woman's face changed from fear to anger. "Why are you laughing at me?"

Marsil elbowed Graaf in the ribs. He snorted and struggled to regain his composure.

"Don't mind him," Marsil told her. "It's been a stressful few days. It's good for him to let out some steam. I'm Marsil and this is Graaf." She pointed at him as he took a couple deep breaths. "And we’re definitely not going to eat you."

"I'm Salaris," she said. "Yeah, I guess that was a little ridiculous. I woke up in here and the first thing that came to my head was all those children's stories I heard as a girl."

"If they are half as bad as what parents are telling their children about Barakaaks, I'm sure they were dreadful," Marsil said. "And ridiculous."

"Yes." Salaris smiled. "I'd say equal parts both. Although I didn't have parents telling me the stories. I'm an orphan.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm a Lun, myself."

Salaris looked at the older woman and the man with his arm draped over her shoulder. "So you aren't together then?"

"We are," Graaf said, squeezing Marsil tighter.

Salaris looked even more alarmed then when she discovered herself surrounded by her mortal enemies. "I know who my parents were," Marsil explained. "But my father refuses to acknowledge me."

"He forced you to be a Lun?" Salaris cried. "That's horrible."

"We couldn't take it any longer, so we left," Marsil explained. "We were heading to, err... Um, we were on a mission when we discovered you. What is your story? I'd love to hear why you were up on the surface without any gear."

“Uncle Vaamick is out of control. He imprisoned and tortured me for speaking out against his plan."

"Uncle Vaamick?" Graaf asked.

"Well, he is my fiancé’s uncle. More like a friend of the family,” Salaris rambled. “But I guess that’s all over now.” She dropped her head.

Marsil took her hand. “You’ve got us now.”

Salaris’ features hardened. “I’ve got to find out if he was telling the truth about Donoon. I just can’t believe that he would agree with Vaamick’s sick plan.”

“What is Vaamick planning? If we know what it is, maybe we can stop it. That’s probably the best way to find out what side your fiancé is on,” Marsil said.

“He never said all of the details,” Salaris explained. “But he‘s doing something to trick the humans into bringing a larger ship and then attack them. He wants to take us to Earth and kill off the humans with the plague.”

“The plague,” Marsil and Graaf shouted in unison.

“Yes. I can’t let that happen. That’s not what Bara teaches,” Salaris said. “I spoke out and Vaamick captured me. He had me tortured until the doctor had mercy on me and gave me something to fake my death. One of the guards carrying me was in on it. The other was my torturer.”

Marsil nodded. “That makes sense. When they spotted my bag, the first one dropped you and ran. The other was gentle. I thought he was paying proper respect to the dead.”

“So what do we do now?” Salaris asked.

“We go back to Saar,” Marsil said. “If you tell the king what you know about Vaamick’s plans, we can use our resources to stop him.”

Graaf shook his head. “Are you sure this is a good idea, Marsil? We didn’t exactly leave on the best terms.”

“This will redeem us. He’ll have to see things our way.”

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that idea. You two seem nice and all, but the Saarkaaks have been my enemy, and I have been theirs, for my entire life.”

“We’re going. You can be our guest or our prisoner,” Marsil said. She crossed her arms and glared at them, daring them to disagree with her again. “And that’s final.”

Nobody said anything for a minute. Graaf was the first to speak. “Well, I guess we should be getting to bed. We’ve got a long walk back.”

\* \* \*

Marsil opened the door to Jeef’s antechamber and stopped. Instead of Rillin’s smiling face, she saw Kis at the desk picking her nails.

Kis looked up at the sound of the intrusion. “Well, well. I’m surprised you would show your face again after breaking the ancient laws and then deserting your people. But I guess with all that Bara worship, we were never really your people anyway.”

“Shut it, Kis.” Marsil gritted her teeth. “I’m too busy to deal with your insults.”

“Oh, you will have all the time in the world once you’ve been arrested.” She reached for her communicator.

Marsil leaned over and snatched her wrist. “You wouldn’t want Jeef to miss out on my news.”

Kis struggled against her grip. “What could you possibly say that he would want to hear after what you did?”

“Just the Barakaaks plan, straight from a defector close to Vaamick.” Marsil smirked, letting go of Kis.

“You’ll need a better lie than that,” Kis said, rubbing her wrist.

“Come on in, you two,” Marsil called over her shoulder at the still open door.

Graaf entered the room with Salaris close behind. Salaris closed the door behind her. When she turned, the Saturn and moon emblem of the Barakaaks became visible.

Kis opened her mouth but no sound came out. Marsil reached over the desk and pressed a button on the edge. Jeef’s door clicked open.

“That’s for the chat, Kis. It’s been fun,” Marsil said. She pulled open the door. “Hi, daddy.”

“Daddy?” Kis and Salaris said in unison.

Jeef looked up and frowned. “I will not say this again. I am not your father. You have a lot of nerve coming back here after what you did.”

Marsil and her party entered the office. She waited until they were inside and seated before shutting the door in front of the still speechless Kis. “You didn’t leave me with much choice, did you? Well, in spite of your unwillingness to do anything, I’ve got real information on the Barakaaks and the humans.” Marsil pointed to Salaris. “This is Salaris. She was to be married to Vaamick’s nephew.”

Salaris gave a little bow from her chair.

“His nephew. Did Lig have a son later?” Jeef asked.

Marsil blinked. *How did Jeef know so much about Vaamick’s family?* She wanted to ask him what other information he knew about their enemy that he hadn’t shared. Salaris had other ideas.

“No, Lig was actually Donoon’s grandmother,” Salaris said. “She couldn’t have any more children after the war started. She was the first casualty of the war that you started. You killed her.” Salaris’s hands clenched. “This whole war was your fault. You couldn’t stand how religion made Vaamick more powerful than you so you tried to destroy him and the faith.” Salaris’s voice got louder with each word.

“I don’t know what lies Vaamick fed you but he really made the first move and my wife was the first to die. Lig was just a pawn he used for his own agenda,” Jeef shouted back. “You don’t sound like a defector or an informant. You sound more like a spy to me.”

Marsil stood up and slid in between the two of them. She held her hands out to stop them. “Now hold on. This isn’t about who is right or wrong, or what side started it,” she said. “This is about information that could end the war. With us victorious if we stop his plan or him victorious if we do nothing.”

“I’ll reserve judgment for now,” Jeef said. “Okay, what’s the old devil up to now?”

Salaris told him what she knew of Vaamick's plan, including his invasion of Earth. Throughout it, Jeef made nods and grunts at some of the more fantastical parts.

When she finished, Jeef leaned back in his seat. "I don't understand what the problem is. Vaamick is going to take his followers and himself to another world? What is wrong with that? Sounds like it solves our problem for itself."

"Because he's going to kill and enslave millions of innocent humans," Salaris explained.

"Who cares about humans? He's been killing and trying to enslave Saarkaaks for forty years."

"Earth has resources," Marsil interjected. "We all know that we've just about mined Bara dry over the millennia. Earth is still rich in metals and everything Vaamick needs to build more ships and more weapons. Then he'll come back and finish the war once and for all. We can't let him do that."

"I'm not buying it. That's a lot of people that he has to deal with. Sure, they are only humans, but the number boggles the mind. Vaamick won't succeed in his plan," Jeef said.

"So we do nothing?" Marsil balled her fists.

"No, I'm certainly going to do something. I can't have the three of you spreading panic," Jeef said. "So I need to deal with you."

"You can't kill us," Graaf exclaimed.

"I do need your skills, Graff. So, you’ll be placed under house arrest. The only ones you’ll get to speak to for the rest of your life are my guards. Salaris will be executed as a spy. It will be public. Good for morale." Jeef turned and looked Marsil in the eye. "I do have a dungeon near the surface. It hasn't gotten much use in the past few centuries, but that will be where you spend the rest of your days. After breaking the old laws about the Lun, this is a great mercy I do to you."

"I'm not a Lun, dammit." Marsil stood. "We both know who my father was, and how much of a coward he continues to be."

"It wouldn't be possible for you to be less aware of your family. Your constant insinuations are one reason you must be quieted," Jeef said.

"You've denied me for the last time." She pulled out her stunner baton and thrust it into Jeef's chest. He convulsed and fell. She looked at her shocked companions. “Come on, we don't have any time to lose if we want to get out of this with our skins."

Marsil took the few short steps to the door and opened it. Kis stood crouched at the door with her hand cupped over her ear.

The look on her face told Marsil everything she needed to know about what Kis had heard. Kis pulled out her communicator. Marsil swung the stunner over her head and hit Kis with it. Kis went down but Marsil wasn't content to run away just yet. She stepped closer to the prostrate body and kicked Kis in the ribs. "That's for breaking my stuff." Marsil spat. She kicked Kis's limp form again. Salaris winced at the sound of breaking ribs. "And that's for sleeping with my father." She wound up for a third time but Graaf grabbed her from behind and lifted her off the ground.

She struggled against his grip. He was stronger than she had realized. That training regimen she had put him through must have been paying off. "Let me go."

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Marsil." Graaf carried her over to the chairs on the other side of the room. "Attacking an unarmed woman? Attacking an unconscious person? That's not you. That's not the woman I love." He pushed her into the chair. She tried to rise but he held her down by her shoulders. "You need to calm down."

"Don't try to tell me what to do. She's been a thorn in my side from the day that I met her. Everything she's done has been to spite me. Even being with Jeef. She only did that because she knew he was the one person that had more power over her than I did."

"That doesn't matter. You are better than her. At least I thought you were. Now I'm not so sure." Graaf shook his head.

"So what are you waiting for?" Marsil said. "Go ahead and leave. Abandon me like my father did."

"No, I'm going to be the bigger person. I'm just going to wait until you apologize."

"You're going to wait a long time, because I did nothing wrong."

"Uh, guys?" Salaris spoke up. "I don't know if your weapons are different from ours, but I don't think Jeef is going to be out for very long." She cast a sidelong glance at Kis and pursed her lips. "She probably will, though."

Marsil struggled against Graaf's grip again. "She's right. I attacked the king. With the two of you as witnesses. I doubt that mercy he was talking about is going to apply any more. We need to get out of here."

Graaf looked back at Jeef's office and sighed. "Okay. We leave. Same plan as before, now with three of us." He let go of her and offered his hand. She ignored it.

Marsil walked over to the door leading to the hallway. She opened it and peaked outside. "The coast is clear. Let's go."

They wound through the tunnels back towards the hidden exit at the back of the city. Every so often, they would duck into an alley or abandoned building to avoid anyone that might recognize them or know they were gone.

Outside of the city, they hiked until the tunnel exit was over the horizon. Marsil looked for the sun through the thick clouds. "It will be the dark period soon. I don't know if either of you have been on the surface in the dark before, but it's going to get cold. Let's make camp and we will have to put on our warmest clothing tomorrow."

Marsil and Graaf continued ignoring each other as they set up the tents. Salaris prepared their meal. From time to time, she would open her mouth but seemed to think better of it and closed it again. The only time Marsil directly acknowledged Graaf was when she announced she would be sharing a tent with Salaris that night.

When they turned in for the night, Salaris seemed ready to talk. As soon as Marsil zipped up the tent behind her, Salaris pounced. "Okay, what is going on?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Marsil said.

"Too bad." Salaris shook her head. "If you want to sleep in this tent tonight, you need to talk to me. Your other options are going back to Graaf or sleeping outside."

"Fine. What do you want to know?"

"What happened with you and Kis? You were probably going to kill her if Graaf hadn't stopped you."

"Graaf had no right to interfere," Marsil growled, crossing her arms.

"Uh-huh. Like I said, that woman would be dead right now, if it was up to you. Did you really want to kill her? Like that? I thought you said you were a believer."

"She would have done it without a second thought," Marsil said.

"Yes, but if it were anyone else, would you have acted that way? If it had been that other woman you were expecting, about to call the guards, would you have kicked her? Would you have broken her ribs?" Salaris mirrored Marsil's pose.

"No, I would have just incapacitated her. I wouldn't have been that brutal. She was always nice to me."

"So, because she was mean, that gives you the right to attack her?"

Marsil dropped her head. "It's so hard for me to separate my emotions out about her. And it's not even Kis. She's just the latest face in a line of bullies and tormentors."

"Graaf loves you. I can see that. It's amazing the two of you were never caught, because he is crazy in love with you and it’s written all over his face. He stopped you from doing something you would have regretted when you calmed down," Salaris said.

"Yeah."

"And to thank him, you yell and jeopardize all of us while we were sitting in the king's office. Then the silent treatment."

Marsil put her hands up and lowered her head into them. "I'm a horrible person," she cried.

"No, you got caught up in some strong emotions. And in the morning, you are going to apologize to him." Salaris lowered her arms from her chest and rested them on her hips.

Marsil sighed and wiped away a tear with her sleeve. “Yeah, I will.”

“Okay, now for the biggie. Is the king really your father?" Salaris's eyes went wide as she recalled that particular bombshell.

"Yes. He denies it, but I saw the security footage. I can't think of any other reason why the king of Bara would personally drop a baby off at an orphanage. Not unless he wanted to keep my existence a secret."

"Wow. I thought Vaamick had a selfish streak in him. I couldn't imagine having to live with that knowledge. You could have been a princess. Instead you are a Lun," Salaris said.

"Exactly. I don't care about being a princess, but I shouldn't have had to run away to have love." Marsil answered.

“Yeah, that didn’t work out so well for you, did it?”

“You know, I’m twice your age. You should respect your elders.” Marsil laughed.

“Speaking of things that didn’t work out so well.” Salaris chuckled. “Let’s get to bed, you have a lot of apologizing to do tomorrow.”

That morning, Marsil avoided getting out of the tent. "I'll pack it up with you still in it," Salaris warned. By the time she was dressed and out of the tent, Graaf already had breakfast waiting. He didn't look up from his stim tea when Marsil walked into his view.

"I need to talk to you," Marsil said. Her voice was barely above a whisper. Graaf didn't respond other than to take another sip of his tea. "Look, I know I was out of line yesterday. Salaris and I talked last night and I'm... well, I'm sorry."

Graaf continued to study his tea for a long moment. "You should be," he finally said.

"I'm sorry that you can't go back to the city. I know you must hate me now," she sobbed.

Graaf dropped his mug and rushed to his feet. He had her in his arms before the mug hit the ground in the low gravity. "Oh, Marsil, I could never hate you. I know that everything that happened yesterday was very emotional for you. I'm sorry that I yelled."

"No, you had every right to be angry. I'm angry and I did it." She hugged him back.

They stood in silence for a few minutes until Salaris finally spoke. "Am I going to get any help packing up camp, or are you two lovebirds going to stand there smiling at each other all day." She laughed. Marsil and Graaf laughed with her. Marsil felt as if a weight had been lifted. Things were going to get better.

Alvin

Alvin walked in circles for hours. He felt torn between keeping an eye on the horizon for anything that might actually stand out and at the ground. He looked up and stubbed his foot on one of the many large rocks strewn across the surface.

He stopped and checked his chart. One more sweep to go.

Alvin continued crisscrossing the surface looking for the entrance to a hidden alien society. *Why won't Sam just give us a location?* Wanting nothing to do with a society that left him for dead seemed logical enough, but it just seemed off to Alvin. The others didn't share his cynicism. So he spent his days searching instead of performing actual science.

He passed his footprints in the icy soil and checked his chart again. "Good enough for government work," he muttered.

"What was that dear," Sandra's voice crackled in his ear.

He jumped. He'd forgotten again that the mic's in these suits were always on. In the low gravity, what would have been a slight jerk on Earth sent him a few inches in the air. He steadied himself as he landed and responded. "I'm done with this sector. There's nothing here. If it weren't for the alien residing in our living room, I'd say this tunnel doesn't exist."

"Well, Occam's razor. One exists, so it's unlikely the other doesn't."

"I know. Of course, if Sam would just help, we wouldn't be wasting our time out here." Alvin frowned. He started to cross his arms, but the bulky suit made the gesture more trouble than it was worth.

"We've been through this, Alvin," Sandra said.

"I know. No use rehashing that out here. I'm coming in."

"Good, I need some help getting the last of the thermal blankets up. They didn't design this rover to be climbed on."

"Roger." Alvin bounced walked across the surface back to the rover. Despite her request for help, Alvin arrived just as she finished putting the last of the blankets up.

"There," she said. "Kind of crazy that it takes as long to get the rover ready to sleep in as it does to do the sweeps."

"I'm actually impressed that NASA was able to cobble something together so we could make the trip in the first place," Alvin said. "I guess they knew we would never make an overnight trip if we were stuck in our suits the entire time."

"Silly NASA, not anticipating the need to sweep the moon for signs of a subterranean alien civilization," she agreed with a chuckle.

Alvin laughed with her and asked, "Is the inside warmed up yet? I can't wait to get out of this suit.

Sandra shook her head. At least, Alvin thought she did. The helmet didn't move and the suit simply swayed side to side for a moment. "Not yet. It takes twenty minutes after I get the blankets up."

