**Chapter Seven: The Storm Brews Part II**

I was having a wonderful dream involving my high school crush Mindy, her best friend Kate, not a lot of clothing, and a whole lot of whipped cream when I was woken up by an annoying beeping sound that was coming from my computer.

This wasn’t the first time that I had fallen asleep at my workstation. My work wasn’t exactly the most exciting line of work in the world. Sure, being a science officer in a great armada that was travelling across the universe may sound interesting, but it was the kind of job where you would have to spend hour after hour staring at a screen and looking at page after page of numbers and graphs. Although we were given the name “science officer”, we did very little actual science. Most of our work consisted of analyzing data and writing reports for the higher ups. It was an incredibly boring job so it was not surprising that I had fallen asleep on the job.

I wanted to do nothing more than to shut the computer up so that I could go back to my dream but the multiple exclamation marks that were flashing on the screen where telling me that there was no more chance of me finishing that dream, so I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, picked up my spectacles from the desk where they had fallen, and tried to focus on the flashing screen. Once the blurry screen came back into focus, what I saw made me question whether I had really woken up from my dream.

I knew for a fact that I was on a ship that was several light-years away from my home planet, yet my computer was telling me that it was picking up images that were almost identical to earth-prime on the short wave antenna. To make matters worse, the data on my computer screen seemed to be indicating that these images were being transmitted from a drone that I was sure that I had lost when I maneuvered it too close to a black hole during an experiment.

I carefully analyzed the data being transmitted and discovered small inconsistencies that showed that the planet I was looking at wasn’t actually earth-prime or any of the other home planets that we had colonized, but it shared too many similarities with earth-prime for it to be a coincidence; the same seven continents, the same moon, the same oceans, the same islands. The differences were also pretty obvious; the barely existent ozone layer, the giant storms blanketing the planet, the strangely lit ionosphere. The place looked like a post-apocalyptic version of earth-prime.

At first I thought that something had happened to earth-prime while the armada was away, but the information just didn’t add up. There were a couple of space stations and artificial satellites orbiting around the planet, but they weren’t nearly as numerous as they should have been. They were also one or two generations more primitive than the models that we currently use. I attempted to establish contact with them, but they didn’t respond when I hailed them using our established emergency channels. What this told me was that they were not part of our federation.

They were aliens.

There were special protocols in place to quickly report if any signs of extra-terrestrial life were discovered. I was feeling a little surreal as I became the first person in history to trigger those protocols.

I had barely finished typing the report when it was immediately flagged by my supervisor. He came running to my workstation, and after seeing what was on the screen, he dragged me out of my chair and led me through a maze of corridors without saying so much as a single word to me.

We went to a part of the ship that I have never been to before and he rudely shoved me through a pair of thick looking blast doors. Inside, I came face to face with a group of people that I had only ever seen on TV and computer screens; the Council of Twelve.

First from the left was Rook, the head of mining and resource extraction. He was a large, muscular, bald man who looked like he could crush rocks with his bare hand. Next to him was Dr. Synthia Green, the head of agriculture, horticulture and botanical terraforming. She was a pretty, willowy, blonde woman with a kind smile on her face. She always looked so gentle and soft, I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who had a massive crush on her. Next to her was Engineer Clark Ignatious. He was the head of the teams that were responsible for the running and maintenance of all the reactors and engines of all the ships in the armada. Physically, he was a well-built man with pale skin and flaming red hair. To his right stood was a woman who was simply known by the moniker “thousand eyes” or “eyes” for short. She was in charge of a network of spies and informants that spanned the entire armada. She was a short woman who wore a skin tight, black, leather body suit that accentuated her obscenely voluptuous body. Although her body was on display for anybody to drool over, her face was covered by a featureless, black, full-face mask. Right next to her stood Cedric Raymond, head of sanitation and water resources. He was a pudgy little man with greasy black hair who a strange fondness for colorful Hawaiian shirts. He looked especially comical and out of place because he was standing next to Dr. Rita Glass, a six foot tall statuesque beauty with silver hair, cold grey eyes and pale skin which combined to make her look like a statue made of ice. I guess it was fitting that the woman that was nicknamed “the ice queen” would be the head of the department of cryogenics.

