

VATICAN AMBASSADOR

VATICAN ASSASSIN: PART TWO

Mike Luoma _____

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VATICAN AMBASSADOR: VATICAN ASSASSIN PART TWO.

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FIRST SMASHWORDS EDITION

Dedicated to my Mom, for all her love and belief.

1Luke 21: 25-26

There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the turmoil of the ocean and its waves; men fainting away with terror and fear at what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

Chapter One

The Moon, our bright orb of light in the night sky. On clear nights, you can once again see distant sunlight glint off Lunar Prime's main dome on the Moon's surface.

There are clear skies on Earth again, now, through which to see the bright and full moon. And a new dome covers the atrium of the moon's main city, once again reflecting the sunlight.

A haze of smoke, debris and dust filled the atmosphere after the United Islamic Nation's surprise attacks on Christmas Day, almost three months ago. The Earth suffered nearly two months of worldwide, unnatural clouds and sooty rain. The constant rain dampened the spirits of those on the ground struggling to rebuild their cities.

The people of Lunar Prime struggled to rebuild the settlements on the Moon as well. The original dome and a great deal more of Lunar Prime had been reduced to rubble by the UIN attack.

The attack: Surprise gave the attacking UIN fleet an advantage it lacked in technology. Most UIN ships lack Transpace drives.

Transpace drives allow United Trade Zone ships to travel in a flash between Earth and Mars. The UTZ uses this tech to their commercial and military advantage. It had given them an edge in their ongoing war

with the UIN.

However; unknown to the UTZ, the UIN had managed to acquire a few Transpace drives, through theft and the black market. The UIN equipped their largest ships with those drives. Those large ships then became carriers for smaller craft. But most of the UIN fleet relied on the old mag lev propulsion system for travel from Mars to Earth and back.

For their Christmas raids, the UIN used their carriers to ferry fighter-bombers into Earth orbit. Other UIN ships used the old mag-lev highway to travel from Mars to Earth orbit, leaving early to meet up with the carriers.

UIN forces massed and then attacked, splitting off to hit targets on Earth, in orbit, and on the moon. The UIN threw everything they had into the attacks: missiles, small asteroids, and lasers. Everything.

The UIN ships did heavy damage to their targets before UTZ ships could engage and destroy them. The surprised UTZ forces retaliated, pushed the UIN fleet back and finally repelled the attacks, but the damage was done.

Besides punishing Lunar Prime, the UIN hit many major cities on Earth: Los Angeles, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Ankara, Moscow, Pretoria, Rome and the Vatican, London, New York, Santiago, and more. They wiped out two of the orbiting stations used by the UTZ as staging platforms, and completely destroyed the private station of Ishmael Takayama, a UTZ CEO Council member.

Two and a half months have now passed. The full moon again lights up the night. The sky is once again clear. The Earth has proven resilient once again, cleansing the pollution of war from her skies. Her people have proven resilient as well.

Everyone left alive has been rebuilding: in the cities on Earth, on the stations in orbit, and at Lunar Prime on the moon.

Survivors on the moon faced many challenges: rebuilding airtight tunnels and structures, conserving resources, finding ways to replenish supplies, just keeping themselves alive over the last two and a half months was in itself a challenge.

The Lunar Prime government directed the rebuilding. Work on the dome was its own separate project, the top priority. After the dome, the first major priority was spaceport reconstruction. They rebuilt ship berths as fast as they could, so supply ships could land, dock and unload.

After the spaceport came the city's infrastructure: living quarters, kitchens, and entertainment spaces for the residents and workers doing the hard work and heavy lifting. Rebuilding the living spaces helped life on Lunar Prime slowly get back to "normal".

Some of the construction on Lunar Prime has gone beyond simple rebuilding. New defensive batteries have been built at strategic points around the city. Anti-ship guns and missile emplacements now blossom like deadly gray flowers, rising up from the network of tunnels, domes and buildings that make up the unconventional city of Lunar Prime.

The Vatican Mission at Lunar Prime is now a small fortress, with its own artillery emplacement and defensive batteries, reinforced walls and security airlocks.

The original Vatican Mission on Lunar Prime was a prime target in the UIN Christmas Raids. Its buildings were leveled; church personnel present at the time were slaughtered.

The new Vatican Mission looks like it could stand up to pretty much anything thrown at it, more fortress than mission.

Reconstruction continues underneath the new main dome of Lunar Prime. The government rebuilt the dome's main structure, replaced the dome itself, and cleared away debris. But the government also monopolized the corps of contractors and workmen available on the moon during the first two months of rebuilding.

In the last two weeks, more and more workers and craftsmen have been freed up to work on other projects. In the last two weeks, some of the merchants who owned and operated the businesses that once circled the atrium on the three floors under the dome have returned. They've begun to rebuild and reopen their stores, restaurants, bars and other businesses. There's construction activity, attempts to get back to normal.

Two restaurants are open with limited menus. One of the clothing stores has managed to restock and

reopen. The picture remains incomplete. Some storefronts remain dark. But rebuilding continues. In the center of the atrium, new vegetation has been planted, just starting to grow. The great old trees that looked like “giant green scrub brushes” are gone, lost to space when the dome was breached in the attacks, along with the rest of the vegetation that flourished in and around the atrium’s central pool. The government has planted new trees and bushes, trying again. Scrawny saplings now quiver where the trunks of the old trees once sank their roots.

It’s Saint Patrick’s Day 2110. The leader of the reconstruction, Marc Edwards, the Governor of Lunar Prime, has declared the day a holiday for everyone involved in the rebuilding effort... and there are at least four bars open on the Moon in which to celebrate!

BC smiles and sips his pint of dark ale as he sits by himself at McGrady’s, an “Irish Pub” that opens out onto the atrium under the main dome of Lunar Prime.

McGrady’s was one of the first bars rebuilt out of the wreckage after the Christmas War, one of the first commercial establishments to again make a go of it. The bar opened shortly after the main dome was repressurized, about a month ago.

It’s good to be celebrating something, even if it’s just Saint Patrick’s Day...

And what a perfect place to be today... I wonder if the proprietor’s really Irish? Or if he even knows anyone named McGrady... Not that anyone really cares right now!

BC’s table is near the back wall of the pub, a perfect vantage point for people watching. The bar is crowded. He can see the relief in folks’ faces, sees flashing signs of hope, even happiness, in the eyes of the people in the crowd of drinking revelers.

Everyone needs this! We’ve all been working so hard to rebuild over the last couple of months. So much destroyed... so many dead... so much changed now, forever... I miss The Cardinal, I miss Swan. She was annoying... but that doesn’t mean she deserved to die.

Man, two months. Two months can go by before you know it, when you’re busy. When all of your time is occupied, there’s never enough of it. And it’s gone before you know it.

That and every year seems to go by faster as I get older...

Huh. I don’t think anybody here is Irish, never mind catholic, heh! Funny thing, guess everybody’s Irish on Saint Patrick’s Day. Even on the moon...

“Ambassador? You ready for another one?” A young guy in his twenties wearing a yarmulke nearly bumps into BC’s chair as he offers to buy him a beer.

Who’s he? Let’s see, Simon something, maybe? Can’t be sure...

“What? No, no thanks, not yet, but thank you!”

BC smiles as he begs off the offer.

“Happy Saint Patrick’s Day, Father!” the man says as he bumps his way back into the crowd, presumably heading for the bar.

Yup, everybody’s Irish today. Happy Saint Patrick’s Day, indeed. Happy Day Off... finally.

Stroke of genius on Edwards’ part. Universal day of rest and relaxation well deserved. Governor’s decree.

Hmmm... speaking of Edwards... He should be here soon. Poor guy could probably use a drink. He needs to let off some steam. I’m sure he regrets calling for a new election, now. He thought he’d have their support after all this...

It’s as if he wanted to be legit, to be really elected governor. Ironic... and crazy. Crazier still, he’s proven he can do the job. Just look around!

We’ve done okay rebuilding this city in space. The main dome was open and functional faster than I thought would be possible. We’re okay... so long as this ceasefire holds. We haven’t done too badly.

Amazing what you can accomplish when you set your body and mind to something. There’s more to do, sure. But look at what we’ve done! The crews who helped me rebuild the Vatican mission worked endless hours and made it come together incredibly fast...

Simon, that’s that guy’s name! I remember now! It was Simon! He was the head of the electricians, I remember... “Workin’ for the ambassador”... that was him! He always said that

when he saw me coming. Simon wanted to buy the "Ambassador" a beer! Nice...

Some ambassador...

Ambassador by default.

"Campion? You still alive? Good. Anyone else? No? Okay, then, you're the ambassador. Rebuild the mission; let us know how it goes. Bye, now."

Or something like that.

Suddenly, Pope Linus makes me ambassador. Then he leaves me on my own. No word yet, to this very day.

Although... it has been nice to be able to build the Vatican Mission to my own specs. No one from the Vatican to tell me what to do... I just do it!

Edwards has helped a lot. The mission is more fortified than it used to be. There's a hell of a lot more security now. We should be able to withstand attacks, maybe defend ourselves. I hope.

Sure, there's a ceasefire now, but how long can that last? Probably just until each side builds enough new ships to do it all over again.

So much destroyed. So many killed. So much changed. Hell, I'm saying Mass on Sunday these days... said Mass this morning. For the "Holy Day." And here I am drinking with the good folks of Lunar Prime this afternoon. The governor's stopping by later... I've become pretty respectable for a former assassin!

I don't know for sure about the "former" part. That's my assumption. But Peter's dead. The OPO was his baby. I don't know if "Linus" is aware of all of our nefarious activities...

I'm not sure I really care to continue with them, anyway. I used to be able to do my job because the people who died deserved to die. Lately, a lot of people who don't deserve to die are dying... all around me!

That ain't right.

I'm beginning to think it all started with Meredith McEntyre.

Somehow, she didn't deserve to die.

Now we're all paying for it.

But it's not my fault!

That was an assignment!

But, somehow... everything since then has gone wrong.

BC drains his pint glass.

Guess I could use another pint... no real hurry, though. The bar looks pretty crowded at the moment.

BC looks away from the bar, past the crowd, out through the pub's windows into the atrium. The main dome is brightly lit, brighter than it used to be.

The old trees used to take the harsh angles off the light and cast shadows, but they're all gone, now.

The new growth is just beginning to blossom and thrive. The new saplings don't yet cast the shadows the old growth once did.

I can't believe they had the atrium open a month ago. Just a month and a half, that's it! That's how long it took them to rebuild. That's determination!

"I can't believe it's already March!" Governor Marc Edwards says, pulling up a chair at the table across from BC.

"I didn't see you come in," BC says. "March is already half gone. You've gotta catch up, Marc!" he says, giving Edwards a hard time.

The governor gives him a humorously cold stare. BC laughs. He raises his empty glass to the governor.

"Good holiday!"

"Thanks. It was one of my aides' ideas, but it seemed like a good one," he admits, smiling. He looks tired, but happy.

"I like it. People need something to help them relax. Step back from the work," BC says, looking around the barroom.

“Yeah. It’s good to have an excuse to take a day off. We *have* got a lot done,” Edwards concedes. He notices BC’s empty pint glass, “You need another one?”

Guess I look parched...

“Sure,” BC agrees.

Edwards gets up and heads for the bar. BC watches people part around the governor, as they realize he’s among them.

People slap him on the back, shake his hand, and clear the way to the bar for him. “I guess rank has its privileges. Remember to vote, huh,” Edwards says to the laughing crowd around him as they move en masse to the bar.

Nice to see smiles on people’s faces. There’s been so much death. Everyone’s been grim, but determined. To rebuild. To carry on. Not to give up. Try to remember to forgive ourselves for still being alive when so many we know are dead... Don’t let the enemy win, let’s rebuild again, like a mantra these last two months. That’s part of why Edwards called for an election... to keep us real and honest.

The governor returns with two pints.

“Nice to see some smiles on faces for a change, huh, BC?” Edwards asks. He hands BC his glass.

“Certainly is, Marc. Good job putting them there,” BC congratulates him.

“I can’t take all the credit,” Edwards demurs, shaking his head.

“Why not take some!” BC suggests. He raises his glass for a toast. “Cheers! Here’s to rebuilding Lunar Prime!” BC proposes. Edwards raises his pint.

“To rebuilding Lunar Prime,” Edwards agrees.

“Amen!” BC says, and he clinks his glass into Edwards’. They sip from their pints.

“So. You hear anything new?” Edwards asks.

“Nothing,” BC shakes his head. “The OPO may be O-V-E-R.”

“Where does that leave you?”

“I don’t know. Ambassador to Lunar Prime, I guess. I’m here, I’ve got the title. I’ve tried to act like one,” BC tells him.

“Do these new guys... does this ‘Pope Linus’ know you?” Edwards asks him.

“Kinda. I guess so. I mean, they made me ambassador...” BC shrugs.

“Yeah, because you were here,” Edwards says needling him. Then he gets more serious. “And I supported it!” Edwards says with some force.

“And, again, I thank you,” BC says. He takes another sip from his pint of ale. “The last thing they said to me was, ‘Congratulations, you’re the acting ambassador from the Vatican to Lunar Prime. Rebuild the embassy, keep us informed, send back the bodies, thank you ever so much.’ I send in my reports, but I never hear anything back. No new mission, no retaliation, no regrouping, nothing.”

BC shakes his head.

“You’ve done a good job. The Vatican Mission looks good,” Edwards says, trying to encourage BC.

“Thanks. It’s its own little fortress now,” BC laughs.

He changes the subject to what he really wants to talk to Edwards about. “So... how’s your campaign coming?”

“I don’t know. He’s made it close. Polls say he could win,” Edwards says, his eyes casting down, studying the tabletop as if studying poll numbers.

“He’s a nutcase, Marc! And *you’ve* led the reconstruction!” BC says, throwing up his hands. A few heads turn towards their table. BC draws himself in, picks up his pint and takes a sip. Heads turn back away.

BC leans in towards Edwards across the table. He whispers, “I can’t believe anyone is supporting the psycho!”

“He’s built a lot of support with his neutrality campaign,” Edwards says in a low voice.

“Like you’re not fair and neutral,” BC says with a touch of sarcasm. He leans back. Edwards shakes his head.

“I’m not, BC, and you know it. And they know it,” Edwards says, a sweep of his right arm indicating the

general populace of Lunar Prime. "I'd like to be neutral. We tried to be but... the UIN attacked us, plain and simple!"

Edwards eyes grow wider, his voice louder, as he relives the attacks in his mind. "I don't *want* Lunar Prime to be neutral... but for some stupid reason *they* still expect us to be!"

Edwards notices people are leaning in, trying to listen. He calms himself down and takes a sip of his ale. BC is still angry. "I hate the way he's twisting the truth, making it sound like you caused the UIN to attack Lunar Prime by allying with the UTZ! He's twisting the whole timetable!" BC insists. "And he's using me as a symbol of the UTZ's influence. If not in public, then in private. I've heard it back from people I trust," BC tells Edwards. "I hate to say it, but I'm a liability to you, Marc... at least my friendship and counsel are."

"I've heard all that stuff, too," Edwards admits. "He never mentions you publicly, but he talks about my 'UTZ advisors' in every speech he makes. And we *are* UTZ allies now."

"Your alliance with the UTZ shouldn't hurt you," BC insists again, shaking his head.

"But it does, at least politically," Edwards says with a frown. "For all intents and purposes, we *are* neutral, even though we're now allied with the UTZ. The UTZ recognized our neutrality back in January when we signed the Lunar Free Zone Declaration, recognizing the right of the moon to remain neutral as we agreed to work more closely with the UTZ." Edwards shakes his head. "He's stirred people up, says the declaration isn't worth the paper it's printed on! He's good with the spin. I'm not."

Edwards downs the rest of his pint. "Guess I'm thirsty this afternoon. Do you know what he said this morning? He said I've made Lunar Prime a 'Provincial Capitol' for the UTZ!"

"The only thing you've made Lunar Prime is whole again," BC reassures him. "You've rebuilt the place! They won't forget that." BC stops, sips his ale again. "How many days is it until the election?" he asks Edwards, although he already knows the answer.

"Another week. Next Tuesday," Edwards answers. He tips his pint up and drains his glass.

"Well, then, here's to good luck," BC says, raising his glass. Edwards looks at his empty glass.

"Whoops! Guess I need a refill to drink to that! Be right back!" Edwards gets up to go after another beer. BC sips more of his.

These people are insane if they elect Daniel McEntyre governor over Marc Edwards... fucking ungrateful bastards! How could they work so hard with Marc to rebuild this place, only to turn it over to that asshole?

"Hey Father, how are ya? Happy Saint Patty's Day, padre!" A heavy set older man deposits another pint of beer in front of BC.

Damn... who? Stanzione! That's it...

"Why Mr. Stanzione! Thank you! Happy Saint Patrick's Day to you, too!" BC greets his beery benefactor.

"How you likin' the new quarters, Father?" Stanzione asks him.

"Just fine, Mr. Stanzione. Your men do good work!" BC smiles.

"Only the best for you, Father. Glad you're happy! Nice mass today, too."

"Thank you, Mr. Stanzione," BC says.

"Call me Frank, Father," Stanzione says to BC.

"Then thank you, Frank. And thanks for the beer, too," BC says, still smiling.

"You're more than welcome, Father! Governor," Stanzione says, as Edwards returns to the table.

"Hey Frank!" Edwards greets Stanzione with a handshake, "Happy Saint Patrick's Day!"

"Happy Saint Patrick's Day, Governor!" Stanzione says.

"Stanzione!" someone yells. More voices join in, "Hey Stanzione!" calling Stanzione back to the bar.

"Gotta go! Gentlemen," he says with a small bow. He turns and melts back into the crowd at the bar.

"Good contractor, that Frank Stanzione," Edwards says. "Does good work with those fakewood interiors."

"Yeah, he handled our interiors at the embassy... You, uh, changing the subject?" BC prods him.

"Yeah, I'd rather not think about it for now, you know?" Edwards says, rolling his eyes. "If you don't mind..."

"I understand," BC tells him, "I don't mind. Today, we drink!" BC toasts with his new brew. "To a punchy politician and a plastered priest!"

"I resemble that remark... I'll drink to that!" Edwards tilts back his glass and downs a good gulp. BC tries to match him, does an adequate job, draining about half of his pint.

Ahhh... cold, though... my teeth hurt!

What's this?

Somehow, another round has appeared upon their table. Edwards lets out a laugh as he sees the two new pints that have miraculously appeared on the table.

"Leprechauns?" Edwards asks, and giggles.

Edwards? Giggling? He must be getting drunk!

BC fakes an Irish accent, "Sure an' begorra, it's the wee folk. We call 'em that 'cause they bring us beer, and the beer makes us wee..."

Edwards, laughing, does his own bad Irish accent, "I'll drink ta that!" and drink they do.

Many more pints appear... and disappear. BC and Edwards stay until the bartender tells the crowd they don't have to go home, but they can't stay at McGrady's 'cause they're closing. They leave with the rest of the well-oiled crowd, each going off on their own drunken way.

BC only knows he made it back to his quarters because he wakes up there in the morning.

Ouch. Ouch ouch ouch. Hangovers suck... shit... what can I take? At least it's not as bad as those other headaches... hangover's almost nothing compared to those fuckers... ouch ouch okay, so hangovers suck, too, don't want you to feel neglected... I'm worrying about neglecting a headache, I must be hung-over...

BC gets up out of bed. His surroundings are blurry. He's a little dizzy. The new place does look nice. Stanzone and his crew make fakewood look like real wood. The walls of his stateroom are covered in a nice dark grain, making his stateroom look like a room in a log cabin back on earth.

Ah, the warmth of wood. It's strange how it looks so organic while it hides our state-of-the-art defense system. It really is everything I was hoping for when I designed it. Makes me proud, in a way... I may have been bragging about that at some point last night... wonder if that was wise...

Ouch ouch ouch... seems like a fuzzy bad dream... I wonder how many other good Catholics are hurting this morning after Saint Patrick's? I bet I'm not the only one... and it's probably not just Catholics... I bet everyone who wished they were Irish yesterday wishes today that they were only dreaming of drinking like Irishmen...

Chapter Two

BC finds himself wishing the next week was just a bad dream, wishing he could just wake up and have it all just go away.

Daniel McEntyre is the star of BC's nightmare. McEntyre's poll numbers are rising along with the number of veiled attacks by McEntyre on BC's influence on Edwards.

BC ducks the media, merely answering, "No comment," when they ask him to answer McEntyre's allegations. He can pretend McEntyre isn't talking about him as long as McEntyre doesn't mention BC by name.

Two days before the election, McEntyre finally begins attacking BC by name in public. It's all over the news as BC wakes up.

"We need a governor who isn't tied to the UTZ!" McEntyre's face shouts off the screen as BC tries to eat breakfast. McEntyre's a guest on "Lunar Prime Today". BC has it on in the background while he's getting ready to face the day. Suddenly it seems McEntyre's speaking right to him.

"There are influences on our current Governor. Unhealthy influences, like his advisor Bernard Campion!" BC drops his spoon into his cereal bowl with an audible plop and jingle. His jaw drops open as

McEntyre's tirade continues.

"This fake isn't even really a priest!" McEntyre shouts. "He's an agent for the OPO! That's the Office of Papal Operations... They're assassins for the Vatican! They kill people for the NcC and the UTZ!"

McEntyre shakes his fist in the air for emphasis. "He kills people, for Christ's sake!"

"So, you allege that this 'Bernard Campion' isn't a priest but an agent and that he," the news anchor pauses to double check, "is somehow manipulating Governor Edwards to get his and this 'OPO's, or the UTZ's, way?"

"I could 'allege' a lot more!" McEntyre says, but waves the thought away. "Anyone who knows me knows how I feel about Campion."

McEntyre looks right into the camera. "I know what you did, Campion! I know you..." McEntyre stops himself. "I know what you did!" he says, as he calms himself down and sits back in his seat. His interviewer comes back on after a brief awkward pause.

"Well. Daniel McEntyre is certainly a passionate man! That's all the time we have for now, I want to thank our gue..." Click. BC turns off the viewer.

That sonofabitch...

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. BC's communicator beeps with a waiting message.

"BC here, what's up..."

"Father Campion, this is 'Lunar Prime Today', do you..."

"No comment!" BC cuts the connection.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Father Campion, this is 'News...'"

"No comment!" BC snarls, cutting them off. "Communicator off!" BC commands.

"You have 24 calls queued up and waiting..." the unit informs him.

Great. This is just fucking great. More reason to hate the man! The guy's giving me a reason to come out of my semi retirement! Gotta respond somehow... not a deadly response, can't do that... yet.

BC addresses his com unit. "Answer all calls with the following message. Begin recording: Hello. This is Father Bernard Campion, the Ambassador for the Holy See, Vatican City, and his holiness Pope Linus the Second. I'm not available right now. And I will not be responding to any ridiculous allegations made by any politician who uses the news media to sully the reputations of others for their own personal political gain. Thank you. End recording."

"Recording ended. Message sent," the unit says.

"Keep using that announcement to answer all incoming messages until I tell you to change it," BC orders the unit.

"Answering incoming signals with the recorded message until further instructions," the unit informs BC.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

I thought I told that thing to... oh, it's the door. Oh no...

"Who is it?!" BC calls out.

The door speaker crackles.

"Father Campion? This is 'Lunar Prime News Service', we just want to ask you a few questions about Daniel McEntyre's allegations today that you are a..."

"No comment!" BC shouts. "Door lock secure! No interruptions! Do not disturb!"

Goddamn him!

BC paces across his stateroom.

"Com unit! Get me Governor Marc Edwards," BC barks.

"Governor's office," a young sounding male voice, not Edwards, answers.

"Governor Edwards, please. It's Bernard Campion and it's kind of important I speak to him immediately."

"Yeah, I can see why," the guy answers back.

Jeesh, a comedian... who is this kid? I don't remember him.

"Yeah, okay, please, just put me through to Edwards, okay?" BC tries asking nicely.

“He’s in a meeting right now.”

“This is an emergency!” BC stifles the urge to crawl through the com unit and strangle the kid. He tries to keep his voice even toned. “I think the governor might want to talk to me *right now*.”

“He’s talking to my dad ‘right now’. They’re busy. I’ll give him the message you called.”

“Your dad? Who is this?” BC demands.

“I don’t have to tell you,” the kid teases BC. BC scowls.

“Visual on!” BC commands. He can now see the young teen sitting at the governor’s reception desk.

“Capture and ID!” BC orders.

“Visual off! Com off,” the boy yells. The viewer blinks as the picture disappears and sound clicks off.

“Subject is a minor,” BC’s com unit tells him. “Justin Spear. Only child. Son of Julius Spears and Margaret “Maggie” Spears. Maggie Spears deceased, December 25, 2109.”

Mother died in the Christmas attacks. Don’t know the mother or the father...

Heh... I do like these new security features!

“Identify Julius Spears?” BC commands the com unit.

“Spears, Julius,” the com unit begins. “Born July 13, 2061. Earth. United States sector of Universal Trade Zone. Graduated with honors, Jersey City Polytechnic Institute for Media, May 2082. Employed by MediAdvisors of Lunar Prime.”

“MediAdvisors?” BC queries.

“Advertising agency,” the com unit informs him.

MediAdvisors? I don’t know them. Marc must have brought them in to help on the campaign. I’ll have to tell him the guy’s kid is a brat...

“Com unit, get me Marc Edwards, please,” BC asks.

“Governor’s off... oh, you again,” the kid answers, then cuts off the com.

Why you little prick...

BC hears something rattle. The sound comes again. It’s a rattle, coming from somewhere near the door to his stateroom. And again. BC places the sound.

It’s the glasses up on my shelf up next to the door, shaking together... someone must be hammering the outside door pretty hard! That’s beyond knocking!

“Com unit, get me security.”

“LSC. This is Security,” a woman answers.

“Yes, this is Father Bernard Campion, the Vatican Ambassador,” BC tells her. The glasses rattle again, louder this time. “There are people right now trying to break down the door to my stateroom, I was hoping you could send some officers over to stop them from doing that.”

“They’re trying to break into your stateroom? Right now?” the officer asks him.

Rattle.

“Right now,” BC says.

“Yeah. I can see them on our security viewer. Looks like a few media teams. We’ll clear them away for now, but you know them, they just keep coming back,” she tells BC.

“I know,” BC says with a sigh.

“Sorry,” she says. “We’ll call back when it’s all clear, Father.”

“Thank you,” BC says, and cuts the com.

Should I bother... what the fuck?

“Com unit, get me Marc Edwards, please,” BC asks again.

“Governor’s Office. Oh. Why do you keep calling?” Justin Spears asks him. “Good buh...” he’s cut off as a voice echoes in the background over the com unit, shouting, “Justin! What are you doing?”

“Visual on!” BC commands in time to see an older man who looks like the boy come into the picture.

“Who are you?” the man who must be Julius Spears asks BC over the com unit.

“I’m Father Bernard Campion, Mr. Spears. Would you please put the governor on?” BC asks. The man’s brow furrows.

“He’s not taking calls right now, Father,” Spears says tersely. “I’ll pass your message along. Good Day.” The com cuts off.

What a prick! Like father, like son, I guess! What the fuck is going on?

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

I thought I turned that off?

“What?!” BC yells out.

“Take it easy, BC. It’s me, Edwards.”

“How did you do that? Get through past my message, I mean?”

“Oh. Some kind of Governmental override, I guess. I just told the com to get me through to you. Sorry about Spears. Ad guys. You know how they are.”

“Yeah, his kid’s a real charmer, too. He cut me off, twice before,” BC tells him. “What are you doing, talking to him about the campaign?” BC asks Edwards.

“Yeah. I obviously need the help,” Edwards explains.

“Spears was a political consultant before branching out into commercial advertising. When I found out he was here on Lunar Prime, I thought I’d talk to him, see if he could offer me any advice.”

“Could he?”

“Sort of. But I’m not listening to some of his advice, or I wouldn’t be talking to *you*,” Edwards laughs.

“What? Has it come down to you not being able to talk to me? Because of McEntyre?” BC asks.

“Yeah. He’s turned you into a ‘hot potato’, Spears said. Told me I shouldn’t go anywhere near you or be seen talking to you,” Edwards tells BC.

“That’s probably good advice,” BC admits. “Thanks for ignoring it.”

“You’re welcome. But I do need you to lay low, and I can’t be seen talking to you. Not until this election is over,” Edwards breaks the news to BC. “I’m sorry, BC. You do what you have to, but I’m going to have to show everyone you aren’t somehow pulling my strings, you know?”

“It’s stupid, I know, but it’s true. Spears has it right,” BC admits with regret. “I’m just going to make a statement, and then try to ride this out and ‘lay low’ for you, like you say,” BC assures him. “I’ve been told to lay low by the best of them, trust me. I’ve got lots of practice,” BC says wryly.

“You know, Marc, I’ve gotta say one more time, you could always bring up the charge that he cheated on Meredith with that girl back on Earth...” BC suggests, already knowing the answer.

“No way!” Edwards protests. “I know, I know, you keep telling me I should, but I don’t want to go negative! Besides... how ‘come I’ve gotta remind *you* one more time that you’re a priest? You shouldn’t be sharing her information in the first place! I’m just... I don’t wanna go there. End of story, okay?”

“Okay. I just had to try one last time before I go incommunicado,” BC says.

“Thanks for understanding,” Edwards says earnestly.

“You’re welcome,” BC tells him. “Good luck, Marc. Com unit off.”

Well, fuck. This isn’t looking good. Edwards is getting desperate. Huh. Getting? He already stinks of desperation! McEntyre acts like he can smell Edwards’ fear like a dog. And Edwards won’t go on the attack...

BC’s life the next day and a half becomes a continuous game of cat and mouse with the news media: They keep trying to get him to comment on McEntyre’s allegations; he keeps dodging them. It accomplishes what McEntyre obviously hoped it would: a sideshow is created that distracts people from the real issues over the weekend before Election Day.

BC leaves his quarters to vote first thing Monday morning, Election Day. He pushes past the perching media people and walks to the polls with a parade of them trailing behind.

McEntyre set us up to lose, but good. If we had ignored him and continued to meet and strategize on the election, McEntyre would’ve been able to point and say, “There! See! They are collaborating! Edwards is in the pocket of the UTZ!” We don’t meet and he says, “See! They obviously have something to hide! They’re not meeting because of what I said! They’re pretending that Campion isn’t an advisor to Edwards! Campion’s dodging the media! That proves what I said!

Blah blah blah blah blah...

I’ve got a bad feeling about this...

“No media past this point!”

An LSC Officer barks at BC's entourage as BC approaches the polls. "You all know that," the man with the badge admonishes BC's following. "No media within one hundred meters of any polling place, that's the law!"

"Thank you, officer," BC says to the LSC. The man grunts back at him

Personable. Nice fucking guy. Least he keeps them at bay...

BC signs in, heads for the curtained voting booth, and casts his vote for Edwards. He draws back the curtain of the voting booth and looks around the polling place, looking for an exit different from the way he came in. He sees one, off across the other side of the room.

Time to escape my entourage...

BC ducks out the side door. He looks around. The media hounds seem to be unaware of this exit from the polling place. None of them are in sight.

BC jogs down the corridor towards the main dome. He makes his way over to McGrady's Pub.

Edwards is using the pub as his election headquarters for the day today and, hopefully, for his victory celebration tonight.

I might as well show up there now, and hide out in the corner. Try to hide in plain sight...

BC finds the pub nearly empty. He waits after he gets inside, listening for the door to open again behind him and the media to swarm.

There's silence.

BC smiles.

"Hey. You okay?" the bartender calls over.

"I'm okay," BC says, looking back over his shoulder.

BC stands there for a moment, still waiting for the media hounds to follow his trail into McGrady's.

Still nothing.

BC is still smiling.

"You expecting someone?" the bartender asks him.

"Oh, I hope not," BC says.

"Uh huh," the bartender grunts, "Well, so far so good, huh?"

BC laughs. "So far..."

"BC!" Edwards calls over from a table in the center of the pub. Julius Spears and his son are sitting there with him, along with two of Edward's aides. BC walks over.

"I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to be here," Spears says to BC as he reaches the table.

"Tough," BC says, dismissing the man with a word. He turns away from Spears and toward Edwards.

"Marc, I just voted and lost the media that were trailing me. Mind if I hide out here in a corner somewhere and read, or knit, or something?"

Edwards laughs. "Thanks!" He smiles. "That's the first laugh, hell, first time I've even smiled today,"

Edwards says. Then his face falls back into a frown.

"It's bad, BC. The poll we did late last night was horrible. McEntyre's gonna win, and he's probably gonna win big."

"You never know," BC cautions Edwards, tries to raise his spirits. "Maybe when people get in the booth to vote, and see both names, they'll go, 'oh yeah, Daniel McEntyre, he's that asshole' and realize they've gotta vote for you. See? It's simple."

"Damn, never realized you were such an optimist, BC," Edwards says. He laughs ironically.

Julius Spears gets up from the table. "Come on, son, we're leaving," he says to the boy. As the kid gets up, Spears turns to Edwards. "I'm not staying where my advice is clearly being ignored. Good luck, Governor."

"Thanks, Julius. I know you tried to help. Good luck with the agency."

"Right. Thank you," Spears replies. He and his son leave the pub.

"Have a seat, BC, looks like we've got the room," Edwards jokes half-heartedly.

"Actually, Marc, I wasn't kidding about hiding in the corner," BC says.

"Really?"

"Really. The media have been merciless!"

“Like you’re telling *me* anything,” Edwards says with a chuckle. “Well, go ahead, hide away.”

“Thanks for understanding, Marc,” BC says. “Hey, bartender,” he calls over. “Could I get a pint and an order of fish and chips?”

“You got it!” he replies.

“I’ll be over here, over in the corner,” BC tells him.

BC ponders the pub and milks his ale, playing with his food for hours. More Edwards’s supporters arrive as the day goes on. By evening, the pub is full, but the mood is subdued, and the crowd oddly quiet, anticipating doom. By the time the media figure out that BC is in McGrady’s, he’s not the story anymore. The polls are closed, and Marc Edwards is the story.

Edwards loses the election, and the Governorship of Lunar Prime, to Daniel McEntyre.

Edwards makes the announcement to the crowd in McGrady’s.

“Well, everybody, it’s happened,” Edwards says with a crooked smile. “Daniel McEntyre has won the race for Governor of Lunar Prime. And I have lost.”

Edwards pauses, struggles a little to keep his composure. He looks up and continues.

“I want to thank all of you for all your support. You’ve all been great! We’ve got a lot to be proud of!

We all worked together to rebuild Lunar Prime...we did it! They can’t take that away, no matter what! I promise to work with Daniel McEntyre and his people as we begin the transition to a new administration.”

Edwards looks around the room.

“And I’d like to ask you all to be gracious and do the same. I know you will. Remember, we have work to do, until the inauguration. Let’s keep the place running well and do our best to see that all these changes go through smoothly. Thanks again, everybody. Thank you.”

Edwards finishes with a sigh and steps back with his head down. One of his aides guides him over to a table to sit down as the crowd begins dispersing.

March 24th, a day that will live in infamy...

Well. Wonder how the new Governor McEntyre will like the new Vatican Mission? I’ll be sure to invite him over sometime soon for tea and crumpets...

BC decides to head home to the Vatican Mission. He stops over to say goodbye to Edwards before he leaves.

“Man, the people are morons, Marc. Pure and simple, they’re idiots. McEntyre’s a...”

Edwards cuts him off. “He’s the governor now, BC,” Edwards says as he shakes his head, as if saying it makes it more real, more painful. “Or he will be, soon enough. You’ve gotta let bygones be bygones with him, BC, or he’ll evict you from your own mission!”

“He can’t do that!” BC protests.

“Sure he can, BC... I’m just saying... be careful, man. We’re at war; he can say it’s for Lunar Prime’s self-defense.” Edwards shakes his head again. He hardly looks up when he talks. “You’ve gotta play nice with him now, BC, I’m just trying to warn you for your own good.”

“Well, thanks for that, Marc,” BC says, “I do appreciate it. And I *do* know that I’ve gotta try to get along with the guy. You’re right. That doesn’t make it any easier. And it doesn’t make me forget who he is... and who his friends are! This isn’t going to be fun.”

“So sorry to ruin *your* fun,” Edwards says bitterly.

BC frowns at his friend’s bitter barking. “Yeah. Guess it’s time to go. Sorry again about the election, Marc. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure. Thanks.” Edwards mumbles. He looks down and contemplates the tabletop as BC turns and leaves the pub.

The inauguration of Daniel McEntyre as Governor of Lunar Prime is scheduled for six weeks later, Monday, May 5th. When he gets back to his quarters, BC has all his calendars fill the date in, in solid black.

Black Monday, indeed. Worst of all, I’ll be forced to attend the damn thing!

Chapter Three

BC tries to visit Marc Edwards several times in April. Edwards claims to be too busy working on the transition to meet with him, but BC can hear the defeat in his voice over the com. BC finally gives up on calling and stops by the governor's offices the weekend before the inauguration.

"Marc?" BC says as he knocks and enters the office.

The room is dark, lit only by the sun and starlight reflecting off the Moon's surface outside the panoramic windows.

"BC?" BC hears Edwards ask softly out of the darkness. As BC's eyes adjust, he sees that Edwards is sitting in the chair behind the desk, the chair turned around so Edwards can stare off into space.

"I sure am gonna miss this view," Edwards says wistfully.

"Working hard on the transition, huh?" BC ribs him.

"Well, that's all pretty much done, now," Edwards sighs. "Everything should be ready for Monday... did you get your invitation, BC?"

"Yeah, surprise, huh?" BC jokes half-heartedly.

"No, they had to invite you to represent the Pope," Edwards replies, his sense of humor seemingly gone.

"No, I know, Marc, no getting out of it. For either of us..." BC says into an awkward silence. Neither of them says another word for almost a minute. BC breaks the silence.

"How's the reconstruction going?" BC says, changing the topic.

"Okay," Edwards says, but he sounds distracted. "I guess."

Jeesh, he is just Mister Excitement! I wonder how long he's been doing this, just sitting in here staring out the window? Seems to me the reconstruction's slowing down a bit. Maybe that's because Edwards has lost his motivation...

"Are you okay?" BC asks Edwards.

"Yeah," he sighs, "Y'know, good as I can be, considering."

"Considering," BC agrees.

"What about you?" Edwards asks BC, brightening a bit. "You keeping out of trouble? I haven't heard any reports, but..." he leaves the sentence hanging.

"...I haven't really been reading any reports, either." I can hear what you're saying, even though you're not saying it, Marc. Defeat can be a hard and bitter pill to swallow. I've been there before...

"No, me? I'm good," BC assures him. "Incredibly uncomfortable at times, but good," BC tells him. "I'm a little unsure of my status under the coming new regime, but I'm not stupid. If I've gotta work with the guy, I've gotta work with him."

"I never said you were stupid, BC," Marc says.

"Thanks," BC says a little sarcastically. "What about you? What are you going to do? Stay here?"

"I don't know," Edwards says, sounding depressed. "Guess I better figure that out quickly, huh?"

"What? You've got until, what, Monday morning! Plenty of time," BC jokes.

"I better get to work then, huh?" Edwards says. BC can hear the dismissal in his voice.

"So... see you Monday?" BC asks.

"Yeah," Edwards says, sounding distracted. BC ducks out of the darkened office, closing the door behind him.

Poor guy... he sounds devastated. And rightfully so, I guess...

Black Monday arrives. Many guests have been invited: UTZ CEOs, Pope Linus for the NcC, even UIN leaders. Travel, however, is still a tricky business, post war. Most invited guests not in close proximity, on the Moon or in close orbit, will not be attending, their invitations really only signs of honor and esteem from the new regime.

BC is compelled to attend by a communiqué from the Curia, from Vatican City, informing him that he would of course be attending the inaugural festivities in the Pope's absence.

Compelled to attend the swearing in of a man I hate, who I know to be a UIN sympathizer and supporter... almost makes me miss Pope Peter, the old bastard... I don't think the OPO would have had me attend this guy's inauguration... unless it was to turn it into his funeral... ah, thinking pleasant thoughts to pass the weary time away...

BC gets ready with an eye on the clock.

10 AM... I will not be late for this sordid affair... No reason to give McEntyre any ammo to use against me. Any more ammo... There's some real excitement in the air. The strange sense of limbo that has hung over this place since the election seems to have finally come to a head and broken open today. McEntyre's inauguration should at least serve as some sort of closure.

BC arrives, on time, and is told to stand with the other religious representatives for the ceremonies. At about 10:15, after the crowd has been seated and fidgeting for fifteen minutes, the lights in the auditorium finally go down.

A piped-in fanfare begins, and golden light fades up, illuminating the hall. At an appropriate point in the music, the crescendo of a fanfare, the auditorium's back doors open with a flash of light, and marching shadows appear.

The light continues to rise, and BC watches McEntyre walk by in a procession of Lunar Government officials.

Look at that shit. All puffed up and proud, makes me sick. Guess I can't hit him, now. Be brought up on big charges! The moon may no longer be home for me anymore, with him in charge.

No more friends in high places... no more backup on earth... Shit. What's next? Keeping quiet and laying low?

BC smiles and behaves himself throughout the ceremonies. He has to stay at the reception afterwards just long enough to be respectful. BC manages to avoid McEntyre at the reception almost entirely, until he is forced to face the man and play diplomat for a brief stint.

BC is led before McEntyre as the Pope's representative. McEntyre scowls briefly, but plays nice through the diplomatic niceties. BC offers the Pope's official regards on McEntyre's election. McEntyre thanks him curtly, dismissing him.

Dick. Congratulations, asshole.

BC moves aside for the next official representative come to offer congratulations, and then ducks back into the crowd. BC mills around the reception for a short time longer. As soon as he figures it's safe, he ducks out and heads back to the Vatican Mission.

Hate those things, unless I'm working. Then it's more of a game. Well, I was working today. Not the same thing, not "working" working. I merely wanted to kill McEntyre; I wasn't there to actually do the job. There's a difference. Well, gotta file another report that no one will ever acknowledge...

BC retreats to the Vatican Mission. He files a report on the day's events. He starts to call Edwards, but thinks better of it.

He probably wants to be alone... gotta find another window to stare out of, after all... that's not really fair. The people here... I don't get it. The guy helps put the place back together, but they listen to Daniel fucking McEntyre because he's more charismatic, slicker, sharper, or something... I can only hope the guy leaves me alone. Well, that and I hope he doesn't open the Moon wide open to the UIN...

Chapter Four

McEntyre's first major action as governor is his new Lunar Neutrality Declaration. It's announced in mid-May, to be signed in early June.

Lunar Prime Governor Daniel McEntyre's declaration sets out in no uncertain terms the independence and neutrality of the moon:

"The free citizens in residence on the Moon, the people of Lunar Prime and its associated colonies, declare themselves to be free and independent of all authority save the democratic authority vested by them in the duly, democratically elected government of the Moon.

"We declare the Moon neutral in this current conflict. We do not believe that faith should divide people, or be the cause for war. The current conflict is faulty in its causes and can only be fruitless in its outcome.

"The Moon shall not be used as a staging area for battles. The Moon is not answerable to either side in this conflict. We recognize the United Trade Zone and the Universal Islamic Nation for what they are and the power they wield, but they do not wield that power over us. We welcome a diplomatic presence from both organizations, but both sides must recognize and respect the sovereign rights and laws of the local Lunar Prime Government.

"The government of the Moon favors no faith, no creed, above any other. All are welcome on the Moon, as long as mutual respect is accorded to the members of other faiths.

"This Lunar Neutrality Declaration also warns the sides in this current conflict not to test the resolve or the neutrality of the Moon. Any infraction, any violation of the rules, rights and laws of the local Lunar Prime Government, or of this Declaration, will be met with swift and measured retribution. Do not mistake our love of peace for weakness.

"The Moon stands alone, neutral, and free.

"Signed and Acknowledged on this 8th Day of June, 2110:

"Daniel McEntyre, Governor

"Amanda Erskine, Lieutenant Governor

"Yari Sayannaya, Council Majority Leader

"Saul Rabinowicz, Council Minority Leader"

McEntyre declares the signing day a lunar holiday.

BC declares June 8th a dark day.

The Declaration sounds good, but I don't trust McEntyre to enforce it equally. He's way too cozy with the UIN. I'd like to be an optimist, but... I know better.

At worst? This gives the UIN the open door to the Moon they want. At best, the signing ceremony is another fucking event I've got to attend for the Pope, another chance for McEntyre to parade around like a fucking peacock.

At least I've been able to avoid McEntyre in the meantime. I think he's been avoiding me, too. And at least he didn't single out the Vatican Mission in the Declaration. It sounds like they'll leave us alone... depends on what they'll interpret as an 'infraction' or 'violation' of their rules. The whole 'Declaration' is ambiguous enough to be dangerous. I don't know... I've got a bad feeling about this.

BC begins the day by saying mass, as it's a Sunday. Over the last half a year he's actually gotten good at it. It's given him something to do while rebuilding the place, and waiting for word from the Vatican.

BC greets the parishioners after Mass at the back door of the chapel inside the Vatican Mission. He shakes hands and makes small talk. A man he doesn't recognize shakes his hand and shifts a small cylinder into BC's palm. BC palms and pockets it. The man ducks away quickly, before BC can stop him.

Can't stop him without making a big ol' scene... hope this isn't a bomb or a corrosive of some kind. I don't think it is... actually, it feels like an OPO message cylinder! Have to check it out later.

BC keeps working the rest of the milling congregation, shaking hands and making small talk as he wonders what he's just been passed. His mind isn't on the conversations. He tries to hurry things along best he can without seeming rude. After the last of his parishioners leaves, BC heads back to his office, playing with the cylinder in his pocket as he walks.

Funny... I know I said something to each of those people back there, I just couldn't tell you what I said...

Back in his office, he takes the CCU from its hiding place and sets it on his desk.

