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[Chapter 1: 69230 Hermes 1](#__RefHeading___Toc2090_191131832)

[Chapter 2: FTL 4](#__RefHeading___Toc2092_191131832)

[Chapter 3: The Reporter 12](#__RefHeading___Toc2094_191131832)

[Chapter 4: The Cardinal and the Evangelist 19](#__RefHeading___Toc2096_191131832)

[Chapter 4: Planetfall 23](#__RefHeading___Toc578_3408804622)

# Chapter 1: 69230 Hermes

Nonna is 62

Papa is 38

Maria is 8

Each afternoon in the summer of her eighth year, precocious Maria Morelli walked the five blocks from her grandmother’s house in the Oltrarno to a small gelateria across from the sprawling Pitti Palace, once the residence of Cosimo I de’ Medici and now home to museums. Most days, her father would take a break from his work at his bookstore and join his daughter in celebrating the joy of ice cream on a warm day while watching the parade of humanity streaming to and from Ponte Vecchio. Maria typically chose chocolate gelato, but, now and then, she ate strawberry; her father always had pistachio.

“How is your day?” he would ask her, and she would always respond, brightly, that it was the “best day of her life, at least so far,” and then she would tell her father of the stories she had read that morning in her father’s extensive collection of old comic books.

“Ah. That is good,” the father would reply, and they would enjoy their treat, and each other, until it was time for the father to kiss the child and return to his shop.

But one day, late in August, Maria arrived at the gelateria only to find that it was closed, and the street was inexplicably empty. Her father arrived minutes later, trotting hurriedly. He had a troubled look on his face.

“What is it papa?” Maria wondered. “Where is everybody? Why is the gelateria closed?”

“There has been some rather sudden and very bad news,” Maria’s father allowed. “Do you know what an asteroid is?”

“Si, papa. A rock in space that orbits the sun. An asteroid killed the dinosaurs long ago. It hit the Yucatán Peninsula and blew dust into the skies that made the planet too cold for them.”

The father puffed out his cheeks and blew softly as he searched the skies. “Indeed.”

“Is another asteroid coming, papa? Are you looking for it? Is it coming here?”

“Well, I don’t know . . . ,” the father looked down at his daughter and could think of no reason to lie. “Yes, Maria, another asteroid may be coming, and it may be coming here. I just heard the news I am afraid. It was spotted only minutes ago for some unknown reason. Usually scientists spot these things when they are still far, far away, but . . .”

“Perhaps its orbit was perturbed in some way,” the girl suggested, unaware that most eight-year-olds don’t use such terms.

“Perhaps,” agreed her father. “But I don’t know what . . ..”

“Should we go away?” interrupted the girl. “We could fly away with Nonna to Germany, France, or Russia--maybe even to one of the North American Federations? Their science is not as good as that of the Russians these days except for Pacifica, but they are far away from here.

The father took his daughter by the hand. “I am afraid it is too late for that.”

“Oh,” said Maria, who was still lamenting the closure of the gelateria. “Will we be like with the dinosaurs? Will we become extinct? I don’t want to be extinct.”

The father shrugged. “I pray not.”

“I will pray too,” said Maria. “I know you do not believe, but Nonna has shown me how. God will take care of us I think. I feel as though something will protect us.”

“I am sure,” replied the father with the best smile he could summon. “Come. Let us walk to the river.”

“You are not going back to the shop?” asked Maria with surprise.

The father leaned over, hugged his daughter tightly, and smiled. “Not today.”

Together, the man and the girl walked to the bridge. At the center of the span, a handful of people mingled, each of them looking skyward with nervous glances. On the road beside them, a radio blared, a worried man’s voice speaking. A dark-haired women in the group saw Maria and her father; she separated and approached, a large bottle of wine in one hand and a stack of plastic cups in the other..

“Un po vino?”

“Si, grazie,” said the father, who took one cup for himself and gave another to Maria.

“Wine, papa?” asked the daughter in amazement, as the woman poured the dark red liquid. “For me too?”

“For you especially. It is past time for you to have your first taste.”

The woman smiled, bowed slightly, and added, “May you have many more tastes!” She the walked back to where she had been standing earlier.

“Here,” said the father, leaning against the railing that faced Ponte Santa Trinita. “Let us drink a toast.”

“Yes, let’s! What shall we toast, Papa?”

“To you becoming an old woman.”

Maria frowned. “But, papa, I don’t want to be an old woman. I don’t want to be all wrinkly.”

The father lightly touched the rim of Maria’s cup against his own. “Allow me my wish.”

Maria lifted her glass to her nose. “It smells funny,” she said. “Like vinegar.”

“Taste it!”

She took a tiny sip and wrinkled her nose. “I do not like it.”

Her father laughed, tears welling in his eyes. He drained his cup and stood behind Maria, his arms around her.

“Will we see the meteor, Papa?” Maria wondered, looking skyward.

“I doubt it, but you never . . .”

Behind them, the sky blazed with sudden intensity. Maria tried to turn, but her father held her firm, thinking to spare his daughter the sight of their imminent demise.

“Do not look, my darling! Do not look!”

“But papa, the light! It is so bright!”

“Si. Best not to look at it”

For several seconds, the father stood, his eyes closed, waiting for the sound of the asteroid hitting the ground and the shock wave that would sweep he, his daughter, and all of Florence away. Gradually, however, it dawned on him that there was no such sound; the only sound he could hear was the voice on the radio, which was repeating, over and over, “The Russians! The Russians did it! They did it!”

He turned and looked at the people standing by the radio, who were crying and laughing with relief.

“What does it mean?”

The woman with the wine bottle smiled. “The Russians--they nudged the meteor out of a collision path with their missiles! We are saved, my friend!”

The father fell to his knees, turned, and framed Maria’s questioning face with his hands.

“My beautiful little girl,” he said, “you will indeed become an old woman!”

# Chapter 2: FTL

20 years later

Maria is 28.

Nonna is 82

Papa is deceased

Dr Maria Morelli held up her zero-point energy probe and marveled at what she saw on the screen: there was a definite coordinate-like structure to space-time, with numbers consistently rising or falling depending on the direction in which she pointed the device, along with other data structures that should had, so far, been able to decipher. She had no idea what the numbers meant, but it was an intriguing mystery to think that there might be an apparent directionally to space. Whatever it was, it was real.

However, compelling though this discovery was, she had other work to do at the moment, so she put the zero energy device back in the hip pocket of her coveralls; she would gather more data after initial the test of the warp drive, and she could study both collections data at her leisure during the three-day trip back to Earth orbit.

She busied herself with checking settings on the large vessel in front of her, itself a vessel within a large cylinder crammed with even more vessels, pipes, machinery, and colorful displays, the latter frantically signalling changes in measured parameters to whoever cared to notice. All were contained within the ten-meter diameter warp-drive chamber whose axis stretched for fifty meters in either direction, ending in bulkheads at both ends into which were set human-size hatches. Maria floated along the length of the negative mass generator, confirming that her creation was ready to perform its crucial part in boosting the ship’s speed by surrounding the ship with a bubble of warped space-time, with space-time compressed at the head of the bubble and expanded at the tail. Encased in the bubble, the ship would move through space-time at many multiples of its own 0.1c.