Next to her was a man who seemed to be the center of attention and someone who was used to things being that way, Admiral Aeolius Sinclair the third. Not only did he personally pilot our flag ship, he was also the leader of our entire operation. He was a fit, attractive, middle aged man. The silver streak that ran through his jet black hair made him look distinguished instead of old. To his right was a tiny woman who was nearly vibrating with excess energy. She was Veronica Thorgood, head of the department of alternative energy. Many people compared her with a chipmunk which had drunk Red-bull and refer to her by the nick name “Sparky”. Trying to stay as far away from the over enthusiastic little woman as possible were our heads of security; Captain Luke Copperfield who was the head of defense and Amelia Shearer who was in charge of the Sword Wings, a battalion of military ships that escorted the armada. As you would expect, they were a pair of no-nonsense soldiers in crisp green uniforms. The penultimate person from the right was the boss of my boss, Professor Samuel Priest. He was a scrawny little man with a head of completely silver hair. He was the only one of the twelve people there who was ignoring us. Instead of staring at us curiously like the others were doing, he was typing furiously on a computer. The final person on the Council of Twelve was Dr. Lara Blackstone. She wore many hats including but not limited to head of the coroner’s office, head of the bio-warfare department, and head of bio-engineering. She was a quiet, reserved woman who hardly said anything to anyone, but she had the scariest reputation from the whole bunch.

I finished taking in all these legendary figures and as I was observing them, they were doing the same thing to me. Finally, the silence was broken by Admiral Sinclair who chuckled and said, “I’ve been in this service for well over two decades now and I have heard almost every emergency protocol in the books, but I think I speak for everybody here when I say, what the hell is emergency protocol K-12?”

Professor Priest didn’t even look up from what he was doing as he replied in a monotonous voice, “Protocol K-12 is the set of guidelines which were set in place in case of extra-terrestrial contact of an unknown nature. It is not to be confused with K-13 which is triggered in case of hostile alien encounters or K-11 which is only triggered in case of a peaceful or benign encounter. K-12 means that we are not sure what the intentions of the other party are so we act cautiously but not aggressively.”

The pudgy little head of sanitation, Cedric Raymond, started laughing when he heard that. “Aliens? That’s a good one Professor! And here I thought you didn’t have a sense of humor.”

He continued to laugh until Captain Copperfield smacked his balding little head. Copperfield took out a napkin and wiped the grease that Cedric’s hair had left on his hand. “He is not kidding you idiot. This is potentially a very dangerous situation and we do not have time for your silly antics so please shut up. Professor, what do you have for us?”

The Professor continued to type away as he answered, “The young science officer standing in front of you discovered something quite interesting about two hours ago. He discovered an inhabited alien planet with one the drones that he was piloting.” A holographic image of the strange planet that looked like earth was suddenly displayed at the center of the room. The people who didn’t know what it was, which was everybody apart from me, the professor, and my boss, just stared at it quizzically.

Finally, Admiral Sinclair cleared his throat and said, “I think you have made some sort of mistake Professor. That is not some alien planet. That is Earth.”

The Professor just shook his head. ”That is not Earth, or at least our Earth. This is a live stream from the drone in question. Ignoring the fact that we are light years away from Earth and that it is impossible to communicate across such distances, there are some glaring inconsistencies which indicate that this is not our Earth.”

One by one, he listed out the various differences that I had noted earlier and a few that I hadn’t, but he didn’t stop there.

“The images that you are seeing are being transmitted from a drone that we had thought we had lost since it was sucked into a black hole. The implications of that are staggering. A lot of theories exist about the interaction of black holes and the space-time continuum, so I took a closer look at this ‘alien planet’ using some secret equipment that we have hidden in all our drones and discovered that the ‘aliens’ on this planet were actually human. You might be thinking that this proves that this is Earth but on the contrary, it proves that it isn’t because I scoured this planet and found fifteen people that couldn’t be on our Earth right now.”

Fifteen faces replaced the image of the planet at the center of the room. I was shocked because one of the faces was identical to my own. There were some minor differences here and there but it was obviously my face.

For the first time, the professor looked up from his computer and he had a look of unbridled excitement on his face.

“These fifteen people are on the surface of that planet right at this very moment but we know that they can’t be on Earth because they are aboard our ship at this very moment. In fact, one of them is right before your very eyes.”