"Well, let's at least get inside, so I can get this monstrosity off the second it's warm enough. Besides, I grew up in the Colorado Rockies. It will be warm enough for my shirtsleeves in ten."

Alvin kept one eye on the temperature gauge as it slowly climbed. He turned to Sandra. "I'm tired of waiting, I'm taking this thing off."

He released the latches on the helmet and twisted it off. His breath showed in front of him.

"It's still too cold, Alvin. Put your helmet on," Sandra's voice was small and tinny from inside the helmet on his lap.

"Not happening. These suits really weren't designed to be worn as long as we've had them on," Alvin said.

Sandra made a cupping motion against the side of her helmet. The small voice in is lap said, "I can't hear what you’re saying."

He removed this suit gloves and reached over to her helmet. He flipped the latches. Her hands came up to stop him but he gave her helmet a little twist and pulled it off. "There, now you can hear me."

"Alvin, you’re crazy. It's cold in here." She shivered.

"It's just a bit chilly. A lot warmer than what ma is dealing with in Denver right now." He smiled at her. He sat his helmet on the bench and stuck the gloves inside.

"Outside. I know she keeps her home warmer than this," she said. "Now give me my helmet back, it's freezing in here."

Alvin pulled his arms inside his suit and rotated the upper section until it clicked. He pulled it off like a stiff sweater. "It's already up to forty-five in here. That's not cold."

She moved closer to the heater coil. "Fine, catch your death of cold. Don't forget to radio Captain-- err, Tom with your report."

He shimmied out of the lower half and stowed the suit before answering, "You called him by his name. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Alvin slid over to the communications console near the driver's seat. The back seats had been removed to make room for bedding for the overnight sorties in search of Sam's home. "He flipped the switch and grabbed the mic. “Rover to Atlas, come in Atlas."

After a brief pause, Tom's voice crackled over the radio. "This is Atlas. How'd it go Alvin?"

"There was nothing there. Just like in the other fifty sectors we've explored."

"Well, we will find it. I just wanted to do so before the Prometheus arrived in four days," Tom lamented.

"Are we wasting our time out here?" Alvin asked. "If this is really an advanced civilization, don't you think they could invent a door? Especially if they are at war with another group."

"Not necessary," Tom answered. "The entrance is a pinch point. They would only have to patrol that one spot and shoot any intruders."

"Great." Alvin clapped his thighs. "Now I'm looking for a door where I'll get shot when I find it. That doesn't exactly make me want to try harder."

"There is a definite chance that you won't actually get shot." Tom laughed.

"I'm going to end this conversation before you completely talk me out of doing what you've ordered me to do." Alvin shook his head.

"Get some sleep, Alvin. You to have a long drive back tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Tom."

Alvin flicked off the mic. Sandra had finally removed her suit. "Anything new?"

He shook his head. "Just that I stand a good chance of getting shot if I do find the tunnel."

She smiled at him. "Well, at least it wouldn't be so crowded on the flight back."

He reached over to the bed and threw a pillow at her. "I'll haunt you."

She caught it and stuck at her tongue. "You better."

When they woke up, they donned their spacesuits and went outside to remove the blankets. Safely stowed, they took the long drive back to the habitat. Sandra tried to engage him in conversation, but Alvin sat silent.

Back at the hab, Alvin waved off lunch. "I'm just a little worn out from the trip. Go ahead without me. I'm going to take a nap," he told her.

Alvin lay down on his shared bunk and closed his eyes. Sandra stayed in their room. He could feel her eyes watching him. He waited another minute but she didn't move. He let out a quiet snore. Finally, she seemed convinced that he was telling the truth and left.

He waited another five minutes to make sure she was gone and left the room. He had work to do.

Alvin rushed to put his spacesuit back on. He hated the idea of wearing it again so soon after being cramped in it in the Rover for hours, but there was no way to get to the ship without it.

He entered the Atlas with nobody noticing him. He quickly removed the suit and stowed it by the airlock. Alvin had to cross the entire ship to get to his old bunk. They had come to a decision months ago that Sam should not be locked up in the medical bay. Since Alvin and Sandra had moved to the habitat, Sam was given their room.

At least some sense hedge prevailed, and Tom and Lana stayed in the ship to keep an eye on him so that he couldn’t get into the delicate parts of the ship that kept them alive and would take them home. Really, they should have somebody watching him all the time; they all left to have lunch together. An hour would have been more than enough time for Sam to get into trouble.

Alvin tried the door. NASA had decided on being able to access the rooms in an emergency over an interest in privacy. It swung open. Sam slept on Alvin’s old bed. The site made him more upset than it should have. He took the three steps necessary to reach the bed and shook Sam awake.

“You are going to tell me where that tunnel is,” Alvin shouted.

Sam put his arms up and tried to push Alvin away. “I no tell you. I no tell you. I no want to go back. You no take me back.”

“You will tell me,” Alvin said. “Nobody is going to make you go back. We just need to be able to get there. There are very important people who want to meet with your leaders. They can work out a treaty to let you live with us.”

“No, they kill me. They kill me if I go back.”

Alvin shook his head. At least Sam’s English had gotten better over the last few months. Conversation didn’t give Alvin a headache like it used to.

“Listen,” he said. “You are going to tell me. All you have to do is tell me when I have the location right. I will just list some places, and you will tell me which one.”

Sam shook his head and said, “I no tell you.” Alvin wondered not for the first time how the blind alien had picked up human gestures.

“Is it near the methane lake?” He asked.

“I no tell you.”

“Is it near the poles?”

“I no tell you.”

“Is it near the large crater on the equator?”

“I no tell you.”

“Is it near the triangle shaped rock outcropping to the West?”

Sam hesitated for half a second and said, “I no tell you.”

“Aha. It’s over that way. Thanks for the help. I’ll make sure your people know how instrumental you were.” Alvin grinned and stood up.

Sam was silent as Alvin left the room. He turned and reached for the door. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Sam smiling, but when he looked up, the expression was gone. He closed the door and went back to the airlock. The area that Sam had given away wasn’t due to be searched for several more weeks. Alvin would have to make sure that the schedule changed. He was tired of wasting his time with this stupid search.

He looked at the time; if he wanted to get back before Sandra noticed he had gone he needed to hurry. He didn’t bother with checking the seals on his suit. Alvin figured that even if there were a leak, it wouldn’t kill him in the two minutes it would take to get to the habitat.

Inside, he stowed his suit and rushed back to his room. He was still wearing his shoes when Sandra entered. “Oh, you’re back. I’m feeling better and I was just going to join you.”

Sandra eyed him but said nothing. She softened. “Well, we left you some stew. You’ll just need to reheat it.”

He gave her a kiss and went to the galley. Tom would probably still be there. Alvin didn’t like lying to Sandra, but he couldn’t tell her this. She was with the others on his doubts about Sam.

Confirming his suspicion, Tom was still eating in the galley when Alvin arrived. “You’re not eating my share, are you?” he laughed.

“If you had taken much longer, I would have,” Tom replied.

Alvin warmed up his stew and sat across from Tom. Tom had mostly finished his meal, but was concentrating on some reports on his tablet. “Looks like it’s official. The Prometheus will land the day after Christmas. They could have goosed her a little and gotten in a couple days earlier, but I’m guessing Jerry didn’t want to hurt his delicate cargo of government flunkies.”

"I know that you wanted to have found the city before they arrived, so I guess a few days delay is in our favor," Alvin commiserated.

"Who am I fooling? It's a big moon and we've only explored a fraction of it. Two extra days aren't going to help," Tom said.

"Well, I have an idea," Alvin said. "I know that the way we have been doing it is the most logical way. Given enough time, we'd have to find it eventually. But with limited time, maybe we should prioritize spots that have a higher likelihood of being it?"

"What did you have in mind?" Tom's head perked up, the tablet in his hands forgotten.

"Well, I know sector sixty-two isn't due to be searched for another few weeks, but I have a hunch about that rock formation," Alvin leaned in closer.

Tom shook his head. "But Sandra said that it looked natural, not man, well, alien-made."

"True," Alvin admitted. "But think about it. Sam said they used to live above ground until it got too cold. They don't have any satellites. They lived in a series of tunnels that had to be reached by land and were hundreds of miles apart. They would want to make their cities near some sort of landmark, right?"

"That makes sense." Tom stroked his chin. He stared past Alvin for a minute. "That makes sense. I'm guessing that you want to search sector sixty-two next?"

Alvin knew he had hooked him. It was easier than he thought it would have been. Alvin guessed that Tom was getting desperate to have some good news. Tom had been in the Air Force before joining NASA and he did not want the marine contingent that was coming with the diplomats to find the tunnel before they could and get the glory.

The crew gathered together over breakfast for the morning briefing. Once they had all sat down, Tom spoke. "Christmas is in two days. That will be a day off for everybody aside from essential duties. Prometheus arrives the day after. So, Lana, you and I will make sure this place shines while Alvin and Sandra are away."

'So, I do the cleaning while you pretend you are busy in the control room," Lana joked, nudging him with her elbow.

"Oh, I'm helping alright," Tom protested. "I can't have a bunch of grunts running around here and acting superior because the ceilings aren't scrubbed." He turned to Alvin and Sandra. "In the interest of trying to find the city before the Prometheus lands, and only getting one area left to explore before they do, we are reprioritizing. You are to go to sector sixty-two by that pyramid shaped rock outcropping. NASA has already approved the change in schedule."

"Understood, Cap--, Tom," Sandra said.

"Anyone else have anything to report?"

"Sensors reported a spike in Sam's vital signs yesterday afternoon," Lana said. Alvin stopped mid bite. He tried to look uninterested. "Nothing happened as far as he would tell me. I'll have to keep a closer eye on him."

Alvin swallowed. It seemed that nothing would come back on him for his little visit. But why didn't Sam rat him out? That was troubling as well. It was almost as if he wanted the crew to find the underground city, even though he wouldn't just give them a location.

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully and Alvin and Sandra donned their space suits. Once they were underway, Sandra asked him, "Why do you think Tom changed the exploration schedule?"

"I think it's a military thing," Alvin lied. "He doesn't want another branch to do something that he couldn't. So this is his Hail Mary pass."

"I guess that makes sense," she replied.

Sector sixty-two was further than the previous areas they had explored. Sandra and Alvin took turns napping while the other drove. At last, the miniature pyramid came into view. There had been some talk when it was first sited during aerial mapping, but a closer look showed it to be natural. From their current vantage point, it didn't even look that pyramid shaped. Just a misshapen rock that was narrower at the top than it was at the bottom.

The parked the rover in the leeward side of the rock in case the wind block helped to keep the rover warmer. For once, Alvin was excited to go out and search for the tunnel. Remembering last time, he did help Sandra put up a few of the blankets. The sooner she was done with the task, the sooner the rover would be warm enough to remove the suit when they were finished.

Alvin plotted a rough course on his wrist computer. Outward spiraling circles would take him from their rock out to a smaller outcropping on the close horizon. He started his route. Along the way, he picked up any rocks that Sandra might find interesting. This area was higher than the lowlands they had explored previously and he knew enough about the science to know the geology would be different.

Alvin didn't expect to find anything too close to the pyramid. They would have seen it already.

After three hours, Alvin started doubting his plan. Maybe Sam was telling the truth about not wanting his civilization to be discovered. Maybe he read too much into Sam's pause.

What would be even worse is if, after coming up empty handed here, the entrance turned out to be in the area they had originally scheduled to explore today.

Alvin scanned the surrounding area again. The other outcropping was getting close. At that point, he would give up and return to Sandra. He didn't feel right about his deception, but finding the tunnel would have made it worth it. Now, all he had were lies without the reward.

He caught the edge of a shadow out of the corner of his eye. The sight didn't even pause his scanning, but then he stopped. Titan didn't have shadows. Not from the sun anyway. The soupy atmosphere made sure of that. There weren't any spot lights set up out here. So where did the shadow come from?

He turned back towards the shadow again. He went in a full circle. Where had it been? Alvin pointed himself back at the outcropping and started turning slowly. Slowly, slowly, there. There was the shadow. But that wasn't quite right. It wasn't quite a shadow. Was that a hole?

"I think I found it," he announced to Sandra over the radio. "Getting closer to take photographs."

"Okay," she radioed back. "Be careful and don't do anything stupid."

"Would I do anything stupid," he said. "Wait, don't answer that." He turned back towards the rover and waved. "Don't worry. I have no interest in finding myself looking at the wrong end of an alien gun."

Alvin took photographs and video with the digital camera built into the suit helmet. He made sure to get the shadow's position relative to the pyramid and the smaller outcropping. He inched up to the hole. There was a rock ledge that extended over most of it. He shined his light inside and saw the far wall. This couldn't be the right place. Alvin stood hunched over the hole for a minute. He looked over at Sandra who was watching his progress. "I'm going in."

"Wait, you just said--" Sandra started. Alvin jumped in. He landed the four feet below with a soft thump. "Alvin," he heard her voice under a layer of static.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

"I--" Static drowned out the rest. "Rock -- inter--ring. --back."

Alvin switched on the voice recorder. "This isn't the place, but it does look like it was recently occupied. Looks like maybe a couple tents. I see footprints. Some sort of boot. They lead somewhere." He shined his light around. The far wall wasn't a wall after all, the cave continued around a bend. He followed the footsteps. "Just a false alarm. The cave does end, just a little deeper." Only one set of prints goes back here, like somebody was hiding."

He returned to the cave entrance and pulled himself out. Sandra stood a few feet away. "What were you doing? Why would you do something like that? You didn't know what was down there." She punched him in the arm of the suit. He couldn't feel the hit, but the momentum wobbled him in the low gravity.

"It wasn't the right spot; it was just a cave. Here, listen to this." He tapped a few buttons on his wrist computer and played the audio file he had made while in the cave.

"Wow," she said, a full minute after the recording ending. "Do you think it was Sam, hiding here?"

"No," Alvin replied. "He didn't have anything to protect him from the elements. He would have never made it to our ship from here. That's why I find it so suspicious. Somebody dumped him there. Knowing we would find him. He's not telling us something."

"Maybe they were trying to show mercy and left him knowing we would find him."

"Then why not just bring him to us, or leave some protective gear. But I don't want to argue this again. That wasn't the tunnel, but it has to be close."

"I think it's my turn to look," she said. "I can't trust you not to explore the tunnel by yourself."

"Fine," he said. "I'll stay by the rover."

He sent her the map data his wrist computer had accumulated during his turn and Sandra set off in the direction he had been heading before discovering the tunnel.

Alvin watched Sandra continue her trek. After a few minutes of watching her stare at her feet, he got to work on putting the blankets up on the rover. It took his full attention and he forgot about Sandra and their mission.

Finishing up, he got into the rover and blasted the heat. There would be no delay getting out of their suits today. He debated whether he should make himself comfortable in the rover as it warmed up when he heard her voice.

"I found more footprints. Just over the dune," she said. "Alvin, come here. Somebody was carrying something and dropped it. Then one set of footprints over the dune and into the rocky area."

Alvin made his way over as fast as the awkward suit and awkward low gravity could take him. Despite her urgency at his coming, she ignored him when he arrived. She examined the footprints from multiple angles. She was, he realized, taking photographs.

Alvin looked at the footprints coming to a stop and the indentation of a large object. The wind was starting to eradicate the evidence, but he thought he could make out some sort of appendages. Could the object dropped have been another person? Maybe Sandra's theory about Sam was right after all.

Beside the lone set of footsteps leading towards the cave, two sets went back in the direction from which they came.

"Sandra," he called. She ignored him, still too engrossed in her task. He reached over and yanked on her arm.

"Alvin, I'm busy," she said, not looking up. "Look at the footprints, they go off to the north. If we follow them, we may find what we are looking for."

Sandra looked at where he pointed and back at the rover. "We aren't supposed to get out of sight of our ride."

"You stand on the dune," he told her. You will be able to see the rover clearly and still keep an eye on me so I can't get lost."

She mulled it for a second. "Okay, but no stunt like you did with that cave."

"Scouts honor," he put his hand up. He put his helmet cam on continuous recording video and followed the footsteps. He was well out of sight of the rover now. They wound around the outcropping. "I'll see if it's right here or if the footprints continue." Either way, I'll be right back."

"Okay," she told him. "You have five minutes."

Alvin continued around the bend. The outcropping leaned over the ground like a shelf. The ground seemed lower where rock met the ground. The prints continued to that area, so he followed them. There it was. "I found it."

"Al--. You're --eaking u--."

"Damn, rocks. Why can't NASA invent a radio that works through rock." He thought about just going for it, but decided to not to scare her again. He turned and tripped over a rock. Again.

The fall felt like slow motion, as it always did. This time, however, when he hit the ground, he discovered it sloped. He bounced in the low gravity and rolled further into the tunnel.