Everything appeared to be within normal values, so Maria floated over to a collection of pipes and valves that extended from the generator to the wall of the cylinder. This purge system was a late addition to the design, tacked on as a potential safeguard should there be some reason (such as a leak in the vessel casing) to eject the negative matter into the void of space rather than allowing it into the unprotected interior of the ship. Maria was herself unsure if such a system would work at all--perhaps it would be better, for a small leak, to deal with any impacts while limping home as expeditiously as possible--but she relented in the name of expediency to get the ship approved for its first test flight. She had, however, secretly added an override to the purge activator that she could trigger if needed--it would be better to ruin the drive chamber than to lose the drive when light-days or months from home. She fully intended to come back when this flight was over!

Finished with her inspection, Maria pushed away and floated to the outer wall of the drive chamber, her hair sea leaves wandering languidly about her head. Walking in bounding steps, she ended the last step by going feet-first into an opening and controlling her descent by grabbing onto rungs set into the wall until she reached a floor severals meters below. She walked to another opening and repeated the process several more times, each time looking less like a swimmer moving through water and more like a person simply climbing down a ladder. By the time she reached the final pitch, her hair had settled, and she clambered down into a large compartment containing four ship seats bolted to the floor. In front of and surrounding the chairs was a forest of equipment and colorful displays. Just beyond the equipment was a large display that showed a field of stars. Somewhat incongruously, two side-by-side bird cages hung from rings attached to the ceiling just in front of the display; each cage held a canary.

Three of the seats in the compartment were occupied by harsh-looking crew-cut men. All four wore blue coveralls of identical design, with a name patch over the right breast; over the left breast was a patch that showed what looked like a dark spear with a thick tail thrust through two white donuts. The name stenciled under the spear and donuts was UNSS Vespucci.

“We are good to initiate the drive,” Morelli said to a man whose name patch read Popov.The names of the other men were Volkon and Semanov. “The distribution lines are filed, and we only need to floor the annular spaces to form the warp bubble.”

“Da,” replied Commander Alexey Popov. Born forty-two years earlier in Volgograd, Popov had been a fighter pilot before joining Roscosmos, where he swiftly rose through the ranks to become the commander for the Vespucci project. “We will do so immediately. “Boris, Vladimir, make the bridge ready. Dr. Morelli and I will secure the torus control center and join you when we are finished.

“Aye,” responded Lt. Commander Vladimir Semanov.

Like Popov, Semanov was a veteran of the Russian Air Force, and he had flown supersonic bombers for many years, until he transferred to Roscosmos at the age of 42, five years earlier. He and Major Boris Volkon, 38, a technical specialist on this flight and a former member of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, rose and began climbing up the ladder that Dr. Morelli had just descended. It was a poorly kept secret among the crew and many members of the UNSS Vespucci team that Boris and Maria had become lovers sometime during the project.

“You are sure this is necessary?” Popov asked of Maria.

Maria shook her head. “No, not absolutely, but until we know for sure that staying in the torus with the drive engaged is safe, I would prefer to be cautious. We have invested too much to take chances that do not need to be taken.

Pokov grunted his agreement. The investment was enormous--thirty-seven trillion Euros in the previous year alone--which justified taking extraordinary precautions, including accelerating out from the Vespucci’s thirty-three hundred kilometer parking orbit for three and a half days at 0.01g to put distance between the ship and the masses of Earth and the moon (just in case those masses might affect the warping of space-time[[1]](#footnote-2)) before cutting in Dr. Morelli’s implementation of the Alcubierre drive to boost the ship’s 0.1c velocity to something that could span the immense distances between stars in days rather than measuring by years.

The United Nations Spaceship Vespucci, towards which the twenty-five largest members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had committed one percent of their respective Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for ten long years was an unprecedented international investment. It had taken ten years following the near-miss of 69230 Hermes to hammer out a joint agreement satisfactory to all, and another ten years to design and construct a ship that could carry Maria’s implementation of the Alcubierre Drive conceived by physicist Miguel Alcubierre in the late 20th Century. The fact that such financial commitment was achieved after the fall of the United States of America, which had often loudly lamented the inability of the former North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members to achieve a two percent commitment to joint defense against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), of which Russia was the capital state, was the ultimate irony. So much for American exceptionalism, Popov thought to himself. Where are your proud boastings now, as we begin to explore the cosmos?

Popov shut down the ship controls and double-checked to make sure everything was locked in place in case the torus stopped spinning. “I am going to the bridge,” he stated when he was finished. “Do not linger for long.”

Maria nodded. “Yes. I will be right there after I see to Leonardo and Michelangelo.”

Popov grunted a second time and started climbing while Maria walked to the port.

“I envy you my loves,” she said to the two small yellow birds, who flitted from perch to perch in their excitement. “You will be the first to experience the warping of space while we humans sit cringing in our shielded cell far above. I should stay, but you know how strict these Russians are about their procedures!”

Blowing each bird a kiss, she walked to the ladder and began climbing the first 25-meter pitch. By the time she reached the top and transferred to the second ladder, her normal 52 kilogram weight had dropped by slightly more than 10 kilos, and it continued to drop as she climbed three more pitches. By the time she emerged from the fourth ladder, she could bound across the floor in giant steps, almost floating along as she traveled to the ship’s bridge, which formed the ‘point’ of the spear seen in the mission patch.

At the end of the long chamber that contained the drive components, she reached a bulkhead and a ladder to the bridge hatch, the latter hardly necessary since Maria could jump to the hatch, but the handholds helped with controlling her trajectory: on her first attempt to gain the bridge, she had overshot and landed on the opposite side of the central tube and had to jump a second time. On this attempt, she grabbed two rungs in succession and floated through the open hatch, then braced herself with one hand on an interior grip point as she pushed the hatch door closed with the other and secured it. Then, she pushed off and floated into the center of the bridge, where the three men were already strapped into their seats. In front of them, the bridge display showed the same view as in the torus control room.

“Almost ready, Commander,” Maria chirped.

“Da,” said Popov, interpreting Maria’s use of his title instead of his first name as possibly an indicator of the young physicist’s nervousness. Small wonder: they were about to do something that had long been a dream of science-fiction fans, or they were about to do nothing after years of enormous expense and effort, or they were about to die in the dark cold of space.

“We are on a heading for Alpha Centauri,” he added, “making about 0.1c, plus or minus a few kilometers per second.”

Maria pulled herself into her seat, quickly strapped in, and poked the digital display in front of her. “I am flooding the annular spaces with negative energy” she said. After a pause, she added--with no small amount of excitement--”the warp bubble is forming!” She had seen the same information before as she monitored the drone ships, but this was different! This was happening to her!