He pulls out the cylinder.

Hmmm... Looks okay. Booby traps?

He looks it over.

Looks legit... just like the old days!

BC opens the cylinder. A small sliver of crystal slides out.

Everything seems kosher...

BC slides the crystal into place in the unit. A brief text message appears on the screen:

“Pope Peter killed by faction who installed Linus. Not killed in UIN attack. M’Bekke.”

That’s it? Wonder if it’s real, if M’Bekke is alive. Wonder if it’s true? All I know about Linus is what I see on the news, for Chrissake! I’ve seen him touring the ruins around Vatican City, talking about Peace. Looks like a pope, acts like a pope. Talks Peace. Everybody’s talking peace. Wonder if that can be believed, either?

I really think we’ve just temporarily run out of weapons... for now. Each side threw all it had at the other in the last battles. Maybe we’ve run out of ammo, too. Maybe we’ve run out of people! Such incredible losses on both sides!

But is this peace or is this stalemate, this current cease-fire? And what was the war for?

Ultimately, nothing, neither side gained or lost ground in any meaningful way.

Maybe I’ve been set free!

Maybe this message also says the OPO is over. No more yoke around my neck... I hope M’Bekke is alive; he’s one of the good ones. Even if the message does come from him, I’m still not sure I’m inclined to believe him.

“Father BC?” His secretary interrupts. She’s old and old fashioned, and while she’ll call him “BC”, she refuses to NOT call him “Father.”

“Yes, Lisa?”

“It’s nearly time for the signing ceremony. You’re supposed to be there before 10:30.”

“Thank you, Lisa.”

Oh joy, oh bliss. Well, at least it will be over with.

The moon is crawling with guests. I saw that bastard Wentworth walking around. Guess he’s leading the UTZ delegation. It’s funny. What a difference a half a month makes! There are some actual guests arriving! Not that Pope Linus would come... he’d rather have endure the pain, heh!

This signing ceremony kinda reminds me of that first peace conference; back when I first came to the Moon. First time since then that we’ve had so many guests. Even the UIN sent actual leaders. I saw Ibn Al-Salid and his delegation arrive just yesterday.

BC puts away the CCU for later, when he gets back from the ceremony. He doesn't want to go, but he has to, duty and all. As a persona non grata with the McEntyre administration, he'll behave himself; play the role of the quiet diplomat.

BC dresses in a formal purple suit and collar, and checks his appearance in the mirror.

Good to go. The very measure of a modern Vatican Ambassador...

Once outside his rooms, BC sets the silent alarms on his quarters. He presses his hand against the hidden security panel in the wall next to the door.

There are a lot of people on the moon right now, and, no doubt a lot who'd like to get inside and take a look at the new Vatican Mission. Best not to give them too easy an opportunity to do that.

BC ponders his security measures as he makes his way to the signing ceremony. Once in the auditorium, he’s sent to an assigned place in the crowd. He can’t help chuckling to himself.

I’m further back from the podium this time! McEntyre sends subtle messages... fine by me. Just get the fucking thing over with... Oh man, can he look smugger? Makes me want to delicately wipe the smile off his face with my fist...

BC zones out and lets the ceremony go by in a blur. He tries not to pay too much attention. He knows they sign the Declaration; he stands and applauds with the crowd.

Then he files out with the rest of the attendees for the mandatory after-reception.

Well, gotta attend this, at least for a little while. I don't want to deal with any of these assholes, really. There's Wentworth... looking at me, coming this way! Shit.

BC tries to avoid him, manages to duck out a side door.

Strategic exit. He's the last guy I want to talk to. Especially after the news I got about Fiza. Fiza's name was listed among the recently deceased on a report from Wentworth Station a couple months ago.

I might have to kill him on the spot. And that would be so messy, so undiplomatic of me as the ambassador...

BC hurries away from the reception. He heads back towards his office. He's just heading down the hall to his section when two goons appear in front of him. BC tries to look nonchalant.

"Hi guys! Afraid you missed mass this morning..."

When all else fails...

BC turns and runs... right into the chest of a third goon who's snuck up behind him.

"Ooof!"

"Mr. Wentworth wants to see you," the goon says to BC.

Insistent Bastard...

"Unh..." is all BC manages to say, as one of the first two goons catches up behind him and clubs him hard on the back of the head.

That hurts...

BC blacks out.

Chapter Five

BC comes to lying on a couch in what looks like one of Lunar Prime's finer hotels. He rubs the back of his head, feeling a goose egg.

Damn. Does that hurt!

BC turns his head from side to side, trying to loosen his neck muscles. He blinks, trying to get his vision to clear and focus.

"He's coming around. Good. I worried you'd hit him too hard, Lawrence," a dark and slippery voice says. "Can you hear me, Champion? I told you, you wouldn't like me knowing who you are! You've risen through the ranks a bit since we last spoke, haven't you? Full ambassador! That's impressive. How is your head?"

Wentworth.

"Fuck you," BC says.

"Is that any way to start our conversation? Any way for a diplomat to talk to the UTZ representative to this ceremony today? What, are you having another one of those headaches, padre?" Wentworth jokes. BC rubs the back of his head as he answers. "Funny. You clubbed me. Is that any way to open a dialogue with the Vatican Ambassador?"

"Touché," Wentworth concedes, "Perhaps not. But certain precautions need to be taken when that Vatican Ambassador is also an assassin! It would have been easier if we could have at least chatted at the reception," Wentworth assures him. "Yet you avoided me. You have been avoiding me."

"I didn't feel like making small talk with a murderer," BC says as he tries to sit up on the couch.

"Murderer? Who? Fiza? She's not dead, just... gainfully employed. Making herself useful, you could say. She's still on my station. She's not dead."

"That's not what I hear," BC says.

"Oh, yes. That. You probably heard about the report. That's what we do with some of our more, uh, *indentured*, servants on the station. She's just *officially* dead, not *actually* dead. Makes the paperwork

so much easier. It's just a formality, terms of her employment," Wentworth says dismissively.

"Convenient for when you really do kill her, then. If I can believe you," BC says. "I know you, Wentworth... I know your type. You're the type of man who can tell another man anything he wants to hear, in order to get that other man to do as you ask. You'll tell me she's not dead, whether she is or not, if it makes me open up to whatever it is you've dragged me here for." BC looks around the room, "Wherever 'here' is."

"You're still on the Moon," Wentworth says. "We haven't gone anywhere. I need information from you, cooperation. I don't need *you*," he says with emphasis, "I need you for what you *know*, and who you represent. I am doing this in an official UTZ capacity, and so I officially apologize for your clubbing...."

"And kidnapping," BC interjects.

"You are not tied down, Campion. You can leave now, if you like," Wentworth says with a gesture towards the door.

After that thwack, I don't know if I can stand up without getting dizzy... maybe not yet. Wonder if I got a concussion from that love tap?

"But," Wentworth continues, "Before you go, a question. Why have we lost all touch with the Vatican?"

"Maybe because you go around clubbing their agents," BC mumbles. He rubs the back of his head.

"What do you mean, 'lost all touch'? I've seen the Pope on the news and stuff."

"Yes, and that's all we've seen or heard from this new Pope. We worked closely with Pope Peter, as you know. This new man doesn't do us the courtesy of returning our messages," Wentworth says with some indignation.

"How rude," BC mocks him.

"Why won't he get in touch with us?" Wentworth says, losing patience.

"He won't get in touch with anybody!" BC says, matching Wentworth's tone.

"What?"

"I haven't heard anything myself, not since he named me ambassador and told me to rebuild the mission up here. It's been a whole lot of nothing since January."

"Nothing? I find that hard to believe. You're the ambassador; there must be reports, communiqués..." Wentworth is shaking his head.

"Nope. Afraid not. Oh, I send reports back there, don't get me wrong. I report to them every week. But them to me? Not so much." BC's tone is tinged with sarcasm.

"But what about..." Wentworth looks around, then walks over to whisper to BC, "What about the OPO?"

Do I tell him about today's communiqué? What if it's a set up? Nothing for now...

"The OPO is done," BC whispers back. "As far as I can tell. No word, no nothing. I can only assume our mission died with Pope Peter. The OPO ain't what it used to be."

"This isn't good," Wentworth says as he turns to pace back across the room.

"You're telling me," BC agrees. He tries standing up.

Good, legs holding, I'm standing, gonna walk outta here soon. Ew. Still kind of dizzy. See if I can take a step or two...

"Are you leaving, Campion?" Wentworth asks.

"Just stretching my legs and, you know, flexing my head," BC says, massaging the back of his head.

"What do you do without the Vatican's direction?" Wentworth steers back to his main question.

"Just keep going. Rebuild the mission, say mass every Sunday, just be ambassador, you know."

"Hmmp," Wentworth breathes, clearly not satisfied. "That's it? No subterfuge?"

"Subterfuge? No, no OPO stuff at all, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean."

"What would I do? Who would I do it for? There's no one directing me. I'm pretty much a free agent," BC says.

"Right," Wentworth says. "Pretend ambassador for an unreachable Pope. That's not what you call a position of strength, now, is it?" Wentworth growls a low chuckle. "How 'free' does that really make

you? Who's got your back now, Champion, eh?"

Bastard's got a point. I could find myself in his "employment" soon if I'm not careful... I gotta get out of here...

"Food for thought, then, isn't it?" Wentworth gets almost playful. "And maybe you're wondering why I don't just take you out, hmm? Now that I see your situation for what it is? Well, maybe," Wentworth draws close to BC, looks him eye to eye, "Maybe we're really on the same side. Ever consider that?" "Nope, never crossed my mind," BC snaps back.

"We can help each other," Wentworth offers.

"I don't know if I can take any more of your kind of help," BC says, and his hand goes back to again massage the spot where he was clubbed.

"You've made this unpleasantness necessary, Champion. I would have preferred we had started off better."

"Yeah, sure... But, you know, it's funny, I react unusually poorly when friends of mine are forced into sexual slavery, and/or killed. Guess that kind of colored my reactions from that point forward," BC can't help the sarcasm. "After you reported her dead, I can't say my opinion of you improved."

"I told you, we have an unconventional arrangement with many of our employees where they are reported dead..."

"Unconventional? I don't know, prostitution and slavery are pretty old fashioned, nothing really 'unconventional' about that," BC interrupts.

"Fiza's working at what she does best. Working off her debt on her back. You know Fiza, BC. You know she's trouble. She's... less... trouble, now. Everyone's happy"

"Yeah, I'm sure she's ecstatic."

"At least. And certainly sometimes orgasmic, eh?" Wentworth smiles a humorless smile. "But enough about the slut. We have official business to discuss. Can't you stay for a little while? Hear me out, at the very least. Have a seat, over here at the desk." Wentworth walks over next to the hotel desk, motions BC to the chair in front of it. "I'm meeting you in an official UTZ capacity. You have nothing to fear."

"Other than getting clubbed over the head?" BC protests.

"I've already apologized for that. And as I've said, you forced the situation."

"Right, this is all *my* fault," BC can't help but lapse back into sarcasm.

"Can we get beyond this petty shit and talk about things of real importance?" Wentworth asks BC as he sits down behind the desk. BC still stands.

"Such as?" he asks.

"Such as, who is this new Pope? Where did he come from?" Wentworth presses.

Wow, he is genuinely interested. How to play this fucker... he's a smart guy... gotta be vague. Information is all I have, my only currency with this bastard. I'm not even sure what I know, now, after the communiqué today. Can't just give it away.

"He's an old school Roman Catholic," BC tells Wentworth. "Giuseppe something."

"I know that. That's public knowledge. We've got the basic facts. But what's his deal? What drives him?" Wentworth probes.

"I wish I knew," BC admits, shaking his head.

Wentworth gets back up and starts to come back around the desk.

So he doesn't have to look up at me... talk about in your face...

Wentworth faces BC from about a foot away.

"It doesn't do either of us any good if you hold back what you know!" he demands.

"I'm not sure that I know any more than you already know. Pope Peter is dead. Linus the Second is Pope. The OPO has gotten quiet. The Vatican has been quiet."

"They talked to you. You were promoted, tasked with this mission."

"Sure, but since then, like I told you before, I haven't heard anything. I'm assuming I'm doing the right things, because they never question any of my reports," BC laughs.

"Why did they tell you to create such a secure installation? What you've 'rebuilt' is far beyond what was originally here," Wentworth insists. "Your new Vatican Mission is heavily armored, and heavily armed,

bristling with hidden weaponry! It's capable of sealing itself off and running self-contained, independent from Lunar Prime. It's a small fortress. Why would they have you build something like this?" Wentworth presses BC hard.

"Why do you care?" BC asks.

Can't let him get to me... How does he know so much about my rebuild? How does he know all that, yet not know that it's all been my little project?

"Creating the kind of secure installation you've been trying to build attracts attention, Champion. My attention, at the very least." Wentworth answers BC's unspoken question.

Must have been written all over my face... What to tell him...

"We'd been hit hard twice. We're a target, so we took action to try to defend ourselves, simple as that," BC offers.

He does not need to know they didn't tell me how to rebuild...

"Simple as that?"

BC nods.

Wentworth smiles.

I do not like that smile. It's a cat-that-ate-the-canary kind of smile...

"You did it on your own, didn't you, Champion." Now Wentworth is nodding. "Yes. A free agent needs a strong base, eh? They just said rebuild. The rest is all you, isn't it? So again, I ask you, who's got your back, Champion? Who can help you when you're not in your fortress? Who can help you now?"

"Do you have a point?" BC half turns to go. "I really should get going..."

"Please, where to? You could use some new friends, Champion. So could we. This could be a mutually beneficial situation."

"You think so?"

"Why not? We'd be stronger together than apart."

"You need me. That's sweet," BC laughs.

"You're still expendable, Champion, don't forget that. We have other leads and other agents working on this Vatican problem. You're easily replaced."

Wonder if he knows M'Bekke? Could they have gotten to him already? What if that message really was a set up? Is he checking now to see if their message got through? If I'll cough it back up at them? Am I completely paranoid?

"Don't get all warm and cuddly on me, now, Wentworth," BC jokes.

Wentworth grins, but there is no joy in his grin. "What'll it be?" he asks BC. "Will you work with us?"

What have I got to lose? If I agree, I at least get out of here alive today...

"I'll work with you," BC tells him. "I'll maintain my independence, but I'll be glad to work with you. We're on the same side after all, right?" BC says. He extends his right hand to Wentworth. Wentworth shakes his hand.

"Right. Good. Pack your things, then. You're coming for a visit. We leave in four hours," Wentworth tells BC.

BC shakes his head.

"Now, wait just a min..."

"No questions, no protests. Please. Four hours. There are others who would like to speak with you. They're waiting back on my station."

"I see."

No, I don't see. Wait a...

"This is already starting to suck for me. You know that don't you?" BC cracks.

Wentworth doesn't answer. He just stares at BC.

"Okay, all right," BC finally breaks the silence, "Where should I meet you?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll send someone with you. He'll bring you to the ship when the time comes."

"I bet he will. That is just so entirely helpful of you," BC says with sarcasm. "Thank you so much," BC lays it on thick.

Yes, I just bet he'll bring me to you when you want me. I have no doubt of that. He'll be

making sure of a lot of things, I betcha.

"Bruno!" Wentworth yells. One of the goons who had melted into the woodwork steps out next to Wentworth and BC. "Go with Campion here. He's going to pack for our voyage. Bring him to us at the ship in time for our departure in exactly three hours and forty-five minutes."

"Yeah, boss. I'm on it." Bruno grunts.

"Bruno, you gonna shake my dick for me after I pee?" BC prods.

Bruno's brow furrows.

"You don't sound like no priest I ever heard of," Bruno says. He looks at BC with death in his eyes, but then he looks over at Wentworth. Wentworth motions him to calm down.

"Bruno will wait outside your residence as you get ready for our trip," he explains to BC. "He will not be intrusive. Isn't that right, Bruno?"

Bruno grunts what might be a "Yes."

"Good enough, then," Wentworth says. "See you in four, Campion," Wentworth tells him. He crosses the room and sits back down at the desk. BC looks at Wentworth, then Bruno, then shrugs, and heads out the door of the hotel room. He doesn't bother to look back to see if Bruno is following.

That is Bruno's problem. Well, isn't this fun? Swimming with the sharks...

BC, with Bruno in tow behind him, heads back to the Vatican Mission and his quarters.

Bruno, good to Wentworth's word, does as instructed and stands outside BC's quarters as BC goes in and gets ready for the trip.

"Don't get lost out here, Bruno," BC says as he heads into his rooms. Bruno grunts. "Gotcha," BC answers.

Once inside, BC secures his rooms.

Must have done something right if the security measures attracted the notice of Wentworth and his bunch. Wonder if he's got any back doors to my system. He sounded... I don't know, maybe he's just playing me. Guys like him want you to think they know more than they really do. Best be careful, he may have a way in, at least into my info flow on some level... jeesh, am I too paranoid... Or do I have to be with these guys?

After all, what kind of a way is that to call a meeting? Club the Ambassador? I don't know, anymore. Goddamn it, everything's going to hell...

I don't have much choice but to go with Wentworth and his goons. Might as well find out what he's pushing. The Pope doesn't seem to be anyone's ally right now.

Maybe I can see Fiza, make sure she's still in one piece... who knows?

BC takes out the CCU with the crystal from this morning still sitting in it.

All right, M'Bekke, let's see if it's really you...

He runs one of the diagnostic programs built into the CCU. The crystal comes up clean. Authentic.

Yeah... But... That analysis is based on the old protocols. Gotta do a more intensive examination. Good start, though, good start. Let's see if there are any DNA traces. That would make it nice and easy... Bingo.

BC uses the unit's analytical programs to isolate two distinct DNA patterns. Both test as true, not constructs. No false patterns to fool with.

Two sets. Once should be the courier, the other, if this is real, M'Bekke's. Let's see... this one's unknown. Could be the courier. No worries yet. Let's look at this and... Yup! M'Bekke! Good to see you, even a microscopic mote of you. So it's real. M'Bekke's still out there, somewhere.

Presumably not at the Vatican, not if this is true.

BC reads the words of the message in the upper part of the CCU's screen:

"Pope Peter killed by faction who installed Linus. Not killed in UIN attack. M'Bekke."

Doesn't sound like we've got a friend in the new pontiff. Better go with Wentworth and explore my options. Better pack wisely! Let's see...

Three and a half hours later, Bruno rings the bell to the Vatican Ambassador's quarters.

"Yes?" BC says on the intercom.

"We gotta go soon," Bruno grunts.

"Gotcha, big guy. I'll be right there."

BC has been packed for an hour. But for the next twenty minutes he continues his meditation.

Maybe if I meditate I can avoid the headaches. Bruno can wait. I'm sure he'll ring again when we really need to go.

One minute later, Bruno rings again.

"Yes?" BC inquires pleasantly.

"Let's go! Now!" Bruno barks back.

"Coming," BC continues pleasantly.

BC is packed for a priest's travel needs, not an assassin's. No weapons.

No 'subterfuge'. I'm sure Wentworth has many levels of security. And when all else fails, big guys with clubs. Primitive, yet effective. I'll be the holy diplomat this trip. Play the role, right?

"Hello Bruno!" BC greets the goon outside as he leaves his quarters. Bruno grunts and turns to lead BC to Wentworth's ship. BC presses his hand against the security panel to seal up his rooms.

For what it's worth...

"Hey!" Bruno calls back. "Let's go! You're already late!"

BC walks up to Bruno without saying a word.

"Here," Bruno says, "You go ahead. I wantcha where I can seeya."

"Which way am I going?" BC asks him.

"Left," Bruno barks, "here. Down to the private bays." BC follows his directions, walking just ahead of the goon as they head to the ship.

After several other barks and turns, they end up in a little used section of the Lunar Prime Spaceport.

Little used, but amazingly intact. They rebuilt these private bays with private funds. Built them back up pretty fast, too.

BC laughs to himself.

Betcha Wentworth's bay is at least as secure as the Vatican mission!

"Here!" Bruno says, indicating a secure airlock door. Bruno presses his hand against the door's panel and it slides open. "Go ahead," he tells BC.

BC steps through the airlock door into the airlock. Bruno follows, closing the outer door behind him. He steps past BC to put his palm against the inner door ahead of them and it slides open, revealing a luxurious reception area. Wentworth's Station colors, gold, red and black, are duplicated here: plush red and gold walls, black marble floors, and a clear glass ceiling open to the stars obscured by just a hint of blue haze, letting BC and others know a security shield is in place.

Three other "Bruno's" are standing against the wall opposite the airlock BC walked in through. Another airlock door stands open between two of the thugs, apparently the airlock to Wentworth's waiting ship, docked outside. They move aside when BC and Bruno approach. Bruno grunts and points to tell BC to go ahead of him once again, into this second airlock.

BC has a sudden panic attack.

What if they're just going to space me, right here and now? No, why would they get so elaborate? So it'll look like an accident? Shit!

BC calms when Bruno steps into the airlock as before, pushing past to palm the panel in the door ahead of them as the outer door closes behind. A quick hiss and the door opens.

"Go!" Bruno says, and BC goes. He steps onto the ship. BC looks up and down the ship's empty corridor.

Hmm, black red and gold, how original... well, at least he's consistent.

"Go ahead, up and to the right," Bruno directs BC in his grunt-speak. BC heads down the corridor. Bruno shows him to a stateroom door.

"Press here," he says, indicating the door panel. BC feels a brief tingle as the door recognition systems id's his palm. The door slides open on a relatively posh stateroom with a king size bed.

"This is your room for the trip. Settle in for takeoff. Mr. Wentworth will be calling you after that."

"You make a great stewardess, Bruno," BC chides him. Bruno ignores him, turns and walks away down the corridor. BC walks in and surveys his stateroom.

Nice. A whole lot nicer than I'm used to. Being a simple priest and all.

The stateroom door slides shut behind him. BC turns and puts his palm against the door panel, but nothing happens.

Locked. Figures. Well, nothing to do now but enjoy the ride.

BC settles in for takeoff, which is relatively smooth.

I suppose he can afford the best pilots, right?

He lies on the bed as they make their way.

It took Fiza and me two days to get to Wentworth Station on a commercial ship. I wonder how fast Wentworth makes the trip?

The bed is comfortable, and BC actually falls asleep soon after they leave the moon's surface. Wentworth's voice over an intercom wakes him up.

"Campion! We're almost at my station. Prepare to disembark."

Rude awakening! Huh, looking at the clock, it's been about eight hours. Must be Monday morning by now...

Damn... a headache? Aw, no, not now...

BC massages his temples, rubs his forehead, and presses his fingers against his eyes, trying anything to stop the headache from intensifying. Wentworth's voice booms out again.

"Campion!"

That's not helping...

"Bruno will meet you outside your stateroom in twenty minutes. Be ready!"

This sucks...

"Gotcha. I'll be there," BC says into the com.

BC tries to freshen up. The stateroom facilities are top notch, with a sink and bath with running water. BC tries to hold back his headache as he gets ready.

It's probably costing him a fortune for me to wash my face right now. Maybe I'll just let the water run, let the reclamation system crank for a while. Ouch, damn this thing!

BC scrunches his eyes closed as he presses the balls of his fists against the sides of his forehead. The headache backs off a bit, and he sighs in relief.

The headache manages to remain at bay as BC is lead by Bruno off the ship and into Wentworth Station. The surroundings are familiar, as Bruno leads him back up to the dining room he and Fiza had found themselves in almost six months earlier, the dining room with the large C-shaped semi circular table. Although BC can't help but feel a small sense of deja vu as he's lead into the dining room, this time the crowd is very different. No banquet this time, and sterner faces have replaced sycophants. Some of those faces are familiar to BC from his first visit. But most of the faces of those seated at the table this time are familiar to BC from the news. These are most of the CEO's that make up the UTZ Council! BC is surprised.

All the CEOs are here!

Wentworth speaks. "Father Campion, welcome. I trust you now understand why we've been so secretive and secure." He gestures to those gathered around him at the table, "We are each targets in our own right. Collectively, we make an incredibly attractive target. That is why no one knows of our meetings until after they've occurred. We gather together in person like this only seldom, and only in time of great crisis and need. This is such a time. Please, sit," Wentworth says, and BC sees that a chair to the right has been saved for him.

I'm sitting right next to Fujima! Cool. Japanese CEO. And there's DeMag, next to him. Wow. This is something! Rarefied air... Surprised I can still breathe!

He keeps his composure and nods at Fujima. Fujima looks at him, and moves his head nearly imperceptibly.

No deference, I get it, fine. None expected, really.

"Father Campion?" An amplified voice gets his attention. A gray haired man opposite BC at the horseshoe shaped table speaks up.

"I'm Klaus Folsom, head of Folsom Industries and current chair of the UTZ Council," he says. BC

marvels again at the hidden systems that allow him to hear the man sitting over ten yards away. BC recognizes him from the news and the dossiers he's seen. "Welcome to our meeting. Thank you for accepting Mr. Wentworth's invitation."

"Hmmpf," BC says, trying not to laugh.

Folsom turns. "Wentworth?" he asks with arched eyebrow.

Wentworth merely shrugs.

Folsom nods, "I see. As always, Richard's methods are nefarious, I'm sure. But he has gotten you here, and you seem none the worse for wear. Let me thank you, then, for being here, perhaps in spite of him," Folsom says, looking at Wentworth, then back at BC.

"At any rate, we have business to attend to. We, the UTZ Council, are turning to you, as an acting Vatican Ambassador, to help us restore relations with the Holy See. Our usually stalwart and reliable ally, the New catholic Church, has become... 'incommunicado' of late," Folsom says, laying it all out in the open.

"As I told Wentworth, I'm not sure there's much I can do," BC tells Folsom, across the gap. "I don't know if I can help you. They're not talking to me much, either."

"Yes, he told us that's what you'd said," Folsom says, insinuating BC has not told all. BC shakes his head.

"Look, I'm not lying to you, I have no reason to. I've pretty much been on my own since Pope Peter was killed. I've kept the Vatican Mission on the Moon operating. I've rebuilt the place from the ground up, after the UIN beat the living shit out of it last Christmas. But for all intents and purposes, it's an independent operation. After the attacks, the Vatican put me in charge as Acting Ambassador and told me to rebuild. And then they went quiet."

BC pauses.

The silence echoes with the word "quiet" as the sound of BC's voice is relayed around the table and echoes back off the chamber's distant walls.

BC continues. "My communications have not been answered. I make reports, I send them in, but I hear nothing back. I don't know what else to tell you."

"Did you know," De Mag begins, and then clears his throat. He sits just to BC's right, on the other side of Fujima. BC turns to see him speak.

"Did you know you're the only OPO operative that we know to still be alive, Father Champion?"

What?! Really? Well, they can't know about M'Bekke, then, can they?

"There are a few others we suspect of being OPO, but their membership has never been confirmed. Probably why they're still alive. But of the agents we know, and we in this room, Champion," DeMag looks around at his fellow CEOs. "We know many. You are the only one still breathing. You're high profile... but lucky? What is your secret?"

What did he just say? That headache is starting to come back on strong... shit! Got to keep it at bay. Not now!

"Are you all right, Champion?" Wentworth asks. "Headache? We all know about your headaches. What a terrible affliction for an assassin."

Shit!

"You didn't..." BC starts to ask.

"Nothing's been done to you, Champion," Wentworth assures him.

"Nothing but club me over the head," BC says as he tries to will the headache away. Folsom speaks up.

"Gentlemen?"

Ahhh... it's going away! Good!

"It's nothing. I'm fine," BC says, trying to regain his composure.

"What happened to the OPO, Father Champion?" Fujima asks from just beside him.

BC looks at him directly as he answers. "I don't know, sir. Maybe it died when Pope Peter died. I've heard nothing. As I told you, I've been running pretty much an independent operation the last three months."

"Keeping up appearances?" Folsom asks, drawing BC's attention.

"I suppose so," BC nods, "Finding something to do, finding a way to move on, to honor the dead by rebuilding, not giving up, that sort of thing."

Folsom nods. "So you're independent, now. Why not join us, come work for us? Give up the charade," he says, gesturing at BC's collar and clothes. "You could do well in the UTZ Security Force." "Really," BC replies.

Don't want to sound too eager. Don't really want to do it, either. Wonder how serious they are? See if I can get away with playing dumb...

"What, would I get my own ship? Make me a Captain or something?" BC plays the chucklehead. Folsom chuckles, "Not exactly."

"What then?"

"We want you to stay where you are. Keep doing what you're doing, for now. See what the Vatican does, watch the Vatican through your special channels, and then report back to us."

"You want me to be a double agent?" BC asks them.

Wentworth leans forward and speaks, "How can you be a double agent when we're all on the same side?"

That kind of fuzzy logic is going to bring my headache back. At least they're buying the dumber version of me that I'm selling, so far, we'll see...

"Interesting. Can I think about this?" he asks Folsom, "Or will you have Wentworth and his goons 'persuade' me again?"

Folsom shakes his head. "Persuasion only goes so far. You're of no use to us as an agent if you're working against your will. The rest of us don't necessarily agree with Mr. Wentworth's methods," he says, finishing with clear disdain.

"You may not like my methods," Wentworth says to Folsom, "But you always like my results."

"I like what works," Folsom agrees. "Everybody uses everybody else, Father Campion. Make no mistake. But it's nothing personal, it's just business."

"Sad outlook you've got there," BC says despite himself.

"You think so? I think it's realistic," Folsom tells him. "Think about it. We all use each other. That's life. Varying degrees of use and utility, Father. We 'like' each other only insofar as we are useful to each other. Even lovers are really only useful to each other, perhaps in the most sublime of ways, but it is still utility all the same. Mutual Utility. The use to which you put a lover is to make you feel good, to feel wanted, to feel loved, whatever that means. So why not agree to use each other?"

"Well, sure, maybe I'll work with you... But I'm not going to fuck you, so don't get any weird ideas," BC jokes. The table erupts in a dull roar of chuckling.

"Does that mean you're with us?" Folsom asks him as the murmuring dies down.

Calling my bluff... why not play through?

"Sure." I'll let you know if I hear anything." BC looks around the table. "Does that mean I can go home, now?"

"Home being where?" Folsom asks.

BC laughs, "You know, that's a very good question. But these days I guess I mean the Vatican Mission on the Moon. I built the place, so I guess it feels like home."

"Sure," Folsom tells him; "you can go. We'll have Wentworth's people bring you back."

"Yes, and then we can get on to the next agenda item. How does it feel to be just another agenda item, Campion?" Wentworth pushes BC's buttons. Folsom shuts him down.

"You're always so kind, Richard. Please see that Father Campion is returned safely to the Moon. Without another bump on the head. If at all possible. Thank you, Father Campion. You are of more importance to us than Richard lets on. You are... useful, at any rate. For now."

"Great. So, how do we get in touch? How would you like me to report to you?" BC asks.

"Contact us through Wentworth. Let him know we need to talk, and he'll arrange a meeting, or whatever is appropriate." Folsom turns to Wentworth, "Won't you, Richard?"

Wentworth nods to Folsom, "Absolutely." He turns to BC, "I'll have Bruno see to it on your way out. We'll give you one of our secure com units, for emergency use only."

"Thanks," BC says, trying not to let his sarcasm slip through. "So," BC looks around, "I can go?"

"You can go," Folsom says.

"Bruno!" Wentworth bellows, aided by the amplification. Bruno appears. "Please escort Father Campion back to the ship, and then back to his place on the moon. We want to be sure he makes the trip safe and sound... don't let a hair on his head get mussed," Wentworth says, with sarcasm of his own.

BC gets up, surveys his surroundings a final time, then turns and walks away from the table full of the most powerful people in the world.

In the universe... maybe. At least in OUR universe they are. But I think I did okay, held my own... at least I survived...

BC and Bruno make their way back through the station corridors to Wentworth's waiting ship. looks around as Bruno guides him.

Don't see any other people, really... Where would Fiza be? Can I get free of my buddy Bruno here long enough to look around?

"Is there a place I can go to the bathroom?" BC asks the goon.

"You can go back on the ship. We're almost there," Bruno grunts.

Maybe I could make a break for it.

"Hey!" Bruno grunts at BC. "Slow down!"

Somehow, that doesn't seem like a viable alternative...

BC walks on next to Wentworth's thug.

Not this time, then. But now that I know you're alive, Fiza... I'll what? Rescue you? Come back for you next time?

Bruno sticks by BC's side all the way to the airlock. He shuts the airlock door behind BC as he boards the ship to leave Wentworth Station.

Next time, then...

Chapter Six

The trip back to the Moon takes just under eight hours. Relatively fast. BC nods off in his stateroom during the trip, coming to as Wentworth's ship clunks into its berth at the port at Lunar Prime.

Eight hours, again... Isn't that just like the UTZ Council? Keeping the fastest ships for themselves!

BC disembarks through Wentworth's private bay and makes his way through the Lunar Prime spaceport. He finds a porter unit to take his luggage back to the Vatican Mission. As he passes queued up outgoing passengers at one of the public carriers counters, he spots Marc Edwards in line. BC walks over to say hello.

"Marc! How are you? What are you doing here? Where are you off to?" BC asks as he shakes his hand. Edwards laughs, "Too many questions at once, BC! I'm going away for a while. I don't have that many responsibilities right now, so I'm gonna go visit some family back on Earth, take a break. Maybe do the tourist thing and see a few sights. A vacation! Imagine that!"

"How are you doin'?"

"Don't ask." BC sighs, changes the subject, "You know, Marc, I'm still stunned people voted that terrorist into office over you."

"I don't know, BC. Is it really that surprising? They never really voted me *in* in the first place, did they?" Edwards sighs. "They got me by default when Meredith died. Now, they've got Daniel. Guess they like the McEntyres," Edwards says, defeat resounding in his voice.

Damn, the guy doesn't deserve this...

Edwards perks up, "Hey, I saw you came in on that UTZ Yacht! Wentworth's ship! Traveling with some pretty fancy company, aren't you?"

Pretty slimy company, actually...

"Not really. He wanted to meet with someone connected with the Vatican. I guess these days, I'm the most accessible. I'm convenient, acting ambassador and all. But I couldn't tell him anything he didn't already know."

Edwards' turn at the counter comes. He steps up and orders, "One to New York. Thank you."

"That's Liner 95. It's leaving soon. You only have two minutes!" the woman behind the counter tells Edwards. "Gate Seven, Mr. Edwards. You'll have to hurry!" She clears his bags through and pushes the ticket into his hand.

Edwards looks at BC, goes to shake his hand, but then decides to give him a hug. They pat each other on the back.

"Thanks, BC. Ya' know, for stickin' by me and all," Edwards says, stepping back. He shakes his head. "Man, I appreciate everything you did, your advice... Thank you, BC." Edwards smiles a half-hearted smile.

He lifts his carry-on bag. "Hey, I gotta run!" He turns and runs for Gate Seven. "I'll see you sometime!" he shouts at BC over his shoulder.

BC picks up something in his tone. "How long are you gone for?" BC shouts back.

"I don't know. A while. I'll be in touch. I gotta go!" he yells as he runs.

"Have a good time," BC says knowing there's no way Edwards can still hear him. But somehow he does, and turns to wave. Then Edwards disappears into the crowd heading for the departure gates. BC turns and heads for the Vatican Mission.

I hate to see that guy go. He was one of the good ones. Maybe it's because he didn't get elected into office. Somehow that let him do a better job. Plus he was a real friend... I don't have many true friends.

Speaking of friends... I've got to find M'Bekke. And then find something to give the UTZ to string them along.

Purposes and missions, I like it!

It's good to have goals to accomplish!

BC enters the main dome and takes in the surroundings. The bareness is harsh: the old trees gone forever, the old growth dead and removed. But there are new plantings around the central pool and on the bridges. The new dome itself is actually clearer than the original, yet made of stronger material.

The crowd isn't quite as 'bustling' as it used to be... still not as many people here. Still, they are here, still running on errands, hustling to work or whatever. Each person a planet, spinning in its own orbit, shuffling off to jobs, other pressing destinations... Some with their heads a swivel... Gotta be tourists... Wandering aimlessly... ducking into stores around the perimeter wall.

And then there are some people you'd rather not see at all. McEntyre! And he's looking this way. He's coming this way! Aw, hell.

Daniel McEntyre walks over to BC.

"Campion," McEntyre says smugly.

"Governor McEntyre," BC answers, with a nod.

The two stand face to face. They look each other in the eye.

What does he want? A stare down?

A minute passes.

A minute is a very long time...

McEntyre finally breaks the silence.

"You keep some powerful company, Campion."

"Me?" BC feigns innocence.

"It was hard to miss the ship you just came in on," McEntyre says, with a touch of sarcasm. "You take a short vacation after the signing ceremony? Almost looks like you're violating the Declaration before the ink is even dry! Are you working directly for the UTZ now that your old masters are gone?"

What, is he trying to provoke me? Am I that stupid? I might be. But there's too much at stake...

"If I had any idea what you were talking about, I have the feeling it would make me angry. Are you trying to make me angry? Why should the Governor of Lunar Prime, the vast Moon colony, lovely Luna, waste time trying to make the Vatican Ambassador angry? Doesn't *that* violate your Declaration?" BC challenges him in an even, measured tone of voice.

"Play dumb. Fine. Have it your way," McEntyre says with a shake of his head and a sneer. Fire flashes in his eyes. "You don't fool me, Campion. I see right through you! You had Edwards wrapped around your little finger, but I know who you really are!" He lowers his voice, "Murderer!"

I just want to hit him. What can I say? I so just want to haul off and let him have it! But I can't hit him now, he's the fucking governor! They could, and probably would, arrest me on the spot. He would love that, love to have a reason to put me away, or, better yet, exile me from Lunar Prime. My hitting him is exactly what he wants.

"You through?" BC asks.

"Through?" McEntyre asks rhetorically. "I'm just getting started, Campion! Things are different, now! You'd better watch yourself!" McEntyre says with a wag of his finger.

I'd like to snap that finger right off...

"Right," BC says dismissively. "Excuse me."

BC steps to the side, and walks on past McEntyre.

He hears McEntyre yell at his back.

"Watch yourself, Campion! You better watch yourself!"

Watch my ass, asshole. Eat my dust. Eat shit and... Know what? Maybe the time has come to find a way to eliminate him. Just kill him and do the world a favor. Pro bono. No charge for this one, folks, it's free...

Maybe there's a way to really take him down... He has a checkered past. There's gotta be something to humiliate him with... that little Asian girl he fooled around with and beat up... Edwards didn't want to go negative during the election, but the election's over... and he's off to New York, anyway, so why not? It'd be better to render McEntyre ineffective and powerless than kill him outright.

BC keeps walking, thinking, plotting to himself as he leaves McEntyre behind. When he reaches the Vatican Mission he locks down the whole facility, setting the mission to self-contained mode.

I've had enough of people fucking with me in the last twenty-four hours, thank you very much.

BC takes comfort in the knowledge that thanks to his rebuild the Vatican Mission can survive locked down and self-sustained for over three months.

If McEntyre wants me, let him try to come get me... let him try! We'll have a siege! We won't go down easy. Besides, with the war on hold, what kind of backing will he get?

BC makes his way into his personal rooms and plops down in his chair soon as he gets inside.

He rubs his temples. He rubs his eyes with the balls of his hands.

One of his headaches threatens to come on, surging up behind his eyes like a freight train rushing in.

Oh man, this sucks! Pressure behind the eyes. It almost has a sound, a high pitched whine, annoying; not a sound my ears are hearing! It's sound in my head! 'Least I'm tired enough to try to sleep it away...

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP...

"Off!" BC shouts.

The alarm shuts off. BC stirs in the chair.

"What the..."

The clock says he's been passed out for almost ten hours.

Must have fallen asleep in the damn chair! Doesn't even feel like I slept. But my headache is gone! My neck hurts, though, ow...

BEEP BEEP BEEP

"Off!"

That's not the alarm, that's the com unit...

"What is it?" BC shouts.

"Father Campion?" Lisa his secretary is on the com.

"Yes, Lisa?" BC asks in a more normal tone of voice.

"Father, we're locked out! You locked us out after you got back last night!" His secretary scolds him over the com unit.

"Yes, I secured the Vatican Mission before retiring last night," BC admits. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you weren't at home, Lisa..." BC says with a hint of suggestiveness.

"Father BC! I was visiting some friends!" She gasps over the com.

"I see," he says with broad humor as he works the security controls. "There, your ID should get you in, now," he tells her.

She sounds indignant, but gracious. "Thank you, Father."

The com goes off and BC gets up. He stretches to work out the kinks from a night spent sleeping sitting in the chair.

This... ouch, damn, stiff neck. Everything is stiff. I can't believe I could sleep so long in that position.

He freshens up until the com beeps again.

Lisa, again...

"Yes, Lisa?"

"Father, some of the parishioners want to know if you'll be saying a Mass today."

What is it, Holy Wednesday? I must be spoiling these people...

"What time is it now?"

"10:30."

"Fine, let them know I'll say mass an hour from now, at 11:30."

"Good, I'm sure they'll be pleased. Mr. Fitzgerald has been leading daily prayer meetings, but some people would really like a daily mass."

Some people meaning you and your friends, I know, Lisa, I know...

"Yes, Lisa, I know, but I'm away a lot on Church business, so sometimes..." BC trails off.

"Right," Lisa says. "Speaking of church business, I have a communiqué tagged for you from his Holiness, The Pope. It arrived earlier today. You know, if I hadn't been locked out, I'd have been able to tell you about it sooner," she admonishes him.

Wow! Finally, a word from below! I've waited this long...

"I'll wait until after Mass to deal with that, Lisa."

"Yes, Father." The com unit silences.

BC finishes getting dressed and heads for the chapel to get ready for Mass.

I don't know how much longer I can keep on doing this. Mass was kinda fun when I first said it, but now... I don't know... the novelty's worn off. I certainly ain't going to do it every fucking day! Damn. How shallow is that?

Jim Fitzgerald is already in the sacristy when BC arrives. He's a young lay minister, gives out communion and reads at Mass. BC had asked Jim to fill in as best he could when BC wasn't able to be there. Fitzgerald's dark complexion and jet-black hair don't quite match his Irish surname. He smiles a little when he sees BC.

"Hello, Father BC. We've missed you," he says. He comes over and shakes BC's hand.

"Thank you, Jim," BC replies, "I was away on Church Business, as usual. You know how it is. Did you hold those prayer meetings we talked about, while I was away?"

"Well, sure, we did, but they're not Mass, you know? I'm glad... everybody'll be glad you're back here for a Mass. That's all," he says.

"Why don't you become a priest, Jim?" BC challenges him, "Have you thought ever about it?"

Jim looks down at his feet as he answers.

"All the time, Father," he admits. "I just... I mean, I don't..." he stammers.

Poor guy sounds embarrassed. Hit a nerve.

"Look," BC begins, trying to ease him out of answering.

"I don't know," Jim cuts him off, "I guess that I just don't think that I'm cut out for it," he finishes.

"Why not? You seem called to it as strongly as I am, maybe more," BC tells the young man.

A whole lot more, let's face it.

"Really?" Jim asks, encouraged.

"Really," BC says, reassuring him. "Do you think God would make you hear His call if, like you said, you're not 'cut out for it'?"

The young man shakes his head.

"I don't know."

"As long as you do what you do out of love, I'm pretty sure God is behind you one hundred percent," BC says.

Listen to me, trying to be wise...

"I just don't know," Jim says.

"I'm sure your serving Him would do Him honor, Jim," BC tells him. "Why don't you think about it?"

"I will, Father," Jim says.

"If you have any questions, just ask," BC says, magnanimously.

Hopefully, now, those questions won't be about me and where I've been. Keep him thinking of something else...

The rest of their preparation for Mass passes in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. BC stays fairly lost through the entire New Reform Liturgy, right on through mingling with the good folk of his congregation afterwards for small talk and niceties. He does his part; he plays his role, plies his priestly persona to perfection, and then heads for home.

Swan would be proud! Poor Swan. Man, she didn't deserve to die. A bitch, a royal pain in my ass, sure, but not guilty enough of anything to be killed. The Cardinal... okay, maybe. Nah, not even him, not really. Heh. Gallows humor.

BC finds himself chuckling under his breath as he enters his office suite. His fond thoughts of Swan are quickly swept out of the way, however, when Lisa appears with the Papal communiqué.

"Here it is," she says as she hands it over. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, really. I was just remembering some old friends," BC tells her.

"Whatever," she says, turns and leaves BC by himself.

He takes the communiqué to his desk.

Sealed. Secure. Only readable in the CCU, by the look of it. Good. Maybe all is not lost.

BC secures the room before he turns the CCU on and pops the contents of the cylinder in. It's a voice only transmission, a voice BC doesn't recognize.

"Father Campion. You've been doing an excellent job as the Acting Vatican Ambassador to Lunar Prime. Your reports, while not always as timely as we'd like, are, nonetheless, both thorough and informative. Your tireless efforts rebuilding the Vatican Mission on the Moon have not gone unnoticed."

Okay. Voice only, huh? Is that the new Pope? His Chief of Staff? Nice to be appreciated...

"We know you must have many questions..."

That's an understatement...

"...Your recent meeting with the Executive Council of the Universal Trade Zone has left us with many questions to ask you, now, as well.

That was fast!

"The OPO still functions, although on a more limited scale, for now. But we are aware of what is going on. We still observe and gather information. You have been providing us with information. You are not alone in this.

"What we do with that information has, however, changed. Your 'other' services have not been required.

"And now, in the last few days, you've engaged in some very curious behavior. We are puzzled by your visit to Wentworth Station. We believe it is time to go beyond simple reports.

"We believe it is time for a meeting between you and me, Father. I've arranged for passage for you to Rome next Monday. A ship will be arriving Sunday night with a Father Daycomb on board. He'll sub for you. He'll say the Mass while you're gone, minister to your people up there. Make sure your congregation makes him feel welcome, eh?"

"We'll see you in Rome on Tuesday, then. Pope Linus the Second, out."