The floor leveled out, and Alvin skidded to a halt. "Sandra, do you copy?" He waited but no response came. "Sandra, do you copy at all? I fell." Still no answer. He pushed himself up and dusted himself off. Before moving, he ran a quick self-check on the suit in search of tears or leaks. Everything seemed to be operating normally. He took a step towards the surface but stopped.

He promised Sandra he wouldn't go off and explore, but he was already down here. It couldn't hurt to go a few feet further. Tom was joking about sentries shooting, right?

He shined his flashlight further down the tunnel. It seemed to run a few hundred feet and go around a curve. He followed the tunnel to the corner and looked around. He held his breath as he poked his head passed the rock wall but there was only him and darkness. He let the breath out. Shining the light down the next stretch revealed more of the same. The sand from the surface gave way to rock. Alvin searched the tunnel walls. Nothing gave away its secret of the roadway to an alien society. If their castaway hadn't told him where to look, this tunnel would have been considered natural and explored only as far as Alvin had already reached. They would not have found enough of note in here to consider exploring further.

But Alvin did have a good enough reason and was already down here. Instinctively, he knew Sandra would be freaking out right now, but he pushed that concern to the back of his mind. There would be plenty of time to deal with the consequences of that later.

Another hundred feet and another curve. The floor started to slope more steeply but still an easy enough walk. At least downhill. Alvin suspected that uphill on Earth gravity would not have been an easy hike.

He debated how much further he should go. "One more bend," he said out loud. That should put him at about a quarter mile into the tunnel. Hopefully, that would bring him close enough to the city to see signs of it.

He continued climbing down. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a light flash. He turned around, but he was alone. It flashed again and Alvin realized it was coming from the temperature reading on the heads up display on his helmet. The number had almost reached zero. That was much warmer than it should have been from geologic activity considered how far below zero the surface was where Sandra was probably looking for his unconscious body.

He decided to run some atmospheric tests. Titan's atmosphere varied with the weather but the lack of oxygen, oxygen that their pet alien seemed to need as well as they did, was remarkably consistent. The oxygen sensor beeped. Five percent. Still much too low to walk around, but well above the moon's baseline. That had to be a good sign as well. He recorded his findings and continued down the rabbit hole.

He shined his light around while he walked. There wasn't anything in front of him during the stretches of tunnel.

The light bounced off the rough rock. Still natural. *Was that an artifact of their tunnel building technology?* Despite the look, this cave seemed to be a funny shape to Alvin.

There were signs of some sort of a scuffle here. Instead of the rough rock all around, he could see fresh cuts in the wall. It looked like a fight had broken out here.

That shook Alvin out of his revelry. He turned around and headed back. When he reached the final curve in the tunnel, Sandra was waiting for him, shining her light around.

"I'm right here. I fell and it took me a minute to catch my bearings. I went the wrong way." There, another lie. Alvin hated how much easier they were getting for him.

"I got worried when you stopped responding," she hugged him awkwardly though their protective clothing.

"We are going to need better radios if we keep this up. I'm pretty sure this is what we've been looking for," he said. "Let's get back to the rover. For once, I actually want to make my report."

Alvin

Alvin hadn't expected to watch the landing himself. He'd become an astronaut to discover life on new worlds, not to watch rockets burn. But Sandra insisted, and he found himself squeezed into the control room with the others anyway.

"Isn't this exciting?" Sandra asked him.

"No, not really,” he admitted. Sandra elbowed him. "This was supposed to be a science mission. That got sidetracked real fast."

"At least you got to do some science while we've been here," Lana cut in. She folded her arms and leaned against the bulkhead. She glared at Tom. "I've been on babysitting duty almost the entire time."

"Not this again," Tom muttered. He dropped his head and sighed.

"Yes, this again," she repeated his words. "I haven't done anything here. I for one am happy that they are sending more people. They can babysit the alien so I can do what I actually came here to do, what I've spent years of my life training to do."

"Look," Tom said quietly. "I'm done having this argument. What's done is done. We did the best we could to help out, and now Sam gets to be their responsibility." He pointed at the screen.

The landing itself was uneventful. Exactly how you would want it to be, Alvin figured. He certainly didn't want an exciting landing when he got back to Earth.

"Welcome to Titan, Prometheus," Tom called over the radio.

"Thanks for having us, Atlas," the voice on the other side answered. Alvin guessed it was the captain of the Prometheus; Jerry, Tom had called him. 'Ambassador' Atwell would feel too important to be chatting over ship radios. "We are looking forward to getting off of this tub and stretching our legs."

"Do you want some help getting your habitat up? We got the only people with experience in putting 'em up on this rock."

Another voice broke into the conversation. "That won't be necessary, Captain. My men will be faster without you in the way."

"Son, your elders were having a conversation. It's not polite to interrupt, so shove a sock in it." Tom rolled his eyes.

"Captain, I will not tolerate your rudeness, and it certainly won't help your cause."

Jerry came back into the conversation, "Major Johns, if you want a ride back, you're going to have to play nice."

"Whatever," Johns responded. "Just all you lot stay out of our way. According to my briefing, this is a war zone and that puts me in charge. Captain Larkin, have the airlock section ready to open in fifteen. And Captain O’Brien, just stay on your ship and out of my way. Over and out."

There was a brief hiss of static and then silence. "Hanging up on somebody just isn't the same since the end of the analog telephone in my granda's day." Alvin chuckled.

Lana and Sandra looked at him but didn't say anything. Tom muttered something under his breath. "Well, I guess we should get back to not being in Major Johns' way."

Lana rolled her eyes. Sandra just shook her head. Tom seemed to finally break free of the fugue he was in. "Suit up. We still have to meet the ambassador." Tom stood up and left the room, forcing the rest of the crew to scramble to catch up.

Alvin was the last to exit the ship to exit the ship. He stepped outside and stopped in his tracks. The Marines must have been suited up and ready to go before the Prometheus even landed. Barely half an hour had passed since the Prometheus had landed and they already had the frame up. Alvin remembered when the four of them had put their hab up, it had taken nearly half a day.

Something seemed odd with their suits. It took him a minute, but Alvin figured it out. Instead of their bulky vacuum suits, the marines were wearing something that looked like a wetsuit with a helmet. That probably helped a lot with getting their habitat up faster. "Well, Tom, I guess he was right. They don't need our help at all."

Tom didn't say anything. He just bounced the hundred yards to the Prometheus. "Hey, Jerry. Open up."

As the airlock door cycled open, Alvin and Sandra rushed to catch up. Lana didn't budge. Alvin turned to look at her. "Go on, I don't really feel like being around Tom right now," she explained.

Alvin opened his mouth but Lana had already turned and was heading back to their ship. Alvin looked at Sandra and shrugged. His suit didn't move. He really needed to get his hands on one of the marines' suits. 'I just shrugged, by the way."

Sandra giggled and put a gloved hand on his arm. "Come on, I heard they brought chocolate."

They caught up with Tom just as the airlock finished opening. They entered and felt the air buffet them as it filled the chamber. They took off their helmets and the inner door opened. A short man with short graying hair smiled. "Welcome to the Prometheus, Tom. I see you brought the kids."

Tom clasped the man on the back. "Good to see you Jerry. Just wish you jettisoned some of your cargo on the way here."

The marine who had been standing silently at attention near the airlock controls up till now lost his composure. Alvin coughed to cover a laugh as the man's eyes went wide and jaw dropped. Years of training quickly took over and the man went back to being a statue.

Jerry looked at Alvin and followed his eyes to the marine. "You and me, both. You want to stay here and I take the Atlas back next month?"

"Not a chance," Tom told him. "Now I believe you wanted to give me a tour of your ship."

There wasn't much of interest to Alvin, but the ship’s original purpose as an asteroid miner intrigued Sandra. Alvin had to admit that it was pretty cool that humans were now mining heavenly bodies, but the details were lost on him.

Mid-tour, they met the ambassador to Titan. Alvin expected somebody pompous and self-important. After all, the woman called herself an ambassador to a civilization they hadn't even met yet.

Cynthia Clinton was none of that however. She won over Sandra first. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sandra." She shook the younger woman's hand. "I'll admit that of the four of you, you were the one I wanted to meet the most."

"Me?" Sandra half asked, half shrieked. She didn't let go of the ambassador's hand. Cynthia brought her left hand up to hold Sandra's. Sandra caught the glint of metal on her hand. "You went to U Penn, too?"

Cynthia laughed. "Imagine my surprise then I was reading your dossiers and discovered that I was flying six times the distance of the Earth to the sun to meet someone that lived in the same dorm as me."

"Cynthia, why don't you Jerry come over to the Atlas? I'm sure you would like to meet our guest of honor," Tom said.

"That's a delightful idea," Cynthia said. "Give me a chance to practice my Titan. I studied the entire flight out here." She smiled.

They made their way over to the storage locker for the spacesuits. Alvin noted that Cynthia and Jerry both had the older style suits. Apparently, they weren't special enough for the Marines groundsuits. Either that or they were experimental and there were a hundred Marines outside right now acting like test dummies.

Major Johns told them on their trek across what Alvin was quickly beginning to think of as a parade field. He approached them. "Ambassador, I must insist that you stay in the ship until the habitat is completed."

"We are just heading over to the Atlas to meet their alien," Cynthia said.

"Well in that case I should join you. I need to evaluate the security threat." Johns swiveled his head. The motion was possible in his suit. "Franklin. Jacobs, fall in." Two Marines working on the habitat put down what they were holding and skipped over to them

"Major, I assure you that's not necessary. He is a refugee." Tom said.

"I will be the judge of that, Captain," Johns said.

"Fine, suit yourself. If you want to waste your time creating work for yourself instead of doing the work you actually have, go right ahead. Be warned, our airlock will only fit four. I'm not making my crew or the ambassador wait just so you can go in first." Tom seemed to work out the math in his head and saw that even without the Marines they wouldn't all fit in the airlock at once.

"I'll stay behind," Sandra said. She turned her body to face Jerry. "Captain, with your permission, I would like to spend more time touring your ship. I'm really intrigued by its original application."

"Go right ahead." Jerry pointed back to the Prometheus. "Ask for Simmons. He's one of the Marines but seems like an okay guy and has a background in geotechnical."

"Thank you, sir." She nodded. Sandra gave Alvin a smile through her faceplate and touched his hand.

"Go have fun and I'm proud of you. You're really breaking out of your shell," Alvin said. He made a shooing motion. "Now go."

"Love you." She skipped off. Sandra chuckled softly. She was literally skipping. Granted, it really was just about the best way to get around on this gravity.

Tom and Alvin got in the airlock with Jerry and the ambassador. They cycled through and Tom said, "I'd say leave them there, but I don't want them wandering around my ship unattended."

Jerry nodded and Cynthia murmured her ascent. Tom turned to Alvin. "Go find Lana and let her know we are here. That way we don't surprise her and, goodness knows, I don't want to get any more on her bad side."

Alvin left without saying a word. He found her in the galley drinking a cup of coffee. "We've got company. The ambassador and the captain from the other ship are here. That jerk major and two of his grunts are with them. You will like Cynthia, she's not at all like what we expected. The other three are even worse than we expected."

Lana laughed. "It will be good to see Jerry. I haven't seen him in a few years. I suppose they’re here to see Sam?"

Alvin nodded and she collected her tablet and her mug. "Well, I guess we should keep them waiting."

They met up with the others in the hallway leading to Sam's room. The door was open. Sam wasn't a prisoner but NASA and the crew hadn't felt letting a blind man have free reign over the ship was the best idea either. The door was kept closed if not locked and Sam generally kept to himself.

Alvin poked his head in. He turned back to the others and said, "Umm, he's not here."

"What do you mean he's not here? You let the prisoner escape?" Johns shouted.

"He wasn't a prisoner," Tom interjected.

"Why wasn't he in a secured location?" Johns asked. He turned to Franklin and Jacobs. "I want this place on lockdown. Seal all the hatches. No one is to pass without my orders. Search every inch of this ship."

"Belay that order. Stand down." Tom blocked their exit. "And Sam wasn't a prisoner, he was a refugee and a guest."

"This is a war zone. I am in charge of this mission now. We need to find him. He could have intelligence that we need." Johns shoved at Tom.

Tom stared at him and grew silent. Then in a voice scarce louder than a whisper, he said, "This ship is not part of your mission. I am in charge here. Get off my ship. My crew will search for the alien but you will not be a part of it."

Johns looked like he might say something. Alvin stood by Tom and tried to look intimidating.

Jerry took a step and stood on Tom's other side. "You better learn to respect a ship's captain when you are on his ship. Otherwise, you're going to need your own transportation back home."

Cynthia put her hands between the two sides. "Major, maybe it is time to get back to the habitat installation.

Johns glared at them but could see that he was outnumbered. Without breaking eye contact with Tom, Johns said to his entourage, "Get back to work." He held his stare a little longer and turned around, following the other two back to the airlock. After a few steps, he turned his head and shouted over his shoulder. “I’ll remember this when aliens are attacking and you need help.”

Tom looked at his crew. "Okay, let's split up and search every nook and cranny."

"Why don't you check the security footage, Tom," Alvin said quietly. "We will get started on the search, but if he's gone, we are just wasting his time."

"That's a good idea. I'll do that. Jerry, Cynthia, I'm sure you have other things you need to get done."

Jerry nodded.

"Most of our food is freeze-dried rations, but we do have actual food for special occasions. I think landing is a special enough occasion, and we need to repair relations or this whole thing will go south quickly," Cynthia said. "Please be our guests at the new habitat at six."

"Well, I won't turn down free grub, but don't expect me to get along with that man," Tom answered.

"Well, it's a start," she said. "Good luck with your search and please keep me updated.” With that, she and Jerry left.

Alvin gave a cursory search of the areas that a blind man might stumble into, not that he thought that actually happened. He was checking the med bay when Tom called over the intercom, "Abandon your search. Footage shows him leaving while we were on the Prometheus. He seemed to know where he was going."

Alvin leaned over and flipped a switch on a bulkhead. He pulled the intercom mic from its holster. "Ten-four. I hate to say I told you so, but..."

"Shut it," Tom interrupted.

"Yes sir." Alvin snorted. "I'm going to go check on Sandra."

Alvin left the ship and walked to the Prometheus. Something in the sky caught his eye. At first, he dismissed it as a bird. He stopped. There were no birds on Titan. If Sam was to be believed, not that Alvin particularly did, Sam's people were the only remaining animal species on the moon.

Alvin craned his neck, a difficult proposition in the bulky suit. The thing swooped and he saw it for what it was. An enterprising marine had fashioned wings out of parachute cloth and leftover tubing from the habitat assembly. Alvin mentally smacked himself. Why hadn't they thought of that? Titan's thick atmosphere and low gravity made human-powered flight, a dream of humanity for millennia, even after the invention of flying machines with engines. With wings like that, they could have conducted their tunnel search in half the time.

Alvin watched the man circle the habitat a few times and then dove in for a landing. The birdman tumbled to a stop a few feet from Alvin. Okay, maybe the wings weren't the greatest idea after all.

"Whew. That was a rush," he said as Alvin reached out a hand to help him up.

"You okay..." Alvin looked at the nametag. "Clarke? Is your suit ripped?"

"Nah, that was awesome," Clarke replied, dusting himself off. "You want a go?"

The thought turned Alvin a little green. His suit wouldn't handle that crash as well as Clarke's did. "Err, no. I'm okay. I was just going to meet up with my fiancée. She's expecting me," he lied.

"Your loss, dude. It was a total rush," Clarke repeated himself. "Hey, Simmons. It's your turn on the wings. They're awesome." There was a pause. "Simmons?"

"No, I'm cool. I'm too busy chatting up this hottie from the Atlas. See if Jacobs wants a turn." Simmons's voice crackled over the radio, noise from construction filling the background.

"That's my fiancée, you're talking about," Alvin shouted. He took off for the Prometheus habitat.

"Sounds like your girl isn't expecting you after all. Sure you don't want a turn?" Clarke laughed.

The hab interior was already pressurized and Alvin waited for the airlock to cycle. He yanked off his helmet as soon as he could and searched for Sandra and this Simmons.

Alvin spotted them in the main space that would serve as a cafeteria and reception hall. Simmons was tall, even taller than Alvin's five foot nine frame. Muscles rippled under his dark skin. As much time as this guy had to spend working out to maintain those muscles, especially in the low, Titan gravity, Alvin was surprised he had enough time to do anything productive, like steal girlfriends.

Sandra laughed at something and Simmons put his hand on her shoulder. Alvin saw red. It didn't matter that Simmons was twice his size and could probably take him with one arm tied behind his back. Alvin charged.

"You stay away from my fiancée," he roared. He swung a punch but Simmons blocked it. Alvin tried a left uppercut to the kidney, and Simmons lowered his arms to block.

Just the opening he was looking for. At least there was one thing he knew he was better at then Simmons. Sandra's brothers had put Alvin through his paces in the ring. Alvin landed a right hook to his nose.