“How much boost?” Popov inquired of his lieutenant. “Keep calling out the status.”

“Looks to be about ten,” replied Semanov dryly. “We are traveling at the speed of light. Check that: the boost is now twenty,” and we are traveling at twice the speed of light. Alpha Centauri is now only a little over two years away.”

“I am increasing the flow rate,” Marie stated. “The warp bubble is continuing to form, very quickly, and it is stable.”

“Boost is now one hundred and fifty-two,” Semanov intoned, “which is much higher than that for the last drone ship, and I am seeing no obstacles.” He did not elaborate on what he meant by ‘obstacles,’ nor did he need to. Everyone aboard was well aware that the final test drone had collided with a small asteroid minutes after achieving a boost of one hundred. As pilot, Semanov was responsible for looking for, and avoiding, objects too large to be pushed aside by the region of compressed space-time in front of the ship, which moved aside smaller junk in the manner of a ship’s bow wave. Based on the limited data available, he was following a guideline that suggested course correction when anything bigger that a small car was in the ship’s path. Version 2 of the improved scanning system provided suggestions, but Semanov made the final decisions and course corrections himself.

“I am holding the flow rate steady,” Maria said. “The warp bubble is stable and shows no potential signs of decay.”

“Boost is two-thirty-five. Alpha Centauri is a little over sixty-six days away,” Semanov stated cheerfully even as a line line of perspiration formed on his brow. “If we ration our supplies, we might make it,” He then added. “I hope they have a supermarket; we will need to restock for the return trip.”

“Steady as she goes,” Popov ordered. “We will follow procedure and see if the bubble can hold steady for another ninety minutes--if that is okay with you Vladimir. I do not want to overtax you--for your sake and ours.”

“Affirmative, Commander,” Semanov reponsed crisply. “I am ‘go’ for now. I believe five minutes is doable.”

The next hour and a half minutes was among the slowest five minutes in recorded history, during which the front display showed no more change than the view from a walker slowly advancing toward a distant range of mountains still days away. The walker walks and walks, but the view never changes. And, for added spice (in this analogy) the walker has to be on the lookout for boulders that are inexplicably hurtling along the ground towards walker, stepping out of the path of the boulders to avoid getting crushed. Semanov saw things differently; time and again, he applied pressure to the controls to slightly change the ship’s direction and avoid an unseen object lurking in the blackness.

Finally, it was over, and nobody was surprised to see that Lt. Commander Semanov was perspiring freely when Commander Popov gave the order to turn off the warp drive; in an instant, the effective speed of the Vespucci dropped to 0.1c without mussing a single hair of the crew.

Semanov blew out his breath and sagged in his chair.

“Excellent work, Vladimir!” Popov said calmly as he pressed buttons on his console. “I will take over the controls.”

The latest AI-aided mass detection was a vast improvement over what had been available for earlier testing--two drone ships had been destroyed by colliding with masses that were either unseen or unavoidable--but the level of difficulty increased with the level of boost achieved. No human pilot, or team of human pilots taking turns, could hope to safely steer the ship for the seventeen days needed when running at maximum design boost. Still, this trip had checked the box on an important milestone and there would surely be continued improvement in both object detection and the navigation AI.

As the rest of the crew clapped Semanov about the shoulders and kissed his cheeks, Popov steered the ship around for the return trip. “We will take the rest of the day off to rest and check our equipment,” he said. “We will make the jump back to Sol tomorrow morning. Enjoy yourselves!”

“Some of us with more enjoyment than others, no?” Semanov said as he looked at Boris Volkon. “Especially during the three long days of deceleration when time will crawl and a diversion is much appreciated, no? Perhaps you can share your wealth?”

“It is not good to be selfish,” Popov agreed from his chair. “Stressful situations require relief. We have secured the future for our country!”

Volkon’s eyes darted briefly in the direction of Maria, who had her back to the three men as she studied something on a display located to the side of the main controls, and then he gave a vague shrug.

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Maria was both mortified and incensed as she puttered about in her laboratory in the forward torus, first downloading the curious data from her zero-energy device, which included additional scans of space following the successful voyage inside of the space-warp Maria’s drive had generated. Of course she had heard Semanov’s crude remark, or was it an implied suggestion? She was fully aware of the fact that both Popov and Semanov knew of her relationship with Volkon, but the remark and Boris’ silence cut her like two daggers! More so the silence. How dare Boris not speak up? How dare he not defend her? Did their relationship really mean so little to him that he would simply shrug? (Yes, she had seen his reaction in the reflection of the display she had been looking at! Both her hearing and her sight were perfect, thank you!)

Since the sudden death of her dear father only two years after the near-miss of 69230 Hermes, Maria had largely avoided men, increasingly seeing them as parasites too stupid to form relationships that did not involve grunting and thrusting. Instead, she disengaged from general society, focusing her energy on the wonders and challenges of physics, which were without end and rarely disappointing. As she withdrew further into herself, examining her own life in tighter focus, she also became the sort of person who thinks that the most intimate details of their life are self-evident too--or should be--with no need to explicate, and she chafed when pressed for explanations regarding her actions and motivations.

Self-absorbed, incapable of seeing her own history and character as opaque to others, she struggled to form lasting relationships outside of her Nonna, with whom she lived when not attending school in Padua or during the winter she studied at the National Autonomous University of Mexico with Professor Emeritus Miguel Alcubierre, who had invited her to assist him with his research. Even when she schooled at Padua, she would return home to Florence on the weekends, there to study and relax in the places so familiar to her: the Ponte Vecchio, Piti Palace, Boboli Gardens, and San Miniato al Monte, the latter a favorite destination to which Maria would walk, following the sinuous, shaded curves of Vialle Machiavelli and Vialle Gallileo uphill to a point overlooking the city. The very few lovers Maria had taken, all of them fellow students, quickly tired of trying to divine predictable patterns in the vicissitudes of her mood, and all but one--Boris Volkon--had quickly moved on to less tiresome relationships.

Boris had appeared in Padua shortly after Maria submitted an application for a postdoctoral position with the United Nations Space Agency (UNSA). UNSA had seven years early begun intensive research and design with the goal of building a faster-than-light (FLT) spaceship capable of carrying humanity to the stars. The goal was to decrease the likelihood that humankind could be summarily wiped from existence by a cosmic anomaly, such as the unexpected appearance of 69230 Hermes on a collision course with Italy when Maria was but a child. Humanity, isolated on Earth and obsessed with its continual non-productive bickerings and pointless wars over power, race, and faith was fragile and woefully vulnerable; humanity, scattered to the stars might finally pull its collective head out of the sand and gain the perspective needed for its own survival.

That was the hope as expressed by UNSA and the members of the OECD.