Well, well, well, what do we have here? That was Him, huh, the actual Pope? Guess I'll find out more next week.

Chapter Seven

BC's itinerary, provided by the Vatican, has him boarding a church transport ship for Rome early Monday morning. He makes his way to the docking bays bristling at being on someone else's schedule instead of his own.

I've gotten used to setting my own timetable.

BC spots the man who looks to be his temporary replacement, Father Dan Daycomb, in the ship's Gate area, based on the pictures sent up by the Vatican. Daycomb looks to be an eager, young, redheaded priest. He's dressed in a traditional priest's collar. His wide brown eyes take in the landing area of the Lunar Prime as he walks through the port.

That must be him. What are the odds of anyone else wearing a collar coming through here, anyway?

"Father Daycomb?" BC calls out, stopping the man.

"Ambassador Campion?" the other priest asks.

"BC, please," Campion says, extending his hand. "Dan? May I call you Dan?"

The other man nods, grasps BC's hand and gives it a good solid shake.

"Well, Dan, please be kind to them, eh?" BC asks.

"Oh, I will, Father Campion. I, uh, I mean, I will, BC."

He's young! I bet he's never even worked in a Parish, never mind on the fucking Moon!

"You'll do fine, Father, I'm sure," BC reassures him. "By the way, there's a young man named Jim Fitzgerald here. He hears the call, but he's unsure. You're younger, you might relate to him better than I can. See if you can convince him to join our ranks while you're here, Father!" BC challenges Daycomb.

"I – uh, I will," Daycomb answers, uncertainly.

"He'll be a help to you, no matter what," BC says, trying to inspire a little confidence in the man.

"Anyway, I've got to catch my ship! Good luck!" BC tells him.

"Th-thanks," Daycomb manages to get out.

"See you later!"

BC turns and heads over to his flight's docking bay.

Well, I wished him luck. What else could I do? Heck, a lot of them here will love having a 'real' priest for a change. Okay... Rome, here I come.

BC is booked on a public flight. He finds the docking bay and makes his way onto the ship. He looks around at the other passengers, trying to see who they are without making eye contact.

Pretty normal looking, I guess. No risky types... Just everyday folk taking a flight down to Earth.

He finds his seat and settles in for the trip.

How long is this flight?

BC looks through his papers for his itinerary as he sits waiting for the ship to depart.

Twenty Hours? A long time to think.

Think about how it's come to this.

Strange, finding myself telling some kid to become a priest! Didn't tell him I did it online way back when. That it was all a cover for smuggling. What a long, strange, bizarre trip, all right, 'The Biography of BC'. I can see it now: Born in the old USA, on Earth, 2080. Early life unremarkable. Classic underachiever.

I wanted to be a pilot, driving ships from the Moon to Mars on the Mag-Loop highway...

BC looks out the window as they take off from Lunar Prime. Melancholy memories well back up into BC's mind.

They said I didn't have the discipline needed to study to become a pilot. So I gave it up... proving them right. Self-fulfilling prophecy. Too bad. Ended up drifting from job to job after I got out of school. Finally ended up on Linderstern Finch as a station-boy. After getting rolled by Fiza, I stayed on board. I answered the ad from the Holy Redemption Church of Jesus. And so I became a preacher! Well, sort of.

I still remember the ad's headline, "Get Nontaxable Status!" Heh. I got my ordination papers and tax forms and officially became Brother Bernard Champion of the Holy Redemption Church of Jesus.

Co-workers and friends were my 'church members', my so-called 'congregation'. I got my family to join, too. That was weird. But that led the Holy Redemption Church of Jesus to raise me to full Reverend status.

The nontax status conveniently covered several dubious import/export deals. Plus, because I was a Reverend, I could use that status to act as a courier for several (let's call them "nontraditional") business interests operating on Lunar and Earth.

2099 was a great year. I loved 2099! I was 19, still on Finch's station, and running my own gig on the side as the Reverend Bernard Champion of the Holy Redemption Church of Jesus. It was sweet! Of course it couldn't last.

Lost the station job the next year. I kind of saw it coming. So, by that time, I'd all ready set up several other residences: on the Moon, in orbit, and on Earth. The actual job on Linderstern Finch had actually become unnecessary, but it did help explain my travel activity.

I was able to make the church thing work for me for a while, four or five years. But then the Holy Redemption Church of Jesus and I got swept up in the Great Reunification of 2104. The Holy Redemption Church of Jesus was absorbed into the New catholic Church. And they made me a priest!

I remember those early days. I was welcomed into the greater church and assigned to a rectory on Earth, in the Boston area. It was weird, but nice. The other 'priests' didn't know what to make of me, but they tried to help me fit in. I tried to keep my "side business" running, but it got to be impossible. So I settled in and tried to blend.

That all changed a couple of years later, when they recruited me into the OPO. Only four years ago, but it feels like a lifetime. They used classic extortion. The OPO dug up the dirt on my past and used it to 'encourage' my 'decision' to join them. Forced cooperation. Cooperate or they use my earlier activities against me, and I go to jail for a long, long time.

The OPO trained me to be an assassin. For the OPO. For the Pope. For the Vatican. Course, my own shady background prepared me well for my new life.

I actually kinda liked the OPO. My kind of people ran the place; least I thought most of them were my kind of people. They were usually pleased with me and my work. I proved quite effective in my job, all in the Name of God, removing threats to the Pope and the Church and the UTZ. And I even did okay as a Vatican Spin Doctor and Diplomat, defusing situations in the media and explaining the Papal position.

Now the new Pope wants to see me. Wonder what the Papal Position will be this time?

Don't feel like bending over... hope it's not too painful a position!

Chapter Eight

BC lands in Rome. The city still stands, but it suffered mightily in the UIN attacks. It's a Rome that has been blasted, but it is a Rome trying to rebuild as well.

The UIN were merciless in their bombardment of The Vatican and its host city. The ancient ruins of the West drew no respect from a Muslim nation still mourning the loss of Mecca.

As BC approaches St. Peter's Square he notices many of the grand old buildings of Vatican City have been reduced to rubble. Buildings standing since the earliest days of Vatican City stand no more.

Seems like each time I come back, there is less to come back to.

There is a new building just off the square, the new Papal office building for the new Pope. The building also houses new, temporary Vatican lodgings. The *Domus Sanctae Marthae* stands, but is under reconstruction.

The new building... How could I miss it? Right where they said it would be.

He walks across the square to the building, a no-nonsense, boxy block of metal and glass.

It looks temporary... none of the grandeur of the old place. Strictly functional. Utilitarian. Well, at least it's not Unitarian... is that a joke? Trying to make myself less nervous by telling myself bad jokes, that's healthy.

He makes his way inside the new building.

Seems too metallic a place to see the Pope. Needs more wood... even Stanzone's fakewood would help.

The building's lobby is buzzing with activity, full of people coming and going, presumably on papal business.

BC finds a central information kiosk.

Place looks like a fucking corporation, not a church...and here I am, waltzing in to see the CEO!

Everything's different.

At least they have real live people working at this kiosk... what do I do, just walk up and say, "Pope, please?"

"Hello," BC says to the attendant when he gets to the kiosk counter.

"Hello," the matronly old woman says to him, "We're expecting you. Here," she says, sliding an ID card to BC across the counter. "See the arrow on the card?"

BC sees a blinking green arrow on the card's surface, nods.

"Follow it," she tells him. "Start by taking that solo elevator over there," she points across the lobby to a door isolated by itself in the wall to the right. A guard stands to either side of the door. "Show those guards your card. Then slide it into the slot next to the door. That will call the elevator. When it comes, get in. It will take you to the proper floor on its own. Follow the arrow on the card after you exit the elevator. Have a nice day."

"Yeah. Thanks," BC answers.

Guess they've adopted heavy security here as well. Makes sense, I guess. Betcha they're actively scanning everyone entering the building.

BC follows the card and his instructions and rides the small elevator up to what feels like the fourth and top floor. After leaving the claustrophobic space of the solo elevator, he follows the direction of the green arrow as it turns on the card like a compass.

BC walks along plain corridors.

Could be any office building anywhere. Creepy. Sterile. Well... That's interesting!

BC's path has led him to a heavy wooden door.

Hmmm. I recognize that door. That was the door to the pope's office back in the old building. They must have salvaged it from the rubble. Looks like some burn marks there.

"Go ahead in, Father," a voice says out of nowhere.

BC starts. He hadn't noticed a small desk just to the right of the door. A small birdlike man in vestments is perched behind it.

"Thank you," BC nods to him. BC reaches out and opens the heavy door. He walks through into a modern looking office.

This has less personality than Wentworth's office back on his station.

There he is, Cardinal Giuseppe... Pope Linus, now.

"You must be Champion. Come in," Pope Linus says from his throne behind a giant metallic desk. Pope Linus is a large Italian man in his late sixties, silver gray hair escaping from beneath his pontifical headgear. He wears the traditional white papal vestments with a gold and red stole draped around his neck.

His bushy gray eyebrows rise up over the rim of the papal miter when he speaks, his sharp brown eyes beneath them assessing BC as he enters.

BC closes the heavy door behind him. He walks over to a chair in front of the giant metallic desk.

He's old school. Is he going to hold out his hand so I can kiss his ring? Should I walk around the desk? I really don't want to... nope; he's just sitting back down. Cool.

Pope Linus waves his hand, "Please. Sit down."

"Thank you," BC says, sitting down. "I'm glad we finally have a chance to meet and speak together, your eminence." BC puts a little too much emphasis on "finally".

That's all the deference and respect I can muster...

"Please understand our lack of communication," The pope says, getting right to it. "We've been trying to rebuild. As you can see." The pope looks around the room and then back at BC.

"We've also been rethinking, reevaluating and reformulating the Vatican's stance, the position of the NcC, as regards the ongoing war. And the OPO," he says, leveling his gaze at BC.

Here it comes...

"The OPO has become ineffective, BC."

Pope Linus proclaims his judgment!

"It's okay, actually," Linus says, looking away. "We won't need all the PR if we aren't getting involved in so many messes, now, will we?"

"What are you saying? Are you getting rid of the OPO?" BC asks him. BC begins to protest. "I don't know, sir... Pope Peter found the OPO to be pretty useful!"

"Pope Peter is dead," Linus says bluntly, deflating BC's emotion. "We must move on. Change with the times. Adapt! That's what the NcC is all about, isn't it? The church has learned to change."

My bullshit detector is going off big time... I think he's talking bigger things than just the OPO... This isn't good.

"We need peace, Father Champion. Pope Peter's policies embroiled us deeply in the war. Pulled the church headlong into the conflict!"

Linus turns in his chair and gestures out the window behind him, out to the rubble and ruins. "His policies caused us to be attacked by the UIN, leaving us like this. So much destroyed... Ultimately, Pope Peter brought this destruction down on himself," Linus pauses for effect, "and on the rest of us as well."

"I see," BC says.

No, I don't. Not really. But I'll play along for now, see where this goes...

"The OPO may no longer be useful," Linus says. He looks BC in the eye, "But *you* are, Father. You've done a great job rebuilding our mission on the Moon. You are to be commended! I wanted to see you in person to let you know I'm considering making you our permanent ambassador."

"Really?" BC says, surprised.

I hear a "But" coming...

"But I have a test for you first, Champion, to see if you're fit to be our full ambassador," Pope Linus tells him.

"A test?"

What the fuck?

"Yes. A test of your abilities as a diplomat, as an ambassador." Linus gives him his serious stare. "As a man of peace. Are you up to it?"

"I guess so," BC says. "I hope so. I suppose that depends on what it is, sir," BC hedges.

Pope Linus gets up off his throne and walks around the desk to stand next to BC in his chair.

So he can look down on me. One of Wentworth's favorite power tactics. So transparent.

Linus attempts to tower over him as he sets out his test for BC.

"I want you to head a peace conference. On the moon... Sometime in October. Invite all the warring

parties and see if we can end this conflict."

What?

"With all due respect, your holiness, how can *we* broker the peace? The UIN attacked us when they attacked the UTZ. They lump us together with them! Why would they believe we want to broker the peace?"

"That's why we have the peace conference in October. It gives us time to *prove* our new neutrality," Pope Linus reassures him.

Neutrality?

BC can't stop himself. "Neutrality?" he asks Linus, incredulous.

"Yes. Neutrality," Linus says, obviously enjoying the sound of the word. "I am declaring the New catholic Church neutral in the war between the UIN and the UTZ."

Linus's air of self-satisfaction is unmistakable. He nearly lectures BC. "This war should not be a religious war. The New catholic Church is not about war. We follow Jesus, we're about peace, or we're supposed to be, aren't we?"

Good argument. Valid points, all of 'em. So why don't I think he believes any of this? He only talked about the OPO and PR earlier; does he know for sure what else we did? There's no way... Why does... does he expect me to believe he's that naive?

"Father Champion?" Linus prompts BC when he doesn't answer. "Aren't we supposed to be the peacemakers?"

"Yeah, well, sure, I mean, it's just that I didn't..." BC tries to not answer.

"I see you're surprised. Why should peace surprise you, Father?"

"I guess I've grown used to war, your holiness."

Linus shakes his head. "You know, I *can* understand that. But it's time to get un-used to it! We need to forge a new peace, Father. And you're in an advantageous position to be one of the architects of that new peace... If you're up to the challenge..."

"Or should I appoint a new acting ambassador?" Linus asks him provocatively.

"No need to, sir, I can do this. I'm just... I am surprised at our change of allegiance."

Linus looks at him, and then circles back around behind the desk to sit down before he answers, as if considering his words carefully. He looks up, looks BC in the eye. "The UTZ is no friend to the church, BC. The UTZ has only used us.

"I worry that you are too close to them to see this," Linus says, shaking his head ever so slightly.

Too close to them? How much does he know? What to say...

"The UTZ seem to want our alliance," BC tells Pope Linus. "They actually called *me* in to meet with them, the UTZ Council, to ask me why *you* hadn't been in touch, sir. All I could tell them was that *I didn't know*. But they would not have reached out to *me* had you been in communication with them yourself, your holiness, with all due respect."

"Why is it when people finish a sentence with that phrase, 'with all due respect', they usually seem to be implying that no respect is really due at all?" Pope Linus prods him. "Rhetorical question."

"You didn't get in touch, and I was nearby and handy. They practically abducted me!" BC protests.

"Yes. I heard."

"So you know!" BC insists. "I'm no *friend* of theirs! If I was, I wouldn't be here telling *you* they've asked me to spy for them, to spy on you."

Throwin' the doggie a bone...

All of a sudden Linus is all ears, leaning towards BC across the desk. "Oh really?"

Feel the love...

"And what did you say? What did you tell them you'd do?" Linus asks.

"I told them I would. Of course," BC answers cryptically on purpose.

"You did? But you won't, will you?" Linus tries to puzzle it out.

"I'll tell them whatever it is that they should know," BC says, keeping it going. "Whatever *we* think they should know."

Linus relaxes.

Yes, and, of course, by "we" I mean me and the mouse I've got here in my pocket...

"I owe them no allegiance, your holiness," BC reassures him.

Linus's brow furrows. "But... why then were you surprised that the church would end such an allegiance?"

"It was pleasant surprise, I assure you, your holiness. It seems uncharacteristically authentic, you see," BC explains.

"Quite a mouthful there, Father. Is that a compliment or an insult?" Linus challenges him.

"A compliment, sir, please don't take it otherwise."

I can't tell where this guy really stands. Or if he believes me.

"So am I to understand that you'll tell the UTZ council whatever *you* think they need to know?" Linus asks, showing more depth.

BC picks up on the disclosure.

He got that.

"I'll tell them what they need to know. And I'll do the same for you, sir," BC tells him.

Linus leans back, eyebrows rising, noticeably taken aback by BC's sudden impudence. Then he leans back in for emphasis.

"Where do your allegiances and alliances lay, Father Champion?" Linus asks BC directly.

"With those I trust, sir. Only with those I know I can trust."

"Do you think you can trust me?" Linus asks him.

"I don't know yet," BC answers honestly. "I don't know you well enough yet to go either way."

"But I am your Pope!" Linus proclaims.

"Oh, that's gonna get you far with me," BC says, half under his breath.

"What?" Linus demands.

"Are you really *my* Pope?" BC goes on the offensive. "How can I be sure? What *really* happened to Pope Peter?"

"He was killed in the attacks. You heard the news," Linus insists.

He's lying. Peter was dead before the attacks began. Now I know at least one thing about him. He lies.

"I heard the news. Honestly? I didn't believe the news. I've learned not to believe much of anything, actually," BC says.

"You don't sound much like a man of faith, Father," Linus observes.

"There *are* some things I do believe in, sir," BC counters.

Linus looks him up and down, assessing.

"Who are you, Father? Who are you, really?"

"I'm your man on the moon, your holiness," BC demurs.

"So you say," Linus nods, "But how much you are actually *our* man very much remains to be seen, I think. It seems you're really nobody's man. I guess that will have to do, for now.

"Do you really think you can handle the peace conference?" Linus asks him.

"We shall see, won't we?" BC answers honestly. "I give you my word: I will apply myself to the cause and do my best to make it happen," BC promises him. "Who doesn't want peace?"

"Who doesn't want peace? Indeed," Linus agrees.

"Actually, think about that for a second," BC says, pausing. "What about the UIN? Do they really want peace? Do they want things to stay the way they are now? Them all cooped up on Mars? Us ranging all over the Moon and Earth and in Orbit? I don't think they want peace unless they get the Earth back in the bargain... and I'm not thinking we wanna make that deal." BC explains.

"They can't want more of their people to die," Linus protests.

"They can. They do," BC tells him. "Some of them see it as the whole martyrdom thing, evidently. That's why we saw those Kamikaze attacks before."

Linus laughs at a funny thought, "Japanese Muslims, Father?"

BC is not amused. "Actually, in all seriousness, Muslims using leftover Japanese tech, your holiness," he says soberly.

"I see," Linus says.

"I'll try to broker a peace," BC says. "I'll attempt to set up this peace conference. But I don't think the UIN is going to settle for anything less than return of control of the Earth. The UTZ won't agree to that. Nor should they. I don't know how much hope we should hold out for a peaceful solution," BC tells him. "You're a realist," Linus says. "That's fine. Probably better than being an optimist."

Pope Linus stands up behind his desk. "So... You make the conference happen. I'll make you permanent, full ambassador. That's our bargain. Deal?" Linus extends his hand. BC stands, reaches out and shakes it.

"Deal," he agrees.

"Well then." Pope Linus looks down at the papers on his desk. BC feels the pope's attention shift away entirely, almost a palpable thing. Linus almost offhandedly dismisses him. "Stay in touch, then. Get the ball rolling on the conference," Pope Linus says. He sits back down. "Good day, Father."

"Good day, your holiness," BC says. He turns to leave. Linus looks up one last time.

"Thank you for responding to our call, Father Champion."

"You're welcome," BC says. Linus is already staring back down at his papers.

Weird dude. I'll leave, then, I guess. What is his angle? Who is he working for? Working with? I'd almost find him authentic, if it weren't for M'Bekke's warning.

Questions preoccupy BC's mind as he makes his way out of the Pope's offices. He heads back to the Rome Air and Space Port, his mind buzzing with questions.

Where is M'Bekke? No sign of him at the Vatican during my brief visit. No outward sign of the OPO anywhere, actually. So either we're completely underground or... we just don't exist anymore.

Another papal coup? Who put Giuseppe in place, then... and why? Traditionalists? The Curia? The Old Roman Catholics? Pope Peter never garnered their favor, not with the way he flaunted so many traditions.

With the way Linus talked about the UTZ, it can't be them. No, not the UTZ, certainly, unless they're playing an incredibly complex game... and playing me with it! Nah... a conspiracy like that would have to be too complex to actually work. And the folks involved would have to be a hell of a lot smarter.

Is "Pope Linus" really so in the dark on the OPO's true function? Or was he just playing me?

BC's thoughts turn back to the Moon.

Heading back to Lunar Prime, back home. It still feels like I'm going home, despite our new "Governor" Daniel McEntyre. Wonder how the NcC's new neutrality will play with him? What will he think of the Pope's peace plan and conference? Probably won't buy a word of it, knowing him.

I'll be nice. I'll try not to punch him again, either. Try not to clench my teeth as I ask him politely and diplomatically if I can hold a peace conference on the Moon, at Lunar Prime. See what happens.

BC lands on the Moon and makes his way back to the Vatican Mission, to send out invitations and inquiries... and to see if Daniel McEntyre can be reasoned with.

McEntyre stalls him, at first, trying to put off any meeting with him. BC attempts to jump through all proper diplomatic hoops to schedule an open, public meeting. He officially and publicly petitions him for an audience, Ambassador to Governor. BC includes in the petition reference to discussing the new neutrality of the New catholic Church and possible ideas for peace. After a week of delays, McEntyre finally agrees to a public meeting.

At the meeting, BC asks the governor, politely and diplomatically, if he'll agree to let BC host a peace conference on the Moon, at Lunar Prime, in mid-October.

BC makes a strong case. He outlines the parties he wants to involve, and presents the NcC's intention of declaring neutrality. After McEntyre discovers that BC has reached out to the UIN leader Ibn Al-Salid and invited him to join in the peace conference, McEntyre begins to treat BC almost civilly. BC is pleasantly surprised. McEntyre agrees to the peace conference with little protest. McEntyre seems

surprised himself by the newly neutral NcC. He shakes BC's hand at the end of the meeting... the first non-violent physical contact between BC and McEntyre!

Peace holds through the summer. BC's peace conference gives people hope there's a chance for ending the war. Maybe even a chance at a lasting peace. The New catholic Church officially announces its neutrality in June. Pope Linus also promises some groundbreaking overtures towards the UIN at the coming peace conference.

July, August and September pass quietly. The parties confirm their intention to participate in the peace conference. The UIN will send a delegation. Although BC keeps his distance from the UTZ council over the summer, the UTZ agrees to send representatives. McEntyre agrees to involve the Lunar government. There is great anticipation for the conference by the time October arrives.

Chapter Nine

BC wakes up bristling with anticipation and anxiety on October 10th, the day his peace conference guests are scheduled to begin arriving.

Well. A day I never thought I'd see finally arrives! My peace conference... how 'bout that? And right on schedule!

The Reverend Bernard Campion, Acting Vatican Ambassador to the Independent Lunar State, invites you to A Peace Conference on Lunar Prime, October 10th through the 13th, 2110. Please do come... And they're coming!

They'll all be here soon... at least their envoys and representatives will be.

BC dresses quickly and heads for the outskirts of Lunar Prime's port to watch representatives arrive.

Ayatollah Salid of Mars is sending representative Mohammed Ibn Al Sere, and his entourage.

Wentworth is heading up the UTZ's delegation.

To BC's dismay, Pope Linus has sent along what he called "additional Vatican Representation." BC knows it's to be Linus's eyes and ears for the conference: Cardinal James Hardwick, Vatican Envoy.

Hardwick came a day early. He arrived last night, expecting quarters and, apparently, maid service.

To the absolute delight of the mission staff used to my more egalitarian ways.

BC sees Hardwick off to the left out of the corner of his eye, standing among the welcoming reception crowd at the port and talking with Daniel McEntyre.

Those two look way too chummy for my taste. Look at them laughing!

Here comes the UIN group. The Muslims were genuinely surprised by the Pope's overtures of neutrality.

We were all somewhat shocked when he pledged to try to find a way to grant them access to any NcC controlled holy sites that Muslims hold to be holy on Earth. That overture was really stunning. Surprising. The UIN were taken aback.

Damn. I can't help thinking back to the last peace conference. The one I ruined by assassinating the last Governor McEntyre. Only doing my job, I keep telling myself. That's what they told me, only following orders... I'm SO less sure of all of that, now. Maybe this peace conference can help me make up for it. It won't give McEntyre back his wife. Won't give back all the lives lost as the war continued, escalated. But maybe it's my chance to do some good.

It seemed like it was right... the right thing to do. I can't say I always know what the right thing is any more. Maybe the Peace Conference is my stab at it

BC watches McEntyre laughing, greeting newly arriving conference attendees.

I still want to hit him. Just one more time! He's been good, though, supporting the peace conference. I haven't had to dig up the dirt on him, yet. Not that I won't. Maybe I shouldn't. I don't know.

Could I just hate McEntyre out of my own guilt?

Nah!

He's genuinely despicable in his own slimy right. Look at him. Wait a minute!

Who was that just behind him?

A familiar looking woman arrived with one of the delegations and passed just behind McEntyre.

Her?! No fucking way! Nita fucking Bendix?!

BC swears he just saw Nita Bendix, behind McEntyre, only visible for a second, then gone.

I haven't forgotten that face! You try to kill me, I remember you!

Instincts flood back for BC. It's all he can do to stand still as the "unofficial" gathering and greeting continues. He wants to get on the hunt. Find that woman!

Was it really her? Would she dare? Why would she come back here? Huh, why wouldn't she? She got away with a lot! What's stopping her? I wonder if she's still wanted for Meredith McEntyre's death? I'm not sure if she was actually brought up on charges for that, officially. They had no hard evidence, only suspicion. And her absence. Which I appreciate.

BC finds himself rocking on his heels.

Gotta try to relax. Look like a good host of this informal formality of a gathering. No cocktails present out of religious concerns. I could use a drink myself!

Never mind. Just nod, be gracious... Funny, I never used to attend one of these things unless I was killing someone. Now it's killing me! Well, not literally...

Everyone's a little stiff, over formal. Well, except for Hardwick and McEntyre... strange they'd get along. Wonder if there's anything to that.

Gotta suspect everyone, dontcha BC? You bet your ass. Everyone here looks suspicious.

Suspicious of each other, and suspicious in their own right.

BC enjoys a chuckle under his breath.

Maybe it will get easier when the actual talks start tomorrow. Right. Somehow, I don't think so. At least I won't have to be there the whole time. That's why entourages and delegations were invented! The leaders paint policy with a wide brush. Then the career boys from the diplomatic corps step in and work through the fine filigree of the knotty details.

We get to step back in at the end, make final adjustments, say yea or nay and sign the papers with a flourish!

I've organized the whole shebang, and gotten the agendas approved by all parties involved. I'll facilitate the process over the next three days, best I can, try to shepherd them along to an agreement, and try to keep the church truly neutral as we go along. There's not much else for me to do.

Except to try to find Nita Bendix, if she's really here. In all my spare time. Right. Oh, God...

Cardinal Hardwick is waving at BC, trying to get his attention, apparently to call him over to speak with him and McEntyre.

No thanks...

Luckily, BC is saved by the approach of the head of the UIN delegation.

"Father Champion?"

"Hello, Sir. Yes, I'm Father Champion, how can I help you?"

"Mohammed Ibn Al Sere, Father, the ranking UIN Representative," he says as an introduction. "I am glad to meet the madman who thinks he can forge a peace!"

Woah...

"Nice to meet you, too," BC says warily.

"Do you know, Father Champion, I am still not sure why I am here?" Al Sere challenges BC.

"I hope you're here because you're as tired as we are of people dying. We have a new Pope, a new head of the New catholic Church. He's declared the NcC neutral and he wants peace. Maybe the time has come when we can finally end the killing?" BC answers.

"Peace? How can there be peace when we cannot go home?" Al Sere asks.

"We understand that. That's why Pope Linus has pledged to try and find a way to..."

Al Sere interrupts him. "You would have us only *visit* places that rightfully *belong* to us! This is but a frustrating tease! Of little value, save to provoke our further anguish as a homeless people! And how many places are left? How can there be peace when Mecca lies destroyed, when Jerusalem lies destroyed? If you have a vision for peace, you best present it quickly, for I have little patience for consorting with the enemy!"

BC waits, to be sure the man is finished ranting. When it's clear he is, BC raises his eyebrows in an, "all done?" non-verbal, question. Al Sere nods.

"I see. Well, Mohammed Ibn Al Sere. Sir. I, uh, don't have a plan. No plan at all. You see, sir, I have a question, instead."

"A question?"

"A question. I think that's better, a better place to start. Than with a plan."

"And what is your question?" Al Sere challenges him.

"What does the UIN really need to have to be at peace? What do you think you absolutely need to have? What places, planets, platforms, territories...? What security? What assurances? What does the UIN need to feel safe, and at peace?"

Al Sere is silent. He stares past BC as he seems to consider the question. BC gives him time. After about a minute, Al Sere responds.

"Good questions. You're right; questions are a good place to start. Better than plans. After fighting for so long, I'm no longer sure we know what we need, even when we think we know what we want."

He falls back into silence for a moment. "We want Mecca back. We want the Dome of the Rock restored."

"What do you want," BC asks him, "that is actually attainable?"

"That *is* the harder question," Al Sere admits.

"If you think you need to have that which cannot *be*, if all you want is the unattainable, the undeliverable, then all you really want is war."

"Are you trying to provoke me?" Al Sere says with some bluster.

"No. Please, hear me out," BC says, hoping to calm his guest.

"I just heard you say that all I want is war."

"I asked you what you needed to make you satisfied, to end the war, and you spoke of things that are gone, things that cannot be. What do you desire, what does the UIN need, that CAN be?"

"I don't know... we want to come back home, at the very least. We want to visit our holy sites that are still there... But why should I be telling one such as *you* this?"

Al Sere's mood darkens. He leans in close to accuse BC in a harsh whisper, "You ask these deep questions, but how true are they? How real are you, Father? Wasn't it not long ago that you killed many for the cause? So it's been reported. You are a soldier, not a priest. The tiger does not change its stripes." He leans back and glares at BC.

Wham! The guy knows how to lay it on thick, doesn't he? And what was he eating on that flight, pepperoni? I didn't think they could...

"I have always tried to serve my faith as best I could," BC says. "Don't you do the same?"

"I find it distasteful to have to speak with one of those responsible for killing my people and chasing us from our homes. I am trying the best I can," Al Sere cautions BC. "I will stay, and see what happens, but my hopes are not high. My expectations are extremely low. The Ayatollah Salid, May he please Allah, does not see peace coming out of this conference, only death. But we are here," Al Sere says. "We will talk again later, when I can stand it again." Al Sere turns and storms away, followed by his entourage. BC stands in stunned silence.

Well... That went well. Maybe I did blow my cover last year. Maybe the UIN does know all about my previous "activities." Or maybe they just suspect it. Maybe Mohammed Ibn Al Sere is here to finally "out" me, expose me for the fraud I am! The last agent of the OPO laid out bare for all to see. What a lovely picture that is!

That would just end my life as I know it, end my career, end this conference, end any hope of peace. Hey, that would be great; I'd be responsible for bringing total war back down on all our

heads once again!

BC shakes his head. He tries to concentrate on nodding and greeting and mingling with the arriving delegations.

I can't believe all that still hangs over my head. But if they've got any proof, why haven't they exposed me already?

I hate to think Pope Peter was right after all. Maybe THAT'S why Nita Bendix is here! Shit! And shit again, look who it is...

"Hello Father Champion," Richard Wentworth says, extending his hand. BC takes it and shakes it. "Mr. Wentworth. Trust your trip was smooth?"

"That's Representative Wentworth, please, Champion."

"And the Reverend Ambassador Champion, then, if you would, sir. Please."

"Ah, yes. 'Acting' ambassador, though, still, if I'm not mistaken... correct?"

"Ah yes, for a little while longer, now that you mention it. Thank you."

"That Mr. Al Sere you were speaking with earlier seems quite charming, doesn't he? Lovely man, glad they sent him. At least it shows they're serious," Wentworth says with pure sarcasm.

"And how serious are you, 'Representative' Wentworth?"

"Excuse me?"

"How serious is the UTZ? Do you really want peace?"

"Funny question, coming from you," Wentworth cracks.

"Is it?" BC asks. He leaves the question hanging, and walks away from Wentworth.

Never did have any illusions that this was going to be easy. Does anyone really want peace? I mean, really? Gotta wonder.

BC leaves the reception behind, lets himself wander through the tunnels of Lunar Prime as his thoughts wander. He strolls down long corridors not really noticing much of his surroundings as he loses himself in his contemplation of the day and the conference.

Ultimately, I can't make them want peace. No one trusts anyone else. Why should we? Why should any of us? Every side has shown itself capable of terrible things when pressed, when "justified".

Hmmm. It's quieter than usual around this section of old Lunar Prime. The moon can be a serene place, sometimes. Hope some of that sense of calm filters through into our discussions over the next couple days. Wonder where everyone is? Probably distracted by the conference...

"Hey! Champion!"

BC's reverie is broken by the shout from Bruno, one of Wentworth's goons who have just appeared in BC's path.

Oh no... Not this shit again!

"Mr. Wentworth would like to see you."

"Great," BC says to the big guy. "Now what? Time for the next the part? Where you club me over the head and drag me off, right?" BC spits back at him.

The big man looks around. There's no one nearby.

The hunter surveys his surroundings before settling in to strike...

Bruno shrugs.

"Nope," the thug tells BC. "Mr. Wentworth says it's to be at your convenience... this time. Give him a call tonight," Bruno says.

"Or else?" BC prods.

"Or else... I don't know. You're rude?" Bruno nearly makes a joke. "Just call Wentworth. Um, please."

"Please. Wow, the magic word! Now, I'll call him. Because you said 'please.' I'm impressed, Bruno, I think we're taking this relationship to a whole new level!"

Bruno shrugs, turns, and walks away. BC is left standing alone. He can't help but shake his head. He starts walking again.

I wonder if the reception is still going on? Hope it wasn't rude of me to wander off like that. It kinda seemed over... If I screwed up it's because I'm new at this stuff. My excuse. But then, I don't want to give either side any excuse they can use to drop out of this peace process.

Damn it. It seems hopeless. Still, I've got to try to pull it off to protect my status under the 'new regime'. Seems foolish to think we WILL find any common ground.

Where the fuck am I?

BC's aimless wandering has brought him into an area he doesn't recognize. He looks around, tries to get his bearings.

Let's see... gotta focus, get out of my head and back into reality here. Hmm, maintenance corridor by the look of it... there, that's a sign I recognize. The governor's office. Must be just off the main corridor. That way, I'll betcha.

BC walks around a corner, up ahead to a larger, slightly more populated corridor. He's near the back of the Lunar Prime Governor's Office suite.

Well, there should be a public com nearby, might as well call Wentworth, get it over with. Wow, look at that. Always takes my breath away.

BC stares out the corridor window at Earthrise, half a blue-green, brown and cloudy blue marble. *Nice. But I can't start staring out the window like Edwards. Jeesh, I haven't heard from him in a while. I wonder how he's doing? Probably down there right now.*

Huh.

Well, on to the other crap.

Best call Wentworth... Where's a com unit when you need one? There it is! Wonder how this'll turn out?

BC makes the call. Wentworth's face appears on the screen. He smiles.

"Father Champion. How good of you to call. And so soon! I appreciate your swiftness. It shows you take this as seriously as I do."

"Thank you. And you're welcome. Now... Why? Why have me call you? I just saw you. I haven't been avoiding you, this time." BC stares at Wentworth on the screen. Wentworth stares back. Wentworth finally breaks the brief, uneasy silence.

"We need to talk. Not like this," he says, nodding toward the screen. "In private."

"We do? As your host, I hope you're not unsatisfied with your accommodations. Do you need something? A toothbrush, maybe? Depilatory cream?"

"Don't play front desk stupid with me, Champion. The stakes are too high for you to be so, er, *witty*. Just come visit my quarters as soon as you can. We need to talk."

"Sounds absolutely cozy."

BC isn't biting.

Not this easily. Sure, just wander in to my den, said the spider to the fly...

"With the conference just getting underway," BC protests, "I've got a lot to do. Responsibilities and all."

"With it being so late in the day on our first day, I can't see how there can be any official activity planned today," Wentworth says, pressing his point. "There's certainly nothing on my schedule. Is there something I should know about? Something you're not telling me about, Champion? Champion, are you there?"

BC is distracted. Out of the corner of his eye he sees her again.

God damn it! That is her! It's gotta be!

"I've got to go now, Wentworth, I'll stop by later, bye," BC says in one breath. He severs the connection, and runs after a woman who's got to be...

Nita Bendix!

It is her! Goddammit... Coming right out of the governor's offices, too! Right out of McEntyre's suite! How blatant is that?!

Where'd she go? She was heading away from me, off toward the main dome.

BC heads for the dome as fast as he can. She's nowhere in sight. BC bursts into the atrium and almost bumps into a member of the UIN delegation enjoying some sightseeing under the dome.

It is night in the main dome, but folks seem to have become nocturnal. There's a crowd milling about, many looking upwards. People have turned out under the dome to see the stars during the dim "night" of Lunar Prime. A crowd of hundreds wanders about under the main dome, looking up. BC surveys the

people in front of him.

No sign of the woman who's got to be Nita Bendix! Where is she? And all these people!?

Where is she?

I didn't really enjoy our last chase, come to think of it.

BC continues to look around the dome for some sign of her.

Nothing. She's gone. Nowhere to be seen. Well.

Might as well go see Wentworth for some further frustration. Let's see, where's he staying? Lunar Lodgings 214 through 220...

It only takes BC a minute to walk from the main dome to Wentworth's quarters. He keeps his eyes open for Nita Bendix while he walks, but she seems to have vanished.

Bruno answers the door when BC rings at Wentworth's quarters.

"Good evening. I'm here to see..."

Bruno grunts, interrupting BC. He nods and motions for BC to enter past him.

BC surveys the small anteroom as he walks in. He'd noted the rooms' layouts before Wentworth moved in for his stay. BC looks for any subtle alterations to the waiting area.

There are some different chairs and sofas along the walls. And another not-so-subtle alteration as well.

That's new.

Evidently, Wentworth brought his own bar.

The other furniture has been crowded together along the walls to make room for a large bar, now facing the door BC came in through. Bruno's twin brother is standing behind the bar.

Bruno 2? Betcha he's not back there for hospitality's sake. That's probably a 'cleverly disguised' security station. Wonder what capabilities it has?

Bruno nods at his 'brother', and both of them head through another door behind the 'bar'. The door closes shut behind them. BC knows the plans for this suite. He can see the layout of the rooms in his mind.

The main room of the suite lies just beyond that door. All the other rooms of the suite open on to that central room.

After a minute or two, Wentworth opens the door behind the bar. He walks into the waiting room and over to BC, shakes his hand.

"Thanks for coming, Champion. Let's go where we can talk. Come in," he says, and motions for BC to precede him in through the door behind the bar. BC doesn't move.

"Can't we talk here?" he asks.

"I'm afraid not," Wentworth laughs, "never know who's listening out here. Nope. Come on," he nods again to BC to go ahead of him.

They enter the central room. Wentworth indicates that BC should follow him into one of the side rooms, on the right. As he walks through the door into the room, BC can feel a weird charge like static electricity in the air.

"This is my secure room," Wentworth explains, once they're in the room with the door closed. "It's a necessity when you travel on high level business. You've got to have a temporary, portable field generator to shield your delicate communications and negotiations."

Wentworth leans towards BC almost conspiratorially. "Spies. Eyes, ears. Competing businesses."

He nods for emphasis. "Hostile governments! They're everywhere! Everyone is trying to listen in, to get an edge!"

A bit over the top. Paranoid? Not if they really are out to get you...

"Can you feel it?" he asks BC.

BC nods, "Yeah. I feel like all my hair is standing on end."

Wentworth laughs, "Yeah, that's it."

"So no one can hear us now?"

"Not by any of the means currently known to be available," Wentworth says.

"Nice. I'd like one of these myself," BC says appreciatively.

"We all have our secrets to keep. Don't we?" Wentworth says. "Let me cut through the bullshit and cut

to the chase. What's your game, Champion? Why haven't you contacted us directly this summer? And this conference, without consulting with us beforehand..."

"It's what the Pope wanted," BC says simply. "You know Linus is not like Peter was. He told me to do this, to show him my loyalty, to show him I can do the job. So I did it. I couldn't get in touch with you directly or it wouldn't have come together. It wouldn't have looked right."

"I still can't believe the UIN agreed to it," Wentworth admits.

"I think I may know why they agreed, or at least part of the reason," BC says to Wentworth. "They think Lunar Prime is friendly territory for them once again," BC says.

"Why? McEntyre?" Wentworth asks.

"He's their man," BC says, nodding. "Always has been. I've studied his OPO dossier, trust me on this! "And I just saw something tonight that confirmed my suspicions!" BC tells Wentworth. "I knew we'd be overrun by spies and agents at a conference like this, it always happens. Been there, done that, you know? Anyway. I saw a UIN agent tonight leaving his offices, a woman I've crossed paths with before, name of Nita Bendix. She infiltrated the Lunar Security Corps a few years ago. She nearly blew my cover back, um, when I first got here on the moon."

Don't want to tell Wentworth, 'yeah, back when I killed McEntyre's wife, the governor,' that's my little secret. Although, knowing Wentworth, he all ready knows. He's high enough in the UTZ to know what the OPO was up to. Just don't have to say it out loud.

"Bendix?" Wentworth inquires, "Don't know her."

"Doesn't matter. She's UIN, she tried to kill me once," BC tells him, "And now she's back, apparently checking in with McEntyre! That's why I was distracted as I called you!"

"I tried to follow her but she got away from me. She's good. She, um, killed Meredith McEntyre..." BC tosses it out.

Let's see...

Wentworth laughs a sharp, short laugh. "Look, I know *you* did that job, Champion, so you can cut that shit out with me."

Wentworth tries to stare him down. "Remember, Champion. I have read *your* dossier. I make it a point to find out who's crossing my radar screen. After you showed up with Fiza, I discovered that *you'd* done some work for *us*. I know all about you now."

He's got a point.

"Still," BC picks it up, "Nita Bendix is the one most people suspect did it. Well, except for McEntyre. And she *is* a known UIN agent! Governor Edwards found out as much."

A thought occurs to BC, "You know, Wentworth, we could make this work to our advantage."

"How so?" Wentworth asks.

"If we can connect the dots between her and McEntyre *publicly*, we might be able to show our current governor for the UIN sympathizer *we* know he is," BC says. "Discredit him and drive him out of office!"

"You don't like him much, do you, Champion?" Wentworth admonishes BC. "You shouldn't let your emotions color your judgment so much."

"Granted, I've got issues with the guy, true. But while he's governor, the moon *is* friendlier to the UIN than it is to the UTZ. How can that be good?"

Wentworth pauses, thinking. He gets up from the table.

"I'll be right back. When did you see her, again?"

"Just before I got here."

"Right" Wentworth leaves the room. BC can feel the static energy shift and pulsate as the field is disturbed. After a couple of minutes he feels it again before he sees Wentworth come back in the room. Wentworth is smiling.

"I have someone tracking down the security records. Surveillance cameras cover the governor's office. We'll see what security has on Ms. Bendix."

"So you have access to the security cameras?" BC asks.

Wentworth nods, smiles.

"I used to. I lost access to them once McEntyre took over," BC admits.

"You know, if we can find a recording of her with him, or her leaving his office, he's done!" BC is smiling now, too.

"If we get that evidence, recorded 'proof', I'll make sure the footage finds its way to my news networks," Wentworth says. "We'll have this all over our media! Maybe we can make it look romantic between them, you know? Really make the guy look like slime: sleeping with his wife's killer! We can always back it up by throwing in the affair he had with that little Asian hooker he almost beat to death. Oh, that is juicy!" Wentworth says with a little yip of a laugh. "That will play very well. Good for the ratings! We can play up the salacious details: did Meredith McEntyre die because of her politics? Or was it because of jealousy?" Wentworth says, like a mock announcer. He turns to BC.

"What do you think, Champion?"

"I think the way your mind works scares me, Wentworth," BC tells him, "but I admire you all the same for your ability to brew up bullshit."

"I'll take that for the heavily qualified compliment that it is, Champion. Thank you. But what, then, drives your mind, Champion? What is your game? What are you playing at? You don't expect me to believe you've thrown in with this new pope, do you? After our agreement?"

"I haven't thrown in with anyone," BC says. "I'm doing what the pope asks because it will do me no good to disobey papal orders. It'd blow my cover. So I play along. I perform as the Pope asks. And who knows? Maybe, just by accident, we could find a way to make peace. How 'bout that?"

"Don't tell me you're beginning to believe your own bullshit, Champion," Wentworth says, wagging his finger at BC. "You haven't suddenly become an idealist on us, have you? Peace?"

Wentworth laughs. "You know, at this point, we'd love it! This war is not profitable for the UTZ. Not anymore," Wentworth says, shaking his head. "We *had* to run the UIN off the Earth because they were destroying our resources and killing our people. They were damaging the world's economy. The instability, the threat, the chaos they created was bad for business, made it nearly impossible to *do* business," Wentworth says. "The war was necessary for our physical and economic survival. But the war, while at first profitable, has proven to become a case of diminishing returns. It has ceased being cost effective," Wentworth offers.

"You know, Champion, if the UTZ could have peace with guaranteed security for our investments, holdings and people... safe from random attacks! And be allowed to mind our businesses and make our profits? We'd be 100% for it! But the UIN will have no part of such a peace. You'll see, Champion," Wentworth says, glaring at BC. "They will never leave us alone in peace. They hate us, and everything we stand for. Shit, they hate you, too, Champion."

"What do you think that you, the UTZ, could give to them to make them stop fighting you?" BC asks. Wentworth is struck by the question, taken aback. "Huh?" He gathers himself in a second. "I don't know... Our heads?" He laughs ironically, "They want the Earth. The whole planet! Now claimed by the UIN as Mecca – you know their drill."

"Well, maybe if you hadn't gone and nuked their original one..." BC points out.

"Look, that was way before my time!" Wentworth protests. "Forty years ago! Why hold that over our heads now? It was an old soviet H-bomb. It could have been anyone!"

"Right," BC agrees sarcastically. "Anyone. And *they* didn't nuke Jerusalem, either, way back when."

"Actually," Wentworth says, "They probably didn't nuke Jerusalem."

"Really?"

Now this is news!