Simmons' head turned from the force of the swing and blood flowed down onto his shirt. He brought his shirt up to blot the blood. "What the hell, man?" He lunged at Alvin.

They were no longer boxing. This was pure scrapping and Simmons had him beat by a long shot. He kept his head protected as best he could, but the knee to his ribs knocked the wind out of him and he fell.

“The alien captive has escaped.” Johns’ voice called through the intercom and echoed about the metal structures. “We are on alert level two. Everyone not on habitat construction, report to Prometheus for briefing on the search.”

Simmons hesitated and another Marine pulled him up. Alvin struggled to his feet. "You just leave her alone and we'll be alright," he wheezed.

"We ain't never going to be alright after you sucker punched me like that. I ever catch you alone on Earth and you a dead man." Simmons left for the medical station.

Alvin turned to look at Sandra. She stood in the same spot as when Alvin first saw her. She saw him watching her. His wide eyes squinted and her open mouth tightened into a thin line. "What was that about? I can't talk shop with the only person knowledgeable in my field for a billion miles?"

"He was flirting with you," he yelled.

Her features hardened further. "And you don't trust me to reject him?" She stepped between two of the marines holding Alvin back. They parted to let her in but didn't seem to be in any hurry to miss the show.

"I didn't trust him," he pleaded.

"No, you didn't trust me," she told him. She got inches from his face. "Get one thing straight. I. am. not. your property. I am my own woman and can talk to whomever I please."

Alvin looked down. She pushed his head back up to meet her eyes. "I hear Sam is gone. Good, you can take his room tonight." She turned and walked away.

Alvin watched her go. Why couldn't she realize he had done it to protect her? The other marines let him go. Apparently, the show was over. Alvin wondered where he should go now.

Clarke came up to him. He had taken off his ground suit and was wearing fatigue pants printed in the muted oranges of the moon and an olive drab t-shirt. "Dude, you attacked Simmons? Not cool. Dude's a big softy. Tough on the outside, soft and gooey on the inside. Wouldn't hurt a fly unless provoked."

"Why is everyone acting like I'm the bad guy? He's the one that was hitting on my fiancée," Alvin complained.

"Not cool, dude. Not cool. Anyway, your Captain wants you back to the Atlas. Just be glad you aren't one of us. NASA ain't going to do shit compared to what our punishment would have been."

Tom was waiting for Alvin when he took off his helmet inside the Atlas. "What were you thinking? Were you even thinking? That's got to be the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

Alvin held up a hand. "I know, I know. It was a stupid thing to do. But I couldn't help myself."

Tom shook his head. "There's got to be something about this moon, driving us all crazy. Me and Lana off fighting all the time. Now you getting into fights. Over what? You got to know that Sandra would never cheat on you."

"It must be all the stress. This mission hasn't exactly gone as planned," Alvin said.

"There is that. Now Alvin, what am I going to do with you? As much as I love the fact that you bloodied one of those grunts and wish I had been there to see it, this isn't something that Johns is going to let stand if he doesn't see you getting punished."

Alvin took off the rest of his suit and hung it up. "What are you going to do to me? Lashings in the parade field?"

Tom chuckled. Then he frowned. "Dang it, Alvin. This isn't a joke. I'm going to have to see what Houston says, but for now, I'm going to have to make you stay here during the dinner. You will man the communications room and wait for NASA to make their determination on your punishment."

Alvin sighed. For once, he didn't feel like joking. "That's fine by me. I don't think I'm welcome over there anyway."

Tom put a hand on Alvin's shoulder. "I'm sure this is going to all blow over. It better. It'll be a long month until we leave otherwise."

"I'm going to go take a shower. I have to wash the blood off my hand," Alvin said.

When Alvin finished his shower, Tom was already gone. There is no point for him and Lana to be staying in the ship anymore, so he’s probably packed up and gone already at the habitat. Sandra would be with them. He wasn't sure that she would want to go to the dinner either.

Or maybe she would. She would go talk to Simmons some more. Maybe dance with him. Alvin frowned. He'd tried to protect her but only wound up pushing her away.

He dressed in a fresh jumpsuit and went to the galley to make a pot of coffee. This was going to be a long and boring night. Communication with earth was like the days of email back when you still had to go to a computer to check it. You'd send a message and then just have to wait for a reply. Every other person in the solar system was going to be at that party.

He poured a cup of coffee and picked up his tablet. The chair in the communications room was fairly comfortable and the head a lot of reading to do.

Alvin found that he had missed the solitude of being completely alone. There were no distractions to keep him from finishing the papers he had been asked to review. Exobiology was finally becoming a discipline that people were taking seriously.

He finished his coffee and stood to get a refill. He stretched his back, stiff from being in one position too long. Wait? Did something just move on one of the monitors?

He bent over the desk and stared at the screen showing the area between the Atlas and the Prometheus. There it was again. Something moved. Alvin increased the gain on the camera. The image became grainy but Alvin could make out a human shape.

No, not human. It was Sam. He was back and wearing some kind of respirator and clothing to keep out the cold. Alvin had never seen equipment like Sam possessed. Definitely not earth technology.

Sam took aim with an odd-looking rifle and the screen turned to static. So much for blind.

Alvin's hands flew over the controls of the remaining cameras. Snow filled the screen for each view. He smacked his forehead. Sam hadn't been a refugee from his people. He'd been a spy performing reconnaissance.

Alvin did have one ace up his sleeve. Sam left too early. He didn't know that the Prometheus security feeds had been patched into the Atlas that afternoon. Alvin switched to those. The first view showed the main hall. He found Sandra. She wasn't with Simmons at all but rather talking to Cynthia.

He switched to the outside cameras. Two were dead already. He found Sam as he aimed at a third. It wasn't the one Alvin was using. Without days of spying on the new ship, he would undoubtedly miss a few.

But Alvin saw the pattern in Sam's movements. He was heading for the Prometheus habitat. With a gun. And taking surveillance out so he wouldn't be seen.

Alvin grabbed the microphone so hard he nearly yanked the cord from the radio. "Prometheus, this is Atlas. You are in danger. Do you copy?" Silence. "Prometheus, this is Atlas. Do you copy?"

Alvin's first thought was that Sam had shot out the antenna. But they were so close, the Prometheus would have been able to pick him up without one. Alvin wondered when Sam had been able to sabotage the radio itself but realized he was wasting time. He had to get to the Prometheus and warn the others. Sandra was in trouble.

He climbed down the two levels to the airlock. The helmet was smashed. He checked inside but the suit radio had been torn out. He keyed into the camera feeds from the wrist computer on his suit. Sam was almost to the Prometheus. Alvin had two options. He could rush to the Prometheus, possibly freezing to death if breathing in an atmosphere with almost no oxygen didn't kill him first. The other was to sit and watch as Sam killed Sandra and the others.

He didn't hesitate. He climbed into the suit and attached the ruined helmet. He turned up the heater as far as it would go and opened the oxygen valve wide. His tank would only last a few minutes, but he only needed five. He entered the airlock and waited as it sucked the air out and replaced it with Titan's atmosphere. All of the alarms on his suit blared in his ears. The outer door opened and Alvin made a dash for the Prometheus. He skipped along the smooth ground, not for the first time glad they had raked all of the loose rock away.

Sam was already inside. He punched at the controls to open the airlock. His nose felt numb and breathing was already difficult, his air wanting to rush out the hole in the broken faceplate rather than traveling to his lungs.

The door opened and Alvin hit the button to close the outer door. Cool oxygen filled the chamber and he took several gasping breaths. After the minutes of not enough oxygen, he felt dizzy on normal atmosphere. He wanted to sit down but he couldn't afford to waste any time.

The inner door opened and he staggered into the habitat. Sam didn't know the layout of this habitat, Alvin was sure. NASA had needed a different design to accommodate so many people. It would take Sam a few minutes to find the hall. Alvin had been there only hours before.

Alvin reached the hall; no sign of Sam yet. "Sam," he croaked, his voice barely a whisper. Nobody heard him. Alvin took off the broken helmet and threw it into the room. That got people's attention. They turned towards him but Alvin saw Sam appear at the far entrance. Alvin pointed and said, "Gun." He wasn't sure if they could actually hear him but Simmons turned just as Sam fired.

Tom had apparently heard him as well. He was standing next to Cynthia and Sandra and pushed them down. A burn hole appeared on the back of his suit with charred, black skin showing underneath.

Sandra screamed and Alvin watched Sam point the weapon in her direction. He steadied his aim when a shot rang out. Sam ducked out of the way, as the plastic doorway over his head splintered. Alvin hoped that the Marines had weapons that wouldn't penetrate the outer shell of the habitat.

Alvin looked for the source of the gunshot and found Simmons standing over Sandra and the ambassador with his side arm. Simmons glanced back at Alvin and nodded. Alvin nodded back. The other marines had taken up positions behind whatever they could for shelter and taking shots in Sam's direction.

Sam returned their fire. Neither seemed to be able to advance on the other. Sam had seen Alvin, but he was protected by his own doorway on the far end. He was safe for the moment.

How many shots did that rifle have? It was some sort of energy weapon, but Alvin guessed that its power supply would have to run out eventually. Would that be before or after the humans' ammunition ran out?

Alvin looked down the hallway. The air sizzled over his head and molten plastic showered down. He covered his head with his arms until it was clear.

He had to put a stop to this. He bounced down the corridor until he circled back around to Sam's location.

He saw Sam's back. If Alvin had a gun, he would have shot him in the back like Sam had done to Tom. He looked around but couldn't find any sort of weapon.

Oh well, if he had taken down the huge Simmons earlier, he could do some damage to a man who had been raised on one-sixth gravity.

He rushed at Sam. He bouncing run landed just shy of the alien and he lunged. Alvin's arms flailed as he came up short. Sam turned at the sound. Alvin pushed himself up as Sam brought his weapon to bear.

Alvin jumped again and this time connected. The gun clattered to the ground a few feet away. Sam rolled to reach for it, but Alvin grabbed at his arms.

He heard footsteps and saw half the room rushing at them. A stray thought flitted through his mind. "At least this time, it's not me they are after."

Sam took advantage of his distraction and kicked. Sam's knee connected with Alvin's gut and he doubled over. As he fell, Sam swung his leg up and kicked him right in the face.

Alvin tried to open his eyes, but one was swollen shut. Every inch of his face hurt. He groaned.

"Alvin, you're awake," Sandra shouted. She kissed him but every nerve felt like fire and he cried out. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry," she said. She reached over and hit a button on the wall. "Doctor Jacobs, Alvin is awake. He's in pain."

Alvin was confused. The adrenalin junkie who had been flying on homemade wings and talked like a surfer was the ship's doctor?

"Did you get him," Alvin managed to croak. Even talking hurt.

"No," she said. "He escaped. Tom is dead. So are three of the marines. A few injuries. But you saved us."

"I was only trying to protect you. But I couldn't do that. Simmons saved you."

"Will you stop obsessing over him?" She took his hand and looked him in the eye. "I have no interest in him and he only did what he was trained to do. You risked your life to warn us in a broken suit and then did what none of those soldiers were able to do. You are the hero."

Jacobs entered the medical bay. "Glad you decided to join us, dude." He smiled at Alvin. Alvin tried to return the gesture but winced. Jacobs turned to Sandra. "Could you give us a minute so I can examine our patient?"

"Of course," Sandra said and got up.

"She can stay," Alvin said. "I ain't got anything she hasn't seen." He laughed and shut his eyes as a fresh wave of pain washed over him.

Jacobs checked his vitals and shined a light in his eyes. "You took a pretty good beating and you’re lucky to be alive. Heck, you’re lucky you lived long enough to get your butt kicked by that crazy alien. I saw your helmet. What were you thinking?"

"Only of her," Alvin admitted.

"Well, you’re a crazy dude. Whole place is talking about it. You got our respect, man," Jacobs said. "Anyway, you're going to be stuck here for a couple days and going to be in a fair amount of pain for a week or two after that. I'll give you something for that. I'll check in on you after dinner."

Alvin grunted and Jacobs left. There was a knock on the doorway and Lana stuck her head in. "Alvin, I'm glad you’re alive. Sandra, could you give us a minute?"

Sandra looked at Alvin and he nodded. She stood and kissed him lightly on the top of his head. "I'll be right outside if you need me. Jerry's relieved me of my duties until you're feeling better."

Lana plopped down on the chair that Sandra had been occupying. "Lana, I'm sorry about Tom," Alvin said.

She shook her head. "No, you did the best you could. Better. This is on Sam for tricking us and attacking us. Tom died a hero."

Alvin murmured his agreement. Lana continued. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't doing something like trying to blame yourself for his death. If only we hadn't fought so much on this trip. Last thing I said to him was call him a fool. Now, that's the last thing I'm ever going to have said to him." She started crying.

Alvin reached out to her and touched her hand. "Tom knew you loved him. Last thing he ever said to me was that. We will find Sam and whoever helped him. Tom's death will be avenged."

Lana straightened and wiped away her tears. "Don't do anything stupid. There's been enough killing already. We are a science mission. Let the soldiers do the war making."

Alvin gritted his teeth and sucked in his breath from the pain. "I'll let them try. But I'm not leaving this rock until Sam is dead."

Marsil

Marsil stuck her head inside Salaris's tent. "Wake up. We need to get going. We are close."

Salaris rubbed her eyes. "We only went to sleep a few hours ago. The Saarkaaks really are monsters."

Marsil smiled. "Stim drinks are ready. This tent comes down in ten whether you’re out or not." She left and took the steaming mug that Graaf handed her. She worked the straw through the beverage hole in her respirator and took a sip.

Behind her, Salaris climbed out of her tent. "These humans had better be worth it," she grumbled.

Marcel started to take down the tent while Solaris drank her stim. She was just finishing up when the air crackled above her and at the rock just past their camp grew a large black spot. "Barakaaks," she shouted. "Take cover."

They scrambled behind the rock. Marsil drew her laser rifle and poked her head out. Another shot scorched the rock inches from her head. She ducked back down.

She looked at Salaris. "How are you with a laser rifle?"

"I've never used one before." Salaris shook her head. "I was going to be a priestess. I wasn't a Lun."

Marcel's features hardened. Solaris seemed to realize what she said. "That's not how I meant it."

Marcel bit her lip and then breathed out. "I know. But we need to draw his fire and Graaf couldn't hit this rock standing next to it."

"Hey," Graaf complained. "I'm not that bad."

"Well we need a plan. We can't stay here forever." She peeked over the rock another shot blasted their cover.

"Come out to all of you," their attacker said. "Come out so I can tell you all. I'm going to kill every last Saarkaak for what you did to my fiancé."

Confusion washed over Solaris's face. She stood up. "Donoon, is that you? It's me."

Marcel grabbed her arm and pulled her down. "What are you thinking? He will kill you."

The shooting stopped. "Solaris, you're alive? I'm not too late to save you from these fiends?"

Solaris pulled her arm free from Marcel and stood. "Donoon, it is you. It's been so long. I'm in no danger, these are my friends." She ran to Donoon.

Marcel looked at Graaf who simply shrugged his shoulders. They stood and watched the two lovers embrace.

Donoon spotted them and pulled Solaris behind him. "Get back my love. I'll protect you from them." He raised his rifle.

Solaris grabbed the rifle and pulled it down. "No, these are my friends. They saved me. Who told you that the Saarkaaks had me?"

Marcel and Graaf slowly approached. They held their hands out to show Donoon that they wouldn't attack.

"When I reported to Vaamick, I wanted to see you. But you are gone. He told me that you had been captured and were mutilating your body."

"He lied to you. He did those things to me." Salaris pulled up her sleeve and showed him the scars. "Kaarg did this to me. On Vaamick's orders."

"I can't believe it." Donoon shook his head. "No wait, I can. Love and family mean nothing to him. But why?"

Solaris told him about the human ship and Vaamick's plan. How she had disagreed and he imprisoned and tortured her for it.

"We have to get to the humans and warn them before it’s too late," Salaris told him. "Do you know where their camp is?"

He shook his head. "I do. But it is already too late. Vaamick used me. I shot their leader last night. I didn't want to, but Vaamick said the Saarkaaks had captured you and the only way to defeat them was by taking the humans' technology."

"So that's it, then?" Marsil asked. "We've trekked all this way to find that we're too late?" Her shoulders slumped.

"I'm afraid so. Vaamick's army is already marching for them."

"Then we aren't too late," Salaris insisted. "We can still warn them."

"The humans won't stand a chance against Vaamick," Donoon said. "Oh, Salaris. You don't know about the weapons that Vaamick has created during this war. The humans can do little more than throw little metal rocks."

"What about our forces?" Graaf asked. "Could they draw out the Barakaak army?"

"But we don't have a radio," Marsil reminded him. "The battle would be over by the time we got word out to Jeef. If he even believed us."

Graaf looked at Donoon. "Do you have a radio?"

"Yes, I do. That's how I know that our army has already set to march. But it's only tuned to Barakaak frequencies. And I don't know the Saarkaak encryption codes."