Several possibilities for FTL travel had been pursued (expand), but, in the end, the concept proposed in 1994 by Mexican physicist Miguel Alcubierre for “hyper-fast” travel within a “bubble” of space-time, a concept henceforth dubbed the “Alcubierre Drive,” seemed the most likely. Still, after seven years and twenty-plus trillions of funding, practical success was proving to be difficult to achieve, and the OECD countries providing the funding began to complain, with some threatening to end their involvement altogether. Clearly, continuing to throw money at the problem without some new insight or a different vision of the project was untenable, so UNSA redirected a large portion of the funding to find new ideas among graduate and post-graduate students of physics, mathematics, and engineering who might serve to revive an increasingly moribund pursuit.

Maria Morelli was the spark that re-ignited the Alcubierre Drive project, and Boris Volkon--who had begun his career in the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR RF), and who had been instrumental in the electronic propaganda campaign that had aided the dissolution of the former United States of America--was the shield that protected the spark from being smothered under the wet blanket of bureaucracy until the spark had become a flame. In her first year, Maria conceived of a way to breath life into the Alcubierre Drive. In the second, she directed the building and testing of three small-scale drone ships, along with the initial construction of the Vespucci. Now, in her third year, she had just shown that a ship could be built that could potentially carry humans to the nearest star in a matter of days rather than years.

But here, at the farthest distance any human had ever been from Earth, the spark that had been Maria Morelli turned as cold and dark as the space outside as she plugged her zero energy device into the lab network and began to analyze the data.

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The return jump mirrored the outgoing, with the Vespucci arriving within a few thousand kilometers of its jump point out of the system. The male crew were elated and shared one of the bottles of vodka Commander Popov had smuggled aboard to toast their success. If anybody noticed that Maria Morelli was more aloof than normal as they went their separate ways to prepare for the three-day deceleration into Earth orbit, no mention was made of it.

In the drive champer, Maria floated about the negative energy reactor as the single bird cage that held both Leonardo and Michelangelo bobbed along by her side, a thin tether connecting the human and the perplexed song birds. In Maria’s hand was the zero-point energy device, to which a hand-held computer had been connected. [Think [Mother Box](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Box)].

Am I so sure that it is a hopeless as I believe? She wondered. Is it worth killing three men to ensure that no one nation will have exclusive access to my technology? She paused for a moment, and to her mind came a vision of centuries of endless war, all of it instigated by men, most of it waged by men. And, now, she had discovered a weapon against which even nuclear weapons would be useless, a weapon that could destroy entire planets, perhaps even Galaxies, a weapon that no man should ever possess--especially not the kind of men that she had known.

She reached down with her free hand and patted her belly, thinking, we will create a new kind of man! The hand came back up and touched the computer. With a second touch, Maria and the canaries vanished.

# Chapter 3: The Reporter

30 years later

Maria is 58.

Maria’s son, Luca, is 30 and the head of the Church of the Allpoint (COTA)

Nonna is deceased

Walta Wambui (“World War”) is 31 and a major in the Church of the Allpoint’s Settlement Protective Service (SPS)

Remy Moreau, 38, is an investigative reporter with Reuters and a 6’-6”, 220 lb sometimes drag queen (nickname: Queen Xerxes because of his resemblance to a character in the movie The 300) who served in the French Foreign Legion.

Two meters of Remy Moreau slowly unfolded after having been crumpled into an uncomfortable seat for forty-five bumpy minutes of chartered E-VTOL flight north from Mombasa. Still unable to fully stand up in the cramped fuselage, he shuffled, bent over, up the aisle, thrust his well-coiffed head of hair (flaming scarlet with ostrich feathers for accents today) out the doorway and allowed his body to follow.

“Ahhhh!” he said as he stepped onto the top platform of the boarding ramp and allowed himself to stretch. The hot, dry winds sent the edges of his golden shuka fluttering. On the dusty plains before him he saw dozens of sand colored structures in a variety of shapes, from simple rectangular boxes, to star-shaped boxes, and others much more complicated, that seemed to rise up as though formed by pushing up the multi-hued material of the plain itself from below the ground. All were mind-bogglingly big.

“Mon dieu! You are as big as I had heard you were!” came from the bottom of the ramp, as though the speaker were reading his mind about size and providing his unvoiced exclamation. Remy looked down at a smiling dark-skinned woman dressed in the n-tech field uniform of the Church of the Allpoint’s (COTA) Settlement Protective Service (SPS). Currently, the fabric of the uniform was configured as a brown khanga with patches of green that mimicked the ground on which the woman stood, but Remy knew that it could morph at a thought into the nearly impenetrable head-to-toe SPS battle armor whose camouflage matched any surroundings, and he also knew that the kangas’ folds hid from view an assault rifle that was the envy of all Earthly militaries.

“Girl!” Remy replied with his characteristic grin and dismissive hand wave when dressed in drag, “I am large and live, and I am here to get the first full scoop on the COTA settlement process! Let’s boogie!” The waving arm settled on his cocked hip for a couple of beats, and then he strutted down the steps, his knee-high golden boots clattering on the metal until he reached the bottom, where he extended a hand tipped by bright scarlet nails. “Remy Moreau at your service!” he said with the slightest of bows.

“Walta Wambui at yours,” said the woman, and she grasped the offered hand delicately, by the fingertips.

“‘Major World War Wambui’ in the flesh? I am honored!” The bow deepened.

“Sounds like you’ve done your research, but the honor is mine, Colonel Moreau.”

This time, Remy placed both of his large hands on his hips. “Uh-uh, honey! I don’t do that ‘Colonel’ stuff anymore. I am retired from that gig! I am a reporter now!”

“You don’t simply retire from 18 years in the French Foreign Legion, Queen Xerxes!” Major Wambui countered. Since leaving the Legion, Remy Moreau had made a name for himself as a war correspondent willing to go places few other reporters would dare. He had also adopted a drag persona based on his physical resemblance to the character of Xerxes as portrayed in a movie from the early 21st Century: The 300.

“Touche!” Remy said as his grin widened. Then, he spread his bronzed, muscular arms wide as he took in the view of the myriad COTA transport vessels dotting the horizon and added, “Now, girl, tell me all about these marvelous machines of yours, and then let’s take one for a spin!!”

“It will be the highlight of my day,” said the Major. As though she had signaled for it--and Remy was certain she had--a smaller E-VTOL whirred across the mottled plain and settled on the ground before them. Like the Major’s uniform and the transport vessels, the craft had the coloration of the terrain above which it flew, which would make it difficult to see from any would-be spy satellite.

A door irised open on the side of the aircraft (Was the hull itself made of n-tech fabric? Remy wondered), and the Major motioned for her guest to board. He did so. Inside, there were four seats, all of which were larger than those aboard the commercial flight on which Remy had arrived. He settled himself in front, and he realized that even the seats were n-tech: his derriere had but touched the seat when its contours began molding themselves to his anatomy, and the headrest began rising to provide a perfect fit for his head. Once configured, the seat extruded thick snakes of material that wrapped around him to create a snug but comfortable harness.