BC goes on, "Do tell," he says, gesturing at the room's electronic walls, "After all, no one else will hear. Are you gonna tell me *we* did it?"

"No!" Wentworth laughs, "Not by a long shot. Our best guess is that it was Hindu extremists, separatists looking to frame the Muslims and provoke a conflict with the west."

"No shit," BC says.

Not sure if I believe that... The war went out of control after Jerusalem... whoever did it got their conflict, if that was what they wanted. How long have we known the Muslims didn't do it?

BC asks Wentworth, "How long have we known that?"

"Not that long. We have a record of a deathbed confession from one of the guys involved. He died of old age, about seventeen years ago. We found out about the confession about ten years ago."

BC is stunned and amazed.

I can't believe...

"Why not reveal this to the general public? The whole war..." BC asks.

"The whole war," Wentworth interrupts, "won't be effected by us 'revealing' this fact. The UIN knew it before we did! And they didn't reveal it, either! We only found out when we turned one of *their* operatives.

"It would be nice if it did make a difference," Wentworth says. "I'm just telling you it won't. We're already too far in, there's too much lost on both sides. Too much blood."

"That's always it, isn't it? Blood begets blood," BC muses.

"Now you're sounding downright Biblical, Campion. Are you sure you haven't gone soft?" Wentworth chides him.

"Don't you think making this public would get the people to back a peace initiative? This could be just the thing to jump start the peace process!" BC says.

"Damn, Campion, now you sound like a bloody diplomat! We can't let the public know now. It's been too long. We've known it too long and kept it from them for too long. They'll hate *us* because we *didn't* let them know for ten years. And consider this, Campion. If they find out it was Hindus, then maybe they'll start killing Hindus. Most of the Hindus now live up here, on the Moon. So maybe Lunar Prime gets nuked in 'retaliation'. Blood *does* beget blood, like it or not, Campion.

"You fond of that scenario?" Wentworth asks him.

"Not exactly. Seems extreme to me."

"A good rule about human behavior, Campion," Wentworth leans in, "People *are* extreme. You almost can't be *too* extreme in your predictions; people always manage to take things further than you can possibly imagine. You can almost never expect people to stay well behaved and predictable," Wentworth says. He finishes his dispensation of insight and leans back.

"No one is completely predictable, but *most* people are *mostly* predictable," BC counters.

Damn. That sounded lame. Try to at least sound intelligent, BC, huh?

"Just because *you*," Wentworth points at him, "are completely predictable doesn't mean else is."

Shift gears and topics.

"Anyway, Wentworth," BC says, "Give some thought to what the UTZ might be willing to give up to the UIN. Maybe something we can use this time.

"And as for people's reactions, you've been in business long enough to know it's all in the packaging, right? Their reception is highly dependent on *how* we sell it to them," BC points out. "We need to try everything this time. Nobody is getting what they want through violence anymore. You said it yourself, it's no longer profitable!"

Wentworth nods his concession.

"So let's try and get a truce done," BC says, bringing the conversation back around. "Let's make it official, make a start, and give people some hope."

"Listen to you!" Wentworth says with an ironic laugh. "This is a whole different agenda for you, Campion! You're serious about this?"

"Figure it out, Wentworth. Too many people have died. *Will* die if we don't make some progress here."

"But you kill people!" Wentworth puts it right in BC's face.

BC grimaces. "Not so much, anymore. And, when I did? It was under orders from the Pope and the OPO, which, I'm sure in some way, ultimately means, for you, right?"

Wentworth doesn't respond.

"I killed people who in some way deserved to die. I was just the instrument of divine judgment. That's what I tell myself so I can sleep at night," BC admits.

"Pretty flimsy rationalization," Wentworth prods him.

"Somewhere along the way, someone decided that when someone does something heinous enough, commits a crime against society bad enough, society has a right to end that someone's life. When

society's judgment is passed, society requires executioners to carry out that judgment. These executioners are not murderers themselves, but the instrument of society, and God's will. I have been an executioner. I'll grant you that. You," BC says nodding at Wentworth with a by-the-way, "who passed those very judgments. By the way."

"I'm glad you can live with yourself, Champion, but what does..."

BC interrupts Wentworth this time, "It's innocent people who are dying in this war, all the time: the original UTZ massacre of the Muslims on Mars, the whole UIN Christmas offensive that killed the Cardinal and Reverend Swan, and all the other ordinary people who were just trying to go about their business. Too many people are dying, Wentworth," BC knows he's not the most eloquent but he presses on, "Let's see if we can slow it down, huh?" BC suggests. "Why the fuck not? Do you wanna die?" "Not especially. But I could live with it," Wentworth laughs at his own wordplay. "I'm not afraid of dying, Champion, are you?"

"Not afraid of it. I'm just not in any hurry to die," BC says. "I am afraid of Morons, though. There are too many morons too quick on the trigger, no matter their underlying ideology. It doesn't matter what motivates the morons. Motivated morons lead to fatal mistakes. Give the morons a reason and they'll call for blood and demand the kill."

"Are you calling the men and women of our armed forces morons, Champion? That's a bit..."

"Not at all!" BC clarifies, "I'm talking about the society that sends them into battle. The soldiers are just instruments, like I was."

"Oh." Wentworth pauses, steeples his fingers together in front of his mouth, "So, then, I'm the moron."

"Not what I meant," BC says. "But you're not above using them, manipulating the morons. You do it all the time. You make money off them, influence their buying habits."

"So consumers are morons..."

"You try to make them morons," BC presses. "They consume less problematically when they're kept stupid. They ask fewer pointed questions. It's beneficial to your business."

"So, the masses are morons to you, eh Champion? What ever happened to love your neighbor?"

Wentworth laughs.

"I'm supposed to love my neighbor, but he's a moron!" BC says. "Makes it tough. That's the big challenge, as I see it. Gotta love the morons."

"Well, you shouldn't fear the morons. Fear is dangerous, Champion, it gives them, the *morons*, power over you. Don't *fear* them, *control* them! Motivate them to *your* ends, don't you see? Keep them busy, occupied, out of trouble, and out of your hair."

"So, Wentworth, do you control them? Do you think you do? Because you were saying how unpredictable they were just a few minutes ago..."

"I said I try to. I do my best. Your church *used* to be an excellent means of control, a wonderful tool for motivating the masses. Which, by the way, *is* why we're currently at something of a loss, since your Pope withdrew his UTZ support. Current circumstances give us less control. Speaking of less control,"

Wentworth pauses, "I don't see your new pope exerting much control of his own. That means that these days, there's not as much control over the masses, the morons as you call them, period. These days, the morons are on their own. That does make them more dangerous."

"Maybe you're right to show a little fear, Champion."

"I've got to believe that for all his supposed ignorance, Pope Linus knows all this, what you say, on some level," BC admits. "Which is maybe why we're all here this weekend, eh?"

"Circular, Champion. So... you think your Pope is finally starting to try to control his morons, is that it?"

"Maybe. In a way," BC admits. "He seems to prefer to be inscrutable," BC cracks. "I *can* tell you he was none too happy about *our* chumminess. It wasn't until after you brought me to the UTZ Council meeting in the spring that I even got to meet with him, remember."

"He asks about our relationship quite a bit. He thinks I'm your man... I think."

"Ironic. Well, then, maybe you really are neutral, Champion. Maybe you are the right man for this job. Although, from what I happened to overhear earlier, you'll need to improve your communication skills with the good Mohammed Ibn Sere."

"Yeah, that didn't go so well. Believe me, I'm working on it. But let me ask you again," BC says, changing the subject. "What does the UTZ need for a truce?"

Wentworth fixes his stare on BC, "Like I said, we WANT peace. We need guaranteed security for our investments and business interests. We want to be safe. I might not fear death, but that doesn't mean I invite it. The UIN stands for destabilizing all of that, it's part of what they are! How do you change that? "We'd like them to stop, but they don't. They won't. It's part of their religion. They need to dominate, to have everyone else believe as they do, or die and get out of their way. Still very primitive in some ways. Tribal. They're the aggressors. At this point, we're just asking them to stop."

Alrighty... This is going nowhere.

"Okay. I hear what you're saying," BC tells him. "I'm going to go now, Wentworth, and consider what you've told me tonight. I'll sleep on it. We'll see if we can make any headway when the negotiations begin tomorrow."

"Sure you can't stay for a drink or something, Champion?" Wentworth offers.

"Nah. I try to avoid drinking. Seems it gives me headaches."

Wentworth laughs, "Subtle! Well, then, goodnight, acting ambassador."

"Goodnight, Representative Wentworth. What about the McEntyre thing?"

"Leave that to my people. We'll see what we can find on the two of them; see if we have a weapon to use against Mr. McEntyre," Wentworth says, a hint of menace in his voice.

Man! The guy can be legitimately scary sounding.

"Okay then... good night, Wentworth," BC says.

"Good night, Champion."

BC makes his way out of the secure room, out of Wentworth's suite and back to the Vatican Mission, his thoughts abuzz.

Couldn't get Wentworth to come up with anything they'd give up for peace. Don't know if Al Sere is even taking this seriously. Any of it. Me. All I can do is hope for the best. And get some sleep.

BC locks his rooms for the night, finds his way into bed, and sleeps a hopeful sleep.

The next two days fly by, a flurry of meetings, discussions, arguments and attempts at true dialogue. The high level players meet, exchange pleasantries, and talk in generalities while the career diplomats meet to outline possible compromises.

BC gets a little frustrated when he can't get the top level representatives, Al Sere and Wentworth, to meet together again on the second day of the conference, but the lower level talks continue all the same. On day three of the conference, BC finally gets Wentworth, Al Sere and himself alone together to hash things out face to face.

"Well, can we all at least agree to sign a statement confirming that we all seek a lasting peace?" BC asks the other two men.

"We do want peace," Al Sere agrees.

"Well," Wentworth says, then pauses, then continues, "Well, of course we do!"

"Look," BC tells the two combatants, "I didn't think we'd come out of here with any concessions of territory or position. But I did hope we could at least reassure people that we actually really did want to try to work out our differences peacefully."

"No concessions? But a joint statement?" Al Sere asks. "Do you think this will have any weight?"

"I do," BC insists. Al Sere looks the question over to Wentworth.

"People are funny," Wentworth says with a quick laugh. "I think he's right," Wentworth nods in BC's direction.

"What about visitations? Travel restrictions?" BC asks.

"Token Gestures," Al Sere says, waving BC's suggestions away with a sweep of his hand.

"Too complicated to work," Wentworth says in dismissal of the ideas.

Stubborn, pigheaded, mulish...

"Let's give the declaration some teeth," BC says. "Your people," BC indicates Al Sere, "have already agreed to ease some travel restrictions if the UTZ will do the same and allow for visitation to holy

sites. Your people,” BC says to Wentworth, “have agreed on the easing of the travel restrictions, but not the visitations.”

“That is correct,” Al Sere says.

“Yes, you’re right,” Wentworth reluctantly agrees.

“Where do you want to go?” BC asks Al Sere.

“Where? Well, some places have been destroyed, but there are still many holy places on Earth...”

“How about a top five?” BC asks.

“A top five?” Al Sere asks. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” BC says. He waves his arms. “Don’t tell me what they are *now*. Have your people come up with a top five list of places you want visitation rights to and bring it to the table. Wentworth?”

“Yes, Campion?”

“Can’t the UTZ allow Muslims to visit five of their holy sites?”

“I guess it depends on where the five are located, what they are,” Wentworth says. “But five is not an unreasonable number.”

“So,” BC proposes, “we put together a declaration that says all sides are intent on working together, going forward towards peace. And, as a symbol of our intention to work together, both sides agree to even further ease the already agreed upon scaling back of travel restrictions. The UTZ also agrees to allow Muslim visitation of five holy sites that we’ll determine here shortly. If we put all that into a declaration, will you two sign it?” BC asks, hopeful.

There is silence in the room. BC looks from Al Sere to Wentworth. Wentworth looks at BC, and then Al Sere.

“If you’ll sign, we’ll sign,” Wentworth says to Al-Sere.

“We’ll sign. But no concessions!” Al Sere says.

“No concessions,” Wentworth agrees.

BC smiles.

“Fantastic! Was that so hard?” BC asks the two men.

All three stand and shake hands, finding some common cause despite their differences.

As a grand finale to the peace conference, BC arranges for the three of them to make a public display of signing the declaration and shaking hands. BC has his people draw up the documents once the negotiations have been finalized, once the career diplomats have dotted the “i”s and crossed the “t”s.

Now I have a declaration! Well... how 'bout that?

At the end of the conference, there actually seems to be some common ground between the sides. To the surprise of most of the parties involved, and maybe to BC most of all, the conference is actually deemed a success! As the news breaks, the media and spokespeople on all sides discuss the conference in glowing terms. BC has his hope.

The intangible result of the conference is a melting of the icy, resolute, pigheaded determination to be right that both sides once held dear. The tangible result is the signed declaration, an official agreement to at least start looking for ways to cooperate, ways to budge a little on both sides, to find a way to peace.

The picture of the three-way handshake between BC, Wentworth and Al Sere is displayed on all the public news screens as BC walks with Al Sere a few steps ahead of Wentworth to the Lunar Prime Spaceport on Tuesday morning.

At the gate, BC shakes Ibn Al Sere's hand, again. The Arab bows, turns, and strolls off to his waiting ship.

That went better than I could have expected. My head still aches... but we have a truce! He's not a bad guy when it comes right down to it. Just feels like his people have gotten the short end of the stick for two hundred years. He's not far from the truth, either. Hell, they don't even have a place on their own home world!

Well... Visitation rights are a start.

It was hard enough getting that out of the UTZ given their security concerns. Harder still to get the UIN to see it as anything but a token gesture. But they did! It's a beginning... Hey, is that McEntyre! I wonder what's up with... now THAT'S interesting!

Daniel McEntyre looks over at BC. When their eyes met, McEntyre looks away quickly. He takes off in the opposite direction.

I think he actually blushed. What has Wentworth been up to? Speak of the devil...

"Campion!"

"Wentworth!" BC strides over to meet the approaching CEO and shakes his hand. "Thank you for giving this peace thing a chance!"

"Thank you for having the balls to approach this thing on a different level," Wentworth says firmly. "I like your straight talk, Campion. Oh, and *you'll* like a little talk we had with Mr. McEntyre. It's funny when you turn on the lights, how all the rats go scurrying," Wentworth says. "Your peace deal won't be the only news breaking on Lunar Prime this week, if all goes as I believe it will. How well do you know the Lieutenant Governor, this Amanda Erskine?"

"I've met her a few times, talked to her a little," BC tells him. "She seems level headed, apparently neutral. Why?"

Wentworth smiles a Cheshire cat smile, but says nothing. He turns and walks away without another word, disappearing down the passageway to his ship.

Wentworth must have worked over McEntyre. Did he get the security videos? Did he leak the stuff on McEntyre?

BC suddenly finds himself thinking of Fiza and feeling guilty for his friendliness towards Wentworth.

I conveniently forgot about Fiza while I tried to make this conference work... while I was working with Wentworth. It was good to be on his side, to see how he does business. I don't think I'd want to be on an opposing side from him! Although maybe I am...

This thing with Fiza and him could end badly if I force it. And, come to think of it... think of all the things he could leak about me! Gotta face it, when it comes to Wentworth and Fiza, there's not much I can do for her, even now.

Pathetic. And I almost started to like the guy. Not trust him... But I've got to deal with him. Can't forget what he's capable of.

Chapter Ten

Two news items break as the peace conference breaks up. The first is an announcement from Earth, from Vatican City: Pope Linus announces his extreme pleasure and regard for his ambassador, Father Bernard Campion. The Pope lauds his ability to broker the fragile peace in the war between the two long feuding enemies. Pope Linus announces that Campion is hereby raised to the status of full Ambassador to Lunar Prime for the Vatican and his Holiness the Pope."

The second news item concerns Daniel McEntyre. Wentworth's people seem to have found what they needed: video leaked from unknown sources to the media from McEntyre's office security cam show repeated visits to McEntyre's office by a known UIN assassin, Nita Bendix, still at large and wanted for the death of his wife Meredith McEntyre. The media have a field day speculating on the relationship between McEntyre and his wife's supposed killer. BC notes there's no mention of the Asian girl from McEntyre's past.

If that didn't come out, maybe McEntyre made a deal... but if Wentworth is letting the rest of this out, I can't imagine McEntyre cooperated too much at all.

BC has enjoyed the reports, but not the attention that he's been getting as a result of being the peace conference's power broker. He's not used to being in the public eye.

News organizations have already started trying to dig up dirt on BC. Some reports have made mention of "an apparently shady past", but most haven't gone any deeper. Of course, the UTZ does sponsor most of the news.

Maybe Wentworth is keeping them from going any further. Something's holding them back. Guess

I appreciate it. Enough scrutiny is enough!

I used to be good at not being seen. This is so much the polar opposite, it's weird. At least McEntyre's news is distracting some of the media glare.

Wentworth is good, I'll give him that. Damn, people eat that stuff up! You don't have to work hard to make them believe it. They want to believe it, or at least think about it. The world runs on rumors. And I'll take this as a lesson never to cross Wentworth... sorry, Fiza.

By week's end the rumors about Daniel McEntyre are flying fast and furious, planted, BC has no doubt, by Wentworth's people. Rumors of love, and jealousy, and the death of Meredith McEntyre. Horrible stories BC couldn't think up are circulating as if true. The video of Nita Bendix leaving McEntyre's office is playing repeatedly on the news.

BC tries to avoid the man himself.

Thursday night, BC ducks out of McGrady's when McEntyre makes an entrance.

He looks horrible... looks like he might already be drunk... and I'm not looking for a fight!

The news on Friday morning confirms BC's instincts: McEntyre had to be taken away from McGrady's by the LSC after starting a brawl with some other patrons. Friday afternoon, Daniel McEntyre tenders his resignation as Governor of Lunar Prime, citing "personal health reasons". BC's first gig as full ambassador is attending the swearing in the new Governor of Lunar Prime, Amanda Erskine, the following Monday, October 20th. In contrast to the events staged by McEntyre, Erskine's swearing in ceremony tries to be a low-key affair. The attempt is somewhat thwarted by the swarms of news media covering the swearing in as part of the sordid McEntyre story.

BC decides to take advantage of the media zoo. As the news media buzz around him asking questions, BC makes an announcement:

"Thank you all for joining us for this next great step in the future of Lunar Prime. I'd like to be the first to congratulate the new Governor of Lunar Prime, Amanda Erskine!" BC starts clapping, leading the group to join in his applause.

Seems like a nice person, reasonable woman. I don't think she had any real ties to McEntyre. She was never on any of the OPO watch lists. Her record is clean, no sign of UIN collaboration. No apparent religious affiliation, though there's a note she paid some lip service to Buddhism. Never suspected of anything by the OPO, or there would be a bigger file. Seems they hardly knew she existed, just kept a file on her because she was in politics.

Born here on the Moon. Native daughter. Edwards liked her, trusted her, so she could be okay. Of course, Edwards liked and trusted me, and look where that got him!

Before they can start shouting questions at him again, BC raises his voice.

"And speaking of our next great steps into the future, I'd like to announce today a second peace conference, to be held here on the Moon in the coming months. This is the first word *anyone* has heard of it!" BC says with a grin. "But I believe we need to move now, while we have the momentum!"

They shout questions at him:

"Does Al Salid agree to this?"

"He's just finding out. I don't know," BC admits.

"Has Pope Linus directed you to...?"

"The Pope, I'm sure, will support any efforts we make towards peace," BC assures them.

"Isn't it risky just announcing a conference like this? What if no one agrees to come?"

"Then everyone else will know they're the problem. Look, by announcing it now, everyone finds out at once," BC points out. "No one can complain that they heard about the conference before or after anyone else. I thought it was a good place to start. And anyone who backs out will have to explain to the rest of us and the public why."

"Does the UTZ intend to come back to the table ready to deal?"

"I sure hope so. That's all for now, everyone. Thank you!" BC says. He looks over at Governor Erskine and shrugs. The news media continue firing away with questions.

"Let's talk later," BC tries to yell to Erskine over the din of reporters questions. She nods. BC ducks out of the auditorium and heads back into the safety and quiet of the Vatican Mission.

Let 'em chew on that for a while! It's not the smartest, most diplomatic way to propose another conference, but I'm thinking it might make one inescapable. We've got to keep the momentum going!

Governor Amanda Erskine calls on the com soon after BC settles in at his office.

"That was some stunt," she says, but she doesn't sound happy about it.

"Thank you," BC says.

"It wasn't a compliment," she snaps. "Don't take it as one. I don't like to be surprised like that. And it was kind of rude of you to upstage my inauguration!"

"I didn't think it would offend you to have your swearing in and a peace conference linked together in the public's mind," BC tells her.

"Fine," she says. "Okay. But it made me mad. Ambassador," she says, finally using his title.

Heh... "Ambassador". That sounds good...

"I wasn't intending to slight you, governor," BC explains. "I don't think I upstaged you either, ma'am, but if you feel that I did, I certainly want to apologize. That was not my intent. I merely hoped to use the very public opportunity given me by the media to move the peace process along."

"Huh," Erskine says. "Was that really an apology?" BC starts to protest but she cuts him off. "Look, BC, I know you're a powerful man. But I'm a powerful woman. I play fair, though. All I want to do is make sure *you* fair, too."

"Is it 'playing fair' to make you the first I ask to confirm you'll join in? And, of course, agree to host the upcoming, follow-up peace conference?"

"So *now* you ask?" Erskine questions him. "What if I don't give you an answer yet?"

Oh man, I hope I haven't burned this bridge too early!

"That's fine," BC tells her, "it's certainly your prerogative. I would ask you to please let me know your answer soon, though, only because if you don't agree to join in I'll need to find a new location for the conference."

"That would make me look good, wouldn't it?" Erskine says sarcastically. "The new Governor of Lunar Prime and one of my first acts is turning my back on a peace conference?" She pauses.

BC doesn't say a word.

She laughs a humorless ironic laugh. "You bastard. You've squeezed me into a corner on my first day on the job!"

"Sorry you see it that way," BC tells her, "but I'm hoping everyone feels the same pressure to join in. It's a great cause..."

"I'm in," Erskine says, surprising BC with the abrupt announcement. "But only so I don't have to speak to you for a while, Ambassador. I'm not impressed by this whole reckless thing. And I'm not impressed by *you*. Please, keep your distance for a while. Contact my office with any scheduling needs. Good day." She signs off.

Well, I've certainly honked her off! Hope my announcement is received better elsewhere.

It is. Both sides are surprised, but forced by the publicity to work with BC once again. He manages to set up the follow up conference for mid-February. With plans in the works, BC takes some time off from the diplomacy around Christmas.

If I've learned anything, it's that Christmas holds too many memories, old ones for the Muslims, new ones for the rest of us. This time of year used to be a happy time, a time for gift giving and loving your fellow man and all that. Now it's a time that reminds us how cruel we can be to each other. Not a good time of year for diplomacy, at any rate.

BC turns to the Vatican Mission and more traditional duties over his "Christmas break". The NcC congregation on the Moon has actually grown in the last year. The staff has grown as well. Jim Fitzgerald is finally studying for ordination to the priesthood. Father Daycomb stayed with the mission even after BC returned from the Vatican, and has taken over most of the day-to-day Masses and sacraments.

And he's probably filing daily reports with Pope Linus, too. No matter. I've got nothing to hide! Report away on the glorious goings-on of the Ambassador for the Vatican!

With all the masses and rituals surrounding the celebration of Advent and Christmas Father Daycomb

has scheduled, BC doesn't have many chances to worry about the upcoming peace conference. The conference itself is scheduled. Commitments are in place, to be firmed up in January. Travel plans are being finalized. It's definitely happening. BC can relax and pretend to be a priest.

He says Mass the Sunday before Christmas, meets the congregation at the back of the chapel afterwards to mingle and make small talk.

It's funny, I still feel like I'm fooling everyone. I'm no priest! I just play one in real life. But if I'm not a priest, and I'm not really an assassin anymore, what am I? Who am I?

The Ambassador for the Vatican? I guess. That's real enough. I'm making peace! Me! Who knew I could be a diplomat? Even though I'm not always diplomatic...

BC would like to go over some of the details of the upcoming conference with Governor Erskine. But Erskine, evidently, is still mad at BC for the stunt that set the peace conference wheels in motion. The new governor claimed to be unable to meet one on one with BC in either November or December. Her last communiqué did express concern about the security and travel ramifications involved with the conference. She suggested they meet some time in early January.

BC finally gets himself scheduled on Governor Erskine's calendar for the first Monday in January. Her schedule's nearly full, but BC convinces her to join him for a dinner meeting.

At least she'll finally meet with me. It probably doesn't hurt her image to keep her distance from me. Heh, maybe she learned from Edward's mistake. Well, at least she's finally agreed to see me. Happy New Year? Let's hope 2111 is a good year.

As the Christmas week activities begin to die down, BC begins worrying about the upcoming peace conference again. The last major NcC related function BC has to attend is Wednesday night's New Year's Eve Mass.

BC begins to feel nauseous midway through the Mass. He struggles to get through the rest of Mass as a headache begins to pound behind his eyes.

Damn! I haven't had a headache in months! I thought they were gone! Argh!

As the congregation launches en masse into the Profession of Faith, their droning voices reciting the rote text join forces with BC's headache to split his head clean open.

I just want to yell, "SHUT UP! STOP TALKING INTO MY BRAIN! IT'S FULL ALREADY! IT'S GONNA EXPLODE!"

He rubs the bridge of his nose, trying not to look as bad as he feels. Despite BC's attempts, Daycomb notices BC's condition from the side of the altar. He approaches BC as the Profession draws to its close.

"Father BC? Are you alright?" Daycomb asks in a loud whisper.

"I'm... no, I feel like I've got a bug coming on, all of a sudden," BC tells him.

"I can take over here, if you'd like," he whispers.

"That... that would probably be good," BC says. BC shakes Daycomb's hand, and then makes his way off the altar. Daycomb steps in to finish the Mass for BC.

BC gets out of his vestments in the chapel sacristy and half walks, half lurches to his rooms.

Fucking headache! Damn! I hope nobody sees me like this... they're going to think I'm drunk... or worse. I can hear it now, "Little early to be celebrating the New Year, isn't it, Father?"

BC finally makes it to his rooms. Once there, he does the only thing he can: He lies down and tries to sleep the headache away. While all around him the population of Lunar Prime celebrates 2111, BC greets the New Year literally lying down, debilitated by his latest monster headache.

BC doesn't miss the party entirely. He wakes up headache free the next morning, the first day of the New Year, and a Friday. The New Year's celebration seems to go one for another three days, right through the weekend. BC joins in some of the fun, but by Sunday afternoon he's had enough. He begins to plan his week ahead, and for his meeting Monday night with Governor Erskine.

Might as well hit the ground running tomorrow. Feels like it's when the New Year really starts.

The New Year marks the beginning of the easing of the travel restrictions negotiated in the October Peace Conference. Some tentative commercial activity is scheduled to start, too; trade between the UIN and UTZ on semiofficial levels, mostly. The visitation clause is in place, but the logistics of making it work

aren't. The UTZ Council seems to be dragging its collective feet.

BC knows the visitation rights will come up again in the February conference if they aren't worked out sooner. His first priority Monday morning is to try to get the UTZ moving.

There's still a lot of work that needs to be done just to get this thing started. I'm afraid both sides will accuse the other of dragging their feet if we stay stalled. And maybe rightfully so! I don't want to spend the next peace conference all mired down discussing the last peace conference.

Maybe Governor Erskine can help. Might be a way to engage her. Have to see how it goes tonight. Interesting. A one on one business dinner. Very civilized. We'll see what she's all about. Hmmm. Incoming communication.

Mr. Richard Wentworth! My favorite species of pond scum! It's been too long! Well, I had to talk to him today anyway. Rumor has it he's been elected the chair of the UTZ council!

"Richard Wentworth! How are you?"

"Happy New Year, Champion."

"Happy New Year. So. Is it true what I hear? Are you the new Chairman?"

"Me? God, no! Never! I never enjoy the exercise of overt power, Champion; you should know that by now. I much prefer my work behind the scenes. The power behind the throne, and all that. No, DeMag is the new chairman of the UTZ board. Folsom decided he'd had enough."

"Will DeMag honor the truce agreement?"

"Naturally. But that's not what I called about."

"No?"

"No. I'm calling to confirm that we will be attending the February follow up conference. Has the UIN confirmed yet?"

"Not yet. But it's early yet. Only the first week of the New Year, Wentworth, give them time. Patience is a virtue, they tell me," Champion gibes.

Wentworth changes the subject. "You are to be congratulated, Champion. This truce seems to be holding."

"I need you to move on the visitations," BC says, not missing a beat.

"Yes, you do," Wentworth apparently agrees. "Folsom was falling behind on a *few* things. This is one of the areas DeMag is focusing on first. We want progress before we meet again in February."

"The faster the better. Get something in place before the February conference or we'll just find ourselves revisiting old discussions. You know that. Will you be representing the UTZ again this time, Wentworth?"

"No. DeMag wants to do it himself. Sign of new hands-on leadership, that sort of thing. He'll be coming this time. I'll stay here. We want to be sure he looks like his own man."

"Looks like' being the operative words?" BC prods.

"Clever. DeMag is first among equals, as we all are on the UTZ Board. We serve each other. Speaking of serving, is your Pope Linus going to make the journey this time?"

"I haven't been able to get him to commit to it. The ayatollah won't commit either. Each of them is waiting for the other one to go first."

"Both stubborn bastards, eh? What, now that it's not his idea Linus doesn't want to come?"

"He didn't come last time, either."

"Maybe he doesn't travel well," Wentworth quips.

"I'm tempted to just tell each of them the other one has already committed."

"Then do that," Wentworth encourages BC.

"What?"

"Try it, anyway. See what happens. What have you got to lose? Worse things have been done in the name of peace. The ends will justify the means."

"Wow. I don't think I can be that devious..." BC shakes his head.

"Don't kid yourself. You? Remember who you're talking to Champion! I know what you're capable of! Are you getting soft, Champion? I worry about you losing your edge," Wentworth chides.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Ah, much better. Spoken like a true diplomat."

"Right. You've confirmed DeMag for the conference. Now, get moving on the visitation rights for the UIN's top five holy places and maybe we can get down to some real discussions next month.

"Was that it, Wentworth?"

"So dismissive! Your position going to your head, Champion?"

"Good day, Wentworth."

Click.

"And off."

Wentworth. What an ass. But he's got a point. Why not tell the Ayatollah and the Pope what they each want to hear? They don't talk to each other, that's for sure. How would they know I was blowing smoke?

"Give me a com line to Vatican City, please," BC calls out to his room's com unit. "Office of the Pope."

"Opening communications," the com informs him.

"Vatican. Office of the Pope. Hello, Ambassador Champion."

"Greetings. Is Pope Linus available?"

"Just a moment. Yes! The Lord's looking on you with favor, father. Pope Linus is available. He's had a very busy day today, but you're fortunate. He has time for you. Hold a moment, please."

Don't tell me how lucky I am to...

"Ambassador?"

"Your holiness."

"What's going on?"

"Well sir, it's the peace conference. The Ayatollah has confirmed that he is willing to come to the next one, in February. He won't admit this publicly until you announce your intent, but he is going to attend, he assures me."

"Really, now." The Pope answers, then a pause. "So, are you saying that, if I decide to go to the Moon for this conference in the first place, I have to announce publicly that I'm going before the Ayatollah will announce publicly that he's going? That still doesn't strike me as fair or..."

"No, your holiness, not exactly," BC interrupts him. "You see, sir, he's suggested that you make simultaneous announcements. So neither one of you goes first or last."

"Really? That's impressive. When would this happen?"

"Well, we have to set a time," BC tells him.

"Tomorrow some time?" The Pope asks BC.

He's asking me? I've got him! But when? Jeesh, uh...

"uh... Good! We'll try to set it up for 12 Noon Greenwich Mean Time tomorrow, then," BC says, committing to the bluff in full.

"Excellent. Get back to me when you have the Ayatollah's confirmation of the time. And Champion?"

"Yes?"

"I like this idea. It's workable. It's likely I'll be at your conference next month. But it is not official yet, got me?"

"I understand. So we'll speak later?" BC asks.

"Yes. I'll call you in six hours."

"Good enough. Thank you, sir."

There's silence as the connection ends.

Now for the really tough one...

"Get me Mars Central, UIN Command, please," BC asks the com.

"Opening communications," the com informs him.

There's a delay. Communication takes longer to Mars.

"Greetings, Ambassador Champion."

"Greetings, Mars Command. May I ask the favor of a communication with the Ayatollah Al Salid, please? It is a matter of great urgency."

"I see. A moment, please."

This will be a harder sell.

"Hello, Ambassador Campion," the Ayatollah says.

"Greetings, your excellency."

"You flatter me. I am Ayatollah, no more. All praises to Allah."

"All praises to Allah, Ayatollah."

"Why do you disturb me?" The Ayatollah asks him directly.

"The Pope has agreed to attend the peace conference. But he is unwilling to make that official announcement until you announce that *you* are willing to attend."

"So, we remain at this foolish impasse."

"Not exactly. Please hear me out. He is not suggesting that you must make the announcement *first*, before he does, but, rather," BC pauses for effect, "you'll both announce your intentions to attend simultaneously."

"Simultaneously? Hmm... Interesting. An interesting idea. When would this be?"

"Tomorrow. Twelve noon, Earth Greenwich Mean Time."

"I see. This has promise, this idea. I will consider this and call you back. This is a step in the right direction. I believe we will be there for your conference."

"Excellent. I eagerly await your call. Thank you, Ayatollah."

Again the silence of the ended connection echoes in Campion's chambers.

I may actually pull this off after all!

BC hears back from Pope Linus in the afternoon.

"I will be attending with a full staff contingent of 50 people," Pope Linus tells BC. "We will require rooms for the entire weekend of the twelfth through the sixteenth. I will make a simultaneous announcement to this effect tomorrow at Noon, GMT. You will coordinate this with the papal communications office. Thank you, Campion."

"Thank you, your holiness," BC says. An underling from the communications office replaces Pope Linus on the line. He coordinates the timed announcement with BC.

BC has to cut that conversation short to accept the call from Al Salid confirming that he will attend with 30 staff members. An underling of Al Salid's makes the final arrangements after the ayatollah's message to BC.

It's all beginning to fall into place...

BC nods off at his desk, tired after his interplanetary negotiations. He falls asleep, only to wake up then the com unit beeps.

"What? Yes?"

"Ambassador Campion?"

A woman's voice... Who?

"Yes? This is Campion."

"It's Governor Erskine, Ambassador. I thought we were to meet?"

She sounds pissed! What time is it? Oh shit... She's going to hate me even more!

"Governor! My apologies! I... I fell asleep at my desk! I didn't realize the hours had passed. But I have some great news to share with you! Can you forgive my tardiness and can we still have dinner?" BC tries to salvage his meeting and his honor.

She waits before she answers. "I'll order pizza in. Meet me in my office, and we can still do this." She sounds more than a little put off.

"I'll be there soon!" BC tells her.

BC freshens up and heads off, making for the Governor's Offices.

He's buzzed in and puts on his best "so sorry" look as he walks into Amanda Erskine's office. She stands up behind her desk to greet him.

Huh. Forgot how short she was. She always seems taller. She's got a no bullshit presence. I like that.

Erskine is about five foot five. She wears her straight brown hair in a sensible cut at her shoulders. She seems to favor standard issue jumpsuits over fashions, although BC has seen her in sensible suits at

formal events. She's wearing a neutral gray jumpsuit today.

Very sensible. Everything about this woman screams sensible. She makes me think of my old schoolteachers, or the ladies at the library. But with more drive or something.

"Hope you have a good excuse. I suppose it's backed up by your great news?" Governor Amanda Erskine says with a dismissive, accusatory tone in her voice.

*She can be a hard ass. She doesn't talk like a librarian!
Just gotta tell it like it is.*

"Yes, it's all tied together!" BC starts with some urgency. "It's been extremely difficult for me to get to see you. You know that. I had no intention of messing this up, believe me, but... well, stuff happened today! It's important we talk about it, now, tonight."

"Okay, fine," Erskine says. "Sit down. I've already ordered the pizza."

BC lays it out, "Look, I'm sorry I'm late, but I was speaking with the Pope, The Ayatollah and a top UTZ CEO trying to make this upcoming Peace Conference mean something."

So there!

"And will it?" Erskine challenges him.

"Well, strangely enough... that's now up to you," BC admits.

Erskine smiles.

Maybe not such a hard ass...

The pizza arrives. While they eat, BC fills Governor Erskine in on the day's successes. He doesn't tell her exactly how he got the two sides to agree, but she seems to figure it out. It remains unspoken, but she nods knowingly when he doesn't answer her questions in every detail.

"I already knew that the new head of the UTZ Council, DeMag, put out a press release today saying he would be here in one of his first official capacities for the UTZ," she tells him as he finishes. "And now you've arranged this simultaneous announcement for tomorrow by the Ayatollah and the Pope?"

"Tomorrow at Noon, GMT."

"So," Erskine closes her eyes, adding things up in her head. "I guess you'll be needing some rooms for all these folk?"

"Probably around 150 rooms, altogether," BC figures.

"Right. We can open up the unused residential section. That'll work. Needed to be done, anyway. It's just been sitting vacant since last June, not enough people to warrant opening it up," she says, thinking out loud.

BC is grateful.

"That's even better than I'd hoped for," he says, smiling.

"Great. So, who's gonna be paying for all this?" she asks him.

"Paying?"

BC stops smiling.

"It costs money to power up and pump air into a new section," she explains.

"But... wait," BC stops her, "didn't you just say you've been needing to do that anyway?"

"Sure. But we wouldn't be doing it *yet*," she tells him.

Hardass, indeed.

"I don't know how it will be paid for," BC admits. "I can try to find a way, maybe through corporate sponsors or other donations, I don't know."

"Huh," Erskine says. "I appreciate your honesty. Well. I'm willing to work under the premise that you'll somehow attempt to compensate Lunar Prime for costs and any damages."

"I promise to *try*," BC says.

"Good enough," she tells BC.

She grins a little.

"Look," she says, softening her tone, "we want an end to this war as much as anyone. I want this peace conference to succeed, even if I still don't appreciate how you roped me into it," she says with a frown.

"The Moon has a lot to gain in a lasting peace," she admits, "But that's because we've paid a LOT! Lunar Prime has been beat up by both sides! You guys do the fighting, and we pay for it!"

"I see where you're coming from," BC tells her.

"How empathic of you," she says with some sarcasm.

"Do you want me to pay for this pizza?" BC asks with a smile, trying to lighten things up.

"It's a start," Erskine jokes, finally cracking a smile.

They finish eating the pizza. Erskine agrees to support BC's peace conference efforts with proper security arrangements and her full participation. As long as BC agrees to pay for it. Somehow.

BC shakes her hand as he leaves, and thanks her for everything.

"Don't thank me yet," she says. "You haven't seen the bill!"

"Jeesh," BC jokes, "How much does a cheese pizza cost these days?"

She laughs and sends him on his way.

BC makes the pre-announcement of the impending simultaneous announcements at 11 am the next morning, an hour before they occur.

News services are alerted. A communications whirlwind ensues. Amazingly, everyone is where they're supposed to be when the announcements begin.

At Noon GMT, The Pope and The Ayatollah both announce they will attend the next conference themselves, in person. Both will travel to the Moon in five and a half weeks, on February 12th.

The announcements are shown side by side in most media, giving BC the image he was hoping for.

And all I had to do was stretch the truth, just a bit.

Don't know how else I could have gotten around the stubborn bastards!

Chapter Eleven

On the twelfth of February, the "stubborn bastards" arrive for the conference on the Moon, also at the same time.

The sudden, simultaneous appearance of two entourages sends the LSC into overdrive, and BC finds himself wishing he could be in two places at once.

I should have called Wentworth... gotten him to make me one of those greeting drones like he has... damn it, who do I see first?

He settles for simply calling Pope Linus as his ship arrives, from a booth near the port where Ayatollah Salid's ship is likewise approaching.

"Your holiness," BC says, greeting Pope Linus.

"Father Champion! Hello! I didn't think I'd hear from you again before we arrived."

"You are arriving, sir. Welcome to the Moon!" BC says with mock enthusiasm.

"Why thank you, Father. Does this mean you won't be meeting us?"

Urgh. He's on to me immediately.

"I'll be meeting you, sir, just not at the port. My secretary is there with an honor guard and a group of parishioners to greet you and show you to the Vatican Mission. I'll meet with you there," BC tries to explain.

"So." The Pope lets the silence echo for a while. "You're meeting *him* first, then, aren't you?"

God, the man sounds like a jealous girlfriend or something... Well, can't lie.

"Yes. I worried more about the Ayatollah taking offense than you, sir. I knew you would understand."

"Hmmp. Okay, then, I'll see you at the Mission," he says, clicking off.

Okay, so you're pissed off. You pissed off I can deal with. I don't know that the Ayatollah would shrug off a slight like no greeting. Speaking of... Gotta go!

BC leaves the booth and rushes over to the port where Ayatollah Salid is arriving. Governor Erskine is there waiting as well.

"Ambassador," she says, inclining her head. "So glad you'll be here with me to greet our guest. I

wondered whether you'd be here or greeting your Pope."

"As you say, he's 'our' guest. It would be impolite not to welcome him properly, now, wouldn't it?" BC says defensively.

"Glad to see you get it, Champion, that's impressive," she cracks sarcastically.

The port's airlock doors open. In march several rows of UIN soldiers, two-by-two. They fan out around the port area, surrounding BC, the Governor, and her accompanying LSC officers. BC can't see out past the UIN soldiers for a moment. Then the crowd parts and the Ayatollah Salid walks up.

"Governor Amanda Erskine? Ambassador Bernard Champion? I am Ayatollah Salid."

Impressive. He's got a real presence in person. Charisma.

"I'm honored to meet you," BC says, "I'm Ambassador Bernard Champion."

"I'm honored to meet you, too," Governor Erskine adds. "Ayatollah Salid, I am Governor Amanda Erskine. Welcome to Lunar Prima and the Moon."

"Thank you," Salid says almost absent-mindedly. He begins looking around, absorbing his surroundings, mastering his personal territory. His gaze comes back to BC and Erskine just as they look at each other, wondering.

Okay...

"I hear the Pope is arriving now, too, at the same time," Salid says sharply, snapping their attention back to him.

"Er, yes, he is. He has," BC tries.

"We have tried to treat you and the Pontiff with equal respect, and your entourages are both equally welcome to utilize the resources of Lunar Prime while you are here for the conference," Erskine says formally.

This draws a small smile to the lips of Salid.

"Thank you," he says, with a small bow to Erskine, "You are a most gracious host." He turns to BC.

"Ambassador, I thank you for the honor of your presence here and now, for seeing the wisdom in greeting myself upon landing. It may not sit well with your *employer*," Salid says the last with a hint of a snarl, "and so I know you've done this on your own, and done me honor. I think it is a good start, eh?" Salid's smile returns, larger this time.

Phew...

"Thank you, sir," BC says with a small bow to Salid.

A short man in LSC garb appears at Governor Erskine's side.

One of her assistants. What's his name? Used to work for Edwards, too if I remember right.

His appearance is Erskine's cue.

"Ayatollah, if you'll follow me we'll show you to your accommodations," she says to Salid. "We followed your requests in preparing your lodgings. I hope they'll suffice." She turns to BC. "Ambassador, I trust we'll see you first thing in the morning?" she asks him.

"But of course," BC says, nodding, appreciating Erskine's giving him his out.

The woman has skills.

"Ayatollah Salid, I shall see you in the morning as well. A new dawn, eh?" BC tries to engage Salid with hopeful humor.

"We are on the Moon, Ambassador," Salid replies. "There's neither dawn nor dusk, and our 'days' here are at best artificial. And, we'll not be keeping a Martian day, but an Earth day, as agreed to," Salid says with simmering intensity. "I consider that a concession to us, confirming the primacy of Earth as the home for us all, our home, denied to us as of now."

What kind of can of worms did I... fuck, he's not done...

"So I will see you tomorrow, at your earth's morning."

Salid, finished, turns back to Erskine. "Shall we go?" he asks, and Erskine leads Salid away.

BC watches the Ayatollah's entourage pass by.

Did that go well or badly? Did he say earth's morning or earth's mourning? I'm not sure. And now I get to deal with the angry Pope. Off to the mission.

No way!

Once again, BC catches a glimpse of a woman who looks like the UIN spy, disappearing into the space port crowd.

That was her again!

I'm sure of it! That Nita woman!

Here in the spaceport!

As the UIN arrives, of course! She looked a little different... but it sure looked like her. She's got a lot of nerve showing up again!

BC casually tries to follow the woman he saw. He catches another glimpse of her as she turns around.

Maybe she felt like she was being followed... she looks just like Nita Bendix!

The woman sees BC looking her way and ducks behind a short man in long robes. The two of them disappear behind a group of UIN underlings moving through the terminal.

BC tries to follow her, but the crowd is too big. Ayatollah Salid travels with a large entourage, laden with luggage and travel gear. BC doesn't get far before he reminds himself he has to get back and see to the Pope.

How does she keep showing up and disappearing?

How does she dare?

How does the UIN dare expose her again after the McEntyre fiasco?

BC finds the Pope in his quarters surrounded by staffers unpacking luggage. BC takes it as a good sign when he's let right in to see the old man.

"Campion! Good. Finally," he says grimly. "And how is the Ayatollah?" Pope Linus asks BC, almost sarcastically.

"He strikes me as a no nonsense sort of man, much like yourself," BC says with a bit of a barb. Pope Linus arches an eyebrow and answers.

"You dare to compare us?" The Pope challenges BC.

Oopses...

"You're both powerful men, both religious leaders. I wasn't trying to be snide or disrespectful, your Holiness," BC says modestly, trying to emphasize the capital H.