"I know them," Marsil said.

"Okay." Donoon nodded. "But what about the frequency?"

"Leave that to me," Graaf said. "We'll just need to unpack one of these tents."

Marsil paced outside. He had to be done by now. She strode over to the tent they shared and opened the flap. "How is it going? Done yet?"

"The answer is the same it was a few minutes ago." He looked up from the parts spread out on the floor before him. "I'm working as fast as I can. I don't get faster when you interrupt me."

"I know, I know. But we are running out of time." Her eyes pleaded with him. "We are between the Barakaaks and their target. There are only four of us. We don't stand a chance if they catch us out here."

"I really am going as fast as I can," he said. He arched his back. "When we left, I wasn't expecting to be doing electronics hacking on the surface. If we were at my lab, I'd be done already. But now I'm working with tools that weren't really meant for the job they are doing."

Marsil sighed. "Okay. Do your best. I guess I'll wait outside."

She left the tent and resumed her pacing. She glanced at Salaris's tent. She and Donoon had been in there getting reacquainted. Marsil shook her head. According to Salaris, they had been apart for almost half of her life. How did they even know if they still loved each other? They both had to have changed so much in that time. Marsil still had trouble being in crowds, but she wasn't the shy young woman she had been when General Keer had sent her to the science lab to get some results from Graaf's predecessor. She had changed. Surely, Salaris had too.

And how could Salaris still love him after what he had admitted? She had objected immediately to Vaamick's plan. Tortured and nearly died because of it. Yet Donoon spent years implementing it.

Marsil shook her head again. There had to be more than what he was saying. He wanted to kill Vaamick. Turn them all over was more like it. Well, she would beat him at that game. They were still going to the human settlement once Graaf got the radio working. Instead of letting him hide while she tried to communicate with them, she would turn him in. He killed their people and deserved their justice.

That would make a great opening to forming an alliance with a civilization that obviously had resources that their moon did not.

Graaf came out. "It's done." He handed the device to her. She looked it over. "I know it doesn't look pretty, but it will work. Although I imagine that Jeef will be rather surprised when you start speaking out of his personal communicator."

She chuckled. "Well, at least he won't have the option of not taking the call." She walked over to Salaris's tent and knocked on a support pole near their door. "You two get out here. The radio is ready and I'm going to need you for this."

She waited as they exited. Donoon looked angry. Salaris followed him out, tears streaked her face.

"What's wrong with you two?" Marsil asked, but she already knew.

"She doesn't get it," Donoon said. "I'm trying to keep her safe. All I've ever done is try to keep her safe. But she's not willing to admit to what needs to be done." He reached out and stroked Salaris's cheek.

She flinched away from it. "You are a good man, Donoon. You don't have to do this."

Marsil pulled the younger woman towards her. "We will figure something out." She glared at Donoon while Salaris was distracted.

Donoon opened his mouth, but Salaris interrupted him. "The radio is ready. None of us are exactly on good terms with Jeef anymore, so we will need to give him something. Donoon, you will have to give up some info on the Barakaak troop movements as a peace offering."

"What? I won't do that," he said. He clenched his fists. Marsil glared at him and put her hand on her stun baton. He exhaled. "I can't do that. Those are my brothers. I won't give information that will get them killed."

"What did you think we were doing? We are trying to get the Saarkaak army to come out here to stop them from killing the humans. People are going to die. The question is only who?"

He crossed his arms. "I won't do it."

Salaris took a step forward. "Please, Donoon. More people will die if you don't."

"People will die if I do," Donoon pleaded with her. "Lomis is probably marching on the humans right now. Do you want her to be killed?"

Salaris paled. "I hadn't thought about that." She turned towards Marsil. "Is there any other way we can do this? Lomis is my friends. She was one of the people who helped me escape."

Marsil shook her head. "The only way to distract the Barakaaks from attacking the humans is for the Saarkaaks to attack. Even if I found another way to get Jeef to act, that would still happen. As a general, you have to make tough decisions about who is going to die. I've sent men to their death before."

"Yes, but you've sent your men to their death. Now you are ordering me to send mine to be killed by yours." Donoon shouted. He went for Marsil's weapon.

Years of fighting and practice honed her reflexes to react in a split second. She batted his arm away as she pulled out the weapon herself and pushed him down with it. "Now, you will do as I say," she said through clenched teeth.

"Marsil, no," Salaris cried. She reached out for Marsil's weapon but Marsil held her off with her other arm.

"I've spent my entire life fighting Barakaaks while my people have died on this dying moon. You risked your life because your faith wouldn't allow Vaamick to pervert it. Innocents are at risk. Innocents who have the recourses to help us if only we can end the fighting. I'm not going to let any of you stop me from saving our people." Her eyes went back and forth between Donoon on the ground and Salaris at the end of her arm, daring either of them to defy her.

Graaf cleared his throat. "What if nobody has to die?"

"What?" Marsil turned. She let go of Salaris who collapsed at the sudden shift. She kept her knee on Donoon's chest.

Salaris dusted herself off as she shot Marsil an angry look.

"We have non-lethal weapons. We could use them. We used to be a peaceful race, if you recall." Graaf explained.

"They won't be using non-lethal weapons on us," Marsil countered.

"Maybe not, but the only way to stop the violence is for somebody to put their foot down." He shook his head and reached out for Marsil's weapon. "I'm putting my foot down.”

She looked at him. He continued to hold his hand out, flexing his fingers in a "hand it over" gesture.

Marsil dropped her head. She handed the stunner to him. He put it in his pocket and pulled her up off Donoon.

Graaf held out his other hand to Donoon, but he refused it. "I've known Jeef a long time. I think he will agree to non-lethal weapons if we do give him one thing. One thing that he wants very much."

"What is that?" Donoon asked suspiciously. "I told you, I'm not going to put my friends in harm's way."

"How about your uncle?" Graaf smiled a half smile.

"I wanted to kill him," Donoon said. He pursed his lips.

"Get in line. Half of Bara wants to," Marsil said.

Donoon opened his mouth but Graaf interrupted him. "As tactlessly as Marsil said it, she has a point. You aren't the only one he's wronged and there would be more than a few volunteers to take care of it, given the chance. Is getting your vengeance worth risking your friends' lives in a battle?"

Donoon was silent. Salaris touched his arm. "It makes sense. We can protect Lomis and the others, protect the humans, and end this war. Isn't that a path worth taking?"

"Fine," he said. "If Jeef will agree to use stun weapons against the Barakaak soldiers, I will lead him right to the human's ship."

Graaf nodded. He turned to Marsil. "Remember, we all have the same goals here. Antagonizing our few allies will only achieve fewer allies.”

Marsil shook her head. "I still don't know about this plan."

"At this point, it is the only plan we've got." Graaf held her hands as he stared into her eyes. "If we don't act, Vaamick wins. But those blindly following him aren't our enemy, just as these two aren't our enemy. Jeef wants Vaamick gone; he'll agree to it." He gave her a brief kiss before pulling away.

"Okay. Well, let's give my dad a call, shall we?"

Donoon's eyes grew large. Marsil chuckled inwardly. Salaris hadn't dropped that bombshell on him. "You aren't the only person with a complicated family," she told him and winked.

She pulled the device up to her face and pressed the talk button. "Pick up your communicator. We need to talk."

There was a pause and then, "Marsil. How are you doing this?"

"Graaf rigged up a Barakaak radio. But that doesn't matter, we need to talk," Marsil said.

"No, we don't. You've gone too far this time. Where ever you are, you should stay away," Jeef warned her. "I won't be able to protect you if you come back to Saar. You almost killed K--. Wait, Barakaak radio. Are you alright?"

"Yes, we are. Salaris is with us and we found her fiancée, Donoon. He has information about Vaamick that you will want to listen to," she said. She handed the radio to him.

"Hello?" Donoon said. "I'm not sure how to address the person who was my mortal enemy until a few minutes ago."

"You will address me as, your majesty. I am your king," Jeef replied.

"You aren't my king. You killed my grandmother." He gripped the radio tighter, threatening to crush the exposed electronics.

"Careful," Graaf warned. He put his hand up. Donoon took a breath and relaxed his grip.

"Yes," Jeef's voice cracked. "Salaris told me when Marsil brought her to me. I am sorry for that. Lis was friends with my wife. I never meant for her to get involved in my and Vaamick's feud." Jeef paused. Donoon looked lost. Not every day that your enemy apologizes to you, Marsil mused.

Jeef continued. "You said you have information on Vaamick. I'm guessing he went too far just like I did."

Donoon nodded. He seemed to realize his mistake and looked down. "Yes. Marsil was right. Vaamick doesn't care about Earth. He just wants its resources to be able to build the weapons he's had designed to kill you and anyone who stands in his way. Make no mistake, if the humans fall, so do you."

"Okay," Jeef answered. "What am I supposed to do? Our armies have been fighting for close to two Saturn-years."

"No, not our armies. I'll tell you the positions of the Barakaak troops but only if you promise to use stunners," Donoon said.

"Stunners? The Barakaaks won't be firing back at my people with stunners. Why would I agree to that?" Anger started creeping into his voice.

"Because in return, I will give you the exact position of Vaamick. Both sides have made mistakes in this war, but I'm going to give you the chance to end it and give you the revenge you seek."

Jeef didn't respond. Marsil looked at Donoon. "You didn't break it, did you?"

"No, I didn't break it," he answered. "Jeef must have decided he wasn't going to help."

The radio broke in. "This ends tonight.”

Alvin

"Mr. Smith. You can't really think that I would believe that the enemy lived among you for two months and you knew so little about him." Johns stood over Alvin's bed.

"Believe whatever you like, Major. I thought there was something off about him but believed me. He didn't want to talk about his past and we didn't push." Alvin wished it was time for his pain medication. All of this talking was making his face hurt, although the swelling had gone down a bit since yesterday and Sandra told him he didn't look quite so horribly disfigured any more.

Johns shook his head. "The rest of your crew is sloppy, but I checked your ship's logs. You snuck in to see the enemy and the next day you found the entrance to their city on a hunch. You were out of radio contact for twenty minutes the day you found it. That is all supposed to be a coincidence?"

"Are you insinuating that I'm a traitor to my own species?" Alvin tried to push himself up.

Johns pushed him back to the bed. The major leaned in close. "I'm insinuating nothing. I'm accusing you of being a traitor to your species."

Alvin struggled against the man who was now the de facto head of their mission. "You’re crazy. I'm on your side. If I was some alien sympathizer, why would I have warned you about the attack and almost get my skull crushed in the process?"

"You would have had to make it look real," Johns answered.

"You're crazy. If you weren't so busy trying to get me to admit to helping Sam, maybe you would have found him by now," Alvin said.

"I'll try again later. Maybe you will be more receptive. Until then, consider yourself in the custody of the U.S. Marines.

Johns turned to leave.

"What?" Alvin blinked. "You're just going to lock me up while you get your men killed facing an enemy you barely know anything about."

The Major turned back around. "We wouldn't be so blind if you would just cooperate," he thundered.

"I am cooperating. I've told you everything I can. What about Sandra and Lana? What are you going to do to them?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Smith. They will be safe. All civilian crew will be locked down in the Ambassador's suite. It's the safest place on this moon."

Alvin exhaled. "And where are you taking me?"

"You will be with them," Johns explained. "I'll need my doctor with me." He pulled out his radio. "Clarke, meet me in Medical. It's time to transfer your patient to Dr. O'Brien's care."

Clarke entered and the two marines conferred for a moment before the Major left. The doctor reviewed Alvin's charts and said, "You will need a few days to heal, dude, but otherwise your fine. I don't have any problem releasing you from care, since you'll be in such close quarters with a doctor."

"You know she's a biologist right? Not a medical doctor like you." Alvin said.

"Well, you don't really need a doctor, just a nurse. She already played that role for your alien," Clarke replied.

"So that's it. You think this is a good idea? You're just going to go along and let that Major get you killed?"

Clarke stayed tight-lipped. Instead of answering, he pulled out a folding wheel chair. "Come on, I'll take you to the others."

Clarke wheeled Alvin to the ambassador's suite where they met Simmons and one of the goons who had followed Johns onto the Atlas when this mess had started. Alvin couldn't remember the name and had to read the tag on the uniform. Franklin. Alvin wondered if he could take him. It was doubtful. Alvin suspected the only reason he dropped Simmons was because of the element of surprise. He couldn't take all three of them.

"Major Johns has assigned Simmons and Franklin to guard the hab in case the aliens give us the ol' sliperoni and try to attack you again. These guys won't let any baddies get in," Clarke told him.

"More like they are here to keep us from getting out where we might actually do some good," Alvin replied.

Clarke just shrugged and nodded to Simmons. Simmons gave Alvin an odd look like he couldn't decide to let him in or just finish what Sam had started. He turned and opened the door.

"Well, I better get going. Can't wait to frag me some aliens." Clarke smiled and left. Alvin blinked. Had the man just missed the entire confrontation? Did he even care?

He sighed and wheeled himself into the room. As soon as he had passed the threshold, the door closed behind him. He heard the lock click.

Sandra rushed over to his side and hugged him as delicately as she could. "Are you okay, Alvin? What's going on?"

"I'm fine. I need some more of that pain medication, but otherwise I'll live. It looks like we are prisoners until this thing is over. But they haven't seen that tunnel. There are a million places to get ambushed. I think the only reason I made it out okay was because they wanted me to."

Sandra pushed his wheelchair over to the center of the room where Lana and the civilians from the Prometheus where waiting.

Alvin continued his rant. "Major Johns didn't want to hear that. He just wanted intelligence I didn't have. And now they've made us all prisoner. They've mutinied, I tell you."

"Unfortunately, Major Johns is quite within his rights," Cynthia spoke up. "In the event of an attack on an embassy, the marines have complete control until the threat has passed. I don't agree with him, but he is in control right now."

"Well, he's going to get his men killed."

"What are you going to do," Jerry asked him.

"I don't know. I don't want more people to die needlessly, but what am I supposed to do? I'm not in charge. That's you guys. I'm just a botanist. One who is badly in need of some more pain meds and a nap. It can be somebody else's turn to save the world." Alvin slumped in the wheelchair. "Now, Lana, can I please have some more oxy. I probably shouldn't be doing this much talking with my face."

Lana looked like she was going to say something but looked down. "Okay, let's get you your pill. I'm pretty sure Clarke left them over here somewhere.

Alvin pushed himself over to where a row of cots had been lined up near a wall. There were more cots on this side of the room than there were through the open doorway leading into Cynthia's bedroom. Alvin guessed that meant that the men would be bunking over here. He sat down on a cot and Lana brought him his medication. She started to talk, but Alvin just held out his hand. He was done being the hero. He hurt and was hurting. He wanted it all to just go away.

Lana sighed and gave him the pill. He swallowed it dry and lied down. He looked over at Sandra who was looking at him with a worried expression but blew him a kiss. He went to sleep.

Alvin awoke to arguing. "They killed Tom. Every one of them deserves to die," Lana said as she folded her arms.

"Killing only begets more killing. We should leave until we can find a peaceful solution," Cynthia responded.

"I'm not getting shot at again. I'm leaving this rock with or without you," Jerry added to the mix.

"Come on, Captain. You can't be serious. You want to run away?" That must have been one of the Prometheus crew.

"Alvin almost got killed. I just want to get him home where he will be safe," Sandra said. She looked over to where he was lying and noticed he was awake. "Alvin, did we wake you?"

"No, I don't think so. Just needed some rest was all. What's going on?"

"We seem to be at an impasse," Cynthia told him. "We have been debating our options and have a tie. I'm afraid you will need to be the deciding vote."

"I told you, I'm not in charge. You, you, and you," he said, pointing at Cynthia, Jerry, and Lana in turn, "are the leaders. I'm just a botanist who wanted to pick some flowers on another planet."

"This is too important a decision to be made by fiat," Cynthia answered. We are way off script here, and even NASA seems to be unsure of what to do. We have to put it to a vote."

Simmons opened the door and the conversation halted. He pushed a tray with food into the room. "You guys might want to know that we can hear you perfectly outside. You aren't leaving and you aren't helping. You are staying put until the Major deems it safe."

"And what if the Major gets himself killed?" Alvin asked.

Simmons glared at him but answered him. "If that happens, then you can resume your argument. I don't agree with the Major, but I'm not going to disobey orders. And Franklin out there, he really isn't going to disobey orders."

He turned to leave but Alvin spoke up. "Corporal, I would like to apologize for my actions the other day. They were uncalled for."

Simmons stopped and turned back around. "That was a hell of a punch. Not many can get the drop on me. Never expected it from a scrawny, white dude. Look, I'm sorry too. I knew Sandra was with you. Just had to make it look good for the guys. You understand, right?"

Alvin nodded, and held out his hand. Simmons shook it. "Where'd you learn how to fight like that anyway?"

Simmons radio chirped. "I've sighted a group of aliens on camera two," Franklin said.