“Oooh” gushed Remy, “I wish I had clothes made of this n-tech shit! I might never have to change outfits.”

“You’ll get an n-tech outfit to wear on this trip,” the major said with a chuckle as she took the seat next to him. “But I’m afraid the configurations it can assume might not match your full repertoire of leisure wear.”

“No spiked boots, honey?”

“Not yet at any rate.”

The craft jumped into the air and accelerated toward the transport vessels. As they neared, the scale of the transports quickly became apparent. Even the smallest were the size of aircraft carriers, and the largest were several times that large.

Remy whistled. “Damn these suckers are big! I had heard they were super-sized, but . . . uhhh!”

“We have a saying at COTA,” replied the major. “Why go little when you can go big just as easy? Our settlers don’t have to go without Earthly comforts while they grow their population to size, unless they really want to rough it. Some do, but we still send them all they need to survive for the first five years, including fully automated resource gathering and manufacturing units that they can set up to create their own goods, from agricultural tools to basic defensive weapons. And they also get robots to run everything while the colonists provide oversight and establish good governance.”

“How much training do the colonists get before they ship out?”

“It varies with the planetary environment, but most spend at least a year setting up a settlement on Earth using the same equipment they will use once they reach their new planet. The colony we will travel with recently returned from Columbia, which has a geography and climate similar to what they will see next. By the time they finish with the trial deployment, they are experienced with all the equipment. And, the robots still provide an expert level of understanding. The robots are steeped in the technical details, and they get updated with new information periodically--even after leaving Earth.

“I’ve been wondering about that updating part,” Remy said. “How’s that work across light-years of distance? More POP jazz?”

Major Wambui smiled. “It’s all Power of Prayer. POP is what moves these vessels filled with people and their resources light-years to uninhabited planets to set up new human settlements. That same POP makes it possible to send information packets back and forth between the far-flung planet and Earth with a frequency that almost matches our best communications bandwidth between continents. Or, at least that is what the COTA engineers tell me. All I know is that I can be five light-years out from Earth, and I’m having a normal conversation when I talk to COTA staff here. If there’s a delay, I’m not hearing it.”

“I don’t want to throw shade, honey,” said Remy, but it’s the POP part of this gig that I’m still having trouble with. I hope you understand.”

“I do. I absolutely do. I was skeptical myself at first, and most COTA staff and settlers seem to carry a bit of skepticism before they make their first jump. But, when you are suddenly looking down on an unfamiliar planet from orbit when you were sitting here just a second earlier, it gets harder to deny the POP.”

“Hmm,” said Remy. “Unless the it’s just somebody messing with my mind.”

“Some people think that too. I understand there were still people who believed the Earth was flat well into the 21st Century. Some people aren’t going to ever believe, but they can still have a fantastic new life. I don’t see that belief is all that important.”

“So you believe?”

“Nothing else makes any sense.”

“Hmm. And all this equipment. Is it really necessary? It seems like overkill.”

“You may still be thinking in terms of traditional spaceship payloads, where a bigger payload means needing a bigger rocket,” said Major Wambui. “With POP, payload is irrelevant. When you move with the will of God, size doesn’t matter.”

“Let’s say I buy that argument,” Remy countered. “Why send so many people at one time--is it ten thousand?--when a smaller group could do the initial set-up and send for the rest once everything is in place, once you know if it will work.”

“Ten thousand is our smallest settlement,” said the Major. “The colony you will travel with is thirty thousand. I don’t know the details, but COTA anthropologists and economists say that the number of people has been established to sustain a standard of living comparable to what the settlers were used to on Earth. In this case, we are sending a small city.”

“Long ago,” she continued, “back in the late 20th Century, the standard thinking was that, in the absence of FTL ships, humanity might gradually diffuse outward from Earth, using resources from the Moon, asteroids, and other planets to build the necessary infrastructure for space migration as they pushed out farther and farther. At some point in that process, they would build a ship large enough to hold 500 people and send it on the long journey to another star. At that time, 500 people was what anthropologists thought to be a potentially sustainable population, but it’s still too few to support the division of labor needed for a modern economy.”

“If I remember a collection of papers from a 1983 conference on interstellar migration I skimmed recently,” said Remy, “a small population cannot support a dentist, or a cobbler. Settlers have to be jacks of all trades.”

Major Wambui nodded. “Exactly! That was the Los Alamos conference. And where you don’t have such specialists, the standard of living would be expected to fall once the store of resources the settlers brought with them was gone. The colony would go through a period of resource scarcity, which wouldn’t be fun. Moreover, it could threaten survival.”

“So you send a small city with everything needed.”

“We send a small city.”

“Are cross-dressers a specialty?” Remy wondered.

The Major laughed. “Got a few of those too. Settlements are designed to reflect normal human society as it is, not as would-be dictators would like it to be. We have rules prohibit trying to impose an artificial structure on settlement society.”

“Which is where the SPS comes into play,”

“Yes, although we also provide protection from natural hazards that might have been overlooked during the exhaustive screening of the planet and the more immediate area surrounding the settlement site.”

“Talk to me about that screening, girl,” prompted Remy. “How’s it done.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll leave that part of the story to the COTA planetary exploration team leader. He can do a much better job of answering your questions. And here’s our transport.”

She pointed as the E-VTOl slowed and began a descent towards the top corner of one of the larger bulks. To Remy’s eye, the structure looked to be easily 100 meters tall, and the dimensions of the top were roughly a square of 1,000 meters per side. Dust scattered as the craft settled onto a bare patch of metal created as the n-tech covering moved aside. The bare patch then lowered them into a cavernous bay filled with the vehicles that would accompany the settlers--there were hundreds, including E-VTOLs, ground cars, and construction vehicles of various types and sizes. All were secured to the floor with clamps.

“It’s big in here,” Remy commented, “but it looks smaller than the outside. Is the ship compartmentalized?”

“Indeed. This transport has a total volume of around one hundred million cubic meters, but it breaks apart into smaller compartments, from individual living compartments of about twenty five square meters up to turnkey manufacturing shops and equipment bays.”

The Major pointed to a door. “This way. I’ll show you to your room.”

Beyond the door was a wide hallway that stretched for what appeared to be the full 1000 meter length of the transport. Parked here and there were electric carts. Major Wambui pointed to one and indicated that Remy take a seat.

“You didn’t bring a bag, did you?” said the Major as she pressed the accelerator and the cart quietly moved down the hallway.

“I travel light. I trust that god will supply what I need.”

“Good!” the Major laughed. “That attitude will take you a long way on this trip. We always trust in god. But . . .”

“But?”

“I don’t mean to make unwarranted assumptions, Colonel, but I didn’t think you were a believer.”

“I feel that I am as much of a believer as anybody is,” replied Remy without a trace of sarcasm. “Which is to say that I don’t think there is such a thing as a believer who simply believes in a supreme being without also believing that they will get something in return, and the most likely return is, always, to achieve power and wealth.”