"I see," says Pope Linus. "So..." he says, leaving it hanging.

BC stands, waiting. He finally says, "Yes?"

"Aren't you going to brief me?" Pope Linus says.

"About what?" BC asks.

"About what to expect... What's going on? Tell me about this Ayatollah, for example. What can I expect from him? What is he like?"

After all this time, he finally asks for my analysis... I wonder if he has been reading my reports?

"Salid is a mullah, a teacher of the law, and is regarded as a holy man by his people," BC tells Pope Linus. "They call him Ayatollah, a Shiite term of respect, though he leads all of the Muslims of the UIN. He commands a great deal of power and respect in the Muslim world. It's a real sign of progress that he's here at all," BC notes.

"I'm afraid he seems to see *you*, your holiness, as an ally of the UTZ at best, a puppet at worse. And he probably doesn't think he needs to deal with you directly on any political matters."

"Is that so?" the pope says, pondering, quiet. "Then why am I here? Why did I need to be here for him to be here?"

"Because you represent his opposite number in at least one regard," BC informs the pontiff. "You are the NcC's religious head, as he is the UIN's. But he is also the political head of the UIN, and so he regards DeMag as his political equivalent. I think Salid views this as a political conference with religious overtones. You need to be here to witness and be included, but the real give and take will be between the UIN and the UTZ," BC tells him, boiling it down for the pope.

"Okay," Linus says. "So he's really here to see DeMag. Fine. I will still be at the table, and I will not be slighted, do you hear me Campion?" Pope Linus wags a finger at BC.

One of the pope's assistants interrupts with a communiqué for the pope from the Vatican. The pope

looks over the tablet and okays whatever the communiqué requests with his thumbprint. Something on the tablet makes the pope laugh a small laugh.

"You're not a superstitious man, are you, Champion?" Pope Linus asks him.

"Superstitious?" BC asks. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"Do you know what tomorrow is?"

"Friday?" BC guesses. "The start of our future? A new beginning?"

"Tomorrow is Friday the Thirteenth," The Pope tells BC. "People used to think it was unlucky."

Great. Cursed by superstition from the outset, just my bad luck...

"I'm glad to hear you're not superstitious," The pope says. "As a follower of Jesus Christ, you shouldn't believe any of that poppycock anyway!"

"Yesssir!" BC says.

Poppycock?

"I want to see DeMag tonight," the pope tells him. "Before tomorrow's proceedings get underway. Please arrange it, won't you? Thank you, Champion. You'll let me know when we'll meet with DeMag, won't you?"

BC nods.

"Good," Linus says. He turns his back on BC.

So... it's like that. Fine. Off I go, holy rollin' errand boy. So, Mr. DeMag, let me introduce you to his holiness Pope Linus...

BC sets off to set up the requested meeting.

The next three days are a blur for BC, meetings upon meetings: Pope Linus meets with DeMag, DeMag and the Pope meet with Ayatollah Salid, Salid and DeMag meet alone, then with their staffs, then with Linus and his staff. BC is sometimes involved, sometimes left outside the doors to ponder what the three men inside are discussing.

Governor Erskine has an undefined role as an objective observer, either involved or excluded depending on some unspoken agreement between the primaries involved in the talks.

Eventually, Erskine's help as a mediator is enlisted, as agreements begin to be hammered out. She seems to be level headed enough to deal with the large issues and even larger egos. The grinding monotony of the sessions hurts BC's head. He's glad of Erskine's expertise and help.

The meetings grind on, but by Sunday there are some results. BC takes one result personally. As a goodwill gesture, Pope Linus has offered to officially and permanently dismantle the OPO, and the offer has been accepted and agreed upon.

Other news coming out of the conference is more positive. Ayatollah Salid and Chairman DeMag commit to a business agreement between the UIN and the UTZ: The UTZ will assist the UIN with the terraforming of Mars.

Salid admits their own terraforming efforts have not been as fruitful as hoped, and says the UIN welcomes the assistance of UTZ technology and know-how.

They hash out free trade and free travel and visitation zones around the ruins of Jerusalem and Mecca, and the official reopening of Medina to UIN visitation. Some UIN citizens will even be granted temporary residency to cater to the needs of UIN visitors.

Salid and DeMag paint the broad strokes, and then the career diplomats take over to hash out the details.

At the end of the third day, DeMag and Pope Linus ask Al Salid to stop calling the entire Earth Mecca. On this point, Salid refuses to budge. The conference grinds to a halt. BC is in on the meeting where the line is drawn.

"We have, on both sides, agreed to many things," Al Salid observes. "But this we cannot agree to. Let us end here for now, this time. We will sign the agreements we have made, but we will not agree to this."

"Essentially, calling all of Earth 'Mecca' means they want the *whole world*," Pope Linus observes for everyone's benefit.

"When Mecca was destroyed, the Earth *became* Mecca," Al Salid says in a "simple as that" tone. "We do not desire the *whole world*. The world belongs to Allah, not to any man."

DeMag is a considerate man, a good listener and careful decision maker. He's about 6'2", gray hair, and medium build.

Average UTZ management unit number 3... He is pretty average. But it takes someone with an even keel to deal with the Ayatollah. Ha! And Wentworth, for that matter!

I'm sure Wentworth has approved each of these concessions.

Oh, he's talking...

"Yes. We've been more than accommodating," DeMag says. "If you won't let go of that 'Earth as Mecca' position, there's not much more we *can* do for now. We'll sign the agreements made so far," DeMag promises. "But this is a major sticking point, Ayatollah. We won't give up Earth! We won't." He shakes his head.

DeMag pauses, gathering his thoughts. Al Salid simply looks on.

"Look," DeMag continues. "Many of us see that, certainly, as human beings, you have some claim to Earth, but not as a political group. Or as a religious group set on the persecution of others!"

"Well, then," Salid says. "If that is how you see it... I'm afraid we can go no further, for now." Salid stands up from the table. "But we have accomplished some things this weekend, have we not?" The ayatollah steps away from the table. "Have the documents sent to me on Mars and I will sign them into UIN law. Thank you," he says, with a slight bow of his head. He leaves the room followed by a trail of staffers.

"I told you it would be the sticking point," DeMag says to Erskine, BC and Pope Linus. He bundles his belongings together and hands them off to an underling. "Make sure they get the documents back to me on my station," he says to BC. "I'll sign them there," he says. "Well, it's something, I guess." He leaves the table and the room, followed by his staffers. Governor Erskine follows him out of the room.

BC is left sitting with Pope Linus and the Vatican group.

"That went well," BC says, sarcasm dripping off his words.

"You got some things done," Pope Linus says to BC, "the business deals, the terraforming. There were some accomplishments. You've done well, Ambassador! You just need to keep plugging away!"

"Right," BC answers, "sure, but... why me?"

"Because... we have to assume God has put you in the right place, at the right time for a reason, *Campion!*" Pope Linus says with a flourish.

He gets up from the table and leads his staffers out of the room. BC is left sitting alone at the table.

And that's that, then... conference over.

The next morning the groups make ready to leave Lunar Prime. Hands are shaken and pictures taken, and there are assurances and agreements made. The news media eat up the photo ops and the conference looks like it went better than BC feels it really did.

BC sees the guests off along with Governor Erskine and a group of LSC. He smiles and waves, but in the end BC feels disappointed with the results of the conference.

Guess maybe Friday the Thirteenth was unlucky... but things didn't really fall apart until Sunday the Fifteenth, so go figure.

Are there any superstitions about Monday the Sixteenth? I think I may just crawl back into bed and avoid any possible unluckiness the rest of today...

BC gazes out a window and contemplates the conference's end results. He watches as the Pope's, DeMag's and the Ayatollah's ships drift off away from Lunar Prime, each carrying its precious diplomatic cargo home.

I guess I hoped with the major players finally all at the table together something more would happen, we'd make major strides toward peace or something... Well, we did end up with more than we started with. UIN people will be visiting Earth to worship, UTZ people will be visiting Mars to help terraform.

And there will be no more OPO.

I think Linus threw that in there just to feel included.

Now everyone goes home.

What next?

It bothers me we set no date for the next conference. But I couldn't pull the same stunt twice. Patience, I guess.

Everyone heads home. Al Salid arrives on Mars and signs the agreements, allowing the UTZ news media to cover the signing. DeMag's return to his station is in the news as well. He looks ill and sniffles as he lands on his station, but he smiles and signs the agreements after landing, and UIN media are allowed to cover it.

The two signings get most of the news coverage. The pope's return to the Vatican gets minimal attention. BC finds himself pulled back into the day-to-day operations of the Vatican Mission on the Moon as the week goes on. But Thursday, the third day after the conference, strange news hits. Odd things begin happening.

DeMag grows more ill after he returns to his station. The news media on Thursday report that DeMag has been rushed to Earth for treatment. He disappears into a private hospital. Rumors fly that many of DeMag's people are also sick. The UTZ refuses to comment on DeMag or any of his entourage's condition.

BC has been fending off the news media's questions about the weekend all week, but on Thursday their questions change from conference analysis to health questions. Is he all right? Feeling ill? Sniffles? Anything?

BC tells them he's fine. He sees on the news that the media are bothering the conference's other participants as well. Governor Erskine is fine. The Vatican is offering no comment. The UIN has once again closed up, with no broadcasts from the UIN media and no word on Al Salid's health.

What is going on?

Do they think DeMag picked up a bug here on the Moon? At the conference? Could someone have slipped him something?

BC tries to contact Wentworth for news, but he doesn't hear anything back from him. There's no word from Pope Linus or the Vatican, either, despite BC's repeated attempts.

And here I thought we'd bridged some gaps... still no love for BC from Rome, I guess...

There does seem to be a bug going around Lunar Prime, a flu bug. Not everyone catches this bug, but those who do are debilitated by it, forced into bed rest. BC is thankful when the symptoms pass him by, especially given his proximity to DeMag during the conference. Ten cases of the "flu" are reported on Lunar Prime by the week's end.

BC visits a sick member of his congregation on Saturday, says the Mass on Sunday, and waits for word from Wentworth or the Vatican throughout the weekend, to no avail.

Wentworth finally calls BC on Thursday, a week after BC called him.

"Campion, did you hear about poor DeMag?"

"Still sick?" BC asks.

He must be over the flu by now. It's a week later.

"He's dead," Wentworth delivers the news.

"Dead? Jeesh. He just had the sniffles..."

"Chairman DeMag got the 'sniffles' while at the conference. He developed flu-like symptoms on his flight home to his station. His doctors had him rushed to Earth to the hospital. His condition quickly deteriorated. He was dead within days. Some of his staff are sick as well, quarantined off. Are you sick? Is anyone there sick? Anyone on Lunar Prime?" Wentworth asks him.

"Yeah, there're about ten people sick here with that 'flu' on Lunar Prime," BC tells him. "Are you saying they should be quarantined? It's deadly? What's going on?"

"DeMag is dead, Campion, that's what's going on! That he caught this 'flu' at your conference is no coincidence! Someone infected him on purpose, I'm sure of it."

"Wait a minute, Wentworth," BC says, shaking his head. "Are you suggesting the UIN did this to him? Bio-terrorism?"

"I'm not the only one suggesting this is the work of the UIN. The doctors who took care of DeMag and his people say this bug isn't really the 'flu' as you call it. They're suggesting this could be a man made virus of some kind. They don't know what it is, yet, though. Not really."

Great. The doctors don't know what this is? I'm glad I didn't catch it! At least I haven't yet.

"Well, at least you've got the rest of them quarantined..." BC says.

"Too little, too late, Champion," Wentworth says. "Even though you aren't sick, you were exposed to the illness. You could be a carrier," he tells BC. "Everyone at the conference could be a carrier. DeMag and his people all mingled with the crowd in the Lunar Prime spaceport. Anyone traveling out of there could be a carrier. And we haven't been able to get any word from the Vatican in the last week. We don't know if anyone from their delegation got sick... but they all could have carried the sickness to back to Earth when they returned."

"You mean this could be big? Bigger than DeMag?" BC asks.

"We fear the worst," Wentworth says. "It could be an outbreak of a biological contagion, a weapon. There are reports of isolated flu outbreaks on Earth, but we don't know yet if they're connected,"

Wentworth tells BC. "What about you? Any word from the Pope?"

"No, I haven't heard anything from him, but that's not unusual. You know that."

"Right," Wentworth says. "Keep me informed." Wentworth signs off.

Two days later, everything changes. People *are* getting sick, all over Earth. Some are sick on the orbital stations.

Some people are dying.

Sick people on Lunar Prime have died, now, too.

The plague begins like a common head cold, with sniffles and coughing. A temperature soon follows as the plague mimics the flu. The plague then breaks down terminally differentiated tissue, impairing the body's ability to repair itself on a cellular level.

This is when the plague becomes truly destructive. The body begins to rot from the inside out. The plague victim's cells lose the ability to repair and regenerate, and the body's tissues begin to break down into an undifferentiated cellular goo.

The kidneys usually fail first, followed quickly by the liver, the nervous system, the lungs, and the heart. It only takes a week from the first sneeze to the last, raspy breath.

BC hasn't heard from Earth, nothing from Vatican City. But he does hear from Richard Wentworth again, on Saturday. Wentworth sounds almost panicked:

"Champion! What's the word on the sickness on Lunar Prime?" he demands without introduction.

"We have about a hundred people sick. They're quarantined. A couple of sick people have died," he tells him.

Wentworth goes off, "On Earth, people have been getting sick at an alarming rate!" He shakes his head.

"No one on my station is sick. Yet. I'm fine myself. But we're crossing our fingers. And we're going to keep our doors closed. Everyone is guessing it's some kind of biological weapon, used on DeMag by the UIN at the conference. That's the common buzz on the street, at any rate. It's some kind of epidemic, but our researchers are a long way from figuring out what it is and how it's spread. Or where it came from,"

Wentworth says. "We're sealing our station. I suggest Lunar Prime do the same. I'll tell Erskine that myself," Wentworth declares. "They'll pay, I swear it!"

"You're sure it was them?" BC asks Wentworth. "The UIN?"

Wentworth pauses. "No. Not 'sure' sure. There's no proof or evidence yet. Just people dying!

"Do you know how many people pass through a major port, Champion? Who then travel to other ports? And so on and so on... this thing is everywhere on Earth already, Champion! After DeMag and his delegation passed through, and the Pope and his people... it's everywhere down there. Already!"

"Everywhere? Have you heard yet if the Pope is sick?" BC asks.

"Not that I've heard, but who knows? I'd expect you'd know that before I would."

"Don't be so sure of that. I still haven't heard anything from the Vatican since Thursday," BC admits.

"Anyway," Wentworth says. "We have no choice but to seal off our station!"

"That seems like a drastic move. What if you've been exposed?" BC cautions.

"Necessary!" Wentworth insists. "I'm fine. One of my people got sick. They left for Earth yesterday. Otherwise the station is fine. No one is sick on my station."

"Oh, I see. If you're sick, leave! And no one comes in. How humane of you. Think that'll keep you

safe?"

"I can try. I'm recommending all our stations do it. You should, too. I'll talk to Erskine," he says, signing off.

Wentworth issues a statement for the UTZ orbital holdings later that day, declaring the orbital stations off limits to traffic from Earth. Two days later, Governor Erskine announces Lunar Prime will not accept traffic from Earth.

BC watches her make the announcement on the news. None of the news is good. The number of people sick on Earth is easily one billion, now. There are at least five hundred sick on the Moon. The numbers for the orbital stations are unknown, and communication with many of them is spotty at best.

What about Mars? The UIN? There's no word... but why would they tell us if they were getting sick?

Would they really do this to us?

Erskine had no choice but to seal us off, too... It may be too late for us, anyway. Everyone is suddenly living in fear of getting the sniffles. Funny. I feel fine! Well, not funny... good.

But funny because I was there, with DeMag, for much of the conference.

BC's com is going off.

Priority message from Earth, from the Vatican! Pope Linus? Finally. He hasn't replied... but that's normal for him...

BC checks his collar in the mirror then turns on the communicator's full mode to face an older woman in a Cardinal's red.

"Ambassador Campion?" She asks, sounding surprised.

Yeah, I know, sometimes I'm still surprised...

"Yes," BC answers, "I'm Father Campion."

"I'm Cardinal Terpa of the Curia, Father. We have some bad news. Pope Linus has taken ill, and appears to be on the verge of dying from the current unknown epidemic, the one that killed Mr. DeMag, who met with the Pope just days ago. Just before he became sick," she says, trying to get it all out at once.

"I see," BC says.

"A lot of people here are getting sick," Cardinal Terpa tells him. There's desperation flooding into her voice. "What's going on? Are you sick?"

"No. I haven't been effected. Others here have been, though. It's an epidemic. We've got the sick ones under quarantine. But some are starting to die. We don't know what it is or how to stop it."

"That," Terpa sighs, "is what Mr. Wentworth told me. Although he told me they're working on it."

"You spoke to Wentworth? Mr. Richard Wentworth?" BC asks, curious.

"Yes. Why?" Terpa wonders.

"It surprises me. You're very resourceful, Cardinal Terpa. You're to be commended." BC smiles at her, then frowns in mock anger, "Although, you did go to him before you came to me..."

Terpa starts to apologize, "Father Campion, I'm sorry, please understand, it's a very hectic and confusing time here right now, with the Pope so sick and all. And so many getting sick everywhere. It's... it's scary, Father. All we can do is pray," she says, solemnly.

"And make a few calls." BC laughs.

"Father..." she says, both rebuking and laughing with him.

I think I like this Cardinal. Imagine that, a sense of humor!

She gets serious. "There's more I need to tell you. We in the College of Cardinals are also becoming sick. Several of our number became ill alongside the Pontiff. I wanted to tell you, after I verified you were healthy and at least sane, that I'm nominating you to the college. I have nominated you, actually, and it's all done. You're to be a Cardinal, Father." She drops the news like a bomb.

"What?" BC can only mangle the one word, for the moment.

"You're an Ambassador for the Vatican already. We, I mean, I figured you were a good replacement candidate," she explains. "Um... congratulations?"

"Yeah," BC says, still at a loss for words, "Thanks."

“When can you come down and be confirmed?” She asks him.

“Huh?”

“We’ll need you down here at the Vatican, first to be anointed in the proper ceremony, then to help us elect a new pope,” she stops herself, “If that becomes necessary.”

“Oh.”

What can I say? With everyone getting sick, I don’t really want to travel to Earth right now...

“I’ve got several matters here which require my immediate attention. I won’t be coming down to the Vatican just yet. But keep me informed!” BC says, trying to sound very concerned.

“We thought you should know what’s going on here, Father,” Terpa says. “We were hoping you would join us. We hope you will soon. In the meantime, we’ll keep you informed of any major changes.”

“Thank you,” BC says. “Please keep me informed of his holiness’s health. I’ll be praying for him,” BC adds for effect, then thinks again. “I’ll be praying for us all,” he says to her.

“As will I, Father. As will we all. We’ll let you know as soon as anything changes. Good day, Father. Terpa out.”

The Pope and his entourage sick. This is raging out of control. What is the Ayatollah pulling? It has to be him, doesn’t it? Him or someone from the UIN. One of his people. Biological Warfare. Shit. I thought we were beyond this! Thought we’d put it behind us. Maybe we’re devolving.

Wentworth and the UTZ are guessing its UIN.

How long until they launch some sort of biological counter strike? What horrific forms will that take? How far can this escalate?

Well, until we’re all dead, of course.

Happy ending, huh?

I’ve gotta talk to Wentworth; see if I can get a sense of where he’s at.

BC’s com alert beeps.

Wentworth?

“Campion? Wentworth,” he says on the com by way of introduction.

Speak of the fuckin’ devil...

“I hear your Pope is dying,” Wentworth offers. “Our man DeMag is already dead.” Wentworth pauses.

“Will the NcC support a counterstrike against the UIN?”

BC is struck by the absurdity. “You’re asking *me*? I’m pretty much all for it at this point. But I have no authority to authorize such a thing. So why ask me?”

“Do you think I’m asking for your permission? Maybe I merely wanted to get your opinion. But as far as that goes, who else should I ask? That Cardinal Terpa you must have just been speaking with? C’mon, you know more than she does! So tell me. Who should I be asking? Who’s leading your people right now?”

“You’ve got a point. Damned if I know. We’ll find out from the Cardinals when they meet.”

“You *should* be a Cardinal, BC,” Wentworth says out of nowhere. “We need someone in there with some kind of savvy to keep the NcC from becoming impotent and irrelevant.”

Wait a minute...

“When did you call Cardinal Terpa?” BC asks Wentworth.

“Earlier... but, why, she called me,” Wentworth demurs. BC shakes his head, stops to think.

It all starts to make a little more sense. And to think I complimented her on her initiative! I liked her, liked her sense of humor. I should never let that color my judgment!

“Lucky one of yours is still healthy, eh Wentworth?” BC accuses.

“One of Mine? Who? Terpa?” Wentworth plays dumb.

“Right.”

“Cardinal Terpa is but a friend of the Wentworth Foundation. She works closely with my charitable foundation.”

“I see. You provide her with funding.”

“Exactly,” Wentworth says. “It’s all very legal, all on the up and up. Don’t get that look on your face,

Campion. Didn't your mother ever warn you that your face could freeze like that?"

"No. Is that what happened to you?" BC cracks back.

"Why don't you want to be a Cardinal?" Wentworth asks him.

"It's not that I don't," BC explains. "I just never thought I'd be..."

Wentworth cuts him off. "Look. We need the NcC to be a strong ally to the UTZ. We need the NcC to provide that social glue that it can, that it does, that sense of belonging, that sense of righteousness. The NcC helps hold our population together. We need that to continue, especially with our current epidemic. Let's make you a Cardinal," Wentworth says with a flourish, leaning in towards the screen, smiling.

"Sure," BC says, as deadpan as he can, "but why would they agree to do this?"

"Because a lot of the Cardinals have gotten sick, Champion." Wentworth is deadly serious. "A lot of them. They're dying. You aren't the only one they're asking to join their ranks, you know," Wentworth informs him.

Aw gee, and for a second there I was feeling all special and shit. But that's not what I meant.

"Wentworth, there's one thing that really bothers me about all this."

"What, being Cardinal? I thought we got..."

BC interrupts him this time, "No. About the biological attack, if it is a UIN attack. Why would they do this? Why would they infect us with something deadly to humans? Aren't they susceptible, too? I mean, wouldn't they be? Or could they have an antidote? Is that what they're doing, holding us hostage with our health? Wouldn't they be more selective in their attacks? And wouldn't they have said, 'Aha! You're Sick! You must cooperate with us or die?' or some sort of thing already?" BC wonders.

"They're savages, Champion," Wentworth explains to him, as if he's ignorant. "It seems as if Islam demands that its followers become quite primitive," Wentworth explains his prejudice to BC. "There is, of course, a great advantage to keeping your populace docile, malleable and superstitious: It makes them much easier to control."

"You'd know something about that," BC can't help but make the crack.

"Look. I'm a businessman. I look for results. I do what needs to be done to get the results I want. But it's just business. Those people do anything, and I mean *anything* for their religion. They use their religion to cultivate and control ignorance and fear. Then they use that to focus their people's hatred, their resentment for their privation, on us, on the UTZ and your church. When you control people like that, you can point them like weapons at whatever other perceived enemies you have. And they respond! And all the while it keeps them from pointing back at *you*. You know! If anything, that's what the NcC does for *us*. For the UTZ. Come to think of it. Full circle, eh Champion?"

"You impress yourself, don't you, Wentworth?"

"Ha ha. Cut the shit, Champion. You and I are still healthy. Either they haven't gotten to us or we're just lucky, or we're resistant. We've survived. I don't plan on dying, either. Remember when you asked me if I was afraid of dying?"

"Not really..."

"Well I'm not. Not really. And I don't plan on dying anytime soon. We've been in contact with the sick, but we," Wentworth points at BC through the screen, back at himself, quickly, "We survive! And we need to stick together!"

"We need? I don't know that I need..."

Wentworth cuts him off, "We need to help each other."

"You mean you need me. That's classic! I don't think so."

"What, you don't think we need to help each other? Don't you want to be Cardinal?"

"Not really. You misread me if you think I do. No, I think *you* think you need me to be a Cardinal, though. I don't think so."

"What? You don't think you'll be Cardinal?"

"Yeah, that too... I don't think I'll 'stick together' with you, I don't think I'll be a Cardinal... to be honest, Wentworth, these days, I don't know what to think. But I do think I'll end this conversation. Goodbye."

BC clicks off his com.

“The man is an arrogant pig bastard!” BC says out loud to no one.

If Wentworth is admitting he needs my help, he must be getting pretty desperate.

The com goes off again in ten minutes.

“Campion, its Wentworth. I need to speak with you.”

“C’mon Wentworth, I don’t want to go around...”

“Hold off on your shit for a second, Campion. I just got word from my scientists. This epidemic, this sickness everyone has, appears to be from a non-terrestrial virus.”

Fuck, it is the UIN...

Wentworth continues, “It’s not from here. It’s definitely not terrestrial in origin.”

“You mean it didn’t originate on Earth?” BC asks.

Wentworth nods, “It’s not from Earth. Which I think increases the likelihood it’s something they cooked up on Mars.”

“Why? Is Mars so different?”

“It’s not so much Mars itself as it is Mars’s cosmic bombardment. Mars has a great variety of meteor strike points. Something like this virus would have to have come from an external, non-solar source like that, some sort of alien virus they picked up off a meteor.”

“Couldn’t someone on the Moon do the same?”

“Nah, the Moon’s fairly clear of untested strike points, aside from any relatively new ones. We know the surface of the Moon very well.”

That bothers me, for some reason.

“Oh,” BC says. “You don’t sound so sure, Wentworth. If it’s non-terrestrial, it could be from anything: a stray stellar microbe DeMag came in contact with. A stray micro meteor. Anything. It could be an accident. We’ve got to know for sure before we do anything.”

“We?” Wentworth notices, “Does that mean you’re with me now?”

“We’ll see. I’m just giving you my ‘opinion’ at this point, see?” BC throws Wentworth’s own words back at him.

“Right,” Wentworth says, and goes on, “But you’d still need a huge coincidence for anything like that to happen.”

“Granted, any of those things happening *would* be huge in the coincidence department.

“How do you explain it? If its non-terrestrial, do you really think it could have been created by the UIN?” BC asks.

“Good Question. My scientists don’t seem to think the UIN *created* it, but that doesn’t rule out the possibility they’re *using* it. Or adapting it for their use,” Wentworth tells him. “My scientists are proud men and women, Campion. They aren’t willing to admit that UIN scientists might be more advanced than they are,” Wentworth says with a sniff.

“Wait a sec. You mean if it was created, it’s more advanced than what your scientist can cook up? That scares me,” BC admits.

“It raises the hairs on the back of my neck some, I’ll admit it,” Wentworth says. “It does imply that they’re far ahead of us. In a few areas. Not just R & D. To manufacture something like this would require facilities we don’t have. That they *shouldn’t* have, unless they built them themselves without our knowledge. Somehow. Otherwise, all their equipment, all their tech, is from here! It’s no different than our older equipment. We’ve advanced since then, maybe they have, too, but we built the equipment they’re probably using.

“Unless they made this thing!” Wentworth looks mad enough to spit.

Wow. What if it’s not the UIN? I know I said maybe a cosmic accident, but it does seem far-fetched...

“Campion?” Wentworth barks.

“Sorry. Just thinking. You know, on second thought, it is hard to believe that this was caused by a simple accident, by coincidence,” BC admits.

“Glad to hear you say that. If I could have reached through the screen and slapped you before, I would have. You’re a military man, kind of, Campion. You’re at least trained to think strategically, right?”

Wentworth asks.

“Sure”

“Then you know as well as I do. This *feels* like a strike against us. So I’m almost hoping it is the UIN. And not somebody new.”

Wentworth pauses to let BC think about the implications of that.

Holy Shit.

Wentworth goes on. “The Pope is dying. According to my reports, half of the Vatican has succumbed to this mystery illness. DeMag and most of his closest circle is dead from this thing now, too. People around the world are getting sick. Who knows how far it’ll spread? Who knows who else is infected? You could be, you know, Champion. You could be a carrier. Or you could be immune. Either way. I feel like we’ve been attacked.”

“Wentworth... we don’t know if any of the UIN delegation got sick. Do you have any *reports* on that? I don’t think they’d come right out and tell us if they were.”

“They would if they perceived it as a threat, as a strike against them. If they thought it was an attack, they’d come right after us,” Wentworth tells him.

“The same way you’re saying we should go after them?” BC says.

“Exactly,” Wentworth nods.

“So we may not have heard from them if they *are* sick because they’re holding conversations among themselves just like this one you and I are having right now,” BC observes.

“True,” Wentworth admits.

“Is there anything else you’re not telling me?” BC prods.

“What kind of question is that?” Wentworth protests.

“What else is there?” BC keeps pushing.

“Nothing else. Yet. I’ll keep my people working on this. I just wanted to let you know what was in this preliminary report. Think about possible counterstrikes.”

“Great,” BC says. “But don’t do anything yet, alright? We need to find out exactly what this thing is first. We need to know what caused it, and if it is an attack, who infected us.”

“Who else could it be?” Wentworth argues. “We’ll give it a little more time. UTZ researchers are doing their damndest. It’s our only priority right now.”

“Guess it kinda has to be.”

“Keep me informed of any developments on your end, Champion. Anything, and I mean, *anything* you hear, let me know.”

“Right. Bye Wentworth,” BC clicks off the com.

Arrogant fuck. I still hate him. I’ll use him though, if I can. Work with him to cure this thing, strike back at Mars if we have to. The man’s got power. If he can be focused properly...

Sunday morning brings with it a new month. BC is forced to come up with a sermon for Sunday Mass in just a few minutes, as Father Daycomb has suddenly taken ill.

The Mass and the day go by quickly for BC. He’s preoccupied with the thoughts running through his head, the Who? Why? And How? of the sickness.

BC paces around his office at day’s end. He looks at the two paintings of Jesus on the wall, salvaged from the wreckage of the old Cardinal’s office after the UIN attacks. BC found the Black Jesus and the Eastern Orthodox Icon in the ruins. There are some single marks on the frame and the lower edge of the painting of the Black Jesus.

Rising out of the fire. Funny, you almost look like an icon, a black icon. Side by side with the old Greek icon guy there, you bear a resemblance. The dark side of the family. Yet probably a more accurate portrait than the pale, thin guy there.

Funny, my mind wanders. Am I deliberately trying to think of other things? What is it? There’s something here, something to this sickness.

Part of me does want to strike out at the UIN... but part of me still doubts it’s them.

I know I don’t want it to be them. But if it is, I want to strike them back and hard.

Love your enemies? That’s really your tough one, isn’t it? The Light was big on that, also

admitted he was no good at it. It's tough to maintain any sense of perspective, I suppose, when you're becoming a messiah figure in your own right.

What do you think?

Great, I'm talking to paintings. Or thinking at them.

I wonder if it really was You, back there on Fortune Station.

Huh. Fortune Station. I haven't thought of them for a while. I wonder... whatever happened to the cult? Back on Earth, probably getting sick... I certainly did them no favors. Screwed that up and screwed them over hard. Though what did I owe them, anyway? After all they did to me.

Well, after what I was going to do to him...

It wasn't intentional. It just happened. I should have seen it coming. Maybe I did on some level and just ignored it. Why should I care? Kim was a real bastard in his own right. I did like his daughter, though. Man.

The chime of the com breaks BC's reverie.

Wentworth? Already?

"Yes?"

"Incoming message. Audio Only."

"Go ahead. Campion here."

"Father Campion?" A woman's voice. Pleasant. Unaccented.

"Yes?"

"Hello, Father. You don't know me, but I have some information I believe will be of importance to you."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a scientist. I work here on the Moon. My name is Doctor Capituna. And I believe I know who infected the people who have died and are dying, here and on Earth, right now."

Holy Shit. No, lady, I don't need to know that!

Is she for real? Or a kook who got through?

"Go on," BC encourages her to talk.

"I can't say anymore over the com. Can we meet?" she asks.

"Sure. Why don't you come to my office?" BC asks.

"Um..." she pauses. "I can't."

"Why not?"

That's suspicious...

"Your security measures. I can't get past them to see you. Not right now."

"Really?"

"Really."

Let's see...

"Then where?" BC asks.

"You couldn't come to my lab for the same reasons. Security measures. So let's meet at a restaurant or someplace like that."

"Sure. How about..."

Where was that place? McGrady's?

"McGrady's?" BC suggests.

"Sure. When?" She asks.

BC checks the time. 7:12.

"How about 8 o'clock?"

"Fine. Where is it?"

"Atrium. Second Level. How will I know it's you?"

"You won't. But I know you. Who you are, I mean."

Creepy. I don't like this at all. But if she is for real...

"Uh... okay. But you have me at a disadvantage, then."

"Oh." she doesn't say anything for a second. Then there's almost a hint of attitude in her voice. "You think you can handle that?"

What's this, sass? I think I know that voice from somewhere... but who? Who is she? What the fuck.

"Sure. See you in about 45 minutes," BC says.

The com is dead.

Gone. Huh.

Should I tell Wentworth? Nah. Nothing to tell yet, don't need to waste his time. Maybe I'll know something soon, though. Or I'm chasing a wild goose. Be nice to have some back up. Oh, the price of running alone. I'll just go early and sit with my back to the wall, facing the door... might as well leave now.

Chapter Twelve

BC heads out the door for McGrady's. He finds the place almost empty, finds himself a table near the back with a chair against the wall, facing the door. He catches the notice of the bartender across the room. He nods and smiles at BC. BC nods back.

Guess he knows me, or at least figures a priest is no threat. I haven't been here very much lately.

BC gets up and orders a pint of Guinness.

Best not to appear out of place. Gotta drink a pint to blend in. Such a sacrifice.

A woman, average height, walks in while BC awaits his pint. She wears a long, tan, old-fashioned coat. Large, dark sunglasses cover her eyes and most of her face. The rest of her head is just about covered by a scarf, but strands of blonde hair fall out around her face.

That head covering almost looks Muslim, but not quite. Is it her? The woman who called me? She looks darker in complexion than a natural blonde... tan or bleach?

The woman looks around the bar. BC tries not to watch as she looks. He can see the bar in the mirror behind the bar in front of him.

There's an older man sitting at the inside end of the bar alone, hand rolling cigarettes. A young couple is in a booth across the room, two booths down from where BC first sat down, all into each other and ignoring their Caesar salads.

Another man sits at a table alone, reading the paper.

Funny. We call it a paper, but it's a tablet, really. Old habits die hard, I guess. Wonder when the last paper was actually made of paper... what's this?

The blonde approaches the bar. She tilts her glasses down. Her brown eyes peer out over the top of them at BC.

That's gotta be her, Capituna... Huh... something familiar about her. There was something about her voice, too, too familiar, felt like I should know her. She looks like she could be cute under there. Maybe it's just that feeling you get when you meet a beautiful woman. You you knew her before, so you you might have known her.

It is her. She comes over with her hand extended toward BC.

"Father Campion?" She asks.

BC nods, shakes her hand. "Doctor Capituna, I presume?"

She nods. "Can we sit down?"

"Sure. Do you want anything?" BC asks her.

"Soda water? With Lemon?"

She sits down across the table from him, leaves on her scarf and her glasses.

The bartender brings BC's finished Guinness over.

"Thank you, sir," BC says to him. "Could you bring a club soda with lemon for the lady, please?"

"You want a tab, Padre?" he asks BC.

“Sure. Thank you...” BC lets it trail, fishing for a name.

“It’s Diamande, Padre. I go to your church. Well, sometimes.”

“Well, Diamande, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Sure, Father. I’ll be over with the lady’s soda in no time!” Diamande says.

There’s a moment of uncomfortable silence, mercifully broken by Diamande appearing with Doctor Capituna’s club soda.

“Thank you,” she says, turning to Diamande.

I swear, where I know this woman from somewhere... ..so familiar, somehow.

She sips the soda through the straw as she turns back to face BC. She puts down the glass.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve lied to you,” she says.

Oh great. She is a nutcase!

“Great,” BC says. “You don’t have any information for me, do you?”

She looks surprised. “No! That’s not it at all! I do. That’s not it! I mean that I lied when I told you we hadn’t met before. We have.”

I knew it!

“Have we?” BC asks, quasi-innocently.

“Yeah,” she says, half gulping. “And not under the best of circumstances. I owe you a huge explanation and an apology, if you’ll hear me out.”

BC gets exasperated. “Look, are you gonna quit this mysterious...”

He stops, suddenly speechless. “Doctor Capituna” has removed her scarf and glasses. And even as a blonde, BC recognizes her.

Nita Bendix! Nita fucking Bendix!

“I should kill you right now,” BC says in a harsh whisper. “Tell me why I shouldn’t. And be quick about it. Very quick. Because you’re already dead. You know that, don’t you?” BC sneers at her.

“Hold on, ‘Padre’. Thou shalt not kill or something?” She smirks, thinks better of it, and gets serious again. “And what about the witnesses?”

“Don’t care. If I hadn’t mellowed, you’d already be dead, *Bendix!*” BC nearly snarls. “You best talk fast!”

“Or what?” She leans over the table. “The Vatican Ambassador to the Moon is going to kill me in public? And with what? You packin’ heat?”

“You might be surprised,” he says coldly. She leans back.

“I don’t think so,” she tells him. “If we met in your office, *I might* be dead already,” she admits.

“Yup, that sounds right,” BC sarcastically admits.

How can I kill her? What’s available? Knives with the silverware? Huh. Plastic. That’ll do.

“I’m not your enemy, Father Champion,” she says. “You need to know that. You wouldn’t want to kill a friend now, would you?”

“You? A friend? You tried to kill me!” BC protests.

“Ha!” She laughs out loud. “If I’d wanted to kill you, you’d be dead. What was it, two years ago? I actually saved your life,” she says with a huff. “I did want it to *look* like I’d tried to kill you, so I guess I understand your confusion. I had to make it look good. Otherwise I would’ve blown my UIN cover.”

“What?” BC asks. But his mind is racing through ways he can kill her in front of these witnesses. But then it registers. “UIN cover?”

“Yeah,” she says, “The UIN thought I was theirs, working as a mole in the LSC.”

“Double Agent?” BC humors her.

“Not exactly. I guess I was a *triple* agent,” she says. “If you want to get technical. But not really. Because I think my side and your side are actually the same side.”

“Right.” BC realizes his Guinness is gone. He contemplates his empty pint glass, and then he looks back up at Nita Bendix. Doctor Capituna.

Whatever.

“Triple?” BC says.

“I work for... a separate concern. Not the UIN. Not by a long shot! We’re independent. I was working

under cover on both sides.”

“Great! An equal opportunity spy! How incredibly *fair* of you!” BC cracks. “You’re not UIN or UTZ... What? Do you work for Lunar Prime?” BC asks.

Edwards never mentioned having any kind of intelligence force. But maybe he wouldn’t have, to me...

“No,” she says. “We work for ourselves. A separate concern, like I said. It was our people who saved you after I left you for ‘dead’. I had to make it look good for the UIN, but I knew my guys would be there to get you.”

“The LSC brought me back,” BC protests.

“The LSC picked you up *after* we saved you. We called them,” she insists. “‘Didn’t you see our ship after the UIN ship took off? One of our ships was there.’”

“What? The flasher? You’re trying to tell me the ‘flashers’ are your ships?” BC asks her in disbelief.

“You’re with the flashers?”

“The flashers? Yeah, I guess you could say I’m with them.”

BC takes the offensive. “So. What is your name? I mean, really?”

“Anita Capituna. Doctor Anita Capituna. That’s my real name. And I really am a scientist. I work for The Project.”

The Project? Man I can hear the capital “P”. Never hurts to ask...

“The Project?”

She hesitates. “The Project. It’s what we call ourselves. And we’ve decided it’s time for you to know about us. That’s why I’m here today. That... and we *do* think we know who has infected us with this sickness.”

“Right,” BC says suspiciously. “It’s ‘my time’. I see.”

“Look. I’m here to bring you in on what The Project is up to. You can accept that, or walk away from it.”

“How do I know you’re not just fucking crazy?”

“Such language from a priest,” she says with a tsk. “I didn’t kill you, I had you rescued. You saw the ‘flasher’ as you call our ships. They called in the LSC.”

BC is still not convinced. “How can I be sure you’re not still a UIN agent, just trying to take advantage of the current situation and trying to keep me from being a threat?”

“Like I said before, if I wanted you dead, you’d be dead. I’m not UIN!” she insists.

“I saw you at the conference here! You were working with McEntyre! Last October! It was all over the news... you’re a celebrity secret agent. Kind of an oxymoron, isn’t it?”

“Did you like that? That performance was for you, once I realized you’d spotted me. I was spying on McEntyre. Then I saw you and I improvised. Hey, it helped you get rid of McEntyre, didn’t it? And as far as we know, Amanda Erskine is clean. No alliances, no agenda except the Moon’s. I did you a favor!”

“Wait, back up. Are you saying McEntyre didn’t know you were here that last time?”

“Not at all. I made it look like he did for your benefit. Well, for you and the cameras, anyway. It helped you take him down, didn’t it?” She pleads her case. “And McEntyre must have been so confused,” she chuckles, “probably figures he did something wrong and the UIN set him up to fall down. Smiles all around, then, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re hurting my head,” BC says.

“Still getting those headaches?” she asks.

“How do you...”

“I know stuff,” she says, cutting him off. “Why be so hostile?”

“I’m not hostile! I’m a priest,” BC protests.

“Oh, like those two have ever been mutually exclusive!” she fires back.

Jesus Christ!

BC raises his voice, “I guess the whole ‘you tried to kill me’ thing is still giving me trouble! I’m having a really hard time getting past that!” BC realizes he’s being loud. He looks around McGrady’s, but no

one else in the place is really paying attention.

“Look,” she says, “I was doing you a favor. I was originally down there to see if you wanted to go for a walk. I knew the UIN were about to strike. And I knew they were gunning for the NcC area. I drew you away! I saved your life twice, and you don’t even know it. One more time, I was *not trying to kill you!* I was trying to make it *look* like I was trying to kill you! There is a difference! It’d be nice to get some gratitude for a change. I mean, now that you know.”

BC shakes his head, “I don’t know anything. You’re raving about some ‘Project’, trying to spin your trying to kill me as saving my life,” BC says, lowering his voice. “What now, then? What could have ever possessed you to make you want to get in touch with me? What do you want with me? And what do you think I’d be dumb enough to agree to go along with you on? What is there you could want that you’d think I’d be foolish enough to get for you?” BC says in a harsh half-whisper.

“I want what you want,” she says.

“I have no fucking idea what I want.” BC states. “How can you want that?”

Ha!

“You can’t know what you want,” she surprises BC, “because you don’t know all of your options. I can increase that awareness. I can let you see what else is out there. Let me help you expand your options.”

“What options?” BC asks, a skeptical edge to his voice.

“The optional answers to the question of who spread this sickness that is killing the human race, Father Campion,” she says solemnly.

“The UIN didn’t do this,” she says.

“Oh, like I’m going to listen to *you* about the UIN’s innocence,” BC says with a chuckle of his own.

“C’mon. If this thing is a manufactured virus designed for biological warfare, who else *but* the UIN would be doing this?”

“Who else? There are others you don’t know about, Father Campion. They’re the ones I need to tell you about. They’re the other options you need to know about. There are other *races* out there, Campion,” she says, looking up, looking him in the eye. “The Project has met with them and dealt with them for quite a while, now. And we in The Project are pretty sure one of these other races planted the virus that is now killing our people.”

BC’s brain tries to sort out what she just said.

“So. What you’re saying is that aliens are trying to wipe out the human race?” He shakes his head. “You expect me to believe this crap?”

“I know it sounds farfetched. I know it sounds unbelievable. I know you have absolutely no reason to trust me, and every reason to mistrust and hate me. I know that,” Dr. Anita Capituna tells BC. “But I won’t ask you to take my word for it. I told you The Project has agreed to let you in, and so I’d like to show you that what I’m saying is all true and for real. Let me prove it to you by taking you on a tour through The Project’s facilities. I can show you evidence there of our interstellar neighbors and fill you in on those who may be trying to do us in.”

“How do I know you’re not just taking me off to kill me?”

“Jeesh. Look, if I wanted to kill you, you’d already...”

“...be dead, I know,” BC says, finishing her sentence, having heard it enough already.

“You should understand that by now,” she says and laughs. “This will take some time, though, about a day. And the lab is totally cut off from other communication, so you’ll need to let your staff know you’ll be *completely* out of touch for about twenty four hours.”

“I’m not sure I like that. Where are we going?”

“Nowhere far. Just to the other side of the Moon. The Project’s labs on the Moon are located there,” she explains.

“It would probably be best to go soon, then,” BC says. “Strike while the iron is hot!”

“No time like the present. Can you get some time right now?” she asks.

“Right now?” BC asks. She nods. “Let me see.”

This is happening a little too fast. Why the fuck should I remotely trust her? Can I get away

right now? I don't think there's anything...

BC tries his personal link.

"Hello?"

Good, she's at her desk.

"Hey Lisa, it's Father BC."

"Good evening, Father."

"Do I have any appointments tomorrow?"

"Nothing. Although you did say you'd stop by the hospital to visit the sick people."

Damn, good old-fashioned Catholic guilt.

"Thank you, Lisa. I'm going to be out of contact for about the next twenty-four hours. There's something," he looks over at Bendix, or Capituna, as he speaks, "I need to look into."

"Okay, Father," BC hears the sigh in her voice, then the quick tone indicating the link closed.

Judgmental woman... thou shalt not judge? Ah, hell. Secretaries.

Bendix... er, Capituna's smiling at me. I don't like that. That's not the smile of happiness. She looks like the snake about to swallow the little mouse whole. That's that kind of smile.

"Okay," BC says to the smiling predator in front of him, "Let's go."