"Shoot them," Lana shouted. She grabbed for the radio on his belt. Simmons stopped her and held her at bay. He plucked the radio and responded, "Open the door, I'm coming out."

"Wait, Corporal," Cynthia said. "What are they doing? Are they armed or otherwise doing something that would require a military solution?"

"Franklin, the ambassador wants to know if they are armed," Simmons relayed over the radio.

"Tough to tell. Not showing, but they are waving a white flag," Franklin answered.

"They are aliens," Lana yelled. "That could mean anything. Maybe they are signaling their intent to attack. Just shoot them."

Alvin shook his head. "No, Sam always seemed to know a little bit more than he should have about our ways. I think they've been spying on us a long time. They know exactly what a white flag means. The question should really be, are they trying to trick us again?"

"Corporal, if they are here under a flag of truce, we must abide by that," Cynthia said. “The only way to peace is to attempt to be peaceful."

"Those aren't our orders, ma'am," Simmons responded. "No one in or out unless the Major okay's it." He lifted the radio back to his mouth. "Have you been able to reach Major Johns?"

The door opened and Franklin stuck his head in. "Negative. They must be out of range. Those guys are going to be on our door any minute now. What we going to do?"

Cynthia tried again. "Please, corporal. I know what your orders are, but they failed to account for this scenario. Under attack, the military may have command, but for a diplomatic attempt, I am in charge."

Simmons mulled it over and sighed. "Okay, but if we are going to do this, we need to do this right. You can communicate, but only from behind a barricade."

"Your security precautions are fine, Mr. Simmons. Thank you," Cynthia said.

Alvin and the others followed Cynthia out of her suite. Franklin and Simmons had stacked tables on their side in the area just off the airlock. Alvin could see the scorch marks from the previous attack. If they held up against one attack, they should hold up against another seemed to be the reasoning of the two marines.

The microphone for the exterior speaker sat next to the tables. "Well, here goes nothing," she said. She picked up the mic and spoke in Titan to their visitors. "I am here for humans. If you are peace, no weapons and be search. No harm if you don't attack."

Alvin glanced at Lana. She shrugged. He hadn't kept up with his language studies as well as he could, but Cynthia's speech was awful.

They watched the airlock monitor from behind their barricade. The three aliens seemed to be arguing amongst themselves, no doubt debating whether to comply.

The male of the group set some sort of baton on the ground. The younger woman dropped another and a riffle similar to the one that Sam had used in his attack.

The older woman stared at them with her arms crossed. The man said something and she dropped her head. She put down the rifle slung over her shoulder, two batons, and a few more weapons that Alvin couldn't identify.

Franklin and Simmons left the airlock. Simmons stayed back and aimed his rifle at the aliens. Franklin trotted up to them and patted them down for weapons. Satisfied, he led them back to the airlock. Simmons joined them and they came inside.

The marines removed their helmets. The younger woman lifted her mask and took a tentative breath. Content that the humans' air wouldn't kill her, she removed her mask. The other two followed suit.

The older woman extended her arm, staring at it as her hand moved away from her body as if unsure of the motion. In Titan, she said, "I am Marsil and these are my companions Graaf and Salaris. I am here to warn you of a great threat."

Cynthia took the extended hand and shook it. "I am Cynthia. Welcome to Prometheus." She said the last word in English.

Marsil looked around the habitat and repeated the word slowly. "Pro-me-thus."

Cynthia smiled. "Why don't we sit and talk." She waved her arm towards the main hall.

The marines had started the cleanup, but there was still blood in places and various broken pieces. Most of the tables were overturned, but there was one near the western edge that was still upright. Cynthia pointed to it and took a seat in the middle.

The others sat. "Do humans require these spaces to be so warm? “Marsil asked.

"We can tolerate cooler temperatures. Would you like us to turn down the heat?" Cynthia answered.

"Please," the younger woman, Salaris, she had been called, “It is warmer hear than even the temple.”

Franklin rushed off to disable the heater. It would get cold here soon enough, but this would get them started.

"Why here you?" Cynthia asked in her halting Titan.

Marsil laughed. "Your Baran is terrible." She said something else, but it was too fast for them to understand.

Lana turned to Cynthia. "May I try? I was studied Sam's language long before you were assigned to Titan."

"Please, go ahead. My ego isn't so large that I won't take help," she responded.

"Please talk slowly, we don't know language well," Lana told the aliens.

Marsil snorted. Apparently, she didn't think much more of Lana's language skills than she had Cynthia's.

Marsil spoke slowly, "I will use small words like talking to children. You are not safe. There will be an attack."

"We know, one of your people tricked us and attacked two days ago," Cynthia answered through Lana.

"No, no. An army. And not my people. Our enemy," Marsil answered.

Franklin opened the door. "There is another one approaching."

"Donoon," Salaris cried out. Marsil half stood.

"Is this one of your people?" Cynthia asked.

"Yes, but he was going to stay behind because, well, it's complicated," Graaf spoke for the first time.

The ambassador turned to the Marine at the door. "Corporal Franklin, please invite him in. All you come in peace are welcome."

"I am not sure that is good idea," Marsil said.

"Nonsense," Cynthia replied. "We will take a break while we wait for him."

"But time is short," Marsil said.

"There isn't much we can do in the next few minutes," Cynthia shook her head.

The sat in silence while they waited for Franklin came back. Alvin pushed his chair back and the others stiffened when Sam came in behind him. His arms were bound together and one eye was swollen shut.

"What did you do to him," Salaris shouted and ran to him.

"Stay back," Franklin yelled in English and aimed his sidearm at her.

"You promised." Marsil yelled. Graaf pulled at her arm. She seethed at Franklin and her eyes roamed the room, probably looking for something to use as a weapon.

"I did," Cynthia answered in English. She walked over to the Marine corporal. "I gave my word to these people. You will put that weapon away."

Franklin kept the pistol aimed at its target. "This is the one that attacked two days ago. He killed Lee, Gregson, and Turner."

"And Tom," Lana added. "Why is that thing still breathing?" She lunged at Sam. Franklin swung the gun in her direction.

Cynthia put her hand on Lana's shoulder. "Violence will not bring Tom back." She looked Franklin in the eye. In a low and firm voice, she told him, "Put that away now." He looked uncertain and slowly put it back in its holster. "Did he attack you?"

"No, ma'am. He appeared to be surrendering," Franklin responded.

"So why did you beat him?" Cynthia asked.

"This is the one who attacked two days ago. He killed Lee, Gregson, and Turner," he repeated.

"Corporal, you are relieved of your duties. Your conduct will be reported to Captain Johns when he returns." She reached for the intercom microphone. "Corporal Simmons, please come here and relieve Corporal Franklin and see him to his quarters."

Simmons entered the room, "What's happen-- oh, holy mother." He stared at Franklin and Sam. "What happened?" He repeated in a lower voice.

"Why did you come back?" Cynthia asked.

Lana started to translate, but Sam held up his hand. "I speak English much better than any of you speak our language. My name is Donoon, and I came back to surrender. I was misled by my leader. I cannot help the man that tortured Salaris to hurt others."

Marsil and Salaris started talking at once. The two voices were much too fast for any of the humans to understand. Alvin caught bits and pieces. Marsil said something about it not being part of the plan, but Donoon countered that it was his. She asked Salaris if she knew.

Salaris got quiet and nodded. "Donoon, the Saarkaaks would have protected you."

Sam - no, Donoon, Alvin corrected himself, said, "They would have executed me. If the humans kill me, at least if will be for my actions instead of for simply being a Barakaak. I know you don't like it but it is done."

The other aliens didn't seem to have an answer for that. Donoon turned back to the humans and spoke in English. "My uncle is a man is the leader of our people. He sent me to spy on you and to take out your leadership ahead of our army attacking you for your ship. From there, we were going to invade the Earth by reducing your population with the plague that killed our people a generation before. When Salaris found out, she spoke against him and he had her tortured and then lied to me about it. I've overlooked much of what he has done because I believed he was trying to protect our people from our enemies, but these two," pointing at Marsil and Graaf," have shown me that my enemy cares more about me than my own family."

Cynthia nodded. "That is a lot to take in. You say that your uncle is heading this way. How much time do we have? We have our own soldiers heading towards your city."

"They will be ambushed and killed," Donoon replied. Vaamick is waiting for them. He knew they would seek revenge for my attack. And then the army will be here tomorrow to kill the rest of you. The Saarkaaks can stall them, but cannot stop them without help. But I have a plan."

"We will hear this plan. But we need to get our people out there to safety. Is there any way to get to them in time?" Cynthia asked.

Donoon shook his head. "Not unless you can fly."

Alvin's head snapped up. "Well, it just so happens that it might be possible."

Human and alien alike followed Alvin to the cargo locker by the airlock. He opened a trunk and riffled through it until he found what he was looking for. He started to unroll the canvas.

"You crazy, SOB," Simmons told him. "That just might work. But never with your spacesuit. Too much weight. Use Lee's groundsuit. He won't need it anymore." He bit his lip and looked down.

Alvin looked down as well. Wearing the dead man's clothing didn't seem right to him somehow. But if Simmons thought the spacesuit would be too heavy, he wouldn't question it. He walked down the aisle to Lee's locker and pulled the garment out.

Simmons showed him how to put it on and how to attach the various cords and valves needed to keep him alive outside. He tied the PVC tubing to his arms and legs and bundled up the canvas in his arms to squeeze through the airlock. Before putting on Lee's helmet, he kissed Sandra. "Wish me luck."

"Please don't do this," she pleaded. "It's too dangerous. Why can't somebody else do it?"

"Because I'm the only one who has even seen it done," Alvin told her. "And I'm probably the only one here with enough muscle but not too much mass. Only I can do this."

"Well, be safe," she cried.

"I will." He put on the helmet and the airlock door closed. The suit felt different from his own as the pressure changed. The outer door opened and he stepped outside.

He let the canvas hang from his arms. "Time to fly." He took a running start towards a large flat rock near the edge of the camp. As he stepped on the rock, he pushed himself as high as he could go. He spread his arms and the thick Titan air filled out the canvas.

He caught an air current and was thrown back and up. Alvin leaned his body forward and the breeze no longer pushed him in the wrong direction but he started to sink. He flapped his arms, regaining the lost altitude and moving forward.

Alvin recalled being a child and imagining that he could fly if he only jumped the right way and flapped his arms hard enough. Now that childhood dream was coming true. He was flying.

The heads-up display in the helmet showed him the direction. Twenty miles separated him and the marines. He banked to his left and flew in their direction.

Clarke had been right; the flight exhilarated Alvin. He had to force himself to stay on course and not attempt all the tricks he imagined himself doing. He was making good time, but Alvin noticed a problem. The oxygen gauge was dropping faster than the distance he needed to travel. He watched the needle drop into the red. A mile away, the alarm started blaring.

He had to keep going, lives were at stake. He spotted the Marines at the horizon and pushed forward. His lungs burned. The oxygen was gone. How long could he hold his breath? Alvin had made it to two minutes once in the pool, but he hadn't been performing a marathon at the time.

He aimed in their direction and hoped they would spot him if he didn't make it. He heard a gunshot and a hole appeared in his left wing. The air rushed through it and the hole started widening. He lost altitude. At least he had confirmation that they saw him.

Alvin tumbled into a dune and blacked out. When he woke up, he was still in his suit with a new oxygen canister attached.

"That's got to be the stupidest thing I've ever seen anyone try," Johns said. Alvin looked to his right and saw the Major standing over him. "There had better be a reason why you stole a dead man's gear and risk your life to get to us. And if I find out that you were trying to warn the enemy, I will take your helmet off right here."

"Oh, for the last time, I'm not working with the aliens." He pounded the sand next to him with his fist and got to his feet. "I'm trying to warn you. They know you are here." Alvin recounted the events leading up to his flight.

Johns didn't say anything for a minute. Then he called, "Fitz. Go scout the next dune. Go the long way and tell me if you can verify Mr. Smith's story."

A voice Alvin didn't recognize confirmed the order and left the camp. Alvin glared at Johns. The man seemed intent to distrust Alvin's every word and take risks just to spite him. For his part, the Major ignored him and reviewed something on a ruggedized tablet.

Fitz returned. "It's true, Major. The enemy has troops scattered over the next ridge. At least two hundred. There's a choke point ahead and we would've been sitting ducks."

"Roger that, Fitz. Good work." Johns turned back to Alvin. "You just saved a lot of lives. Thank you. I'll sound the retreat and hopefully we don't alert the enemy. You say there are allies coming?"

Alvin nodded. He guessed that was as close as he was going to get to an apology for the way Johns had been treating him since the Prometheus landed. "But they won't be here until tomorrow. There's a plan to assassinate their leader and hopefully stop this before we have casualties. I need to get those wings repaired and get back so I can fill my role in it."

Johns held out his hand to Alvin. "Well, make sure you take enough oxygen this time, will you?"

Marsil

Marsil didn't like the plan. Everything about it made her nervous. She'd had little input into its design. Even though she had risked her life and thrown away her career to warn the humans, once Donoon showed up, he stole the show and conducted business in human. No, make that English. She shook her head at the thought. She knew Earth was bigger than Bara, but it boggled her mind that the humans' world had so many languages. English wasn't even the most spoken.

Donoon said that he wanted to make amends by helping the humans and they had jumped at the chance to use their own language. He translated for her, but how did she know that he was translating faithfully. He had his own agenda. Of that, she was sure.

So now, she and Alvin were tied up and following him to meet with Vaamick. She couldn't believe that Vaamick fell for "They have information that could be of use." If one of her soldiers had told her that they had a prisoner with information, she would have directed them to get the information and get rid of the prisoner. It seemed harsh, but they didn't have the resources to feed idle hands these days.

Marsil fidgeted under her bindings. She had to take Alvin's word that she would be able to get out of them easily at the right time. He'd shown her the fake knot they would use and how easy it was to slip out of. He'd called it the Wookie Gambit and said it was the oldest trick in the galaxy.

The humans had laughed at that. Marsil frowned just thinking about it. She'd frowned then, too. "Don't worry if you don't get it," he'd said. "It requires a cultural reference that is almost universal amongst our people."

While Alvin tried to explain about something called Star Wars, Graaf worked to rewire the radio again. His original work at served its purpose but now Donoon had to lure Vaamick out into a trap. Marsil didn't want to lose the ability to contact the Saarkaaks. "Why don't you use one of the humans’ radios?" She had asked.

The soldier in the human's party had handed Graaf one of their spares. He gave it a cursory glance. "No good. Their technology is too primitive. I'd never get it to work with our stuff."

The soldier squawked when Donoon translated Graaf's opinion. “What are you calling primitive? That is state of the art. They are hardly two cans and a string."

Graaf struggled for a way of putting it as inoffensively as possible. "Our people have been around for a long time. We experienced our technological revolution similar to the one who you are experiencing now when your people were discovering how to work metals."

The explanation didn't seem to satisfy Simmons. Marsil supposed she needed to make the effort to remember all of their names, even the one who hadn't even tried to learn her language through Donoon's misdirection.

"So you are calling us cavemen?" He'd said.

"No, I-- Look. I have a lot of work to do and not much time to do it if you don't want your people slaughtered. One of the others may be more diplomatic about how far you need to go to be considered on the same planet, technologically."

Marsil snorted at Graaf's loss of temper. She took the radio from Donoon and led him to another room in the human structure. She wished the humans didn't keep their living space so warm. Even Salaris, who had grown up in the warmest spot on all of Bara had rolled up the sleeves of her jumpsuit and opened the top a little. For Marsil, only modesty kept her top on her jumpsuit on at all.

"Don't worry about them. How well would you react if you met an alien civilization that made us look like ants? And then told you that you could be of no use in saving us?" She defended the humans to Graaf.

"I suppose so. He just wouldn’t quit," he told her. "At least the tools they have here aren't totally useless. It should go a little faster this time." He sat down at a workbench. Marsil started for the door. "And it will go even faster if you have some patience and wait for me to finish." He smiled to take the sting out of the barb.

Marsil listened to Alvin's broken Baran until Graaf returned. "It's done."

"Thank Bara," she exclaimed. She jumped over and met him on the other side of the great room. "Donoon," she called over to where he was explaining Bara's political structure to an eager Cynthia.

Donoon stood and walked over to her and Graaf. "Okay, I'll need silence for this. He keyed in the identifier for Vaamick into the restored keypad and waited for it to connect. "

"Donoon, Thank Bara you called. I was beginning to think that something happened to you." Vaamick said over the radio.

"There were some complications,” he explained. "I have prisoners. A human and a Saarkaak. They almost stopped me. But I stopped them instead."

"Well, that's good. But why did you take prisoners? I have no use for them. Kill them."," Vaamick sad.

“The Saarkaaks already made contact," Donoon lied. "They can give us information on how the Saarkaaks are going to return."

“Fine, bring them to me," he responded.

"Not enough time," Donoon said, shaking his head. Marsil noticed that he always made gestures even if the other person couldn't see him. Her people tended to laugh at people like that. "Meet me at Grey Rock. It's halfway."