Wambui nodded. “So you are still a skeptic?”

“With some religions,” Remy explained, “my skepticism begins instantly with the premise of one person or a small group of people being chosen as the sole recipients of the wisdom of the almighty. Why, I wonder, would a being capable of creating an entire universe be so limited in communication capability as to need to whisper in the ear of a single man--and it has always been a man, no?--with the expectation that that man can then reliably spread the word of God to the rest of humanity? Such a supreme being would have to be blind to the reality that a message spread in such a manner will invariably have both data loss and data invention, with facts deleted or added in accordance with the personal beliefs of the person sharing the message as the message is passed from mouth to ear. It is human nature that, individually and in homogenous groups, we distort reality to fit our beliefs.”

“So you would see both Islam and the Church of Latter Day Saints as prime examples of such distortion of a message because the message has been passed from human to human instead of being passed directly from God to all mankind?”

Remy nodded. “I include Judaism and Christianity as examples as well. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the the Torah and the Bible, include the story of Moses climbing Mount Sinai to personally--and individually, of course--receive the Ten Commandments, unseen by prying eyes. Moses then shared these commandments with his people, claiming them to be the word of God, and, please, pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

“Human nature makes it much more likely that these messages were crafted to fit the needs of the messenger, and that need is almost always to gain power and wealth,” Remy continued.

“Any supreme being worthy of the title would surely understand the nature of his or her creation, no? After all, he or she made people the way they are. How could it possibly be a surprise to realize that if you tell something of great value to one human, that human is, by nature, going to see if he or she can benefit from having knowledge that nobody else has?”

“You make a good argument,” Wambui agreed as she stopped the cart such that there was a closed door on Remy’s side. “But, as you know, the Church of the Allpoint has no single messager who writes the rules for the religion. In fact, there is no actual religious text to be studied and interpreted.”

“Just a Statement of Essential Truth,’” Remy replied. “And a Commitment to the Survival of Humanity. Let’s see, how does the first one go? ‘Before the beginning, there was a point that contained everything. Then, the point expanded, creating space and time. But, because a point is still a point, everything remains connected to that point. You are connected to everything, and you can go anywhere, because everything is connected.’ Did I get it right?”

Wambui, clearly amused, nodded. “Spot on!” Then she pointed to the door. “Here is your room,” she said. “In case you would care to freshen up after a long, dusty trip. And, there is an SPS n-tech uniform for your use, should you care to put it on. Oh, and Colonel?”

“Yes, love?” Remy inquired.

“If I were you, I would care to put it on. It’s not likely that we will run into any trouble, but, should the shit hit the fan . . .”

Remy grinned. “Girl, I am always excited to try out some new clothes!”

# Chapter 4: The Cardinal and the Evangelist

Characters:

Alessandro Cardinal Ricci, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Florence, who was the young priest who interviewed Maria Morelli shortly after her miraculous return from the doomed spaceship Vespucci.

Giuseppe Conti, assistant to the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Florence.

Atticus Johnson, Pastor of Christ the Conqueror Church (a megachurch with international branches) headquartered in Grapevine, Texas, and current president of Prosperity Theology International.

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“Your Eminence?”

Alessandro Cardinal Ricci, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Florence looked up from his desk to see the head of his young assistant, Giuseppe Conti, peeking in through the open doorway.

“I suppose he is here?” the Archbishop inquired without any trace of enthusiasm.

“Si,” replied Father Conti, speaking softly. “Should I ask him to wait?”

Archbishop Ricci drew a deep breath and slowly let it out, savoring the thought of delaying the inevitable. Then, with a shake of his head, he decided to get it over with.

“Send him in,” he ordered.

Father Conti nodded and left the doorway. When he returned, he was accompanied by a large man with a toothsome smile of the exact sort that the Archbishop had long ago learned not to trust. The man was dressed in an expensive charcoal suit and pointed boots made from the skin of some unfortunate lizard, and his thinning black hair was slicked back in a style long out of date.

“Your Eminence,” Father Conti said, “I present the Reverend Atticus Johnson of Christ the Conqueror Church in Grapeville, Texas.”

“Grapevine,” Atticus corrected, adding, “But what’s in a name, hey?” He then strode forward confidently and extended his hard to the Archbishop, who slowly made his way from behind the desk, his expression inscrutable. The Archbishop fully expected a bone-crushing grip and he was not disappointed as Atticus squeezed his hand and pumped it for far longer than necessary, all the while grinning a toothy grin. Also as expected, the Reverend wore gold cufflinks studded with diamonds. The look and the mannerisms of the man perfectly fit the Archbishop’s vision of how the head of a church that spread the ethically flawed gospel of prosperity theology should look and behave; the fact that he was the stereotypically overbearing and overconfident American made the package perfect.

Cardinal Ricci extended his left hand to the three chairs lined before his desk even as Reverend Johnson continued sawing away with the Cardinal’s right hand. “Please,” Ricci suggested, “Make yourself comfortable.”

“Mighty kind of you, your Eminence,” said Atticus with a final pump, his breath smelling of cloves. He settled his bulk in the center chair, spread his legs wide, and raised his arms, palms up. “And may I express my gratitude that you have welcomed me here to your beautiful city! The Lord has done wonders here, sir! Wonders indeed!”

“Yes, thank you. He had the help of many very smart, very hard-working, and very faithful people, but, yes, it is a wonder, and I feel blessed to live here, and . . .”

“And you, sir, know Maria Morelli personally,” said Reverend Johnson. It sounded almost like an accusation.

“Si,” Ricci acknowledged, suppressing a groan; at times, it seemed as though Maria Morelli had defined his life. “We both grew up here in Firenze. I did not know her well as a child, but she and her grandmother attended the church at which I served as a young priest.”

“Excellent! And you later interviewed Ms. Morelli following her unexpected return to Earth from a dying spaceship.”

The Archbishop nodded to the affirmative. “And those interviews were meticulously documented and are kept by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints for possible future use. Should somebody choose to nominate Ms. Morelli for sainthood following her death, those documents, along with many other documented actions taken during her life will be invaluable during the stages of the canonization process.”

“Yes, thank you your Eminence,” said the Reverend, his hands held up and finger splayed out. “But I am more interested in understanding your personal thoughts regarding Dr. Morelli and her miracles.” By the waving of the Reverend’s hands as he said the word miracles, the Archbishop took it to mean that the man was casting doubt on the supernatural aspect of what Dr. Morelli was doing at the Church of the Allpoint--sending humanity out to colonize other planets. For a man who viewed the mere accumulation of wealth to be a gift from God, it was an odd thing to cast aspersions out the stupendous nature of near-instantaneous transportation of people across light-years of space.

“I do not quite understand what you are asking.”

“Surely, your Eminence, there must be others who wonder if this transporting of people to planets orbiting around distant stars is the work of almighty God or just a clever manipulation of the laws of physics as understood only by Dr. Morelli.”