Her eyes light up, her eyebrows raise, she says, "Alright!" and gets up to go.

"Hold on," BC stops her. "I need to stop by my office first."

She tries, unsuccessfully, to hide her frustration, "Why?"

It's BC's turn to smile. "My business, not yours."

"You can't come into my lab armed," she warns him.

"I need certain security," BC counters.

"You don't trust me. That's understandable," she admits.

BC laughs, "Thank you for being so understandable," he says sarcastically.

"Oh, my pleasure," she retorts, matching his sarcasm.

BC gets up. "Okay, so let's swing by my offices."

She shakes her head, "Tell you what. You swing. I'll meet you back here."

"Back here?"

"Back here."

"Sure."

BC walks over to the bar and pays the bartender for his tab. Anita Capituna sits back down at the table, as if to wait for BC.

Yeah. I'll bet she just sits here waiting. Doesn't strike me as the type. Bendix, Capituna, or whoever you really are.

BC sets off on his way to his office.

What do I want? Not a gun, obviously. Be nice to have some nano's... No more of those without the OPO. Maybe a toxin? Poison of some kind? Do I have anything left? Damn, I'm out of practice!

Back in his room a few minutes later, BC settles on a wrist-worn poison dart launcher. The "darts" are sliver thin and made of an instantly deadly neurotoxin.

Undetectable by most contemporary security systems. And they conveniently melt away without a trace. I'll drop her in her tracks if I have to... hate to be a prick... heh.

BC laughs to himself at his wordplay. He heads back to McGrady's feeling just slightly more secure. He chuckles again to himself as he enters the bar. Anita is there, waiting.

I wonder if she did go anywhere?

She stands up as he approaches the table.

"Ready?" she asks him.

"Ready," BC replies. "I guess. So where are we going? How are we getting there?"

"It's hard to explain. You'll see. We're not going far. I said it was nearby, here on the Moon. Still suspicious, huh?" she observes.

"Absolutely."

"I understand," she says.

"That's big of you," BC counters. She looks exasperated.

"Okay. Please get over yourself so we can move on! I'm sorry you think I tried to kill you! I'll explain what's going on when we get going to the lab. I have a lot to tell you. There's more you need to know."

Bitch.

"What?" she asks when he doesn't say anything.

"Nothing. I'm just working on repressing all my feelings of mistrust and hatred so I can keep my tensions bottled up inside while I follow you," BC tells her.

She wrinkles her brow, but then nods, "Okay. Fine, I guess. For now. I'll take what I can get from you. At this point." She sighs. "Follow me." She brushes past him and on out of the bar. She doesn't look back.

He follows her out. They cross the atrium and head for the spaceport.

Funny, this is right near where she tried to lose me that time... or didn't try to lose me, according to her current version.

"Deja Vu, huh?" BC comments as they head down a familiar looking tunnel.

"Yeah. We're actually going to be near the same place I left you for, um, dead. But not really."

"Huh. Not really the place? Or not really dead?" BC prods her.

"Didn't really leave you for dead," she says, not looking back at him. "In fact, your deja vu should continue. One of the ships you call flashers is coming to get us. Might be the same ship that called for your rescue back then. When I told them to call."

"Yeah? I hear what you're selling. I just haven't committed to buying it yet," BC responds.

They end up in the same outbuilding where she tried, or didn't try, to kill him two years ago.

Well this just creeps me right the fuck out! Talk about-facing things head on...

"Come on," she says. BC didn't realize it but he stopped in the doorway to the building. "Sorry. Old wounds ripping open and all," he says as he walks into the outbuilding.

"Sorry. This is one of our regular rendezvous spots. Grab an EV Suit. We've got to go outside."

"What, did you sabotage them ahead of time?" BC cracks.

"Ha. Ha. No," she says with no humor in her voice. "Get dressed. We're supposed to be out there to meet them in five minutes." She answers BC's inquiring look. "I called when you were back at your office."

BC gets dressed. He pulls on the bulky pants and oversuit and snaps them together, puts a helmet on and clicks it into place.

Just to be careful, I'll put my gloves on last. Keep the darts available until she opens the airlock...

BC hears his breathing echoing in his helmet. The helmet's nearly clear all around. He can see pretty well around him. Anita Capituna is over at the airlock. She stops just before she starts to cycle the airlock.

"Let's go, Champion," she says in his ear, over the com. "They're waiting for us."

BC pulls on his gloves. "Go ahead."

She opens the airlock and walks in. BC follows her in and closes the door behind him. She cycles the airlock. BC can feel his suit puff up a little as the air escapes from the airlock and the pressure drops.

Capituna opens the outer door and bounds through out onto the lunar surface. BC follows her out, feeling the artificial gravity let go as he crosses the airlock door's threshold.

Low gravity... always makes me feel like trying to fly!

"Champion," Capituna says over the com. "Close the door, huh?"

Oh. Yeah.

BC bounces back and hits the button for the door. He turns and sees Capituna waiting for him about a hundred yards away.

"Here they come!" she says in his ear.

Wait... did I blink?

Because, suddenly, there is a ship behind her.

Holy shit... I think we've got ourselves an actual flasher here!

He bounds over towards her and they approach the side of the ship.

A door opens on the side of the ship. She bounds over to it.

"Come on!" she yells in his ear, louder than she has to.

It's a com, woman!

BC tries to take it all in as he scrambles to get to the door.

The ship is identical to the one I saw in this same place two years ago.

BC climbs up into the flasher and the door closes behind him.

It's relatively dark inside the ship. BC climbs out of the airlock and looks around the "flasher's" interior. Everything's a utilitarian gun metal gray: the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. There are no portholes, no windows that BC can see. Lighting is provided by small round lamps overhead. They disappear off into dimness in each direction, making a dimly lit line of dots down the corridor ceiling's center.

My eyes need to adjust. It's so bright outside. You don't realize how bright until you come back inside. Huh, gravity again, too.

BC steadies himself against the wall as the ship lurches a little. His boots stop him short from sliding on the two non-slip strips that run parallel down the center of the corridor floor.

"We're off," Capituna says in his ear. Then she clicks off her helmet and secures it to a Velcro loop on the wall of a small cubby next to them. BC takes off his helmet and does the same.

It smells new. Like the Vatican mission smelled for a while after we rebuilt it. Everything looks new. Maybe they just keep things very clean... My eyes are adjusting.... It really is dim in here... I'm not the only thing here that's not very bright, bada bing. Wonder what's up with the mood lighting? I'll feel better as soon as I... now.

BC gets his glove off. His dart hand is free. His other glove is off soon after. He swivels his head around on his neck trying to work out a slight crick he got when the ship lurched earlier, and to see if there's anyone else lurking in the shadows.

Anita Capituna takes off the rest of her EV Suit, and then attaches the suit to the wall next to her helmet with more handy Velcro loops. BC undoes his EV suit, too, and following her example uses the loops on the other wall to fasten down his suit below his helmet.

"This won't take long at all," she says. "It's a very short trip to the lab. We're almost there."

BC looks at his EV suit.

"We won't need those to get from this ship into the lab," Capituna says, answering his unspoken question.

BC and Anita Capituna stand side by side in silence.

"Are we going to go sit down or something?" BC asks, feeling awkward.

She laughs, "Oh no! It takes about two minutes. We'll be docking at the lab in a minute," she assures him.

"Nice ship," BC says.

"Thank you."

"So... Who are you guys again?" BC asks her.

"We're The Project. We began as Van Kilner's Transpace Project back in 2066," she says, nearly reciting, and then breaks in on herself, "I haven't been with it myself for that long, obviously," she clarifies.

"The Transpace Project? Van Kilner? They developed the first Transpace Ships. Every school kid learns about that in history class... But that project ended years ago! I mean, the first Transpace ships came out, what, back in the eighties? Are you telling me *that* project is still ongoing? That it's your 'Project'?"

"The government..." she begins to answer him, but she stops. She puts her hand on the wall of the corridor. The airlock door opens again. A small corridor, brightly lit, is visible beyond the threshold.

"Go ahead. We're here. I'll catch up in a minute."

Yeah. Right.

"No. I don't think so," BC says, staring at her.

"What?" she asks.

"I'm supposed to just walk into whatever this is by myself? I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I think you're going to lead the way for me. Kinda like a human shield, how 'bout?"

She nods, "Fine, fine. But you know you've really got to work on these trust issues..."

"Right," BC says. He stands there. Waiting.

She waits for a minute as well.

What, you wanna play stare down, honey? I don't think so. Don't play as dumb as your new blonde hair might suggest you are...

"Oh, all right!" She huffs, then heads into the bright corridor. BC lets her get a couple of paces ahead, and then follows her.

"Oh good, you're coming," she calls back at him.

"Yup!" BC calls. As he gets close to her he says, "Gee, too bad you aren't fatter."

She stops, and he almost walks into her before he stops as well.

"What?!" she demands, taken off guard.

BC laughs. "You'd make a better human shield. If you were, you know, fatter. More for me to hide behind."

She rolls her eyes. "You sure do know how to make a gal feel sexy," she jokes. "Besides. There's nothing to hide from!"

"Uh huh," BC agrees, without conviction.

She sighs. "Let's go. This corridor opens right onto the lab." She walks up to the door at the end of the bright corridor, presses her hand against the wall to the side. She turns back to talk to BC as the door slides open.

"You see? No one's here! There's no one to shoot you, take you hostage, whatever you were anticipating in your fevered little bray..." Her eyes roll back in her head and she collapses into a heap on the floor in front of BC.

BC sees a tranq dart sticking in her shoulder. He looks up from her body in time to see someone through the doorway with a gun. A dart hits him in the shoulder.

BC blacks out.

Chapter Thirteen

BC can hear voices as he tries to wake up.

"...trying to gain his trust, and you shoot me! And then him! Way to go, brainiacs!"

Anita Capituna.... Nita Bendix! That's right...

Betrayed... Fuck! What was I even thinking! Stupid, stupid, stupid!

BC opens his eyes on unfocussed brightness.

"He's awake!" someone shouts.

"BC!" Anita says anxiously, "I'm so sorry! I had no idea they were going to..."

"Fuck you," BC spits out in a hoarse, forced whisper.

BC's eyes begin to adjust. He's lying on a plain white bed in a small blue walled room with no windows.

Anita stands next to the bed, dressed in a plain white lab coat.

BC moves his hands, his legs, experimentally.

No restraints... Well, that's something, anyway. Don't feel too strong though... very weak... not quite right yet... Huh, the wrist launcher is gone... What the hell was I doing, trusting her...

"Look," she protests, "they weren't supposed to, I mean, I had told them not to... I didn't even think they were going to be here... shit." After stopping and starting several times she pauses, looks him in the eye. "I'm sorry, BC. How are you feeling?"

BC ignores her. He tries to sit up. His brain feels like it's moving at a slower rate than the rest of his head as he pulls himself up. It feels like his brain stops a second too late, crashing into the inside front of his

skull when he sits up straight.

Oh, my head... what did they shoot me with?

"You might want to keep lying down for a few more minutes," Anita says. "They injected you with an anti-reactive to counteract the sedatives in the dart, but you're probably still feeling some of the sedatives' effects. The anti-reactive itself is only just starting to take effect," Anita informs him. "Hey, gee, thanks," BC says, lying back down. "I'm ever so, er, um, thankful. Yeah." He closes his eyes. BC hears voices talking in whispers as he lies there with his eyes shut.

If I could only concentrate on them, it would probably be to my strategic advantage to know what they're saying... What are they saying? Can't keep my thoughts in order... Can hardly keep my head together... That murmuring is annoying... Who's talking? My head hurts.... Not like those other headaches, though... Starting to feel a little better...

After about fifteen minutes, BC opens his eyes again. He tries sitting up again. This time, his brain behaves and moves with the rest of his head.

Better... better... let's see if I can get them off guard...

Anita Capituna is across the room with her back to BC, talking to two guys, like her, wearing a white lab coats, in a small circle: the source of the murmuring.

One of the guys is older, white-haired and balding, pale and thin framed. He towers over Capituna. The other is slight, short and dark complexioned. He gestures wildly with his hands as he tries to make his whispery point with the other two.

BC clears his throat. "Ahem."

The three turn in unison.

"How about some explanations?!" BC says, trying to sound stronger than he feels. "You say you've got a shitload to tell me, so how 'bout it?! Let's go!" BC's shoulder throbs where the dart hit, "And let's start with why you fucking shot me, huh?!"

"Okay, calm down, hothead!" the short guy says, his voice a little shrill, with a slight accent BC can't place.

"It was fear, BC," Anita says, cutting off the short guy. "They were afraid of you," she says as she looks back and forth between the other two.

"We know all about you!" the short guy butts back in, "We know who you are! What you've done! You're a dangerous man! You were armed!"

"Yeah, just look at me," BC says, and a wave of nausea washes over him. "And I'm feeling real fucking dangerous right now," BC says. "Uh oh," BC says, "Woah..."

"What?" the other three say in almost comical unison.

I'd laugh but...

"I gotta puke!" BC leans over the side of the bed and heaves up some nasty, bitter, yellow bile that splats across the floor.

Less than I thought I'd toss. Ugh. I hope that's it.

"We pumped your stomach," the short guy says. "Had to clear out the toxins. Sorry."

BC leans back up to a sitting position and wipes off his mouth with the sleeve of the standard issue hospital gown he's wearing. He's suddenly sweating, drained and shaking.

"Thanks," BC rasps. "Can I get a glass of water?"

They oblige his request. BC sips his water and analyzes his surroundings.

Half lab, half hospital room. Just the kinda place to keep a great big rat!

"Where am I?" he manages to ask.

"We're in a lab complex on the other side of the Moon from Lunar Prime. We're just where I said we were going, The Project base," Anita says.

"Yeah," BC says, voice still raspy, "I got that. You're 'The Project' or something."

The tall man speaks for the first time. "We are The Project," he says in a soft but firm, deep voice. "We also called ourselves Kilner's Kids, or even TP, as a joke. But we are The Project. The Transpace Project. Only now, we do more."

"BC," Anita says, "Meet Doctor Krishnavarti," she nods at the short guy, "And Doctor Dundell," she

says, indicating the older, taller man. “Krish is the little guy, Dell is the tall one,” she says by way of introduction. “Dell is the one who shot us.”

“My apologies, sir,” Dell says to BC. “We... um, we were improvising, you see.”

“What’s with the we?” Krish says. “You pulled the trigger!” he protests to Dell.

Dell looks down at Krish, “You thought it was a good idea,” he says in a quiet, measured tone of voice. Their voices echo inside of BC’s head.

“Right. Please shut up. Both of you,” BC asks. “Just don’t say anything for a minute.”

BC winces as a headache pounds at his temples.

Shit... now my head hurts!

The two men look at BC, silent and hurt.

BC closes his eyes. He opens them when he hears Anita make a strange noise. She’s trying not to giggle, suppressing a smile while the other two glare at him.

She thinks it’s funny? Huh... maybe it kinda is... Those two... well, now, at least it’s a little quieter...

“Thank you,” BC says. He closes his eyes again and rubs his temples.

That’s some nasty shit they hit me with. Wonder if the pain is from the dart or the antidote?

BC cracks his eyes open a little. Squinting, he sees the three still standing there, watching him.

She is something else, man, and those two are almost comical. It would be funnier if they hadn’t just done me some serious damage... still, hard to stay mad at ‘em when they act like cartoon characters...

“BC?” Anita asks, to see if he’s awake. BC opens his eyes fully.

“Yeah?”

“We’re going to leave you alone a bit, to rest and get your strength back. Aren’t we, boys?”

The two men turn to her in unison with questioning looks.

“Why don’t we let the, ahem, good ‘father’ rest a little while?” Anita asks them. “When he’s ready, he can get freshened up, get dressed, and join us, so we can move this whole thing forward. You two have set my timetable back!” she chastises them again. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I am sorry, Anita,” Dell says, inclining his head a fraction of an inch.

“Sorry,” Krish chimes in.

“You should be more yourself in about an hour,” Anita says, turning to BC. “In fact, you should be starting to get better right about now. How are you? Are you feeling better?”

BC takes quick internal inventory.

“Yeah, a little. I guess,” BC admits.

“I just went through the same process you’re going through now,” Anita tells him. She glares at Krish and Dell, and then continues. “Unfortunately, these supposed geniuses waited until I was coherent before they started to help you recover. The toxins had permeated your system to a greater degree, so we had to use more anti toxin on you. You’ll be fine. It’s just going to take a little bit longer for the anti-reactive to do its work.”

Is she for real? Maybe I’m still out and just hallucinating, dreaming all this. Who the fuck is this woman?

“Alright. Let’s go,” she says, turning and shepherding the other two scientists out the door ahead of her. She turns back and smiles at BC as she closes the door.

BC lies on the bed, alone in the room.

Shot by a couple of mad scientists from The Project... “Anita Capituna”, if that’s her real name, talking about an alien source to the mystery sickness... There’s nothing to say she isn’t a UIN agent, just working me.

Why did I follow her into this? Well, there is that ship, the “flasher”, there’s no way the UIN has that... Damn. This is a lot to swallow. Plus... I really don’t like getting shot! Loss of control! But I did ride on a flasher... didn’t I? Sure seemed like it...

BC drifts off. He wakes up with a start.

How long was I asleep? No clock in the room.

BC sits up in bed.

Wow.

Man... I do feel better.

BC gets up off the bed. He goes over to the sink in the room. They've provided soap, toothbrush and toothpaste. There's a towel sitting folded in a small alcove over the sink. He washes and dries his face, brushes his teeth, and straightens out his clothes. BC pulls himself together. He walks to the room's door, and presses the panel in the wall next to the door.

Let's see if they've locked me in...

The door slides open silently. The corridor outside is mostly gray: gray carpeted floor, gunmetal gray ceiling, gray walls overlaid with white enamel. A thick, navy blue stripe runs waist high along the wall in front of him.

So generic, it could be any civilian or military installation anywhere. Huh.

Anita, Krish and Dell are sitting in three of four gray easy chairs lined up against the wall across the corridor, to BC's right. They were talking together until BC poked his head out the door. Now they all sit silently, looking at BC.

"Don't stop on my account," BC says into the awkward silence that fills the air.

"You made it," Anita observes.

"Hoping I wouldn't?" BC cracks.

"No," Anita sighs, "Come here, sit down."

BC walks over past Krish, Dell and Anita and sits in the empty chair on the end.

"So, what are you guys, Transpace, the next generation?" BC jokes.

"You laugh... but it is *something* like that. The Transpace Project is where it all began," Anita says. "It's just expanded."

"And we've lasted a lot longer than people thought we would. Or did," Krish adds.

"Why stop at Mars?" Dell asks, in a serious tone. Everybody else pauses. Anita and Krish both look at Dell.

"What?" Dell asks them, "Too soon? He's to know at some point, right?" he finishes his sentence with a shrug.

"Why stop at Mars?" BC asks back, repeating the question more than asking it himself.

"That was Van Kilner's question," Krish says. "That's what he asked way back when. We call it 'the Big Question'."

"The Big Question," Dell emphasizes in his deep, somber voice.

"The UTZ Military needed to get back and forth between Earth and Mars," Anita explains. "That's why they hired Van Kilner to start The Project. The old mag loop highway was just too vulnerable, and too inconvenient. You could use it for fast travel between Earth orbit and Mars orbit, but depending on where the planets were in their orbits, just getting to the loops could be a real pain."

"They needed a faster way, more convenient, less vulnerable to attack," Dell says. "We gave them that: A better way to get to Mars. And that was all they wanted."

"The military was going to shut The Project down afterwards," Krish says.

"But then Van Kilner asked The Big Question," Dell says. "Why stop at Mars?"

"Good question," BC agrees. "But so far this is all pretty much public knowledge, from the history files," he says, "Common knowledge."

"Except for the Big Question," Dell says. "You see..."

"Dell, hold on, okay?" Anita asks, interrupting. Dell nods and sits back. "Campion," she says to BC, "This is just the beginning of a lot of, well... lots and lots of information we need to brief you on. We should wait."

"Huh?" BC asks, confused. "Why wait?"

"Do you want to sit twisted in these chairs in this corridor for hours? Or would you rather find a comfortable conference room where we can talk to each other and not get stiff necks?" She asks. "I just didn't want Dell to get rolling before seeing if we could move this down the hall," Anita explains.

"Could we get something to eat?" BC asks. "Suddenly, I'm starving."

“Look who’s feeling better!” Anita says. “Sure, I think we can arrange that. After knocking you out and pumping your stomach and all, it’s the least we can do.”

“The anti reactive is restoring your inner balance,” Krish assures BC.

“Let’s go, then,” Anita says. She stands up. “How about the West Side Room?” she asks Dell and Krish.

“That’s a great idea,” Dell says, agreeing. “You’ll like the view there,” he tells BC, “lots of windows looking out on deep space. Nice.”

BC is amused.

First he’s shooting me, then he’s playing tour guide. I’ll like the view, huh? Strange dude.

BC gets up. He follows the others as they head off down the corridor. He takes in the surroundings as they walk to the conference room.

Everything seems... smaller. Older than Lunar Prime. Well maintained, for sure, but older designs, smaller passages. This base has been here for a while.

The walk takes them down four corridors as they twist and turn their way towards the West Side Room.

I feel all turned around... like, maybe we’re circling back to where we started? And where is everybody else? There’s nobody here! Can’t be that thriving a place. Unless they’re shepherding me along an unused or predetermined route that avoids contact with other people. Or maybe these three are it! Maybe they are the whole “Project”! They could be insane... The Project could be a figment of a fevered imagination, a product of... Huh?

“Are you coming, Champion?” Anita asks. She and the other two have gone ahead into what is presumably the West Side Room. BC’s stopped outside in the corridor.

“Last time I walked through one of your doors here, I got shot,” BC explains.

“No one’s going to shoot you,” Anita says with a hint of exasperation in her voice. “Come in here!” BC walks through the door.

No one shoots him.

Three of the four walls of the room are entirely transparent. The three walls in front of him provide an unlimited view of the dark surface of the moon and the carpet of stars of deep space. White, exposed beams frame the roof, but the ceiling itself is also clear, and full of stars.

We’re definitely on the dark side of the Moon. That makes sense, given what they’ve told me. What a view! I suppose it’s never really dark. The carpet of night is always filled with stars, far as the eye can see...

Dell sees BC gazing out. “What did I tell you?” he says to him.

Well, gotta give it to him, I do like the view...

“Nice,” BC says, nodding.

“Have a seat, BC,” Anita says, indicating a chair at the oval table that dominates the room.

The table is nearly as clear as the walls and ceiling, a translucent blue tint giving the surface an element of tangibility. The five chairs surrounding the table are covered in soft gray upholstery. BC crosses to the opposite side of the table and sits down facing the door.

“So,” BC asks, “Where is everybody?”

“What?” Anita asks.

“This place is nearly abandoned,” BC explains. “I didn’t see anybody else as we walked here. Where’s everybody else? This can’t be your main base. It isn’t, is it?” BC challenges her.

Or should I be asking her where the rest of her imaginary friends are? Or maybe she’ll ask me why I didn’t see all those people we just passed in the halls. Then I’ll know they’re really insane...

“You’re pretty sharp, there, Champion,” Anita gives him credit. “We now only use this base for little side projects and such. And right now, you’re a little side project,” she says with a smirk. “I’m sorry if that deflates your over inflated sense of self worth,” she cracks.

“I see,” BC says.

And how am I supposed to take that?

Anita sits down at the table across from BC. Krish pulls up a chair at his left, Dell at his right.

“So... Why stop at Mars?” BC prompts them, not so much asking the question as repeating their earlier comment.

“Exactly,” Anita says.

“So... Your real base is out beyond Mars?” BC tries.

“*This* is a real base,” Anita says, defensively.

“*Riiiiight*,” BC answers sarcastically.

“Right boys?” she asks Dell and Krish.

“Right,” Krish snaps back.

“Sure it is,” Dell agrees.

“I thought it was truth telling time?” BC laments.

“The truth must be revealed layer by layer, unfolding like an onion,” Anita says, trying to sound deep.

“Trying to sound deep?” BC quips.

“Well, I’m impressed,” Krish pipes up.

“Shut up, Ghandi,” she needles Krish.

“Uh oh,” Krish says, “Musta hit a nerve! I only get the cute pet names when she’s really getting mad!” Krish smiles.

Anita scowls at him, but Krish just keeps grinning.

“You know, this does remind me of an onion,” BC says, changing his tone, “Because, so far... this stinks!”

A moment of awkward silence follows his outburst.

“Man, you sure are a buzz killer,” Krish jokes to break the silence.

Dell sits quietly, looking on. He has been since the onion thing comment. BC glares at Anita.

I can play staredown with the best of them...

Krish looks back and forth, between them, from Anita to BC.

BC finally breaks his stare first. “Sorry,” he says, relenting. Anita shakes her head, and she relents. The tension dissipates.

“We have another base, in the asteroids,” Anita confesses. “Part of it is adapted from the ruins of an old alien base we found.”

“An *alien base*?” BC asks out loud, in shock.

This is bigger than I thought...

“Yes. We deal extensively with two major alien races, and know many others,” she tells him.

“Two?” BC asks.

“Two. The Flaze and The Domo. There are others out there, but our contact with them has been more limited,” she explains. “But The Flaze and The Domo have been around our part of the galaxy for a long time,” Anita says. “Longer than we have,” she adds. “We found an old abandoned Domo base when we got out to the asteroids. The Project built our base up and around the alien original.”

“We? You three?” BC wonders aloud.

“Not me, personally. Van Kilner, really,” Anita says. “He still leads The Project, BC. Van Kilner lives out in the asteroids, at the base, where the low gravity helps keep him alive.”

“Van Kilner’s alive? I thought he was dead!? Everybody thought he died, when he disappeared back... oh.”

BC gets it.

“He can’t return to even the Moon’s gravity, now,” Anita explains. “So he stays out there, and most of The Project is out there with him. We use this base as our local station, a place to keep our ‘flashers’ as you call them, and a base to work out of in the Earth system. This place, as you noted, isn’t exactly hopping. But this is where it all started, and we do still use it.”

“So much for the onion,” Dell says under his breath.

“That onion thing is all unraveled, huh?” Krish cracks to Anita.

BC sits, quietly stunned, trying to process the information just dumped on him.

“Okay. So. Van Kilner’s alive on a secret asteroid base, hanging with aliens. Why should I buy that? Pretty wild story, if you ask me,” BC says. “Let’s hear more...”

“Not ‘hanging with aliens’...” Anita sighs. “Dell’s been with The Project the longest; he can tell you how it all start...” Anita says. Krish cuts her off.

“Boy genius, you know?” Krish interjects. He presses on. “Tell us about the early days of ‘The Project’ won’t you, Doctor Dundell?” Krish says to his tall friend in a mock news announcer voice.

Anita shoots a nasty look at Krish.

Dell looks thoughtful

Mulling it over, is he?

“I joined what would become the “Transpace Project” when I was fourteen,” Dell begins. “I joined up with Van Kilner while he was still at Oxford, back in 2060. The Project and the Transpace Drive were just concepts, back then. It was an exciting time, a thrilling time,” Dell says, as if reciting a story he’s told many times before. “Van Kilner seemed like a god to me when I was fourteen.” Dell looks off into the distance.

He focuses back on BC. “Doctor Van Kilner is an amazing man. Demanding to work for, but unselfish in his rewards.” Dell looks at both Anita and Krish before looking back to BC to continue.

“He’ll ask the world of you... and expect it,” Dell muses, “but he’ll give you the world back in return. I’m proud to have worked for him, and with him, all of my life.”

Dell smiles. “Back at the start he was a famous academic, which was a rarity back then. Well... I suppose it still is.”

Anita interrupts to ask BC, “How much do you know about the history of Transpace?”

“Why? Is this a test?” BC laughs.

“I just don’t want Dell to have to tell you stuff you already know...”

“Anita, it’s all right. I don’t mind,” Dell says. “So long as you don’t?” he asks BC.

“Go ahead,” BC urges him on. “I have some of that common knowledge I mentioned, but a refresher course won’t hurt. Plus, I’m sure they left a lot out when they taught it in school.”

“Did you know Val Kilner started preliminary work on The Transpace Drive while he was still at Oxford in the sixties?” Dell asks BC.

BC tries to remember his history, to remember what he does know about Van Kilner and The Project.

“It began at Oxford?” BC asks as he tries. “Yeah, I kinda remember that. It was a regular company by the time the UTZ took it over though, wasn’t it? Was that in the 80s?”

“Van Kilner moved the company into the public sector in 2072,” Dell informs him. “That was also when he moved the entire operation here, to this base on the Moon. The UTZ provided essential capital and other backing for the move, and so The Project came under the auspices of the UTZ council from the time Van Kilner left Oxford,” Dell explains.

“But in 2082, with the UIN occupying Mars and the UTZ sending in troops, the UTZ Military decided it should take control of the Transpace Project. They stepped in and tried to force Van Kilner to the side. It was a bad year. Van Kilner nearly lost it, almost had a nervous breakdown. We had come so far!”

Dell says, shaking his head.

“We had a working model by ‘82! We’d already begun preliminary field testing,” he says. “Everything was happening so fast! Then this General Johnson arrives to inform us that he’s in charge,” Dell says, a sour look crossing his face. “He said Van Kilner must report to him!” The General then installed a ranking officer over each manager in The Project. Dark days.”

“Gotta love the military,” BC commiserates.

Dell shudders a little, involuntarily. “Strangely enough, all they really ordered us to do was keep working, to work faster, with more intensity. And so we did. But even though the work didn’t change, the Federals changed everything.”

“Federals?” BC asks, unfamiliar with the term.

“That’s what we called our UTZ military bosses,” Dell explains. “They turned our smaller original base here into this more militaristic outpost. They also kept this base ‘off the radar’, so to speak, isolated from the general population. And we kept working on the Transpace Drive,” Dell says.

“But Van Kilner *did* almost lose it. After seeing him nearly melt down, General Johnson finally gave in.

He didn’t want to be responsible for the death of the old man genius. It wouldn’t look at all good on the

record.

“Their arrangement was altered: Hans once again was in charge, and the General was now his ‘consultant’,” Dell says with a chuckle.

“The battles with the UIN on Mars soon took most of the UTZ military’s attention. We began to get used to just one question from them, ‘when?’ They needed us to give them a working, usable, Transpace Drive equipped ship as soon as possible. They really only wanted the Transpace Drive for the fast trip to Mars, so they could send more men to Mars more quickly,” Dell says, shaking his head at the waste of it.

“They *did* need our ship. If you remember your history, the mag loop highway was inconvenient: orbit-to-orbit... but then what? And those bullet ships? I would hate to have to ride in one of those things! They were dangerous! Who would want to ride in something called a bullet, anyway?” he asks.

“The soldiers used to say they were ‘spam in a can’ in those bullet ships,” Dell says with a quick laugh.

“The military needed us to give them ships that would get their troops to Mars *en masse*. Besides dangerous, those bullet ships were proving to be too small and too slow for mass troop movements,” he tells BC. “They only wanted our Transpace Drive so they could move troops to Mars *more efficiently*.”

“The military is remarkably short sighted,” Krish interjects.

“Remarkably?” Dell opines, “I don’t think so. ‘Typically’ would be a better word. I *expect* the military to be short sighted,” Dell sniffs. “It may be the nature of what they do that makes them that way, I don’t know. Anyway, soon after they put Van Kilner back in charge, they began doing two wonderful things: They left us alone again *and* they gave us more money,” Dell chuckles.

“Well, the military *mostly* left us alone, but they could almost taste the Transpace Ships. They knew we were almost there, too. Our first ‘working’ Transpace Ship disappeared during its first test in ‘82,” Dell remembers. “Lost forever. The second one exploded when we started up the Transpace Drive,” he says, and shakes his head. “But, as the saying goes, the third time was the charm.”

“I still have no idea why the Transpace Drive works,” BC says. “But I thought it had something to do with being able to fold the space just between here and Mars.”

“That’s still most people’s assumption,” Dell agrees. “That’s what the military assumed, and we never bothered to correct them. We let them assume it was localized, Earth-Mars only. The public went along with the military. But Transpace Drives are not limited to Earth-Mars runs. The drive compares two points in space and finds the shortest way between. It’s not really ‘folding’ space, like some have described it. It’s more like ignoring space entirely.”

“Ah, quoting Van Kilner,” Krish observes.

“That *is* one of Van Kilner’s favorite sayings about Transpace,” Dell concedes. “‘It’s not folding space so much as ignoring it entirely,’ I do like that. The Transpace Drive pushes its ship down a different path than our linear time constrained reality.”

“Sweet,” BC says, egging on the geeks. “So why stop at Mars...”

“Indeed,” Dell agrees. “All we need for the Transpace Drive to work is a properly identified destination, no matter *where* that destination is. We just need a complete set of coordinates,” Dell explains. “We can use the Transpace Drive to ‘ignore’ space between almost any two points. There are limitations. We can’t use the drive too close to any gravity well. So most of our ship’s engines and fuel are dedicated to getting the ship up and out to a place where the Transpace Drive can be used, a safe point. That takes longer than the trip through Transpace does!” Dell says, chuckling again. “We need a complete set of coordinates to create a safe point to go to, and that can be a challenge. We went to Mars the old-fashioned way and jumped back *here* the first time, because we had a safe point well mapped out on this end of things. A few runs to Mars, we worked out the kinks and it was smooth sailing from there. We could get to Mars and back effortlessly after just a few tries,” Dell says.

“We gave that tech to the military and then they left us alone,” Krish starts to explain. Dell just looks at him. Krish stops.

“Not exactly,” Dell corrects him. “They left us alone only after we built them actual warships,” Dell explains.

“They had us create the assembly lines to crank out Transpace Transports, the first UTZ Transpace Ships, designed to carry five hundred men between Earth and Mars, and to act as their support platform

while those men were on Mars, fighting. They were all space inside and all armament outside: missiles, lasers, and machine guns all over the exterior. Nasty.”

“I’ll say,” says Krish. “One of the best stories is the one about how the first five ships off the assembly line took a bite out of the UIN Mobile Base on their test run. Did you know there were only scientists and test pilots on those ships when they eliminated the ‘invisible’, mobile UIN Base?” Krish asks BC. “I don’t know the story, I don’t think,” BC says.

Dell gets back into it.

“The UIN thought they could attack The Transpace Project’s shipyard base out in Earth orbit, hit the assembly works and shipyard before the ships were staffed by the military and ready to fight. They did not reckon on the resolve of a group of crazy test pilots and scientists functioning as the ships’ ersatz crews. We challenged those assumptions for them. They suffered our consequences!”

Dell allows himself a pause of triumph and a thin smile before he goes on.

“That was the first time the UIN’s mobile stealth base was revealed,” he tells BC. “We knew they had some kind of flying fortress that was evading most UTZ sensors. It had been attacking UTZ targets fairly easily. Our ships were the first real challenge that base faced. And I was on one of those ships!” Dell says, smiling with pride.

“Really?” BC asks.

That’s something...

“Really,” Dell affirms, “We were testing the first five ships off the assembly line when the UIN stealth base attacked us out of nowhere. The ships were crewed by the test pilots and scientists. And we kicked their ass!” Dell asserts with a smile.

“Dell likes to remind us every now and then that he’s a war hero,” Anita kids a little.

“He’s our hero,” Krish adds, voice dripping sarcasm. Dell looks down his nose at Krish and arches an eyebrow.

Krish looks down nervously. “Well... actually, you are,” Krish says sheepishly, “Our hero, I mean. Sorry.”

“Dell is rightly proud of his feats,” Anita says in his defense, “as he should be.”

“My only regret is that we didn’t destroy the base entirely,” Dell admits. “It escaped us. But we did do serious damage! And we proved that it actually existed, and that it could be stopped or at least turned back. And we stopped them from destroying our assembly plant! They did some damage, but nowhere near as much as they could have. We could repair the damage. We did. And we kept going. We continued cranking out ships for the UTZ military from this base. And the UIN Mobile base didn’t attack us again.”

“And suddenly Mars was much closer for the UTZ,” Krish says in a loud, exaggerated announcer’s voice.

“Yes,” Dell agrees, and plows on, mostly ignoring Krish. “The UTZ military were ecstatic. We set up the plant, protected it, and then made sure it could run itself. And then we handed it over to the UTZ military to run for themselves. They could make as many Earth-Mars Transpace Ships as their hearts desired. And then they left us alone. Finally. So we could do what we wanted.”

“And what did you want to do?” BC asks.

“We wanted to keep going!” Krish exclaims. “Why stop at Mars!”

“Shut up, Ghandi,” BC jokes, using Anita’s earlier appellation.

Krish gives him a dirty look.

“She,” Krish says, nodding at Anita, “can call me that. You cannot,” he says, reprimanding BC. “You haven’t earned the right to, not yet! I know she means well. You I still don’t know about, so watch out!” BC laughs. “Oooo... I’m scared!” he says with sarcasm. “Sorry,” he adds, more seriously.

“Shut up, Ghandi,” Anita says. She looks from Krish to BC and laughs. Dell sighs and everyone quiets back down so he can continue.

“We did want to keep going,” he says. “And so we did. We gave the UTZ Military the shipyard in orbit and kept this Moon base ourselves. The UTZ left us alone and kept us funded, to keep a pool of skilled engineers handy in case things broke down on one of the ships or at the shipyard. Which they usually did

not,” he says with an “I’ll have you know,” nod. “But we *were* left alone, for the most part.”

“I joined up around then,” Krish says. “That was around ‘85, right?” he asks Dell.

“Yes,” Dell nods in agreement.

“It was the perfect time to join,” Krish says. He looks over at Dell.

“Go ahead,” Dell tells him, answering Krish’s unspoken question.

“The cool thing about The Project,” Krish says, “is that even though it was a UTZ thing, it wasn’t exclusively Christian. It wasn’t religious at all. I could join The Project without worrying about not fitting in... because I’m Hindu, you know? Well, I was then, I’m not anything, now,” he says.

Anita cuts him off. “You know, Krish, Father Campion here,” she nods at BC, “is a Christian Priest. Be careful what you say.”

“Are you easily offended, father?” Krish asks BC.

“Not really,” BC decides.

“Good. You can’t be easily offended if you’re a Hindu these days, let me tell you. Gotta live on the Moon to escape *your* friends’ persecution,” he says to BC, accusingly. “Nice, huh, in this day and age! Anyway, as a Hindu intellectual all I had was the Moon.”

“You were never,” Anita butts in.

“Never what? Hindu?” Krish asks. He protests, “No, I was, I was. Back then...”

“No. An intellectual,” Anita says with a grin, cutting him off and cutting him down at the same time. Krish clams up and looks hurt for a moment. Then he smiles, and continues as if she hadn’t said anything. “And The Project recruited me! It was as if the universe had opened up to me!”

“Very poetic,” says Dell. “We had begun building our own Transpace Ships around the time Krish was recruited, in eighty five. Once the military had theirs, we could make our own. We brought in Krish and some other fresh blood. Our new brains, we called them.” Dell grins evilly at Krish, “whatever did happen to your brain, Krish?”

Krish laughs a fake laugh, “Ha ha.”

“With the UTZ Military out of the picture, mostly, we could bring on more NC’s, as the Federals used to call them,” Dell interjects to explain.

“NC’s?” BC asks him.

“Non Christians,” Dell and Krish say in unison.

“Oh,” BC says quietly. Then he grins.

“That was cute. Do you guys do that a lot?”

Both of them glare at BC until they crack smiles a second later.

“NC: Non-Christian... How nice. I’m BC: Bad Christian. Don’t let the collar fool ya...”

“When did *you* join up?” BC asks Anita.

“In ‘96. Later. After a couple of other important things happened,” she answers. She gets up and walks over behind Krish. “Don’t jump ahead,” she chides BC. She looks down at Krish then over to Dell. “Let them tell the story. I’ll chime in when my time comes, don’t you worry,” she tells BC. “Actually, I do want to interrupt for a sec. Are you guys hungry?”

Funny, I was, but then I hadn’t thought about it again. Lost track of time but...

“Sure, I’m starving,” BC says.

Dell shakes his head, “No, I’m not that hungry. But why don’t you eat in here, and I’ll keep debriefing Father Campion while you eat. If that’s okay with you, Father?” he asks BC.

“Sure, and please, call me ‘BC’, okay?” he answers. “I’ve never been much of a ‘Father’ figure,” BC jokes.

“What, killing people get in the way of that?” Anita asks pointedly.

BC glares at her.

Low blow, bitch. Don’t care if it’s true. Where did that come from?

“What?” she asks, quasi innocently. “We know what you are. Who you’ve killed. You’re a soldier.”

And to think we’d been having so much fun, after all the shooting and all the puking was done...

BC feels the need to defend himself.

“Look,” BC states, “I did my job. I worked for The Pope! And according to him, I did the Lord’s work!”

“Yet again, the number one excuse for bloodshed over the course of human history,” Anita says with a note of anger in her voice. “I congratulate you on your sense of history, if not your morality, or lack thereof,” she finishes.

She walks around the table, stands beside BC and looks down on him in his chair. “It’s why we’re still in this war now, isn’t it? Just people like you, doing your job.”

“Oh. I get it,” BC goes on the defensive, “I didn’t know that when you asked if I was hungry that you planned to serve me humble pie for lunch. Is that it? Yum yum yum, isn’t it good? Wasn’t I bad?” BC lays on the sarcasm. “Jesus Christ, give me a break!”

“What, is that a prayer? Are you praying now?” Anita says. She can’t keep her face composed after that. She laughs.

“Some people,” Krish interrupts, “some people get veery cranky when they’re hungry,” he notes.

“Krish is right,” Anita agrees. “Let’s eat something. BC?”

“What?”

Simple as that? Move on? I guess...

“What do you want?” she asks.

“Anything?”

“Anything,” Anita prods him. “Go ahead. You’ll be surprised.”

“How about Tuna Salad? A Tuna Salad Sandwich?”

Anita nods. “Krish, will you go get that and my usual?”

“Me?” Krish protests. “Why am I the waiter all of a sudden?”

“Because BC and Dell need to stay here to tell and listen to the story. And I need to stay to keep BC in line,” she says with sarcasm.

“Oh, she does,” BC echoes her sentiment.

“Right,” Krish sighs.

“Besides, you know the way there!” Anita says. “It was so nice of you to volunteer, Krish!” she smiles at him.

“Bah!” Krish says, standing up. “I’m going! Are you sure all you want is a tuna sandwich?” he asks BC.

“Well, since you’re asking,” BC pauses...

...Let’s push him a little...

“...how about a salad and a cola, too? Oh, and creamy Italian dressing on the salad, but on the side, okay, not on top, I don’t want it to get soggy, I hate that,” BC says, sounding faux-finicky. “And croutons! Don’t forget croutons! Make sure they’re crispy, not stale. Do you have garlic ones? I love those! And could you make sure the cola isn’t too syrupy...”

“AARGH!” Krish loses it. BC smiles. So does Dell.

“That was good,” Dell nods to BC.

Krish leaves the room, cursing under his breath.

“I’ll be back shortly!” his voice echoes as he hits the hallway.

“Sometimes it’s at his expense, but Krish is usually good about being our comic relief,” Anita confides to BC conspiratorially. “I’m sorry things got hot there for a second. I was actually trying to make a joke.”

“I don’t joke about killing people,” BC says without humor.

I don’t joke about them, do I? Have I? Hmmm... okay maybe I have a couple of times...

“It is war,” she admits. “People get killed on both sides. We’ve all done what we’ve had to,” she says.

Wonder what she’s done?

“I can see how it could have sounded like a cheap shot,” she admits, “and I’m sorry about that, okay?” Anita checks with him.

“Apology accepted,” BC says.

You know, she is kind of pretty in an unconventional way. Like a mischievous angel. When the light hits her right. And when she isn’t trying to kill you. Or give you shit over what you do.

Funny, any woman looks good when she's apologizing to you, happens so rarely...

"Look, don't gloat, okay?" She admonishes BC. "And don't get used to it!"

"Shall I go on?" Dell asks, stoic and reserved. BC and Anita look at each other and laugh.

"Please," BC says. He shifts in his seat, settling in for more of Dell's story. Anita sits back down in her seat as well, and the tall man begins again.

"We in The Project built our own ships, and we didn't stop at Mars," Dell says. "The asteroids were the next logical step. We hoped to find a large enough, stable enough rock to build a base on, with raw materials we could use to build more ships, well beyond the reach of either side of the war. We'd be left entirely to ourselves," Dell explains.

"Van Kilner wanted to go to the asteroids to live in lower gravity. Gravity was punishing him, as he got older. That was one reason. The monetary support from the UTZ was beginning to dry up, too, each year's budget slightly smaller. Van Kilner figured the asteroids' resources would free us from the UTZ's budget control, give us the means to build Transpace Ships to jump beyond the Solar System," Dell says. "That was Van Kilner's dream, to go to the stars themselves, beyond our own system. He could see that wouldn't happen with the war going on. Not if we tried to survive just on the UTZ's scraps." Dell shakes his head.

"We moved everyone out to The Project's first asteroid base in mid '92. The base was fully functional by then. We kept a small staff here," he says, looking around the room and the base around their conference room, "but all our meaningful work moved out to the asteroid base," he says, confirming BC's earlier guesses.

"This place has been like this," he indicates the emptiness, "ever since. Mostly used now as a base for covert-ops," Dell says, nodding to Anita.

"Those ships we built for ourselves to take us to the asteroids were spotted by some commercial pilots. They called our ships flashers, pretty much from the start, so we called them that, too. Van Kilner doesn't like that name, though, says it's undignified, and reminds him of fat naked men in long trench coats..." Dell laughs.

"BC's all about flashers," Anita jokes.

"We were jumping back and forth all the time, so it was inevitable that some of our ships would be seen. A few were that first year," Dell explains. He gets back to his story. "It was after we had spent a year out in the asteroids that we found the other base. The alien base," Dell says.