Vaamick agreed although he didn't seem to be happy. He'd be a lot less happy when he realized that his own nephew had turned on him and was turning him over to his mortal enemy, Marsil mused.

They walked across the plains to their destination. Marsil kept fidgeting in her bonds. Alvin didn't seem to be faring much better. His face was still swollen from Donoon’s attack, a fact that they wished to capitalize on if Vaamick needed convincing.

Marsil hoped it didn't come to that. Jeef and his guards should be there already. Two seemed like a good compromise between force and stealth. She kept her eye out for the mark he was supposed to make to signal his arrival. They reached Grey Rock. There was still no sign of Jeef but Vaamick was already waiting for them. She looked at Donoon but he kept his stare ahead to his uncle.

They closed the last few feet to Vaamick. He stood alone. She guessed that he didn't want any more witnesses to the treachery he was about to undertake. Donoon pushed her down. "Kneel." She glared at him, but he boxed her ear. He leaned forward and hugged Vaamick. "Here they are."

Vaamick stared at her, "Well, what information can you give me. What is worth me sparing your life?"

Marsil hadn't really thought about what she would say. Jeef was supposed to be here already. "We picked up your troop movements and warned the humans."

"I figured that," Vaamick said. "Only explanation for why the humans withdrew just before the ambush. He inspected her more closely. "Is that all you have? That wouldn’t save you from meeting Bara today."

Marsil bit her lip. “Well." Wait. What was that sound?"

Vaamick started tapping his foot. "I can see from the insignia on your jumpsuit that you are a general for your people, so I know you aren't an idiot. But right now, I’m having trouble believing that. I'll ask one more time.” He leaned forwards and stared her in the eye. "What information is worth your life?"

Marsil heard that sound again. Was it? No, it couldn't be. But it was definitely a hoverbike. She blinked, the first outward sign she’d given of something being up.

Marsil had never even seen a hoverbike. She didn't think there were any left. Whoever was riding it had to be crazy. Those things weren't the most stable when they were new before the war.

Vaamick heard it too. He scanned the horizon until it appeared. The hoverbike crested a dune to reveal Jeef. He was alone and heading towards them at full throttle. Seeing the four of them, Jeef pulled a laser rifle from the saddlebag and shot at Vaamick. The shot missed Vaamick but hit Donoon. Marsil and Alvin broke free of their bindings as they scrambled for cover.

Jeef lined up for another shot but the hoverbike spun out of control sending the monarch tumbling. The angle was wrong for it to be the bike’s fault. She looked up and saw a sniper above them. The sniper held his eye up to the scope to aim for another shot against Jeef.

Marsil ran over to Donoon. She saw his chest rise and fall out of the corner of her eye and as she grabbed his weapon.

The sniper saw her motion and brought the muzzle of his weapon down at her. Without stopping, he raised her gun and shot. The sniper fell to the ground. His nametag caught her eye. Roogar. That was the one that tortured Salaris. He wasn't moving, but she aimed at his head and fired again just to be safe.

The weapon sparked and crackled. She dropped it as the power cell exploded. She kicked at the torched mess to see if there was anything she could use. Not seeing anything, she rolled Roogar over for his weapon but found that it, too, had been destroyed.

That left only Jeef's weapon. She canned the ground for it. Jeef was crawling for it. Vaamick also realized that there was only one rifle left and was running for it. The old man scooped it up and fired it right into Jeef’s chest. Jeef crumbled.

"Father," she cried. Vaamick stopped mid motion and stared her, as if studying her. He started to raise the gun at her when she remembered the knife. He was happy she had talked them into letting her keep it. She pulled it from her boot and threw it at him. The knife hit his hand and he dropped the laser riffle. She ran towards him.

Vaamick wrapped his bloody hand in his robe and went for Jeef's hoverbike. He started it and rose off Marsil chased him on foot but he lost her. She went back to Jeef's side and checked for a pulse. Jeef, the man who been the ruler of her people for her entire life and the man she had only recently discovered was her father, was dead.

She slumped to the ground. She barely noticed Alvin check on Donoon and helped the recovering man back to his feet. How could this have happened?

Alvin was at her side before she realized it. He stared at the dead body. "You said he was your father," he asked.

“Yes," Marsil responded. "And now he's dead."

"Is there anything I can do? Help you bring his body back for burial?" he asked.

She shook her head. "We take our dead to the surface and allow the elements to take them.”

Donoon walked over to them, holding the arm Jeef had hit. He reached for the radio on his belt but winced at the motion. After a few tries, he was able to get the radio free and he handed it to Marsil. She took it; it was the human radio the soldier had been so proud of. She pressed the button. "Can anyone hear me?"

There was a pause and then Lana answered, "Yes we can, Marsil. Did it work?"

"Negative," she said. “The plan failed. King Jeef is dead and Vaamick is on the loose. You need to prepare for his attack."

"Understood," Lana replied. "Get back here as soon as you can, we are going to need all the help we can get."

They walked back to the human habitat in silence. Donoon grimaced every few steps. They reached the habitat and Clarke looked him over. Alvin recounted the attack to the humans while Marsil sat by herself.

Lana sat down beside her. "I'm sorry about your father. Alvin told me."

Marsil just nodded. Lana continued, "I'm also dealing with loss in this. If you ever want to talk about it, let me know." She stood and left.

Marsil thought about her options. With Jeef gone, there was no way to confirm her parentage. She was stuck as a Lun forever now.

One of the human soldiers burst into the room. She looked up as he shouted, "aliens." Marsil had heard the human word often enough in the past two days that she knew what he was referring too. The Barakaaks had been sighted. The fight was on.

The soldiers rushed to the cargo airlock. They had been wearing their outdoor gear waiting for this moment. They assembled and fell into formation as the big doors opened. The fighters marched outside and took positions. Cynthia turned on the intercom radio to be able to hear their progress.

"Wait until they fire first, and then give them everything we’ve got," their leader said.

They didn't have long to wait. Marsil had just made it outside when the air sizzled as a laser pulse flew over her head and hit a support beam behind her.

In unison, ninety-seven marines fired at the advancing Barakaaks. A couple went down, but only wounded. The A shot hit a Barakaak in the chest. The reflective armor was designed for laser weapons, but the atmosphere seemed to be wreaking havoc on the humans’ ammunition. The bullet hit the armor and shattered. The Barakaak aimed at the shooter and a hole formed in the marine’s chest.

The battle went on like this. The humans were talking heavy losses and the Barakaaks barely any. The humans and Marsil with them were heading for defeat unless something happened.

Marsil considered her options. Maybe she could sneak away, but Graaf would never agree to that... Besides, she wasn't welcome with her people and the Barakaaks would just kill her. She just had to throw her lot with the humans and pray to Bara for a miracle.

She fired at another Barakaak. With the only remaining laser riffle, she was making more progress than all of the humans combined. "There are more approaching to the south," one of the humans said.

Donoon translated it for her and Graaf. Then he looked in the direction indicated. "Those are allies. Don’t shoot them," he said in both languages. In Baran, he added, "Not that it would do any good with these weapons."

Marsil looked herself. The Saarkaak army had already arranged itself on a ridge overlooking the battlefield and was picking off any Barakaaks that left themselves unprotected.

Jeef had honored their agreement. The fallen Barakaaks moved on the ground, only stunned. If they won, that would help reconciliation. But unless the humans got some weapons that could stop the Barakaaks, they would simply turn their attention to the Saarkaaks and ignore the humans to save them for later.

Marsil looked over the plain, trying to find a path that would protect her from enemy fire until she could reach her comrades. There was one path, but it would take a while to get that far out of the way. She considered handing her weapon over to somebody, but that would leave her defenseless and if she didn't get some Saarkaak weapons, her one rifle wouldn't do anyone any good.

She shouldered the weapon and took off. One of the enemy saw her and fired. She ducked behind a rock just as chips sprayed above her. She peaked around and saw the man approaching. She shot. He fell.

Her rifle wasn't a stunner; he wouldn't get back up. She felt conflicted. She had spent her entire life killing Barakaaks and wanted to celebrate another death. But she knew that everybody left on the surface after this would be another that didn't resisted reunification.

But she couldn't stay behind her rock. She ran up the hill. A soldier Saarkaak aimed at her but lifted his rifle when he saw the colors she was wearing. He put down his weapon and held out his hand to help her the last few feet up the slope.

Marsil paused to catch her breath and asked who was in charge. The private pointed at a man standing at a field table with a few others, head down. She thanked Bara. Jeef had put Keen in charge and she knew he would be sympathetic.

She trotted up to the table. Keen spotted her and waved. Two pages made room at the table.

"General, I'm so happy you’re alive. We all got worried when you disappeared. If you had marched on Jeef, the army would have stayed behind you. We didn't believe what he said about you."

"Don't," she warned. "I did do what he said. But Jeef is dead. Vaamick killed him."

Keen dropped his gaze and was silent. After a moment, he looked at her. "The civilians can figure out succession later. You are our leader. What are your orders?"

"The humans need stun rifles," she told him. "Only way we are going to win this battle is if the Barakaaks have to worry about two fronts."

"Niman." He turned and called across the table to the quartermaster. "Gather together all the weapons we can spare and take them to the humans."

The woman nodded and started to leave. "Gather them and bring them to me." Marsil stopped her. The humans won't be able to tell you from the enemy. At close range, their weapons might actually do some damage."

"Yes, ma'am." Niman smiled. "Good to have you back."

Marsil and Keen discussed the situation while they waited for the quartermaster to return. Keen's war council was larger than she would have liked, but Keen and even Jeef had been after her for years to increase the size of hers to include more positions.

The thought of Jeef made her tear up a little. She wiped her eyes while trying not to bring attention to herself. She breathed a sigh of relief when Niman returned and caught their attention.

Marsil hadn't thought about how much space enough weapons for the humans would take. Niman directed a handful of the people under her to stack five large crates by the table.

Niman saw the look on her face. "Don't worry. We are scrounging up a cart for you to take." A sixth soldier then appeared pushing a buggy. "We took the motor out of one of the wheels in a superbus so you will be able to move the thing. We also got you a radio so you can communicate with us while you are with the humans."

Marsil thanked her, as the boxes were stacked in the buggy. The controls looked similar to Jeef’s hoverbike. She wondered if that was form following function or if the quartermaster's tech had ever seen one of those contraptions. She made it back to the human camp without incident and found their ambassador and their military leader talking in English by the ship.

"Weapons," she said, taking care to speak as simply as possible. Marsil wasn't sure how much Baran Johns knew. "No kill. Stun. Your weapons not working."

"We noticed. We were just discussing that," the Major spoke in much better Baran than Cynthia. "Thank you." He barked an order in English over the radio. One by one, the marines left their positions and swapped their guns for the stunners.

Marsil used her Saarkaak radio to reach Keen. "We need a distraction so the Barakaaks don't realize something is up until the humans learn how to use our guns."

"Gotcha," came the response. "We will put on a show." A moment later, a rocket streaked through the air. It landed wide of the battlefield, more for show than anything else. The launcher was moved up to the front lines and the Barakaaks predictably started firing on it before it could be loaded again.

Alvin came and got his new gun. Marsil grabbed him and asked him to translate something for him. He nodded and they went inside.

She told him what she wanted to say and practiced the words he gave her until he was satisfied. Marsil had been in hundreds of battles and faced death more times than she could count. But what she needed to do now was the scariest thing she had ever faced.

They went back outside to the center of the where the Marines were assembled. She flicked on her human radio and addressed the crowd.

"I know you want your revenge for the attack that happened. I want my revenge for a lifetime of attacks. But today we do not kill. These weapons will only stun. Today, we disable and tomorrow, the people shooting you will no longer be your enemy. But only if we don't kill today. They are only following the twisted lies of their leader. Him we kill. The others we just remove from the battle."

The Marines looked to Johns. He was silent and looked Marsil in the eyes. She stared back, not willing to back down. "Do what she said. Only kill if you must."

"Ooh Rah," Dozens of men shouted in unison. She turned to Alvin and asked, "What does that word mean?"

Alvin just chuckled and shook his head. He took his weapon and went back to his position in the line.

With the Saarkaak weapons, the humans finally were able to make some progress. The Barakaaks had ceased removing the bodies from the battlefield and the stunned soldiers were taking longer to return than before.

Marsil picked off those who tried to get close. If she had a particularly clear shot, she used her normal weapon to shoot their gun out of their hands. It wouldn't kill them but it would sure hurt and that was one less gun firing at them.

Someone broke off from the main group and started running away from the battle, taking whatever cover he could. Marsil had never met him before that day, but she would never forget those robes.

"Vaamick is getting away," she shouted and took off for a run. He saw her and took a shot. Marsil was forced to duck behind a rock. She was just about to check to see if was clear when Donoon and Salaris caught up with her. Donoon had a human riffle with him, and Salaris carried a mean looking knife. "We aren't letting you have all the fun," Salaris said. "We all have reasons for wanting him dead."

Marsil nodded and looked around the rock. The coast was clear and they took off again. They fled the battle, alternating taking cover and running. Marsil started getting frustrated. Slowly but as sure as they lived underground, Vaamick was getting away.

He turned to take another shot at them just as Salaris moved in front. He jerked the weapon and hit her in the arm. Salaris shrieked and fell, clutching the wound.

Donoon dove to her side. "Are you okay?"

She gritted her teeth. "A few more inches and I wouldn't have been."

Marsil tore her eyes from them. They were exposed but Vaamick wasn't shooting. She looked up. Vaamick stood there, blinking.

Donoon stood. "Get her back to your people. I'm going to finish this." He took off in a sprint.

Marsil administered some field medicine, wrapping the burn wound and giving her a painkiller. Salaris wouldn't make it back by herself, she would have to carry her.

"Your liar," Donoon shouted. "I will kill you for what you did to her."

That got Vaamick's attention. He started to run but Donoon had gotten too close. Donoon tackled him. They tumbled to the rocky soil and started wrestling.

Vaamick was stronger and faster than Marsil could have believed. He pushed Donoon off and brought his knee up and connected with his nephew's lungs.

Donoon deflated. That was the best word Marsil could think to describe how he collapsed. Vaamick eyed his riffle but it had snapped in the scuffle. He ran.

Marsil lowered Salaris back to the ground. Already the younger woman was losing consciousness.

Marsil brought her weapon up. She inspected it briefly to make sure she still had a laser weapon and not one of the stunners. She took a deep breath and held it. This would be the most important shot of her entire life. This was for a lifetime of war, for a father who for some reason couldn't acknowledge her. For a father that Vaamick had killed.

She aimed and pressed the button to release the laser burst.

Marsil knew a little known-fact about laser weapons. It burned flesh as its energy pulse penetrated the body. Everybody knew that. But if got somebody's hair, it would ignite.

Vaamick's hair burst into flames as he fell to the ground. His brain was already a smoldering mush inside his skull.

Salaris

Salaris opened her eyes, looking for the strange beeping she heard. She craned her head to look around the strange room. What happened? She remembered getting shot and Marsil giving her something.

Donoon had been fighting with Vaamick and he had fallen. "Donoon," she shouted as she tried to get up.

"I'm right here, my love." He gripped her hand. She swiveled her head to find him standing at her right.

"What happened? You're okay?"

"I'm fine. You gave us the scare." He squeezed her hand more tightly. "Vaamick is dead, but our army won't surrender. I tried to talk to them. I even showed them the body and said that as his nephew, I was his heir. They called me a traitor and shot at me. Luckily Fiimit is a pretty bad shot.” He laughed.

She laughed with him but then returned to seriousness. "Let me try. Nobody has seen me with the humans yet."

"No, you are too weak."

"Please, I have to. The longer this goes on, the harder it will be to settle it."

"Fine, let me get the doctor." He gave her hand a final squeeze and left the room.

Salaris did a double take when Donoon returned with the doctor. "Sorry, I was expecting one of Marsil's people."

"I guess he's busy with his own people," Clarke said in blousy Baran. "Have to settle for me. That is a pretty nasty burn wound on her your arm, but it should heal in a few weeks if your physiology is anything like ours. Take it easy and take whatever pain medication your people take. I don't really have a reason to keep you here."

She smiled. "Thank you. Now, Donoon, help me up. We have a war to stop."

Donoon looked like he might refuse. He exhaled. "Okay. Here, take my hand." He helped hoisted her up and she leaned on him as they gathered their respirators and headed for the airlock.

As they passed outside, Donoon spoke to the human leaders in English. One made a motion to wait and left. He came back with something cone shaped. Donoon took it and they continued to the battlefield.

He raised his hand up and the humans and Saarkaaks stopped shooting. He handed her the device. "The humans call it a bullhorn. Hold the handle and speak into the small end. It will make it easier for our people to hear you."

She took it and did as he suggested. "My fellow Barakaaks." She jumped at the noise it made as it amplified her voice and gave it a metallic sound. She put the cone back to her mouth. "My fellow Barakaaks. Vaamick is dead. We must stop fighting with our brothers and sisters."