The Archbishop breathed slowly and chose his words carefully. “Yes, there have been many doubters, but, so far, there is nobody who has a credible alternative to the transport of Dr. Morelli back to Earth being a miracle. Moreover, my conversations with Dr. Morelli did not reveal any manipulation of the laws of physics; had there been such manipulation using methods devised by Dr. Morelli, it is my feeling that she would have taken credit for her discovery.”

“Even if that discovery resulted in the deaths of three crew members of the USS Vespucci and the loss of that very, very costly ship?” wondered Reverend Johnson. “Mind you, I am not saying that Dr. Morelli intentionally caused the deaths of her Russian crewmates, but is it not possible that she discovered a wholly new method of transport while aboard the Vespucci and that its use caused the destruction of the ship?”

“I understand what you are asking Reverend Johnson,” but I am not qualified to provide an answer. I have no training in physics. Have you reviewed the accident investigation reports written by the UN investigatory commission? I understand that Dr. Morelli cooperated fully with the investigators, many of whom had impressive technical credentials.”

Atticus Johnson leaned forward, elbows on knees, his dimpled chin resting on steepled fingers. “The pregnant Dr. Morelli cooperated, taking time off to give birth to her son, Lucca, and then she slowly reduced her contact with the commission. Is that what you mean by fully cooperated, your Eminence? And since then, Dr. Morelli has founded a completely new church that transports human colonists to distant Earth-like planets in return for a gift to the Church of the Allpoint.”

Cardinal Ricci noted that the Reverend Johnson did the hand-waving thing again with the words fully cooperated and gift.

“It is my understanding,” Ricci replied, “that the gift is compensation for the cost of the transport vessel, equipment, supplies, and the extensive training required of each colony prior to its off-Earth transport. And, of course, there are always overhead costs that must be paid for as well, for administration, facilities, and the like. I am sure you are familiar with such money matters, no?”

Reverend Johnson leaned back and smiled. “Well, we certainly don’t handle as much money as the Roman Catholic Church does, your Eminence—about three hundred billion dollars in revenues annually, no?—but we have revenues and costs to account for.

“Yes,” agreed Cardinal Ricci. “I understand that broadcasting services worldwide is an expensive proposition. And you, yourself, travel to many of the churches, do you not? Traveling to Rio de Janiero, Sydney, Hawaii, London, Paris, Seoul, and Cape Town is certainly expensive, I would imagine.”

“We are not in the same league with his Holiness, the Pope,” Johnson agreed, “but meeting with the faithful is a vital part of our then mission, as I am sure you would agree. Now, to get back to the matter of Dr. Morelli and the Morelli Miracle, what I was hoping to get a better understanding of is your personal assessment of the woman. Do you trust her?”

“I have no reason to not trust her,” the Cardinal responded. It was not quite the answer the other man was looking for, but neither man expected total frankness in this conversation. “She answered my questions, and I assume that she was truthful in what she said. Moreoever, I spoke with several of her former classmates—here in Florence and in Padua—and I found nothing that speaks to a history of prevarication.”

“So you believe that she prayed her way off a spaceship and was transported here?”

“I have no reason not to believe. You have seen the videos I presume?”

Reverend Johnson sniffed and leaned back in his chair. “It is not difficult to create a fake video.”

“No, but many of the eyewitnesses were interviewed after the event—some by me—and they all attest to the authenticity of what they recorded that fateful day.”

“A good illusionist can trick people into believing what their eyes see,” Johnson countered. “It is simply a matter of making sure they do not look where they should not.”

“I am not an illusionist,” the Cardinal replied. “I would not know about such things.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Reverend Johnson chuckled, rose, and extended his hand to Cardinal Ricci. “Your Eminence, it has been a pleasure, but I think that I have learned what I needed to learn here, and I have an appointment with Luca Morelli shortly. Thank you!”

The Cardinal stood, shook Johnson’s hand, and almost smiled. “I am sure you will find the young man most interesting; he is undoubtedly blessed with his mother’s intellectual prowess when it comes to science, and he was broadly trained in the humanities. I myself was one of his tutors on the history of Roman Catholocism, and we have had many interesting conversations since then.” He paused and then added, “You know how to get to Allpoint Cathedral, yes?” The Cardinal look at Father Conti, who had returned to the doorway as he heard the meeting drawing to a close.

“I have a driver,” Johnson replied.

The Cardinal raised an eyebrow. “A driver? Really? One really hears of such a thing these days.”

“Well,” replied Johnson, “I am a bit of an anachronism in many ways. Arrivederci your Eminence!”

The Reverend Johnson spun on his heel and walked out. Outside, he strode briskly to a large black sedan with tinted windows. As he neared, a driver dressed in a black suit and black shirt with a white tie emerged and opened passenger door.

“Take me to the place where miracles happen, Jimmy,” the Reverend ordered.

# Chapter 4: Planetfall

Had it not been for the sudden loss of gravity, Remy Moreau might have assumed the change in view shown by the SPS ready room wall display was no more than a cut-away from one camera to another. One instant, he had been looking out at a dry African Plane. In the next instant, he was looking at a planet, [Kepler-452b](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kepler-452b) (nickname: [Coroscant](https://www.google.com/search?q=coruscant&safe=strict&client=ubuntu&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjj4Ib7pJHhAhWCiYMKHYHDA3oQ_AUICSgA&biw=1366&bih=608&dpr=1)), surrounding by black sky while his stomach tried to escape his body and his arms floated up. The safety hardness extruded by his seat kept him security strapped in place, but he felt his breakfast rising. He swalled hard, closed his eyes, and centered himself for several seconds. When he opened his eyes again, he was back in control of his stomach.

“Damn!” he said. “I didn’t feel anything at all. It always like that?”

To his right, Major Wambui smacked the crossed straps of her hardness with an open palm to release herself and floated gently into the air above her seat. “Always,” she replied. “Everybody expects some kind of trip down a colorful wormhole—or something along those lines--but there’s nothing—just a new view and weigthlessness.”

To Remy’s left, the sounds of retching indicated that his was not the only breakfast that sought its freedom. He looked over to see several SPS personnel vomiting. Some had been able to disgorge their stomach contents into plastic bags, but most had not, and the results were floating in globules that wandered slowly about the room.

“It usually takes a few trips to get used to it,” the Major explained. “I was puking my guts out until the fifth or sixth jump. Now, I could eat a steak dinner with all the trimmings, jump, and ask for dessert.” She looked at her tall visitor with admiration. “You handled it well. Not bad for a rookie.”

“Sugar, I’ve flown in reduced gravity airplanes more than a few times,” Remy revealed. “I got experience with this shit.”

“Bang there,” Major Wambui said, pointing to where the hardness formed an “X” on Remy’s chest. “I’ll walk you through the preparations for landfall.”