"I wondered when we were getting to that," BC chimes in.

"We found an abandoned base, left years ago by some alien race. They left parts behind, ship parts, fusion reactors, fusion drives. We hit the jackpot!" Dell can't help but smile. "We began reverse engineering what we found!"

Dell leans in towards BC. "We had a working shipboard fusion reactor by the end of '93. We moved into their base in '94. And we kept making new discoveries. But somehow our activity had, unknown to us, set off some sensors, some silent security alarm of some kind. That, and it turned out that our jumps between Earth and the asteroids had not gone unnoticed. Someone discovered us. We drew attention... alien attention."

"The original residents came back, huh?" BC asks.

"They came back," Dell nods.

"Who were they?" BC asks him.

"They're the ones we call 'The Domo'" Dell says.

"We call them a lot of things," Anita mumbles under her breath, loud enough so BC will hear her.

"They are..." Dell hesitates. "They're not all you would hope for in an alien race," Dell says.

"They're greedy, nasty, bloodsucking, fat, little bastards!" Anita says.

"Oh, yeah, you mentioned them before," is all BC can say.

"They're okay," Dell says, "as long as you don't mind dealing with vampires."

"Okay," BC shakes his head, "You know," he laughs nervously, "I thought for a second there you said 'vampires'." He lets out another nervous chuckle.

"I did say 'vampires'," Dell tells him.

“Damn,” BC can’t help shaking his head again. “I was hoping I was having a flashback or something.” Anita cuts in. “We don’t have any proof... but we think Domo invaders on Earth in the seventeenth century may have been the basis for the old legends of vampires.”

“Really? Did they suck your blood or something? Do they?” BC asks.

“We’ve never caught them in the act,” Anita admits.

“But there have been strange, um...” Dell pauses looking for the right word, “casualties, when they’re around. A few people just... die. Their life-force just sucked out of them,” he says quietly. “They seem to pass quietly in their sleep.”

“Not too scientific there, doctor,” Anita admonishes Dell.

Krish enters with food and breaks up the mood. He gives Anita and BC theirs, then sits down and begins to unwrap his own lunch. He stops and looks at the other three when he realizes no one is talking.

“What’s up?”

“The Domo,” Anita fills him in.

“Oh, the Vampires, lovely ghouls. Stephen Spielberg would have been so disappointed,” Krish sighs, and then gets back to unwrapping his food.

“Who’s that, someone in The Project?” BC asks.

“He’s an old moviemaker,” Krish says.

“Krish is an old movie buff,” Anita explains.

“Close Encounters? ET?” Krish asks BC.

“What?” BC asks, at a loss.

“They’re movies?” Krish prods him.

“Sorry. Don’t watch them,” BC tells Krish.

Krish puts down the sandwich he was about to bite into. “Spielberg thought we’d meet cute, even cuddly aliens. The Domo are more X-Files.”

“You lost me there, too. X-Files? Is that Project lingo?” BC asks him.

“That was a television show,” Anita interjects. “Krish is big on all that old sci fi,” she tells BC. “It used to be big a hundred years ago. Krish is a connoisseur of that crap. Hang around him long enough and he’ll try to get you to watch some of it with him,” she cautions BC.

“It’s not crap!” Krish says, defending himself and his interests.

“I’m sure those Domo like that old sci fi,” BC says dryly, “Maybe they inspired that, too, huh? So what the hell is ‘that old sci fi’?”

“Sci fi is science fiction, stories about the future,” Dell says. “It’s quaint to see what they thought we’d be doing by now.”

“Wait until you meet one,” Krish says to BC.

BC is lost by the non sequitur. “What?”

“Wait until you meet a Domo. Just being with one is draining, like they’re siphoning off your energy while you’re with them. It feels like they’re taking something from you. We don’t know if that’s intentional or not,” Krish informs him.

“Something?” BC asks.

“Don’t listen to those two,” Anita says. “They’re a couple of surprisingly superstitious babies for being supposed scientists.”

“Wah, wah, wah,” Krish mock cries.

“Anita likes the Domo, don’t you,” Dells prods her. She glares back at him.

“She did call them ‘greedy, nasty, bloodsucking, fat, little bastards’,” BC says in her defense.

“She gets along well with a couple of them,” Dell continues.

“They seem to warm up to me. I do not like them. At all,” Anita insists.

“Well, you do see the best in everyone,” Krish quips.

“How else could I stand to work with you?” Anita shoots back.

Krish tries to laugh and talk and drink his soda, all at the same time. All he manages is a snort that sends soda shooting in a spray out of his nose. Everyone jumps at the sound, and to avoid the spray.

“Nice,” Dell admonishes Krish.

“Did he get you?” Anita asks BC. He looks down to see if he’s been hit

Good... no droplets of snot soda here...

“I’m good,” BC tells her.

“Sorry,” Krish apologizes. He mops up his mess with some napkins.

“May I?” Dell asks.

“Go ‘head,” BC says with his mouth full of tuna sandwich. “Sowry, ma mouf is full.”

“For all their flaws, the Domo were the first aliens we met,” Dell gets back in his storytelling groove. “We were using their old base. They grew curious as to who was operating on their old property. So they paid us a visit. It did not go well, or smoothly, at first.”

“Ha! That’s putting it mildly,” Krish says, having recovered from his snort. “They were very... what would you call it... agitated? Annoyed? Pissed off? Put out? They weren’t happy someone was in there. Our presence was not welcome.”

“And we imprisoned the first Domo who appeared on the base, so we did well right from the start, too,” Dell says to him.

“You imprisoned the first one you met?” BC asks.

“He looked almost human! And he wouldn’t speak to us. We thought he was a human spy from somewhere local,” Krish says trying to justify their actions. We locked him up, so they sent a bunch more.”

“They have a planetary base not far from here,” Dell says. “Close enough that reinforcements arrived very quickly. We calmed that situation down, thankfully. And then we began to get to know the Domo. We found out the Domo had been here for a while. The base was quite old. And they’d been on Earth in the past, and blended in,” he tells BC.

“The Domo are a highly adaptive species,” Dell explains. “We know they were on Earth about three hundred years ago. They’ve admitted as much to us. They adapted while here to look like us, to live among us undetected. They did look very human at one time... except for their mouths,” Dell says.

“They have vertical smiles,” Krish says, then bursts out laughing.

“An old joke,” Anita says. She reaches across the table to try to smack Krish. He leans back out of the way.

“Their mouths move sort of sideways,” Dell explains. Anita sits back down, shooting Krish the evil eye.

“Are they still around?” BC asks Dell.

“Oh, they still exist,” Krish speaks first. “They’re just not around *here* much anymore.”

“The Project still has dealings with them,” Anita tells BC. “Just not here,” she says, looking around the room to indicate the base they’re in. “Not on the Moon.”

“Out at the asteroid base?” BC asks.

“Some. They’ve got another planet we go to most of the time, now, the one I was mentioning. But let’s not get too far ahead,” Dell says. “Back in ‘94 we had just met the Domo. Once we ironed out our differences, we found we could share technology and both profit from it. It turned out we were actually ahead of the Domo in some ways. Our Transpace Drive,” Dell grins, “was entirely new to them.” Dell smiles with pride. “‘Never saw anything like it’, they told us. That gave us leverage for negotiating with them.”

“You ask me, it was a good thing they had a reason to be nice to us, a different reason we were useful to the Domo... other than as a protein source, I mean,” Krish jokes. He looks at his sandwich for emphasis before taking another bite himself.

BC swallows hard. “They eat us, too?”

“Krish is exaggerating,” Anita assures BC. “We don’t have actual proof they do anything to us. They’re just unpleasant. And I hate watching their mouths move, it just looks wrong. But that doesn’t make them evil. Greedy, nasty, bloodsucking, fat, little bastards, yes, but not necessarily evil. We can work with them.”

“A little bit like the UTZ,” BC jokes.

Everyone laughs.

“They do drain your energy, though. I’ve felt it myself,” Krish says. “They are kind of like vampires.”

Dell clears his throat. "That's where we were when you came back with the food and disturbed everything," Dell looks down at Krish.

Krish laughs, "Ooooh, I'm hurt," he says with sarcasm.

"Can we move on?" Dell asks them all.

"I thought you were moving on," BC says to Dell. BC pops the last corner of his tuna sandwich into his mouth.

"I'm trying to," Dell says, sounding all put upon.

BC is trying to digest more than just his lunch. "Okay, so let's see. You guys have a secret asteroid base, you've met aliens who are like vampires and imprisoned one, pissed them off, negotiated with them by giving them your Transpace drive, adopted their tech to advance your technology beyond what the general public could imagine... that sound right?"

"Are you taking it all in?" Anita asked him.

"It's a lot to absorb," BC admits. "Hey, could I go to the bathroom?"

It'll be good to stretch my legs and think.

All three of them nod and Anita says, "Sure."

"Go out the door and to your left, down the hall, then take another left. The door's at the end of the hall," Krish tells him.

BC takes his time. By the time he gets back to the conference room they've cleared the table. BC sits back down.

"Let the briefing continue," BC says with a flourish.

Dell cracks a half smile. "Very well. Since we're through eating, Anita suggested it might be all right to tell you about Doctor Kwan's theories on the Domo."

"There's more to the Domo?" BC asks.

"Yes. More we've guessed at than they've told us. Doctor Kwan spent a great deal of time among the Domo, on their nearby world. He made extensive observations."

"He was your spy!" BC figures out.

"He was a scientist. Scientists observe," Dell states.

"It's what we do," Krish adds. Dell gives him a look.

"Just trying to help. Tell him about Kwan!" Krish says, laughing.

"Kwan's evidence suggests that when the Domo came to Earth for the first time, in what would have been about the sixteen hundreds, they probably did eat human flesh and drink human blood. In accounts of their travels to other worlds, Kwan found mention of them consuming the local protein sources to adapt to the local species. They take in the planet's native DNA and assimilate it," Dell says. "It stands to reason that the way they came to look like us..."

"...was by eating us. I get it," BC nods.

"The Domo, of course, deny this," Dell says. "They admit to consuming DNA, but insist they can get it, and did get it, from plant life and food animals. Kwan's studies lead him to believe that was simply impossible. He studied their adaptability, to the extent he was allowed to by the Domo.

"For the Domo to adapt and become more human, they would have had to have consumed human DNA repeatedly, over a long period of time."

BC feels his stomach shift ever so slightly.

Damn. Vampires and flesh eaters... and bears, oh my.

"As they no longer need to adapt to look like us, there should be no reason for them to consume our flesh and blood now, even if Kwan's theory is right," Dell says, by way of small reassurance.

"They still drain your energy," Krish interjects.

"So, why do you deal with them?" BC asks.

"We didn't know any of this, not at the start," Anita says. "Wanna see a picture?" she asks BC.

"Sure."

"Hold on," Anita says. She activates some controls in the tabletop in front of her. A three dimensional head appears in front of BC, making him jump.

Krish chuckles. "Ugly bastards aren't they?"

“Nice fangs,” BC observes. “Their mouth does go the wrong way, doesn’t it? Kinda pointy headed. Are they all bald like that?”

“Yes. None of them have hair,” Dell says. “Not anymore. Some of the first Domo we met did, but they’re long gone.”

“Ones who’d ‘adapted’ in the past by chowing down on us?” BC asks Dell.

“Probably,” Dell confirms BC’s deduction. “But you’ve got to understand. After our first misunderstandings, we thought we’d found an ally in the Domo. They helped us go to the stars!”

“How? You’d developed the Transpace drive,” BC asks.

“Sure, but that was just the start. The Domo were very nice to The Project, once they realized they weren’t being exposed to the general public. Our Transpace drive was faster than their faster-than-light drive. But their reactors and ship’s systems were far more advanced than ours.

“We pooled our resources. They helped us soup up our ships, and we helped them travel between their planets faster than they ever had before.”

“Planets?” BC asks.

“The Domo control a handful of planets. They run a part of our galactic ‘neighborhood’,” Anita fills BC in.

“They brought some of us from The Project to their ‘homeworld’ as they called it at the time. It turned out it was not their planet of origin, more like a new permanent base. The Project set up an outpost there back in ‘95. Kwan was on the original staff. I myself spent two years on the Domo ‘homeworld’.”

“You’ve been on another planet, in another solar system?” BC asks.

“I’ve been to several planets, Mr. Champion. Although, I wouldn’t call them other ‘solar’ systems, that’s our sun’s name, better to call them star systems,” Dell corrects him.

“I stand corrected,” BC says.

“The Project built ships with both the Domo drive and our Transpace drive. We use the Domo’s drive to get to a system for the first time. It’s still faster-than-light, after all. And thanks to the Domo, our ships have the shielding needed to withstand those speeds. They taught us how to manipulate gravity fields to create a safe pocket around the ship as we went that fast.

“Once we got to a place, we could set the coordinates within the Transpace drive to get back there, and jump easily back and forth. And the Domo gave us directions and star charts to find our way there. They helped us get to twenty different worlds. They introduced us to other alien races, more alien looking than the Domo.”

“Can you understand now why we first warmed up to the Domo?” Dell asks BC.

“Sure,” BC says. “All the best toys and aliens, too!”

“You know, though,” Krish cautions, “even though they look a little like us, the Domo are still utterly foreign, completely alien. And totally creepy.”

“Thank you for your keen insight once again, Doctor,” Dell dresses down Krish, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“How did you keep all of this a secret?” BC asks.

“Easy,” Dell explains. “We worked out of the asteroid base. We were on distant worlds. We weren’t here to give away any of our secrets.”

“But what about the military,” BC protests. “Didn’t they check up on you?”

“You’d think so,” admits Dell. “But they were satisfied with the little dribs and drabs of tech we’d dribble out to them. As far as they were concerned, we were just their little R & D labs on the Moon.”

“As far as they still know,” Anita says, bringing things into the present tense. She locks eyes with BC.

“That is all they know. Now *you* know more, much more, than *they* do.”

“I’m not UTZ military,” BC insists. “I barely have any authority in the NcC!”

“You’re an ambassador!” Anita says, slightly raising her voice.

“By default!” BC answers.

They don’t need to know about the whole potential “Cardinal” thing...

“Kids?” Dell cuts them both off. “I think Anita was just trying to let you know just how privileged this information is, Champion.”

“Believe me. I know! I know. I get it,” BC insists.

“We’ve never opened up like this to anyone outside of The Project before,” Dell tells him. “Who knows, maybe it’s time to let the rest of humanity know who else is out here in the ‘neighborhood’.”

“Why now?” BC asks.

“Because of what I told you when I contacted you,” Anita answers him. “We think an alien race may be responsible for the plague that’s now killing humans on Earth, on Mars, on the Moon and Earth Orbit.”

“Why would the Domo want to kill us?” BC asks, confused. The others shake their heads.

“It’s not the Domo,” Anita says. “The Domo introduced us to another race that we think are behind this.”

“As we traveled with the Domo, we began to notice they seemed to enjoy subjugating other races. Most other races. They were nice enough to us, I guess, especially early on. But every other planet we went to, the Domo were in charge. Other aliens deferred to the Domo. All except for two: The Flaze and The Eldred.”

“The Flaze and The Eldred?” BC asks.

“Yes. We met them through the Domo. The Domo and Flaze treat each other as equals. The ones the Domo call the ‘Eldred’ they actually defer to,” Dell says.

“We’ve only met the Eldred recently,” Anita adds.

“The Flaze we met right after we met the Domo,” Dell says.

“The Flaze were hauntingly familiar, too,” Krish says. “They look like old sci-fi UFO aliens! All spidery limbed, bony, with gray skin pulled kind of tight over the bones. But they’re always in pressure suits, so it’s hard to see for sure. Big heads, big eyes.”

“More science fiction?” BC asks.

“Maybe not so much fiction,” Dell says. “It turns out the Flaze paid visits to Earth in the past, too. It was some of their ruins that were found on the Moon.”

“I knew that was true! They really did find alien artifacts on the Moon, here, didn’t they!?” BC says, excited.

“They did,” Dell nods, “Flaze artifacts. They and the Domo had their fun with us, before the Eldred interceded, as far as we can tell. The Flaze followed the Domo here, visiting several times back in the nineteen hundreds and messing with us humans.”

“Really? But you said these other aliens made them stop?” BC asks.

“I don’t know that they *made* them stop. Somehow, just the Eldred knowing that the Flaze and the Domo were meddling with our planet was enough to make them stop, from what I’ve heard.”

“Okay, something’s bugging me,” BC says. “You spent two years on the Domo’s planet, right Dell?” BC asks. “How is it you’re okay, then, with all their energy draining and vampiring and all?” BC challenges him.

“I’m okay now,” Dell says with emphasis. “I suffered some serious depression and exhaustion and poor health after my stint on their base world. No one could ever stay there longer than two years, although Kwan tried to. After his suicide, we kept the staff at the base in a constant state of turnover.”

“He committed suicide?” BC asks.

“He did,” Dell says. His head drops for a moment. “He was a colleague and a good friend.”

“I’m sorry,” BC says. “But with all that... you still have a base there?”

“Actually, we don’t, not like we used to. Not as large a one, anyway,” Dell tells him. “After we began to explore beyond the original twenty worlds the Domo introduced us to, we found that the Domo’s base planet wasn’t central to the worlds we were discovering for ourselves.”

“We have four of our own interstellar outposts,” Krish says proudly, “Rigel Four, Cat’s Eye, Dimwit and Crankshaft.”

“Nice names,” BC cracks.

Dimwit and Crankshaft?

“Two of the names are ours,” Krish says. “‘Dimwit’ and ‘Crankshaft’ are approximations of the old Domo names for the planets.”

“I get it,” BC says. “Nice names. So you guys and this ‘Project’ actually have five bases besides this one? How many people work for your ‘Project’, anyway?” BC asks.

“About two thousand,” Anita says. “Only about four hundred work in this solar system. There’s a handful here. Most work out on the asteroid.

“The other bases have staffs of between four and five hundred,” she says.

BC shakes his head, “I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta tell you, that shit is really hard to believe.”

She’s gotta be exaggerating those numbers...

“It’s been fourteen years, BC,” Anita protests. “We’ve had time to recruit.”

BC is still shaking his head. “Fine. So. What about this other race of aliens you mentioned, The Eldred. Are they called that because they’re old?”

“I guess they are the ‘oldest’ race we’ve met,” Anita says. “But their name is again an approximation of a Domo word, the name they call them. It sounds to us like they’re saying Eldred. Funny, though, when we say, ‘Eldred’ back to them, they insist it isn’t the same word at all.”

“That’s the thing about alien languages, they’re so alien...” Krish muses out loud. Dell and Anita just look at him. “What?” he says. “Jeesh.”

“We’re just beginning to get to know the Eldred,” Anita tells BC. “They seemed almost like they were afraid of us when we first met them.”

“They did react... strangely,” Dell admits.

“We’re beginning to think that we don’t know them at all,” Anita admits. “We think it was The Eldred who infected the delegations at the peace conference.”

BC sits in stunned silence. Anita has a, “there, I said it out loud,” look on her face.

Krish and Dell watch BC absorb Anita’s news.

Is this for real? Eldred Flaze, Domo, Do Re Mi...

“Anita said she’d already told you the plague was non terrestrial,” Dell confirms with BC, who nods.

“We thought it might be the UIN,” BC tells them.

“Yeah, and they thought it was you, big surprise there!” Krish snorts.

They know about the UIN? How? More spies? More ‘triple’ agents?

“Nice,” Dell says. “Anyway, it’s not the UIN, not this time.”

“It’s the Eldred?” BC asks, to confirm.

The three scientists nod.

“Are these Eldred all-powerful aliens?” he asks them.

“We don’t know,” Anita answers. “They didn’t seem to be, not at first.”

“But they could be,” Dell says.

“Or not,” Krish chimes in.

“Quality information,” BC mumbles out loud. “How many times have you met them?” he asks.

“We’ve had a few visits with them,” Krish says. “We thought we were getting to know them better. But they used us!” He seems heated. He shoots a sideways glance at Anita. She glares back at him.

“We were,” Dell says, cutting the tension between the two, “perhaps a bit too hopeful.”

“What do you mean?” BC asks, puzzled by the suddenly darker mood of the room.

No one answers him. The room is silent.

“Huh,” BC grunts.

There’s more going on here...

“Okay,” BC says, leaning back in his chair, arms open wide, “What aren’t you telling me?” BC can see from the looks passed among Anita, Krish and Dell that he’s on to something.

Krish and Dell stare at Anita. She looks at BC, then back and forth between Krish and Dell, then back at BC. He can see the anguish in her eyes. Finally, she speaks.

“We brought one of the Eldred to the Moon,” she tells him, “Where he probably infected the members of the conference.”

Woah. This is big. This is major! I did see her there!

“So, then, this plague is your fault!” BC throws down the accusation. “I can’t believe it! You’re telling me you helped an alien race kill us all! That’s fucking brilliant! You guys are *really* smart!”

God save us from the scientists...

“Jeesh,” Krish reacts first, “How do you really feel?”

“We didn’t all agree that the Eldred should be allowed to travel here,” Dell says.

Anita shoots a look at him, but Dell stands his ground.

“It’s Anita’s fault, if it’s anybody’s” Krish offers.

“What?” BC and Anita ask in unison.

“You’re in charge here. That makes it your fault. Plus, we did it *your* way,” Krish says to Anita “She knows it’s her fault,” Krish says, turning to BC. “That’s why she dragged your sorry ass into this.” Krish smiles at his Sherlock Holmes turn. “Shows just how desperate she is.”

Anita tries to explain and defend herself.

“The Eldred are new to us! We’ve been trying to get to know them better, but it hasn’t been easy. They’re a very secretive race, very closed to outsiders. They’re... aloof,” she says. “They keep us at arms length.”

“Yeah, even though they have such short, little blue arms,” Krish jokes. Everybody gives him a look.

“What? It was getting way too serious in here!” Krish protests in his own defense.

“Thanks to you!” Anita says.

“I wouldn’t get mad at *him*,” BC admonishes her; “You’re the one who’s got some explaining to do!”

I knew she was trouble! Even as a scientist, she’s trouble!

“Look. I thought bringing one of them here would *maybe* lead them to open up to us a bit more. They seemed very interested in seeing the peace conference,” Anita says.

“They have expressed an interest in what they call our ‘concept of religion’,” Dell says.

“We thought their interest, the way they warmed up to the idea of coming here to observe the peace conference... it made us think we were getting through to them,” Anita says.

“Who’s this ‘we’?” Krish asks her. “You got a mouse in your pocket?” He turns to BC, “They played ‘us’ for fools,” he says, pointing a thumb at Anita.

“The Eldred representative traveled to Lunar Prime with a delegation from the Project,” Dell explains. “It escaped our supervision for a brief period, about three hours. The Eldred was found unharmed, and nothing more was thought of it. Until people started getting sick and dying.”

These guys fucked up big time...

“Are you familiar with the Old Greek concepts of Hubris and Nemesis?” Krish asks BC. Dell intercedes.

“Krish thinks our pride, our ‘Hubris’, has lead to this plague, that The Eldred are our ‘Nemesis’,” Dell tells BC.

“It’s easy to second guess,” Anita protests. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty!”

“How did you let this happen?” BC asks her.

“We were too trusting.”

“Why do they want to kill us?” BC asks.

“We don’t know,” Anita admits.

“This doesn’t make sense!” BC argues.

“We know that,” Anita sighs.

“Did they give any indication...” BC tries.

Anita cuts in. “There was no sign of malice, no sign they meant us any harm. If you only met one of them...”

“What?” BC can’t believe it.

Meet one of them? One of these “maybe” murderers? I don’t think so!

Anita begins to protest.

“They’re so mellow! They’re the last beings you’d even think would do...”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” BC blasts back.

And you, Ms. Anita, if that’s really your name, would be exhibit “A” for that axiom...

“It doesn’t do any good for any of us to raise our voices,” Dell states calmly.

His quiet settles the room.

“We’ve been going at this briefing for a while. Perhaps we should take a break, rest, and come at this fresh later on,” Dell suggests.

“Are you kidding?” BC protests. “We’ve finally gotten down to the heart of things, the reason why I came here! Don’t stop now!”

Dell shakes his head, but agrees to go on. “Right.”

“Yes, Dell, there’s no reason to stop,” Anita says. “We’ll be good.”

“So the Eldred are the bad guys?” BC asks for clarification.

“Bad guys?” Dell almost sneers.

“I always do better when I can clearly define things,” BC says. “Black and white, good versus evil, friend versus enemy, us versus them. And the ‘them’ are the Eldred, right?”

“Ouch,” Anita cringes. “And you’re the enemy of the English language, right Champion?”

“You know what I mean,” he says.

“Yes. It looks like the Eldred did it,” Anita confirms. “And that *is* why I brought you here.”

“You know, the Flaze or the Domo could have engineered it to look like the Eldred did it,” Krish ventures.

“Your pet theory, again?” Dell chides him.

“Why would they do that?” BC asks Krish.

“Why indeed,” Dell echoes BC’s query.

“I don’t know...” Krish muses. “Maybe so we’ll take the Eldred out for them?! Get us to do the job of getting the Eldred out of their way? Lead us into doing their dirty work? They could have several reasons,” Krish observes.

“Are the aliens at war with each other?” BC asks.

“No,” Dell says. “They tolerate each other. They marked out their borders and staked their territories and claimed their planets over a million years ago. It’s very static out there. We’re the newcomers to this part of space. And they tolerate us.”

“No. I don’t think they do,” BC rebukes Dell. “You know... this plague thing?”

“I stand corrected,” Dell admits. “They had *seemed* to tolerate us, I should say. We’ve never seen any outright hostility on the part of any of the alien races. Certainly not between them. There are always some tensions, but they seem to work things out. Their cooperation could teach humans a thing or two,” Dell thinks out loud.

“Well, again, except for our attempted genocide!” BC again brings the scientist back to the matter at hand.

“They do not fight wars,” Dell tells BC sternly. “Not internally within their own races. And not with most other races. We strike them as unusually violent in this regard. We kill each other very easily,” he admonishes BC.

“The Eldred were particularly appalled at our violence toward each other,” Anita chimes in. “They never said anything to us, but we could see them draw back away from any sign of human aggression.”

“They’re fascinated by our religions, but they visibly paled and even shook when they heard reports of violence between humans, and read the histories of our current and former wars,” Dell says.

“They may have decided we were too violent a race to continue to live,” Anita ponders aloud.

“What?” BC answers sarcastically. “Since you kill each other easily, you’ll kill us eventually, so we’ll pre-emptively kill you all now? Nice people.” He shakes his head.

Almost makes me want to laugh. If only there wasn’t so much at stake.

“It’s only a guess,” Anita says.

Time to turn this around...

“As I see it, we have two goals,” BC tells them. “We first need to cure this thing that’s killing us. Then we need to strike back at the Eldred so they can’t do it to us again!”

“Confirming their suspicions,” Krish says, “That they were right to fear us!”

“Wrong!” BC snaps at him. “They changed the rules when they fucked with us first!”

“Careful, BC. We don’t yet know the extent of the Eldred’s holdings,” Anita cautions. “We’ve been to several of their outposts in the area, and what they consider outposts looked to us like full fledged colonies. I always felt we were only seeing the tip of the iceberg, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” BC admits.

"I mean, they're big, BC. Really big," she says, shaking her head. "We have no idea how many they are in number, but we know they outnumber us humans on a nearly infinite scale." She closes her eyes and whispers, "It's not a war we can win."

"Why do we know so little?" BC demands of them.

"Because, we've only just begun to get to know them," Anita protests.

"Yeah, too bad, then, that we'll have to kill 'em," BC cracks. Nobody laughs. "You know, this could be a good thing," BC says.

"How?"

"No way!"

"I don't think so!"

"Okay, hear me out," BC tells them. "If the public finds out we're facing an alien enemy, maybe the human race can unite in the face of a common foe! Fighting aliens might make other humans seem, I don't know, a lot less alien, I guess," BC observes. "Maybe this is something that can unite the human race."

"That's an interesting yet twisted way to look at it," Krish answers first.

"We could use the help," BC says. "We haven't been able to do it by ourselves."

"There's one more thing," Dell says.

"Isn't there always?" BC sighs.

"After the Eldred agent returned from his 'disappearance' he was strangely relaxed," Dell tells him. "He had seemed tense up to that point, though it can be hard to read alien body language."

"Actually, the Eldred act a lot like us," Krish says. "Body language-wise, I mean."

"We'd always observed this tension in them, as a race, ever since we first met them," Anita says. "We thought it was just the way they were. But after he came back from disappearing, the Eldred who had come with us to Lunar Prime was almost... jeesh, almost carefree. It was weird," she says. She looks from Krish to Dell, then back at BC. "So. That pretty much does it," she tells him. "Now you know everything we know." She smiles.

"So..." she says, turning to BC. "Do you want to head out to the asteroid base tonight, or wait until tomorrow morning?"

What?

"To the asteroid base?" BC manages to say, though stunned. "You mean we're going out to..."

"Well, yeah, it's the next logical step," Anita says, cutting him off. "You really should meet the old man. I told him I thought you were the right person to help us. He's big on having the right person with the right set of skills on the right project at the right time for whatever project we're working on, it's one of his 'things'. I told him you have the skills we need right now. He wants to meet you."

"Thanks," BC tells her. "I think. But I am tired. And if I'm meeting the 'old man' I'd like to be at my best. How about we go tomorrow morning?"

"That's fine. Krish, can you show Campion to his room? I want to go over something with Dell here."

"Sure," Krish agrees. "Campion?"

BC gets up to follow Krish, who's already on his way out the door of the conference room.

"I'll give you a wake up call with enough time to eat and get ready before we fly out," Anita tells him as he leaves the room.

"Thanks," BC says.

BC follows Krish to his room, a nondescript stateroom with a bed, desk and chair and refresher. When he's left alone, BC lies down on the bed and lets the incredible tale he has just been told sink in.

Wow... what a mindful!

We are not alone... matter of fact, we've got lots of company.

Who are the Eldred? The Flaze? The Domo?

How lucid is the 'old man'?

BC's head is spinning as he tries to fall asleep.

The Domo are vampires?

The Flaze flew the UFOs?

The Eldred are trying to kill us?

BC wakes to a ringing com.

Didn't even feel like I fell asleep... but I must have.

"I'm awake!" he answers the com.

"Good, because this is your wake up call," Anita's voice rings out from a hidden speaker.

"Right," BC says.

"We're leaving for the asteroid base in one hour. Please be ready," she says, and the com clicks off. BC gets up and gets freshened up best he can.

A change of clothes and a shower would be better. Like to be able to check my messages, too. See some news; find out how bad this thing is spreading now. There's no outside contact here. And now we'll just, what, bip out to the asteroids? We're moving pretty quickly.

The room alarm rings in an hour. BC opens the door on Anita, waiting for him.

"Ready?" she asks him.

"I guess," BC says. "I would have liked to have gotten a shower in."

"Fussy, fussy," she chides him. "You'll be fine." She makes a show of smelling him. "You don't stink too bad, Champion," she says with a laugh. "The ship is waiting for us at the lock, the same place we came in. Come on."

BC follows Anita through the base to the airlock. She opens the door and then steps aside so BC can step through first.

"Go ahead," she says. "Time for your universe to expand!"

BC chuckles in spite of himself and steps through the airlock into another 'flasher'.

It's a different ship than the one we came over on yesterday. Looks bigger, at least inside. I wonder what the outside looks like? Doesn't look like anyone's home.

BC looks down the long, empty corridor in both directions as Anita cycles the airlock closed behind them.

"Big ship?" he asks Anita.

"What?" She says, figures out what he said, "Oh. Yeah, big ship. Bigger than the last one we were on, anyway." She gestures up the corridor to their right. "Let's head to the bridge."

"Is this gonna be a long trip?" BC asks her.

"Nah, the bridge isn't that far," Anita says. Before BC can protest she laughs, "A joke! The trip won't take long, either. We'll travel up off the elliptic, turn on the Transpace drive, and be there almost instantaneously! The longest part of the trip is flying far enough away from a planet's gravity well, up to where we have to be in order to make the jump safely, and then flying from the transit point on the other end down to the asteroid base. The Transpace event is surprisingly fast. Whole flight takes about an hour."

"Just an hour? Wow!" BC is impressed.

"Some of our interstellar trips are even faster," Anita tells him. "We can transit from almost anywhere, but don't dare to do so into the asteroids. So we'll take a little while to fly in to the base. It's in a busy neighborhood. The safe point is a lot further out than it is for most of the planets we visit."

I'm still wrapping my head around that one...

The corridor branches. BC stops, and then follows Anita down the left branch.

"We don't want to transit in open space around here, you know? Too many stray rocks," she says as they walk. "We're here."

She punches a code into a panel in the wall that opens the sealed airtight door they've come to. She leads BC through another airlock, and on to the bridge of the ship.

Man, this sure looks different than that UTZ Cruiser's bridge I was on during the war. So simple looking.

They've stepped into a low, domed room, paneled in white enamel and glass, bordered by chrome molding. The "back" of the room is solid white, the "front" of the dome entirely clear.

It's like being inside an invisible cookie dipped in milk... with a pilot inside...

A woman sits in a white sculpted chair in the center of the room, her ebony skin a striking contrast to the stark white dome interior. Her smile is even more striking as she stands to greet them.

I think I'm in love... maybe lust... she's beautiful!

What the fuck?

Her chair and the bank of controls she had been looking at have just melted into the floor behind her. Anita elbows BC, "Is that cool or what? Oh, stop leering at her!" she chastises him.

"Welcome aboard, Anita!" The woman says. "Is this Ambassador Campion?"

"It is!" BC says and extends his hand.

"Bernard Campion, this is Sensha Williams. She'll be our pilot. Sensha, this is BC."

"BC?" Sensha asks.

"My friends call me BC," he says. "I hope you will, too."

"You're quite a charmer for a priest," Sensha says.

"NoC Reform and all, we're all pretty loose these days," BC quips.

"I see," Sensha says. Anita doesn't say anything. The bridge grows quiet.

"It's quiet," BC observes.

"I like it that way," Sensha says.

BC looks around. "I like the way your chair melted into the floor there like that," BC says, awkwardly trying to maintain the conversation and break the silence. "Um... alien tech?" he asks.

"We came up with that," Anita and Sensha say practically in unison. "The Project," Anita explains further.

"Pretty cool," BC says, nodding. "Does the ship have any weapons?" he asks Sensha.

"Sure does. I like it that way, too," she says.

"Where are your gunners?"

"You're looking at them."

"You?"

"Me. I can do everything from here: guns, conventional drive, and Transpace drive. It's all at my fingertips," she says proudly.

"But this is a big ship!?" BC protests.

"Is it? Maybe by your standards. But we've had the time and developed the tech, and incorporated the tech we found on the alien base and on other worlds. Makes this 'big' ship seem pretty small. And you should see some of the Flaze Vehicles, if you want to talk big!"

"Really?"

"Oh yeah," Sensha assures him. "Well, you two ready to rock?" she asks.

"Sure. Where do you want us?" Anita asks her.

"Hold on a sec." She turns and waves her arm. Her chair and the console melt back up into existence. She leans over and presses a series of buttons on the arm of the chair. Two more chairs melt up into place behind Sensha's. "Have a seat," she says.

"Cool," BC can't help but say it as he walks over to a seat. Anita sits down next to him.

"I guess we're ready," Anita says.

"Good. We've been moving up off the plane and we'll be transiting soon," Sensha tells them over her shoulder. BC can see her tapping at the console in front of her. Then she sits back.

BC feels a lurch in his stomach. He hears and feels a low rumble.

"How long until Transpace?" BC asks, after a few seconds.

"Now," Sensha says.

BC waits.

Nothing?

"When are we going?" he asks.

"We just did," Sensha says.

"Wow," BC says in admiration.

"I'm good," Sensha says. BC can hear the smile in her voice. "And now..." she pauses for a second, "...we're here!"

"At the base?" BC asks, puzzled.

"No, at the transit point near the base. I've got to fly us in to the base itself." BC feels and hears another

low rumble. "We'll be there in about an hour," she says.

"I told you that," Anita says to BC.

"It's still good to hear it from the pilot," BC says. "Travel by flasher, who woulda thunk it? Ooof!" BC gets jerked to the side as the ship lurches.

"Damn!" Sensha says to herself. "Sorry about that," she says back over her shoulder to BC and Anita. "Just a little bumpy in the 'roids. You know what they say," she says, and she and Anita say it out loud together, "Roids are a pain in the ass!"

"What, is that the ship's bumper sticker?" BC jokes.

"No stickers on my ship," Sensha says way too seriously.

"So sorry," BC apologizes. "I was joking."

"Can't talk now," Sensha says, "Gotta dodge the rocks!"

BC watches out the clear screen in front as they dodge through the rocks for about an hour. Small and large asteroids pass slowly by, some spinning, some just hanging in space. After a time, he notices a small dot in the center of the screen grow larger and remain centered.

Must be the base...

There's a light at the center of the dot. Both light and dot grow larger and larger as BC watches. The light gains form, becomes a square, then the outline of a square, in the center of the dot which has grown into a large asteroid that keeps growing larger.

Looks like a platform, carved into the rock.

They approach the platform slowly.

Huh... bigger than I thought.

The craggy face of the asteroid disappears from view as they near the platform. The entire square of light around the opening passes beyond BC's sight before their ship is even within the opening.

BC begins to make out details. The opening is honeycombed with doors and hatches of differing sizes.

They look to be heading for one of the smaller doors in the middle of the larger opening. It opens. Light pours out to greet them. BC sees landing lights flashing inward in sequence, beckoning the ship in to land. Sensha brings them in slowly, smoothly. They touch down with just a small thump.

"Thank you for flying the Sensha Express!" Sensha says with a chuckle. "Off you go! They're sealing a walkway up to the door you came in through as I speak! They've been expecting you, of course."

"Thank you, Sensha," BC says. "It was a pleasure to meet you, and a wonderful flight."

"Aw, cut it out," she says.

"Yes. Please. Do .Cut. It. Out," Anita says menacingly.

"Better stand up, you two," Sensha rebukes them. "I'm about to make your chairs go away!" BC and Anita both snap up to their feet as Sensha chuckles some more. The chairs melt away into the floor.

"After you," BC says with a sweep of his arm. Anita shakes her head.

"Gimme a break," she says with a touch of exasperation. "I've gotta go first. You don't know where you're going. Don't even pretend you're a gentleman!"

"Fine, just go ahead."

"Just go all ready," Sensha says to them.

They make their way back through the ship's corridors and out through the airlock, then cross the walkway into the base itself.

The number of people and the bustle of the place strike BC immediately.

Wow... There are people everywhere! It's like Lunar Prime in the good old days! Makes their moon base look completely deserted. Hey, where'd she go?

"BC!" Anita calls to him through the crowd. She makes her way back to him. "I thought you were right behind me. Come on."

"Sorry, a little distracted," BC says. She turns and heads back into the crowd. BC follows close behind.

Who are all these people?

She heads down a hallway, turns a few corners. She walks quickly. BC keeps up. The crowd thins as they walk into a quieter area.

"This is the residential area," Anita tells him as they walk. "They've set up a room for you nearby." She

gestures ahead, to their right.

This part of the base looks like any hotel on Earth, the Moon, or in orbit.

Anita stops in front of a room on the right whose door is ajar.

“Here we are. Your room!” she says. “Get some rest, freshen up, and relax. I got word on our way here that the old man isn’t up for visitors today. You’ll meet him first thing tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I thought he was waiting to see me?”

“He is. He’s waiting until tomorrow to see you. Tomorrow. He’s an old man, BC,” she explains.

“Gotcha. I understand. What am I supposed to do in the meantime? And I need to let the Vatican Mission know I’m going to be away longer than planned.”

Anita spreads her arms out in an overdramatic gesture of welcome. “Freshen up, and relax... your room, sah,” she jokes. “We’ll send word to your secretary that you’ve been delayed, okay?” she asks.

BC shrugs. “Fine.” He walks into the room. “No windows, huh?”

“You’re deep inside a rock,” Anita says. “Not much to see.”

“Point taken,” BC agrees.

An awkward silence ensues. BC breaks it. Awkwardly.

“Um, do you want to come in?”

Anita blushes. “No! I mean, I can’t,” she stammers. “Not right... I’ve got to check in, and there’s stuff I... I gotta go,” she says. She quickly turns and closes the door behind her on her way out.

That was weird. Didn’t think there was anything between us. She’s cute in that rugged sort of way, I guess. Didn’t really notice her eyes til just now. Beautiful brown eyes. And she blushed! I swear she blushed! What’s that about?

Not that anything is normal anymore! A secret base in the asteroids. Super ships. Alien races.

Killer plagues. And the way she looked just then... Stupid! Let’s not be stupid, BC. Remember, she did try to kill you! I always fall for the dangerous ones. Talk about stupid.

Well, they’ve got full facilities, at least. All the amenities of home. High tech and high class. Might as well take a shower, get some rest, and get ready to meet the dead legend that ain’t so dead after all. I can’t believe I’m going to meet Van Kilner!

Anita stops by the next morning to lead the way. She and BC walk through the residential section, through what appears to be manufacturing and labs. They exit the labs and begin walking down a featureless corridor, which then leads to another long corridor, followed by a third hundred-yard length. Anita and BC walk down one long connecting corridor after another.

Corridor after corridor... We have to have walked at least six miles!

“You know, you’d think since you folks can travel to distant stars and faraway planets, you at least might make it easier to get from place to place in your own facility,” BC grouses.

“Van Kilner doesn’t like to be too accessible, even to those in The Project,” Anita explains. “So, we walk.” The corridor ends. They turn, and start down still another. Another turn, another corridor. No windows, no doors, no other branching corridors, just a long tunnel of connecting corridors winding through the asteroid.

Finally they arrive at a blank gray wall: no apparent door, no apparent controls.

“Here, hold on a sec,” Anita says.

“Where am I gonna go?” BC asks.

“Shh!” she shushes him. “Doctor Van Kilner? It’s Anita Capituna. I’ve brought Bernard Campion, the Vatican Ambassador, with me, as you requested,” she says in a loud voice. She and BC wait in silence. BC begins to speak. She cuts him off with a quick, “Sh!” and a flail of her arm and a look that could boil blood. He stays silent.

They wait in silence for what seems like a long time.

It’s been what, two minutes, really? What’s this guy’s deal? Eccentric old bat, no doubt.

The outline of a door appears in the blank wall, and then slides silently aside.

“Come in,” a voice says.

Anita walks through the door. BC follows cautiously behind her.

Whoa!

BC is stunned. Stepping through the doorway into Van Kilner's quarters is like stepping into another world. Light brown wood paneled walls and a brown, cream and white marble floor replace the grays and whites of the endless corridors. Stained glass windows backlit by hidden, golden lighting line the walls of the foyer, casting multicolored shafts of light across the floor and across BC and Anita as they walk through.

BC marvels at the artwork, the mosaics of cut, colored glass in the windows. Each depicts a different subject: Earth on a field of stars; the landscape of an unknown planet, with two moons rising above the horizon; ships in combat in space; a vast field of asteroids; a bright red nebula; a cool blue spiral galaxy. Each window is a work of art. Most depict scenes and places BC has never seen before.

"Whoa!" BC lets out an involuntary gasp. The gravity eases as they advance further in to Van Kilner's quarters, lessening its grip. BC suddenly feels pounds lighter, and there's an extra spring in his step.

"He keeps the gravity at about a quarter of Earth normal," Anita explains, noticing BC's surprise. "Helps keep him healthy. He's... old," she says haltingly. "We're expected. We'll meet him in the arboretum."

"The arboretum?" BC asks.

"It's where Van Kilner takes his visits with his guests. It's just ahead, on the right."

BC follows her a short way down the corridor. She places her palm flat against the wall and a door appears. After a minute, the door opens. The smell of damp wood, wet leaves and fresh loam washes over BC.

"Mmm... smells like Earth," BC says.

"You can see why it's the old man's favorite place," Anita agrees.

The arboretum isn't like any on Earth, though. Van Kilner's taken advantage of the light gravity. Trees and plants grow up from the ground, out from the walls, and down from the distant ceiling somewhere far above. Trees, plants and vines interweave overhead, creating a dense canopy that makes it impossible to judge just how high the roof of the arboretum is. Light sources abound, placed to feed the forest with photonic goodness.

"Birds?" BC asks as he hears chirping off in the distance.

"Birds. And bugs, too. No real pesky insects, just useful ones."

"Just us useful bugs..." BC comments.

"At least you're useful," BC hears come from behind him. He turns to see the legendary Dr. Van Kilner, floating in a chair hovering two feet off the ground. He's still recognizable from all the news coverage of thirty years ago, but he shows the years in the lines in his face and the stoop of his back. He looks old, but not ancient.

Smaller than I thought he'd be... he's one of the giants of history. Guess you kind of expect someone like that to be... I don't know... bigger?

"Go ahead, say it," Van Kilner says with a chuckle. "I know what you're thinking. I hear it all the time! 'I thought you'd be taller,' right?" He chuckles again. "You must be BC. Hello, Anita, thank you for bringing him to me."

"You're welcome, sir." She turns to BC. "BC? I'd like to introduce Doctor Hans Van Kilner. Doctor Van Kilner, may I present the Vatican Ambassador to Lunar Prime, Father Bernard Campion. We can call him 'BC'."

"Good!" Van Kilner extends his hand to BC. "Formalities are done! I think they're important, but I'm always glad when they're over!" He and BC shake hands.

Pretty good grip for a geezer! Vigorous handshake... he's doing well, or he puts up a good front.

"You're not as tall as I thought you'd be," Van Kilner says to BC.

"You're not as old as I thought you'd be," BC counters. Van Kilner laughs.

"You, I like," Van Kilner says. He smiles at BC. "Walk with me," Van Kilner says. He turns his chair and begins to float away from them down a cleared path among the trees. He stops the chair, turns back to BC and Anita. "Come on, you two, there's much to discuss!"