The Barakaaks had stopped firing when they heard the strange sound. There was quiet for a moment, and Lomis stood. The rank Vaamick had elevated her placed her position towards the middle. She shouted to be heard in the distance. "Salaris, is that really you?"

"Yes it is." She remembered the horn and repeated," yes, it is."

"But I watched Fiimit and Roogar carry your body to the surface." Lomis's voice came out in a choked sob.

Salaris was about to speak when she heard something. Somebody was repeating a word, a name. "Bara."

Others joined in, and the chant went through the group. They lowered their weapons to the ground and bowed towards her.

She turned to Donoon. "What should I do? Bara didn't resurrect me. I never died."

"Just go with it."

"But that would be a lie," she protested. The crowd continued to chant as more and more prostrated themselves. Even some of the Saarkaaks were starting.

"My uncle is dead. Our people need a leader. They will accept you."

“I can't run the entire moon."

He shook his head. "You won't have to. Just deal with the religion. The Saarkaaks probably won't accept a Barakaak ruler off the bat."

"Okay." She raised the bullhorn for a final time. "Bara brought me back because she doesn’t want any more fighting. She didn't want this war in the first place. Vaamick twisted her teaching. It started with when Vaamick had a child with the queen. When the child died, Vaamick attacked the King's guard."

The chanting stopped. Salaris didn't think any of them knew that. The only reason she knew it was Vaamick had drunk too much of the wine offering one night.

The crowd mulled over this development. It seemed to fit with what they knew of their leader. The chanting continued and the Barakaaks began to approach.

The Marines raised their weapons, but Donoon held up his hand. "Let them."

Lomis made her way to the front and hugged Salaris. She hugged her friends tightly back. Others began to surround them and raised her up on their shoulders.

Salaris was still clutching the bullhorn when Marsil waved from the edge of the crowd and mimed for the device. She handed it to one of her followers and pointed towards Marsil. It was passed from person to person until it reached its destination.

Marsil moved away from the crowd with her prize. She got closer to the Saarkaak army, which was now trying to figure out if they still needed to be there.

"For all of our lives, Vaamick has led good, ordinary people to their death. But his aggression is over. Bara has peace. Go, be with your brothers and sisters who have been separated from us for too long."

The Saarkaaks cheered and marched down the hill. Perched up as she was, Salaris could see pockets of resistance, but overall, they seemed to accept the idea that they were no longer enemies.

Her arm ached and she asked to be let down. She went looked for a medic to see if she could get another dose of painkiller, hopefully something that wouldn't knock her out this time.

Marsil caught up with her and handed her a packet. "Here, I figure you might need this. I got shot like that once."

"Thank you." She tore open the packet and swallowed the capsule. The orphanage hadn't bothered with pleasantries like giving them something to swallow their medicines with.

As they walked, she realized that Marsil was leading her somewhere. "Where are we going?"

"Just somewhere private." Marsil looked over her shoulder and decided that this was good enough. "Was what you said about Vaamick true?"

"About him having affair with the queen? Yeah. That's why he and Jeef hated each other so much. But when the mother and baby died, he kind of lost it."

Marsil looked down. Salaris looked at her. "What is it?"

The older woman bit her lip. Her voice was barely a whisper. "Lorinth's baby didn't die."

"What was that? I couldn't hear you. It sounded like you said that the baby didn't die."

"She didn't." Marsil still wouldn't look up.

"Are you sure? How do you know this, Marsil?"

"I am that baby. I never understood why Jeef abandoned me. Now I know why. I was never his in the first place."

"When you said Jeef was your father, I figured that he had remarried, or taken a lover after the queen died," Salaris said.

"He had plenty of lovers, as far as I could tell. But that was later. My birthday. I was born the day the war broke out." Marsil looked like she might cry. "This means that Vaamick is my father. I killed my own father."

Salaris took her friend's hands. "You did what you had to. You ended the war. He was like family to Donoon and I. But I don't regret that he's dead. You shouldn't either."

She didn't answer so Salaris continued. "You know what this means, right? You are now the queen."

Marsil pulled away. "What? I can't be queen. I couldn't possibly run the moon."

"I said exactly the same thing," she laughed. "But who better to reunite our people but a child of a Barakaak and a Saarkaak?"

"But, I'm no good around a lot of people," Marsil complained. "All through today, I just wanted to escape somewhere I could be alone."

"You were in charge of the Saarkaak army. How did you do it then?"

"Mostly I surrounded myself with a few close advisors who did most of the interacting with the troops."

"Well, do the same thing. You will have to make some public appearances, but mostly you can rule Bara like you led your army."

Marsil looked up. "Yeah, I guess I could do that."

Salaris held out her hand. "Come on. You have an announcement to make."

They returned to the battlefield. The adrenalin seemed to be wearing off and soldiers from both sides were packing their equipment.

Salaris found the bullhorn where Marsil had left it. "As the first step of reconciliation, I invite everyone to rest at the temple before returning to their homes." Several heads picked up at the news. The promise of a warm bed below ground would be a welcome change for those who had marched for days to get here. "But first, General Marsil has an announcement she would like to make."

She handed the horn over. Marsil held it at arm’s length and stared at it like it was going to bite. Salaris gave her a little shove towards the crowd. "Go on."

She took a step back to reinforce her point. Donoon approached her. "What's going on?"

"You'll see." She smiled.

The crowd watched Marsil. Even the humans still outside stopped what they were doing to see what new development was coming.

"Uh, Salaris revealed that Vaamick had an affair with Queen Lorinth before the war. He thought the baby died, but she did not. King Jeef hid the baby away and kept her identity secret. I have video evidence of this."

She paused. Her limbs shook. Marsil looked back but Salaris gave her a motion to continue. "I know this because I am that baby."

All murmuring and motion stopped. Salaris stepped forward and stood by her side. Taking the bullhorn, Salaris knelt at her feet. "All hail, Marsil of the ancient line. All hail, Queen Marsil of Bara."

The others prostrated themselves. It started with the Saarkaak soldiers, already loyal to their general. Donoon knelt by Salaris. The other Barakaaks took their cue from their new leader and knelt as well. Even Cynthia gave her a formal bow.

Graaf made his way up to Marsil. "I'm so proud of you. I know you must have been tempted to sit on that and let somebody else rule."

Marsil gave him a weak smile. "I was. But then I thought of something that made me feel better."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh, what is that?"

"You'll be my king." She kissed him. A cheer went through the crowd and a few of the humans whistled. Marsil blushed.

Cynthia approached and shook Marsil's and Salaris's hands. The gesture had been explained to them when they had made plans before the battle. "Congratulations to the both of you on your promotions. This world will be in good hands."

"Thank you," Salaris said as Marsil looked down and forced a smile.

"If you have time, I would like to meet with the two of you this evening. We have much to discuss," Cynthia said.

Salaris looked around. The Barakaaks and Saarkaaks were already heading towards the tunnels leading to the temple. "I guess we have time now."

Cynthia led them inside to her office. On the way through, she grabbed Lana and asked her to translate for them. As they settled in, Major Johns and another human that Salaris didn't recognize escorted a bound Donoon to an area they had turned into their brig.

"What are they doing to him," Salaris asked.

"I'm sorry," Cynthia responded. "He still has to answer for his attack and the murder of four people. He will be taken to Earth and tried there as soon as logistics are worked out."

Salaris gripped the table and saw her friend do the same. She took a slow breath and exhaled. She placed a hand on Marsil's wrist. "We can't fight another war."

Marsil looked at her. She shook her head. "I know you've come to the same conclusion that I have. Bara need's Earth resources if we are to survive. But I'm going with him. I can't stay here without him. Not again."

Lana translated as best she could and Alvin's ears perked up. "How are you going to get there?" He turned to Lana and Cynthia. "For that matter, how are we going to get home?"

"Donoon is a pilot. He can fly your ship," Salaris said.

Lana stood. "I won't get on a ship with Tom's killer."

Marsil started to rise, but Salaris kept a hand on her arm, keeping her down. "Donoon will fly your ship and then face your justice. Salaris will go with him. In return, I will recognize your embassy and sign any treaty that trades your resources for our technology."

Lana shook her head. Cynthia looked at her. "Please sit down." She was quiet for a moment. She pressed a button for the intercom. "Captain Olers, Jerry, please join us in my office." She released the button and looked across the table. “Okay, that is acceptable."

"No it isn't," Sandra spoke for the first time since Salaris had met her. "There isn't enough room on the ship for four people. Even without Salaris, Lana would have to share a room with the person who killed her husband."

"I'm staying. She can have my spot," Lana said quietly.

Alvin took her hand. "Lana, no."

"I've got nothing to go back to. And I couldn't spend half a year in such close quarters with my husband's killer." She gritted her teeth. "He wouldn't make it back to Earth."

Jerry entered the room. "Interesting idea. Don't know that NASA will go for it. But can he really fly one of our ships? They are pretty advanced."

Salaris laughed. Everyone looked at her. "Sorry. Donoon flew to Earth to help advance your flight technology. Without him, you would still be sitting on Earth."

"Well, I guess that's a yes, then." Jerry scratched his head.

"Captain," Cynthia said. "Please compile a report to NASA of this plan and inform them of my approval."

Jerry nodded and left.

Marsil and Salaris look at each other. "I guess we should be going as well." They shook hands with Cynthia and walked to the airlock.

They paused to pull on their respirators and warm clothing. Salaris looked at hers and laughed. "First time I ever used one of these, Vaamick took us to the surface to watch the humans land. Now I haven't been underground in days." The smile faded. "I guess I better get used to it. Donoon says that the humans don't live in caves."

Marsil hugged her. "You don't have to go."

She looked down and shook her head. "But I do. You were willing to leave everything behind to be with Graaf. I'll do the same to be with my love."

Marsil

Marsil paced in the chamber. "Calm down," Salaris told her. "You are making me nervous."

Lana laughed. Her Baran was getting better and she could hold her own in a conversation, even if she did sound like a small child, missing the occasional word or verb tense. The human had nothing appropriate to wear for the ceremony, so Salaris had loaned her one of her smaller gowns. She was almost tall enough to fit into it.. It had taken her a while to accept that the orange dress the priestess had given her was fashionable.

Marsil forced a small smile. She straightened the sapphire pendant that Cynthia had insisted she wear. The humans had suggested an Earth custom for the wedding. It didn't go against any of her people's mores, so she had accepted. Her black gown was new but her mother's peridotite tiara was definitely old. Salaris loaned her a prayer sash that hung over the dress. The sapphire was blue.

"I can't help it. I keep expecting to wake up. When the humans arrived, I was a Lun. I'd gone as far as I was ever going to with my life."

"And now you are getting married and crowned." Salaris grinned.

"Yeah, well, I'm a lot happier about one of those than the other," she admitted.

There was a knock at the door. "Ladies, it's time," Alvin said.

"Come in, Alvin. We're all decent," Lana said.

He opened the door and waved them on. "Graaf is heading up to the altar now."

Lana smiled and wished her luck. Salaris stayed back for a moment and hugged her. "You are going to be fine."

Then it was just Alvin and Marsil. "Are you sure you want me to walk you down the aisle?"

She nodded. "Both the man I thought was my father and the man who actually was are dead. I have no living family besides Donoon and he is chained to his seat. "

"Well, I'm honored that you chose me. It should go a long way to repairing relations between our people. And thank you for allowing us to tape it. I heard that tabloids are raving about it. The first ever alien wedding."

Marsil smiled for the first time. "Tabloids. Fake news, right? This is hardly the first wedding. My mother got married in this very same building an orbit and a half ago."

"Fake news is about right." The first chords of the wedding march echoed through the hallway. "Well, that's our cue."

Alvin led her down to the great room. Every living being, human, Barakaak, or Saarkaak, was squeezed into the space. Two holorepeaters that Graaf had repaired and a human video camera recorded the entire scene.

Her anxiety crept back and she fought the urge to run. Alvin squeezed her hand.

"I know what you’re dealing with," he whispered. "Sandra is the same way."

She took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. Knowing that there were others like her. That she wasn't fundamentally broken in some way, did help.

The music started again and she took a step forward, the first step towards her new life.

She kept her head down and counted the rows of attendees as she passed. At eight, she turned her head slightly. Lana smiled. At fourteen, Cynthia gave her nod. At fifteen, Salaris sat next to Donoon and wiped away a tear.

And at the altar stood Graaf. He smiled wider than she had ever seen him. Alvin let go of her arm and she stopped to stand in front of her husband to be. He took her hands into his, and they stared into each other's eyes.

Lomis coughed. They broke their gaze. Marsil's first act as ruler of their people had been the decree that Lun would no longer be restricted to military. "We've had enough soldiers," she'd declared. "Let us now have peacemakers." Lomis had jumped at the chance to become a priestess. Marsil had barely seen her new friend in the past week as Salaris raced to teach Lomis years' worth of catechism in a short time.

"We have today a first. Bara stands at the precipice of a new day. War has ravaged us for too long, but a child of Saar and Bara unites us as we work together with new allies from another world. For the first time in a long time, we can look tomorrow with optimism instead of dread."

Lomis began to hum. A higher note followed by a lower one. Repeating every few seconds. The crowd joined in, even the humans. The sound grew in volume until Lomis gave the signal and the room fell into silence.

Fiimit brought forward the bowl of icy soil. Throughout time, other couples had practiced to stay silent through this challenge. Marsil and Graaf smiled at each other. They'd been on the surface more than most did in a lifetime. They took their entwined hands and plunged them into dirt. Then, they raised them to the crowd. Together, they marched to the exit. Passing the threshold, they turned back to the ground. They were no longer in the room, so the silence could be broken without bringing bad luck. Lomis had wanted to add another human element to the ceremony.

Lomis raised her arms towards the ceiling. "I know pronounce you husband and wife!"

The musicians began to play. Graaf kissed and led her away.

\* \* \*

Marsil woke the next morning in Graaf's arms. She smiled as he stirred. "I could get used to this," he admitted.

"Me, too. I could stay here all day."

Graaf smiled and then frowned. "We can't. They are leaving today."

She groaned. "Why did they pick the day after our wedding?"

"I understand that they pushed their departure back so they could stay for it." He tousled her hair.

"Well, they aren't leaving yet. We can stay in bed a little longer."

"You don't want to go out to the surface looking like you just got out of bed do you?" He pulled the bedding off, exposing their bodies to the chilly air.

She shrieked and grabbed for the blanket, but he kicked them further away. "How dare you deny the queen her sleep!" She slapped him playfully.

He wrapped his hands around her and rubbed her skin. "I'm the king now." He smiled. "I can do whatever I want to the queen."

"Fine." She melted into his arms. "Let's get cleaned up. Salaris said that Vaamick had his own private baths heated by the same source as the shrine."

They reached the surface only a few minutes late. Salaris stood in the human encampment. She looked up and saw them approach. "Oh, thank Bara. I thought you weren't going to come."

Marsil shook her head. "Of course we would come and say goodbye. You are my friend."

"You get this business with Donoon straightened out and come home. You will always have a place here." Graaf slid his arm around Marsil.

"Thank you. If they ever let him free, we will be sure to return."

Alvin waved to them. "Come one, Salaris. We have to board the Atlas now."

She hugged Salaris. "Goodbye. Be safe."

"You too." Salaris gave her an extra squeeze and let go. She walked to where Alvin waited by the airlock.

"Make sure you stand behind the line." Alvin warned them, pointing to the circle the Marines had painted around the ship. "Hate to vaporize the royal family."

"You'd probably start a war." Graaf laughed. Marsil turned her head. "What? Too soon?" He smirked and Marsil chuckled.

She took his hand and walked over to the line. A few of the others waited nearby. The Barakaaks had seen a ship land, but none of them had ever witnessed one take off. No one alive when they abandoned spaceflight had been alive when the grandparents of anyone on Bara had been born. Few of Earth's civilizations had even existed yet the last time the people of Bara had explored the world above.

Lana stood next to them. Speakers were set up to relay Donoon's voice from the cockpit. He spoke in English but Lana translated for the crowd.

"All lights are green. You are go for takeoff," Jerry called from the other ship.

"Roger, Captain Olers. Ignition in ten. A display counted down the seconds. At zero, the ship's engines rumbled and a plume of steam escaped from the bottom. The ship powered into the air.

Marsil followed the ship as it rose into the murky atmosphere. She lost sight of it, but could still hear them.

"We have cleared the atmosphere. Donoon called.

"Oh, Bara." Marsil could hear the awe in Salaris's voice. "Saturn. It's so beautiful. Just like the paintings. I never thought I'd see it."

The crowd continued to stand outside, watching the speakers as Donoon continued narrating their progress. They orbited the moon once and he powered the main ion thrusters, breaking free of Bara's gravity and heading towards the Earth.

Marsil had enough to worry about with turning peace into reunification, but for now, she could only wonder what would happen when they reached their destination.