Remy did as instructed. He floated up behind the Major, who pushed off from the back of her chair and floated towards the door, swerving here and there to avoid floating vomitus. Once in the corridor, they floated past a couple of doors and then swung through the third door into a large control room containing many visual displays watched over by personnel strapped to chairs behind rows of control consoles[[2]](#footnote-3). At the back of the room was a single large console at which were seated two women and a man; the Major made her way to this console.

“M. Mayor,” said the Major to the woman in the center seat. “SPS is readying for landfall.” Remy nodded at Mayor Matsuko Ito, with whom he had spoken extensively prior to the jump. He was pleased to note that the mayor was a bit green about the gills and that there were small globules of vomitus drifting about the room. As he watched, one globule drifted against a wall and was instantly absorbed. *Damn that n-tech shit is cool!* He thought to himself. What was vomit now would probably end up being regenerated into food, water, and other necessary life supplies for this colony. Little was wasted.

Major Wambui and Remy took stations adjacent to, and to the right of, Mayor Matsuko’s, joining Captain Jaali Njeri, who had staffed the SPS console during the jump. The captain was as tall as Remy but thinner, having the build of a distance runner, but Remy knew from their initial handshake that Jaali Njeri did not lack strength, and the man’s Maaori background made him well prepared for survival in a challenging environment.

Mayo Ito’s assistant, flight director Kosuke Nakamura, called out the console names, and the leader at each replied with a status:

“Navigation!”

“Navigation Control!”

“Guidance!”

“Guidance is go!”

“Communications!”

“Communications is go!”

“Environment!”

“Environment is go!”

“Transport is go!”

“Ground!”

“Ground is no-go. Repeat, Ground is no-go! Indigenous herbavores moving across the LZ.”

Major Wambui and Captain Njeri chuckled in unision as Mayor Ito turned her head in their direction.

“Major?” the mayor inquired.

“On it!” Major Wambui responded, as both she and Captin Njeri banged their harnesses open and floated above their chairs.

“Might as well come along,” the major said to Remy. “I think you will find it interesting.”

*More interesting than being weightless in a giant box*, Remy thought to himself, and he joined the two SPS officers in a short journey down the outside corridor to a small hanger that contained three SPS E-VTOL craft anchored to the desk. The trio entered the first craft and strapped in, then Major Wambui powered up the craft and issued a command.

“Prep for hover 1000 meters over LZ,” she stated.

Remy felt the engines start and spin up to speed, but the craft remained locked in place while the major and the captain checked the instruments.

Satisfied that the craft was ready, Major Wambui issued a second command. “Simultaneous release and transport!”

Somewhat conditioned by the sudden relocation from Earth to orbit around Coroscant, Remy Moreau was nevertheless not entirely prepared to suddenly find himself a thousand meters above ground and just below a layer of cumulus clouds spitting rain upon a tableau not that different, from this distance, than where he had started. The E-VTOL’s engines complained for several seconds as the craft reacted to the sudden turbulence, but then it settled into a smooth descent that took the trio down in a spiral that gave them a broad view of the red-dirt Landing Zone and the surroundings.

“Look there!” said Njeri.

The Major and Remy followed the Captain’s arm to where many still-distant forms were moving across the LZ in prodiguous numbers.

“Like a herd of Wildebeest,” Njeri pronounced.

Indeed, as the craft continued down to no more than two or three hundred meters, Remy saw that the beasts, many of whom were now reacting to the presence of the E-VTOL in panic, even resembled the Wildebeest of Afrika to a certain extent, with horns and ragged manes. However, they appeared to be somewhat larger, perhaps nearer in size to the the American bison.

“We call them Wildebuffalo,”Major Wambui explained. “Our preparation teams have shown that they can be domesticated.”

As the E-VTOL came to a landing twenty meters from the packed surface of the LZ. The trio released their harnesses and clambered out of the craft. “They come to the LZ to lick the salts in the compacted soil, “ Captain Njeri stated, “So we have to chase them away long enough for the transport to land.”

“Feels like I’m wearing a pack,” Remy observed as he moved about.

Wambui nodded. “Garvity is 1.4 Earth standard. Early estimates from exo-planet exploration indicated that it might be as high as 1.7, but it’s still noticable when you start moving around. It takes a few weeks to become fully adjusted.”

“Girl, I’m just thinking about how nice my calves will look living here,” Remy replied, and then he looked at the herd of Widebuffs ambling along the LZ and licking the surface. “So how do we chase them away? Do we shoot at them?”

“Nah, man, we just scare them away,” said Captain Njeri as he removed his SPS rifle from the folds of his n-tech uniform. It was remarkablly small as assault weapons go, looking a bit like the old Belgian [FN F2000](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FN_F2000), but without any magazine. One rumor had it that SPS weapons manufactured their own ammunition in some mysterious way. However, all COTA technology was closely guarded, and the SPS weapons were coded for personal use. Another rumor had it that in the few instances in which an SPS weapon had been lifted from SPS personnel, the weapon soon changed into a useless puddle of inert pellets.

But what Njeri’s rifle did next was just as remarkable as far as Remywas concerned: it elongated and changed into a long spear. At the same time, the captain’s uniform changed into a red Shuka adorned with chains of jewelry, his boots transformed into sandals, and he was also holding a small brightly colored shield. The SPS captain had become a Maaori herdsman.

As Remy stood there, gobsmacked by what he was seeing, Major Wambui followed the lead of her captain and also transformed into a Maaori herder. She then pointed to several similarly clad figures in the distance, on the other end of the LZ. Together, the group began whistling and banging spears against shields as they moved towards the beasts, who grunted and sulkily moved away from the herders.

“What do I do?” Remy complained, pointing down to his camo uniform. I got no spear or shield, and I don’t know how change these ugly clothes into something presentable!”

“I got you covered,” Major Wambui said. “Your kit is slaved to mine, so I just need to . . . there.”

Remy had the startling sensation of several somethings crawling across his skin. As he looked down, his uniform turned into a red Shuka, spear, and shield. However, instead of the sandals worn by Wambui and Njeri, he suddenly had red knee-high boots with a thick spiked heel suitable for the terrain.

“Oh, now we are talking, sister,” he said to the major with a huge grin, and then he banged spear against shield and joined the others.

In a few minutes, the red-clad herders had moved the Wildebuff a hundred meters or so from the LZ. Major Wambui spoke briefly into her uniform’s comm link, and seconds later the LZ was covered by the hulking mass of the COTA transport vessel and Remy felt the breeze of displaced air roll past. “In-fucking-credible,” he whispered.

“Just the power of prayer,” Major Wambui replied softly over his commlink. “But I still have the same reaction each time I see it work.”

CONTINUE OR END HERE?

# Chapter 5: ?

1. Think accordion. Not sure what I was thinking, but accordion popped into my head at one point. A large mass might interfere with the negative mass required by the drive. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See <https://arstechnica.com/science/2012/10/apollo-flight-controller-101-every-console-explained/> for a reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)