BC and Anita catch up to Van Kilner. He leads them down the path.

"I gather Anita and her crew have filled you in on The Project, the aliens, and what's been going on,"

Van Kilner says as they walk.

"They have, but..." BC is stopped by a wave of Van Kilner's hand.

"It's a lot to take in," Van Kilner says, to reassure him.

"I'll say," BC blurts out. He composes himself and continues. "You folks have been doing a lot without telling the rest of us what's happening."

"Well," Van Kilner says. He stops his chair and turns to BC. "Can you blame us? Can you imagine us humans, the way we are right now, mounting any kind of defense against powerful alien races? If the humans these aliens meet are from The Project, we create a good impression! They're meeting the best and the brightest!" Van Kilner turns and smiles at Anita. "Aren't they, Anita!"

"Yes, sir."

"Makes these alien races less likely to take humanity for granted! You see, we serve a purpose! Trust me, if these aliens were in regular contact with the greater mass of humanity, they'd soon be figuring out ways to wipe us all out, like interstellar pest control!" Van Kilner clears his throat. "Some of us are afraid that might already be happening," he says, his eyes drilling into BC's as he speaks. "But, you see, we serve a purpose!"

"Sure you do," BC answers without flinching.

"Don't you love the way it smells in here!" Van Kilner says, inhaling a deep breath and changing the subject.

"Huh?" BC asks, lost for a second.

"Breathe!" Van Kilner demands.

BC breathes. He inhales a deep breath of the earthy, musty moist air inside the arboretum.

Wonder if he's got any psychotropics in the air? Stuff he's used to, but would affect me? Soothing, calming agents... aromatherapy? It does smell good, like being back on Earth, out in the country, after it's rained.

"Trust me, there are no drugs in the air, BC," Van Kilner says, noting BC's unease and suspicion.

That was weird... guy almost read my mind.

"You know, BC, you project your thoughts rather openly and quite loudly," Van Kilner says.

I do?

"You do," Van Kilner says, answering BC's unspoken thought.

"Cut that out!" BC snaps.

"BC!" Anita cautions.

"Your own fault, son," Kilner says. "I'm not trying to hear you. You just keep broadcasting to me. Keep it to yourself!" He admonishes BC.

BC tries not to think out loud.

Damn.

"Hard not to do, huh?" Van Kilner asks him.

Anita's brow is furrowed. "I don't hear anything," she says, frustrated.

"You just don't know how to *listen*," Van Kilner says. "You may be hearing more than you know," Van Kilner adds, mysteriously.

She glares at him.

"Let's get beyond this," BC suggests.

"I'm all for that," Van Kilner agrees.

"Right," Anita says.

"So..." BC looks from Van Kilner to Anita, "What's next?"

"You know," Van Kilner says to BC, "You're not quite what I expected."

"I'm not?"

"No," Van Kilner says. "I expected someone... coarser, I guess."

"Coarser?" BC asks.

"You're an assassin," Van Kilner explains matter-of-factly. "I thought you'd fit the part."

"You know, funny thing, I actually haven't killed anybody for a while," BC protests. "And it was never by choice. They forced me into it."

“Who was your last kill?” Anita says with some venom.

“Who was yours?” BC spits back at her.

“Children!” Van Kilner upbraids them and takes the conversation back over. “Enough of this. We are wasting time. BC, Anita told me what they told you... how much do you remember?”

“What, do you want a summary?” BC asks him with some sarcasm.

“No,” Van Kilner chuckles, “Not necessary. You obviously know about this base,” Van Kilner gestures at his surroundings. “Do you know about The Domo?”

BC nods.

“The Flaze? The Eldred?” Van Kilner asks.

“Yup,” BC says, nodding.

“Our other bases?”

“Heard *about* them. Not much more. Is there more?”

“Only this: The Eldred have used a plague to wipe out their enemies in the past. We’ve heard tell of it from some of the other races. It would seem the mellow, quiet race is quite capable of genocide.”

“Why wasn’t I told this?” Anita asks.

“Great,” BC says sarcastically. “Good to know.”

“The Domo told us that The Eldred wiped out a race on the planet we call ‘Crankshaft’ centuries ago,” Van Kilner elaborates. Anita looks surprised.

“So they’ve done it before?” BC asks.

“They sure have. And the way that The Domo told it, it sounded like it was just something The Eldred, well... Do.”

“So... If it’s them,” BC speculates, “how can we prove it’s them and not the UTZ or the UIN? What court could we ever try them in?”

“Here’s something I just found out. The plague microbe? The one the Project and UTZ scientists isolated? It’s been found in a place that neither the UTZ nor the UIN had access to.”

“Where’s that?” BC asks.

“Here,” Van Kilner says, gesturing around him.

There’s stunned silence between the three of them. Van Kilner breaks it.

“We found it after it was isolated. When we knew what to look for. More incriminating, the microbe was found in the quarters formerly occupied by our visitor from The Eldred. Actually, there was so little of it, we can’t be sure it was actually left with the intent of infecting the whole base. Doesn’t really matter now, does it?” Van Kilner asks hypothetically. “If we hadn’t quarantined the area as soon as we had suspicions, more would have died.”

“People died?” Anita asks, suddenly worried. “Who?”

“Yes, dear, I’m afraid so,” Van Kilner says to her. “A couple of the techs. We haven’t found a cure for it yet.

“Oh,” she says, just to say something.

“I know,” Van Kilner says with sympathy. “I don’t know if you knew them. I’m afraid their names weren’t familiar to me, though I hate to lose anyone.”

Silence again hangs in the air between the three of them. This time, BC breaks the silence.

“Why? Why would they try to kill us all?” BC looks from Anita to Van Kilner. Van Kilner clears his throat to speak.

“I have no idea,” he says. “The Domo and The Flaze hold The Eldred in near reverence, act like the Eldred are somehow intergalactic parents. They seemed to be a mellow, benevolent, caretaker sort of race. They were a little jittery, but they seemed mostly old and wise.”

“Watch out for those old and wise ones, eh?” BC cracks. Van Kilner smiles.

“Maybe they’re so wise,” Anita ventures to guess, “They decided we were too violent a race to live.” She shakes her head. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“I don’t know,” Van Kilner disagrees, “The Domo and The Flaze can both be very violent races. Why would The Eldred let them hang around, if that was the case? The Eldred have dealt with them for centuries, evidently.”

“You know, BC,” Anita says to him, “when we first met the Domo, before we knew the Eldred existed, the Domo would talk about ‘those who walked among us.’ The Flaze early on told us about a race they called ‘The Shapers’. We think that both the Flaze and the Domo were talking about the Eldred. They never said that for sure, but the pieces fit. But we aren’t sure.”

Van Kilner nods, and then adds, “All we know is that all of them have messed with human beings and Earth to one degree or another over the course of our history. The Domo and The Flaze have treated the planet Earth like a curiosity. The Domo said that ‘those who walked among us’ also messed with our planet, somehow, centuries ago,” Van Kilner says. “But they don’t, and won’t, elaborate on who ‘those who walked among us’ were.”

“Really? Why won’t they talk about the Eldred?” BC asks.

“They usually will. They usually do. That’s why we’re not positive that ‘those who walked among us’ *are* The Eldred. We don’t know for sure that The Domo meant The Eldred were messing with us in our prehistory. We aren’t sure what they had to do with us, if anything.”

BC tries to get his head around everything Van Kilner’s saying. “Okay. Anita, Dell and Krish said that The Domo were like vampires, that they might have inspired some of our legends. They built the original base here,” he says, gesturing at the space around them. “And the others, The Flaze?” Anita and Van Kilner nod. BC continues, “The Flaze left the ruins we’ve found on the Moon and Mars, and might have been responsible for U.F.O. sightings. But what did the Eldred do?”

“We don’t know,” Van Kilner admits. “We just don’t know. You can bank on the fact The Domo were vampires in the 17th and 18th century. They posed as nobility and fed on the local populace in parts of Europe. They studied us, studied Earth, and decided not to take it over. Then they left. The Flaze arrived some time in the 20th century, about 200 years ago. Most of the U.F.O. craze back then *was* caused by The Flaze. But we have no idea when or even *if* the Eldred came to Earth.”

“Some of The Project’s anthropologists think they *may* have exterminated the Neanderthals,” Anita says. Van Kilner gives her a dubious look. “It’s possible... still a relatively new theory.”

“But!” Van Kilner says with a sense of drama, “There is another possibility... and here it gets *really* interesting: ‘Those who walked among us’ and the ‘shapers’ could have been someone else. The Domo made only one mention of them, another race they called Dixitpaszay, or the ‘Ancient Enemy’.”

“They only mentioned them that once, and then never again,” Anita says, sounding frustrated. “And they definitely didn’t mean The Eldred.”

“No,” Van Kilner says. “The Eldred are not the Ancient Enemy... but then, who is? We’ve considered some possibilities: The Eldred may work for them. Or, somehow, they’re connected. Maybe the ‘Ancient Enemy’ are the ones really behind this plague, eh? There’s a possibility,” Van Kilner says, introducing a new variable. “The Eldred may just do their bidding... it would explain why the other races all hold The Eldred in respect, if they are the Ancient Enemy’s right hand, their intergalactic ‘concierge’. But The Eldred have not mentioned an ‘ancient enemy’ at all, not to us.”

“When The Domo mentioned The Dixitpaszay, they said that they and The Eldred were on opposing sides in a war a million years ago,” Anita says. “They could easily have made up, in the intervening years.”

“What was the war about?” BC asks.

“We don’t know,” Anita says.

“And... what about the ‘why’?” BC asks. “Why would any of these races want us dead? How could we be a threat to anyone? Could any of these aliens have allied themselves with the UIN?”

Anita and Van Kilner exchange an “ask a stupid question” look between them. Anita answers.

“None of them could do anything like that without us knowing about it,” she assures BC.

Damn, they sound awful cocky about that! Especially for people who possibly helped one of those races infect us with the plague.

“Well,” Van Kilner admits, “We don’t think they could. We know their ships. We know their energy signatures, the trails of particles their engines leave behind.

“And The Domo and The Flaze, at least, know to leave us alone.” He chuckles. “Plus, none of them, The Eldred included, understand what it is we’re fighting about. They don’t *have* religions. Not like ours.”

“Really? No religion?” BC asks, mystified.

“None. Not like human beings do” Van Kilner shakes his head. “That was why The Eldred wanted to come to Lunar Prime and observe the peace conference. At least, that was the reason they said they wanted to attend and observe, so they could study our religions further.”

“Further?” BC asks.

“Further,” Van Kilner confirms. “Evidently, The Eldred find our dedication to and obsession with religion to be... unique in the universe. And so they’ve been studying us for a while now. Us... and our religions.”

“Heh,” BC laughs, “That could be enough to convince any race that we don’t deserve to live! Maybe the Eldred and this Ancient Enemy are our enemies, too.”

“You know, the way The Domo talked about them,” Anita says, “I don’t think they’re around anymore. The Domo spoke of them in *very* past tense.”

“What do the Flaze and The Eldred say about the ‘Ancient Enemy’?”

“The Flaze are... odd. They don’t hold linear conversations, per se,” Van Kilner says. “They’ve never mentioned anything about the ‘Ancient Enemy’ and you can’t really ask them questions. The Eldred ignored the question completely when we asked them. They acted as if we didn’t say anything at all.”

“What do you mean?” BC asks.

“They ignored the question,” Anita says. “They just stared at us. As if we hadn’t said anything at all. They waited until we spoke again, and then reengaged in the conversation.”

“Weird,” BC observes.

“It was!” Van Kilner agrees. “But we dismissed it at the time. Chalked it up to bad translation, miscommunication. Of course, everything’s being reevaluated, now.”

“Okay, so... maybe we forget about the ‘why’” BC says. “How do we cure this? Can we stop it? You said it showed up here, have you found a way to cure it? Prevent it? Anything?”

“No,” Van Kilner says, shaking his head. “As I said, people died. But we did isolate the microbe causing the plague. And we’re working on it. We did discover one thing. It’s apparently not universally fatal. Some people aren’t affected, even though they were infected. Not everyone exposed to it catches it.”

“No?” BC asks.

“No,” Van Kilner says. “As a matter of fact, you were no doubt infected yourself, BC. You just have the good fortune of being immune. You don’t have it.”

“Am I a carrier?” he asks, worried.

“We don’t know for sure,” Van Kilner says. “There’s no evidence so far that this can be spread by anyone except a sick person. Not that we’ve seen, so far. We just don’t know all that much about it yet. We should have you checked out. Do some bloodwork.”

“What are you, The Flaze?” BC jokes, getting it deliberately wrong.

“No, that was The Domo,” Anita corrects him, “But they don’t... I mean, they’re not... oh, never mind,” she sighs. BC smiles at his little victory.

“Very clever, BC,” Van Kilner notes. “It will be painless. We’ve got the best doctors here, I promise you,” he says to BC. “Hell, they’ve kept *me* alive this long!” He laughs. “Anita, why don’t you take BC to our infirmary? Have them draw some blood, test for the microbe, see if there’s some healing factor you have that’s unique and fun and different.” Van Kilner shifts on his chair. “Then, I’m afraid I should let you go. There isn’t much more to tell you about. I wanted to meet you, see if you were the sort of man I can work with. You are. But I’m afraid they’ll be needing you back on Earth, back on the Moon at the very least.

“This plague is bad, BC, and it’s spreading through the human population like wildfire. There are a lot of people dying,” Van Kilner says. He drops his head, rubs his face.

“And it’s all your fault,” BC realizes. “Isn’t it? Both of you! All of you in The Project... your arrogance made you blind to a serious threat, didn’t it?” He looks from Van Kilner to Anita. Neither says a word.

“You two are responsible for taking more lives, and certainly more *innocent* lives, than I ever did in my former career!”

Anita protests, “BC, really, come on...”

“Wow,” BC keeps going, “What you’ve unleashed makes my discretions pale in comparison!”

“This was not intentional,” Van Kilner says softly.

“We are responsible,” Anita says. “I’m responsible. I’ll admit it, even if you can’t, doctor. We’re killing people,” she nods at BC, “Sure as he did.”

“We are not murderers!” Van Kilner says defensively.

“Does that matter to the victims? To any of our victims?” Anita asks them. The three of them are quiet. There’s nothing else to say. A minute passes in silence.

“We should get going,” BC finally says. “Get me to the infirmary, and then back on my way to the Moon, right? Okay?”

“Sure,” Anita says, still quiet.

“Well,” Van Kilner says, “I guess this is it for now. Think about our next step. We’ll keep in touch.

“It was good to meet you, BC. Even if you did have the unbridled temerity to call me a murderer.”

He extends his hand.

BC shakes it.

“Thanks, Doctor Van Kilner. I’ll do what I can to help you, to help us all stop this thing.”

“So will we. We’ll be doing all we can here.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Anita says. She motions to BC to precede her out. They turn, leaving Van Kilner among the trees as they make their way back to the arboretum’s door. The door shuts silently behind them, disappearing into the wall.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” BC asks Anita as they walk down the corridor.

“What?” Anita says absentmindedly.

“The Plague?!” BC reminds her.

“I don’t know,” she tells him.

“It sounds like its bad.”

“Yeah. It does,” Anita says. She sounds defeated.

“Hey,” BC says, stopping. Anita stops.

“What?” she says, a little exasperated.

BC looks her in the eye. “Look. If anyone can find a cure to this, it’s you people, The Project. You may have unleashed this plague, but you’re the only ones who have even a chance of defeating it. The UTZ scientists are working on it, too, but I’ll put my money on The Project.”

“You? You’re trying to cheer me up? Give me a break,” she sighs, turns, and sets off back down the corridor. BC follows her back through the long empty corridors in silence.

What I get for trying to be nice... Have it your way, bitch... jeesh.

After a quick trip to the infirmary, BC and Anita take off on a Flasher for Lunar Prime. BC is back on the Moon by dinnertime. Anita and BC disembark from the flasher in EVA suits and re-enter Lunar Prime the way they left it, through the outbuilding at the edge of the facility.

“I’ll be in touch in the next couple of days,” she tells BC as he begins to leave the outbuilding and head for home.

“How can I get in touch with you?” he asks her.

“We’ll set that up when I call. Figure out what to do next...”

“It’s a lot to digest...”

“I know. Thanks for not killing me.”

Back in his quarters in the Vatican Mission, BC turns on the news. It’s not good.

“This new sickness, this new plague, is decimating the population on Earth, in orbit, and on the Moon,” the newscaster says. “UTZ officials assure us their finest scientific minds are applying themselves to a search for a cure.

“Most people wonder if this is the UIN’s doing. There is also talk among the scientists that this plague is not of human origin, but may spring from some interstellar source or origin. Theories abound. Some suggest the UIN uncovered the plague among artifacts on Mars and brought it to the peace conference on the Moon. But did they do it deliberately? Or was it a horrible accident? We’ll be speaking with experts on both sides in our next segment. Another theory? Cosmic infection! Maybe a stray meteor,

some hunk of killer ice, carried a deadly cargo to the Moon that somehow was introduced into the environment.

“Or could it be... aliens? All we know for sure is that the plague began its wave of destruction on the Moon, let loose as representatives gathered to talk peace.

“In a related story, the sponsor of the conference, Vatican Ambassador Bernard Campion has reportedly disappeared! There’s been no sign of the Ambassador, according to our sources, for at least the last two days, although unnamed UTZ officials are saying, off the record, that Campion is working in secret with them to try to trace the source of the plague and find a cure.”

Nice... at least someone is making excuses for me. Weird to have someone handling PR for me. I didn't think I would BE the news!

I'm here! Just took a little trip, is all. Should I issue a public statement? What would I say?

BC checks his messages. Several of the waiting ones are from the Vatican!

Well, all it takes is a genocidal plague to get them to call, nice.

The last four are marked as “Extremely Urgent”

The Pope is dead.

His Holiness the Pontiff Linus the Second has died. And the Curia has sent BC messages asking BC to report to Vatican City.

Great. They want me down there yesterday! Guess I better go. So wait, what are these? Next message: A new pope is chosen, Peter the Third!

BC advances to the message after that. Where the last told of the election of a new Pope, the next announces that he, too, has died.

Time passes like a freight train chugging past too fast to see.

The last message asks him to report to the Vatican, once again.

Well, I guess I should get back down to Earth. See if I can do anything at Vatican City. Don't know why I should. No good ever seems to come from helping.

Chapter Fourteen

When mass numbers of people get sick, things break down. Even as humanity advances, it still takes raw people power to keep the machines running.

BC has a hell of a time booking passage down to Earth. When he finally secures a ride, the flight itself is nearly empty.

The Rio Di Janeiro spaceport on Earth is another shock. Many of the shops and stores are shuttered. Other travelers are scarce.

BC hunts around for a connecting flight to Vatican City. It takes a few hours. He books his flight and calls the Vatican to let them know he’s on the way.

BC lands in Rome to a very different greeting. The media have somehow been alerted. Reporters surround the gate at the airport as BC disembarks. They spot BC and begin hurling questions at him.

“Ambassador! Where have you been?”

“Father Campion! What do you know about the plague?”

“Why haven’t you been infected, Father Campion?”

“How did it happen?”

“Do you think this is the work of the UIN?”

“What’s your reaction to the Pope’s death?”

BC ignores them all best he can as he walks past. He breathes a sigh of relief when he spots a waiting Vatican transport with his name on it. He hops in and rolls away from the pursuing, clamoring crowd.

Aside from the media dogs, there weren't many other people there at the port.

How bad is it?

BC is sent to the College of Cardinals immediately upon his arrival at the Vatican, his luggage whisked away to some rooms he's told he'll be shown to later. Cardinals Hardwick and Terpa are waiting for BC when he arrives outside the Sistine Chapel.

"Cardinal Campion, you're just in time!" Terpa says, greeting BC.

"What? I'm not a Cardinal..." BC demurs.

Terpa and Hardwick nod.

"You are," Terpa says to him.

"But I was never even a Bishop... That's a done deal?" BC asks.

"A done deal," Hardwick says. "There aren't many of us left," he tells BC. "You were elevated *in absentia* by the late Pope Peter the Third, under special circumstances. We'll make it official while you're here in Rome. You'll be elevated to bishop at the same time."

"Okay," BC says, surprised, trying to think.

Made a Cardinal against my will! These people are desperate.

"How bad has this sickness gotten?" BC asks them.

"It's bad," Terpa says. "It is a plague such as the world has never seen. Billions are dying, Cardinal Campion. Not all who are exposed are infected... it seems to affect people at random. It's very strange."

"The UTZ Scientists have announced cures twice," Hardwick says, "only to find their announcements have been premature, that their measures don't measure up."

"I'm afraid many people are sure it's the work of the Muslims," Terpa tells him.

"Really?" BC asks.

"We've seen the polls," Hardwick says. "We hear it from our own people."

"It's not the Muslims," BC tells them. They both stare at him. Terpa finally breaks the silence.

"What..." she says, and then she pauses. "How do you know?" she asks him. "Mars has been silent, closed off."

Hardwick shakes his head.

"There's been no traffic from Mars," he tells BC, "and no communications, either. There's no way to know how the UIN has been affected."

"I know that," BC admits, "but I also know that this 'plague' wasn't caused by the UIN."

"You *know*? Well..." Terpa says. "...what are you saying? This is natural? Or is someone else responsible?" she asks BC.

"I've spoken with some UTZ scientists," BC says, stretching the truth. "They think it may be extraterrestrial."

I don't want to tell them about The Project... yet.

"We've heard that, too," Hardwick says. "But couldn't they have found a virus or something on Mars and somehow, I don't know, 'weaponized' it? That would make it 'extraterrestrial', wouldn't it?"
Now he's a Cardinal and a scientist?

"Not really... They don't have the technology to create *this* sickness," BC explains. "*Our* scientists admit that even *they* couldn't create this."

"I haven't heard any of them admit that," Hardwick says, the question in his voice.

"They haven't publicly," BC tells him.

"Oh."

A group of young priests appear from inside the chapel and approach them.

"Primus inter pares? Your eminence?" the lead priest, a young African woman wearing bright blue clerical robes addresses Cardinal Hardwick.

"Yes, Reverend Chiamaka?"

"It's time. The other Cardinals are waiting for you and the Secretary Cardinal to begin the Papal Conclave," Chiamaka says, nodding to Cardinal Terpa as well. "The chimney has been prepared. The chapel has been swept for any possible surveillance devices. All is in readiness, awaiting only the three of you."

"Well, then... as the Dean of the College of Cardinals, I officially invite you to join the conclave, Cardinal

Campion!" Hardwick says to BC, extending his hand.

"Right now? I accept, I guess," BC says tentatively. He shakes Hardwick's hand. They enter the chapel and the doors crash shut and are sealed behind them.

"Come," Hardwick says to BC and Terpa, "We have work to do."

The Sistine Chapel... Gets to me every time...

I didn't know there was damage in here, too. It was never hit directly. It was one of the few buildings they protected.

Sadly, there has been some damage. Some of the wall frescoes are now cracked, or broken, with pieces fallen off. Several of Michelangelo's masterpieces on the ceiling have lost chunks, ugly white patches showing through some of the master's work.

Sad to see... Huh, there's old Jeremiah up there... some say it's a self portrait by Michelangelo... funny, I never read Jeremiah's book until forced to by The Light. He puts the cur in curmudgeon. Look at him up there, angry and puzzled. Guess we have that in common...

"Watch where you're going," Hardwick cautions BC. BC's been so busy looking up he didn't notice the chair he was about to walk into. The chapel has been furnished for the affair: large, red velvet cushioned, oaken thrones are arrayed along the side walls, facing each other.

BC looks around. Staring up at the ceiling he didn't see the other Cardinals gathered around the altar. There aren't as many as he'd thought there would be. He tries to make a quick count.

There are only about fifty people here... and a lot of them are pretty young to be Cardinals!

"Where's everybody else? I thought we had over two hundred Cardinals in the College?" BC asks Hardwick and Terpa.

"We did," Terpa says.

"We now have 59 Cardinals," Hardwick says sadly.

"Counting me?" BC asks.

"Counting you," Hardwick tells him.

"Oh. I see."

"Have a seat," Hardwick says, indicating a throne for BC.

"Thank you," BC says. Hardwick nods. He and Terpa then continue on up to the altar.

A throne... a throne of my own...

BC sits down. He looks across the chapel at some of the other Cardinals, already seated.

I feel like I just walked into a party I was not invited to... Talk about not belonging somewhere... what?

The Cardinal on the throne next to BC is talking to him in a soft voice. All BC hears is, "by the Cardinal Camerlengo, stand."

"What?" BC asks in a hoarse whisper.

"Stand up!" the old man snaps back at BC.

Cranky old dude! Well, I guess this is it...

Cardinal Camerlengo Hardwick, Dean of the College of Cardinals, stands before the altar and swears them all to secrecy. Terpa and two other Cardinals walk down the rows of chairs and hand each of them a slip of paper.

"Please be seated," Hardwick says as the last of the ballots is handed out. BC looks at his slip.

"Eligo in summum pontificem," BC reads. Luckily, there is a translation underneath the words: I elect as supreme Pontiff...

BC looks around the room. He notices others doing the same.

I don't even know any of these people! Maybe I'll vote for myself... or Hardwick. Maybe Terpa... this church could use a female pope, a first for the NcC and Christianity in general. This is just the first ballot; it doesn't mean anything anyway...

BC writes his own name down and laughs.

Why not? I'm sure we'll find out who the real candidates are after this first vote.

Hardwick speaks from the altar.

"Please bring your ballot up, present it, and place it in this chalice," he tells the assembly, indicating an

ornate, oversized gold and silver chalice on the altar, covered by a thin gold paten.

The Cardinals process up to the altar in an orderly fashion. BC tries not to smirk as he walks up to the altar, holds his vote aloft, and then slides it under the paten and into the cup. He is one of the last to vote. As he heads back to his seat, Terpa and the two other Cardinals line up with Hardwick for counting. The counting takes a while. Each name for each vote is read aloud three times: Terpa reads the name aloud and writes it down on a tally sheet in front of her, then hands the ballot to the next Cardinal. The next Cardinal reads the name aloud as well, and then hands the ballot to the third Cardinal. The third repeats the name again, and then runs a needle and thread through the ballot, creating a string of punctured votes.

“Bernard Campion,” Terpa says aloud, about halfway through the ballots. Her eyes lock with his briefly.

She does not look happy... guess she didn't like my little joke...

“Bernard Campion,” repeats the second Cardinal.

“Bernard Campion,” echoes the third, and then he pokes the needle and thread through the ballot, adding it to his string.

One ballot for BC...

More names are called. It's clear there won't be a pope elected on this first vote, there are too many names for any candidate to have received a full two-thirds.

“Bernard Campion,” Terpa says again, his name echoed by her two colleagues.

Wait a minute... Another ballot? Who else would vote for me?

BC hears his name come up again on two other ballots, his name repeated three times each time, before the voting is over.

This is insane...

The first vote finally over with no winner, Terpa and the other two Cardinals assisting in the voting gather all other notes from around the room, and then head to the back to burn the ballots and notes. The black smoke will let the outside world know there's been no decision. While they perform the ritual task, Hardwick addresses the rest of the assembly.

“We do not have a new pontiff yet,” he tells them, “but we do have four candidates who have received more than one vote. Cardinal Castellini of Turin has five in his favor. Cardinal Kibwe of Nairobi has four, as does Cardinal Hardwick, er, myself,” he says, pausing awkwardly, visibly uncomfortable. “And, finally, Cardinal Campion of the Vatican Mission on Lunar Prime has three votes.”

BC can feel the eyes of the other Cardinals on him. Luckily, Hardwick continues, drawing back their attention.

“We will vote again tomorrow, twice in the morning, and twice in the afternoon, if necessary,” Hardwick tells them. “I would like to ask now for a vote on the number of ballots we will have before we look for a simple majority rather than a two-thirds majority.

“As time is of the essence, I suggest six, in hopes that we can elect a new pope in our third day. All in favor?”

The vote carries.

“Good!” Hardwick exclaims.

“Please follow Cardinal Terpa. She will lead you to the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, where you'll be staying. It's similar to a staff-less hotel. Everything you need is, hopefully, provided. If there *is* anything more that you require, please see Cardinal Terpa or myself. We reconvene at 6 am tomorrow morning. Thank you, God Bless You all,” he says, finishing.

“Amen,” the assembly answers back.

The Cardinals begin filing out after Terpa, heading for their rooms.

BC walks along behind the cranky older Cardinal.

“Well, Campion.”

BC hears a familiar voice he can't quite place behind him.

“When I heard that you were elevated to Cardinal, I knew this church had dropped its standards even lower.”

BC turns and sees a familiar face... but again he can't quite place...

Fortune Station! Kim!

“So, it’s *Cardinal Kim* is it, now?” BC asks.

Kim doesn’t answer the question. Instead he asks his own.

“So tell me, *Campion*, will you take the name ‘Pope Judas’ if you’re elected? That would be a first!”

Ouch!

That hurts because I deserve it...

“Look, Kim, I don’t know what to say. I filed a report. My superiors in the OPO at the time took my information right to the UTZ. I didn’t know they would come and herd you all off of there.”

“You didn’t?” Kim asks him. “You’re either lying or you’re naïve,” he says.

“Worse,” BC says. “I really didn’t think about it. I’m sorry it went down like that.”

“Come on you two,” Terpa says, coming back for the stragglers. “You two know each other?” she asks them.

“You could say that,” Kim says. BC just nods. They follow slowly behind Terpa.

“Since when are you regular NcC?” BC asks him. “And a Cardinal?”

Kim stops. BC hangs back with him.

“I became regular NcC again when they forced us to settle in Dubuque.”

“They resettled you in Iowa?” BC asks.

Kim mumbles under his breath, “...didn’t even bother to find out where we went...”

“I said I was sorry,” BC sighs. Kim just shakes his head.

“Cardinal Kim was made a Cardinal just in time to elect Pope Peter the Third,” Terpa says, coming back to them again. “Come on, you two. There’s dinner waiting for you in your quarters. You don’t want it to get cold, do you?”

Kim and BC follow Terpa into the Domus Sanctae Marthae. Instead of a front desk, there is a plaque with the names of all the Cardinals and their assigned room numbers. BC and Kim study the chart and find their respective lodgings.

“I’m on this floor,” BC notices. “Room 115.”

“I’m upstairs,” Kim says. “Third floor.”

BC and Kim stand in uneasy silence.

“How’s your daughter, Ruth?” BC asks Kim, breaking the silence.

“As if you care,” Kim says softly. “She’s dead, *Campion*,” he tells him. “She was one of the first to get the sickness in Dubuque.”

BC doesn’t know what to say.

“I... I’m sorry, Kim.”

“So am I,” he says. Kim presses the “up” button of a nearby elevator. The door opens and he walks in, away from BC. He turns to push the button for his floor, but stops.

“Hey, *Campion*,” he calls to BC. “I voted for you. By the way.”

“Thank you?” BC says, questioning.

“Don’t thank me,” Kim says. He pushes the button for his floor and the door begins to close. “I voted for you because the job appears to be fatal. Good luck!”

The elevator door closes. BC is left alone in the small lobby. He finds his way to his rooms, finds dinner waiting, a salad, Francesco Alfredo and green beans, with white wine.

Too bad... not enough to get drunk on... I could use a drink.

BC pours himself a large glass of wine and settles down to dinner and to sleep.

He and the other Cardinals start again early the next morning, meeting in the chapel at six am.

There are rounds of discussion before each vote is taken. Words of support are spoken for each of the prominent candidates. Candidates can bow out and throw their support behind other Cardinals.

Cardinal Hardwick throws his support behind Castellini, but it isn’t quite enough. BC tries to throw his ‘support’ to Hardwick, but Hardwick declines. Cardinal Kibwe then surprises the college by throwing his support behind BC.

“He is a man of action who knows the world as it is today very well. He is a peacemaker, the first man to bring the opposing sides of the war together in years,” Kibwe says, explaining his move. BC sits in

stunned silence.

I want to get up, wave my arms and shout NOOOOOOO!! But I don't think that will play well here...

After the final vote of the afternoon, Cardinal Castellini has the most ballots, but not the two-thirds he needs to get elected.

BC can't sleep that second night of the conclave. He tosses and turns, gliding just above the surface of real sleep.

Well... at least I'm not getting a headache... knock on wood. Heh, plenty of that here. These rooms are beautiful.

BC drags himself out of bed when the clock strikes five. He tries to wake up with a shower and some coffee. He makes his way back to the chapel for six.

The now familiar process rolls on ahead. BC wishes he could shrink down into nothing as he hears his name read aloud, over and over again. His and Castellini's.

Neither he nor Castellini get two thirds of the vote. Castellini does have a simple majority, however, and the next ballot will be the seventh, and a simple majority will win it for him in that round of balloting as agreed to on day one.

Thank God!

The Cardinals mingle amongst themselves as they await the second ballot of the morning. BC tries to keep to himself, nodding politely but not engaging in conversation when approached. Castellini, on the other hand, is surrounded by supporters.

I'm too tired to even think my way out of this... hope being aloof helps get Castellini votes... what's that? Oh shit, something's wrong!

One of the Cardinals in Castellini's group has collapsed. BC approaches, only to be stopped by another Cardinal.

"Give him some air!"

"Stand back, please."

BC hangs back. Murmurs surround him.

"Is it the plague?"

"He looks sick. He may have it."

"I've seen this before; it's the start of it."

BC's worst fears are confirmed as the crowd parts. Cardinal Castellini is on the floor of the chapel, with two other Cardinals attending to him. They help him to his feet, and lead him back to the Domus Sanctae Marthae. Cardinal Hardwick takes to the altar and asks for their attention.

"Cardinal Castellini has taken ill. We hope it's just some bad fish, as he said to me just a moment ago," Hardwick says with a nervous chuckle. "Although he has been excused from the voting, he is still the prime candidate and remains so as we approach the next ballot. Please, return to your seats, and we will conduct the next ballot. Thank you. May the Lord guide us, and help us choose wisely. Amen"

"Amen," the assembly responds.

The ballots are passed out once again. BC writes "Castellini" in the biggest allowable letters, folds his ballot, and then slides it into the chalice when his turn comes.

Terpa begins reading the ballots aloud.

"Castellini," she says, echoed once again by the other two assistants.

BC breathes a sigh of relief.

Thank God! There is no way I can...

"Campion," she says, reading the next.

Oh no...

"Campion," she says again. And again. Twenty-nine times.

BC wakes up on his back on the floor of the chapel.

"What happened?" he asks Terpa, who is hanging over him.

"You fainted, I think. At least I hope so. We can't have two Cardinals struck down by the plague in one day, can we? Especially not when you've just been elected..."

“Don’t say it!” BC tries to shout.

“...Pope,” she finishes despite his protest. She extends her hand and helps him to his feet. “You okay?” she asks him.

“Considering... I guess,” BC says.

“Bernard Campion! Approach!” Hardwick calls to BC from the altar.

BC can hear the bells of St. Peter’s ringing out as he walks up to the altar.

Must be white smoke, too. Maybe I’m still passed out... this can’t be happening.

“Do you accept this election?” Hardwick asks him.

“Do I have a choice?” BC asks.

“You can refuse,” Hardwick says. “But no one ever does. It could wreck the church.”

“Really? What do you think making me Pope over the whole NcC is going to accomplish?” BC says in response.

“Do you accept?” Hardwick presses him.

Like I can say “no”...

“I accept,” BC says. “I guess.”

“By what name shall you be called?” Hardwick asks.

Name? God, I didn’t give that any thought! What name...

“Uh...” BC stammers as he tries to think.

Well, it’s worked SO well so far...

“I will be called Peter... the fourth,” BC declares.

“Come forward and be consecrated as a bishop of the church,” Hardwick says. BC approaches him.

“Kneel,” Hardwick tells him. BC kneels before him and Hardwick lays on his hands, on BC’s head.

“By the power vested in me by the Lord and by the NcC, I ordain you a Bishop of the New catholic Church. On Earth as it is in heaven, Amen,” Hardwick intones.

“Amen,” the assembly responds.

“I give you your new Pontifex Maximus! The Holy Roman Pontiff! The Bishop of Rome, Pope Peter the Fourth!”

The College of Cardinals begins applauding.

This is just great. Wonderful. Just ducky... I’m the fuckin’ Pope!

Chapter Fifteen

BC sits on the altar in the Sistine Chapel as each Cardinal comes up in turn to pledge his allegiance according to the ancient traditions of the church.

He’s whisked away out of the chapel after the ceremony and up to the papal apartments where they fit him with his new white robes.

“You had my size?” he asks, when they bring him his white outfit.

“We have everybody’s size,” the tailor tells him. “Just in case.”

“Do they have to be robes?” BC asks.

“I don’t know,” the tailor says. “They just... are.”

“I don’t want robes,” BC tells the man. “Make me more modern vestments. I want white sport coats and trousers, and white clerical shirts. I need one set today, and then another fourteen outfits after that. It’s time the modern church had a modern Pope,” BC proclaims. The tailor leaves, shaking his head.

Well, it’s robes for now, I guess.

Cardinal Terpa passes the tailor on her way in to see BC. He gives her a withering look as she passes.

“What did you say to *him*?” she asks.

“Why?”

“He looked angry about something. He was scowling.”

“I asked for an alteration of the wardrobe,” BC tells her. “I want suits, not robes. Time to modernize the look along with the rest of the NcC.”

“You can’t do that,” she tells him.

“I can.

“I just did.

“I’m the fucking Pope!” BC tells her, joking to lighten the mood.

“Such language!” Terpa says, embarrassed.

“You’re blushing,” BC observes. “Sorry. It’s just an expression.”

“An expression?” she says. “I hope you don’t plan on using it as part of your blessing. I won’t introduce you!”

“Easy, Terpa, I won’t have my Secretary of State getting all crazy on me.”

“What was that?” she asks.

“You heard me,” BC says. “I want you to stay on as the Vatican’s Secretary of State. As a matter of fact, I want the whole Curia to stay on in their current positions. You people know what it takes to keep this place running. I don’t. I need you.”

“Fine,” Terpa says, regaining her composure and trying not to smile. “As long as you promise not to say the ‘f’ word around me. Or in public!” she adds.

“It’s a deal,” he tells her, smiling at her mild offense.

“Are you ready for this?” Terpa asks him.

“This?” BC asks. “No. Not really,” he admits.

“Too bad,” she says. She walks over to the balcony door. “Ready or not...”

She turns, and then swings the doors wide open. She strides out onto the balcony. BC can hear the crowd outside in St. Peter’s Square roar.

People in a crowd! Everything has seemed so deserted; everyone staying in seclusion, isolated away for fear of catching the sickness... it’s actually good to hear a crowd! Even if I’m the one that has to face them next...

“*Habemus Papam!*” Terpa proclaims in Latin. “We have a Pope! I give you Pope Peter the Fourth! *Servus Servorum Dei!*”

BC walks out on the balcony. There is a large crowd, nearly filling the square.

But nowhere near as large as they used to be.

BC waves and the crowd goes wild.

“Hello!” BC says to more applause. “I greet you as your new pope!”

The crowd gets even louder in their cheers. He waits for the frenzy to die down.

They don’t really know me... they wouldn’t be applauding if they did. Heck, I could be anyone up here right now. Just have to say a few words. Make it sound good.

“We live in a time of great chaos and change,” BC begins. “We live in a time of horrible sickness, what some are calling a plague. We live in a time of war between religions and ideals. There are some who will wonder: has God abandoned us? I tell you he has not! Whenever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there, Jesus told us! He is here now! With us now! The New catholic Church has unified Christianity like never before, the Body of Christ made whole once again! I ask you, with the Lord on our side, how can we fail?!”

The crowd gives BC their applause and approval.

“I ask you to join me in calling on the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

“Jesus, look down upon your church, your Body of Christ in the World. Let us each become your brothers, your sisters, sons and daughters of God, united in the Word, united in our faith, and united in our Love. I ask this blessing in your name for those of us here, for all the members of your church wherever they maybe, and for all of those who have not yet experienced your love, may they feel your strength in us. I also ask your blessing upon those who are no longer with us. Please take them into your home and keep them with you always and forever. We ask this through Christ, our Lord!”

“Amen!” the crowd says, nearly as one, nearly knocking BC off his feet.

Not bad for quick improvisation... Man, you can feel their love!

“God bless you!” BC says. He backs up slowly off the balcony, and closes the doors behind him, shutting out the crowd.

“Intoxicating, isn’t it?” Terpa comments as he turns around.

“It is,” BC admits. “They love me.”

“They love what you *represent*,” she tells him. “Don’t let it go to your head. *Servus Servorum Dei*, remember?”

“Yeah,” BC says, “I heard you say that. What does it mean?”

“Servant of the servants of God,” she translates. “Okay, let’s go.”

“What?” BC asks. “Where are we going now? I thought I was done?”

She laughs. “Not yet. We have another ceremony to attend. Come on,” she says, opening the door for him.

“Tell me this, Cardinal Terpa: Why is it that with all the reforms in the New catholic Church with our small ‘c’, I still have to go through all this old Roman Catholic mumbo-jumbo?”

“Be careful who you’re around when you’re calling it ‘mumbo-jumbo’,” she cautions him.

“Like you?”

“No. But some of the old Roman Catholic Cardinals are still around here.”

“Sure. But why all this?”

“Why all this?” she asks rhetorically, her arm sweeping around to indicate his robes, the balcony, the Vatican. “Because the Roman Catholics demanded that it all be kept like this, part of their conditions for joining up with the NcC... And another reason not to make fun. Can we go now? Ready for more ‘mumbo-jumbo’?”

“Great, just great,” BC mumbles as he swishes by her in his robes.

“Stop mumbling,” she chastises him, “you’re the you-know-what pope!”

“So, you do have a sense of humor,” BC observes. She frowns at him.

“Come on,” she says.

BC is formally inaugurated in the ceremony.

Cardinal Hardwick places a woolen pallium on his shoulders and arranges it in proper position like a thin, flat sash. The white sash has black silk ends. Five red crosses adorn the sash, three of which are pierced with pins. BC asks Hardwick under his breath why they left the pins in, after pricking his arm with one and nearly letting out a yelp.

“They represent Jesus’ five wounds and the three nails from the cross,” Hardwick explains, as the choir chants, “*Tu es Petras!*”

Tu es Petras... That one even I can figure out, “I am Peter” ... wearing a sash with pins and crosses in it. What a happy bunch... let’s celebrate wounds! Jeesh can’t say that out loud...

BC finds it all starting to run together as he begins to run out of energy.

I never did get a good night’s sleep, did I?

The Vatican is buzzing with the news of the new pope. His news that the Curia will remain the same has also been greeted with joy. BC makes his way to the suite they’ve prepared for him in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, greeting well wishers as he goes.

I need to sleep!

BC doesn’t get much sleep after he officially becomes Pope Peter the Fourth in April of 2111.

Keeping the Curia intact works both for and against BC; they keep the Vatican running like a well-oiled machine, for the most part, but some old loyalists left over from the reign of Pope Linus seem to be going out of their way to make BC’s life more difficult.

BC begins to call them the “mumbo-jumbo” boys behind their back. It’s a small attempt at humor amid the chaos and decimation. He can’t blame them too much for their resistance to his more “modern” ways. Even BC is unsettled by the lightning-fast turn of events that have him suddenly leading the New catholic Church. He’d never be Pope save for the plague.

The only bright spot has been seeing his old friend M’Bekke again. It turned out M’Bekke was as hard to kill as BC.

M'Bekke resurfaced right after the news broke of BC's "elevation" to pope. But M'Bekke soon left for the Moon, named by BC to replace himself as Vatican Ambassador to Lunar Prime. One of BC's first appointments.

Two weeks into the job, people are still dying. He's tried to reach Nita Bendix, or Anita Capituna, or whatever her name is, to no avail.

She never did get back in touch! Course, I was here instead of Lunar Prime. But, still... I haven't been hiding!

How do you get in touch with a super secret "Project", anyway?

I can't even get in touch with Wentworth! He used to be so hot to get in touch with the pope. Now I'm the fucking pope, it's been two weeks and I still haven't heard anything back from him! I'm the head of the NcC! An increasingly smaller NcC...

How do we stop this thing?

BC paces across the length of his papal office, the same office in which he once met with Pope Linus, waiting as he tries to get another call through to Wentworth Station.

I'm wearing out a path in the carpeting already. Why hasn't the call gone through yet?

"Campion!" a voice rings out. Wentworth.

Just who I've been waiting for.

"That's Pope Peter the Fourth to you now, My Son," BC says in mock solemnity, trying hard not to laugh.

"So I've heard. Apparently, we no longer need worry about getting in touch with the pope. What is it you want?"

"Right to the point. I always liked that about you, Wentworth," BC says. "I want to know what more you know about this plague..."

"We still don't have a clue," Wentworth admits. He changes the subject. "I can't believe they made you pope!"

"Shows you how bad it's gotten, huh?" BC jokes.

"Terpa told me you'd been proclaimed a Cardinal. I had no idea you'd take it this far."

"It just, uh, sort of happened," BC explains.

"Even after all this started at your peace conference!" Wentworth says, nearly snorting.

"What? Are you blaming *me*, now?"

"No, but we still have heard nothing from Mars!" Wentworth shouts. "This whole plague still could easily be a UIN plot! We don't even know that they've been affected. Infected!" Wentworth is almost yelling.

I've never heard him lose emotional control like this. He's usually so cool, aloof, elite...

"Calm down," BC says to him. "So you haven't found a cure. Neither have I. And even with my new job title, I'm thinking prayer isn't our answer this time around. But here's a thought: Maybe we can work *together* and find a way to stop it. How about it? Can the UTZ and the NcC put aside past estrangements, put our alliance back together and stop this thing?"

"You're proposing this to me now?" Wentworth says, sounding taken aback.

BC just laughs. "Well, to who else? And when? And why not? Two billion people are dead down here, Wentworth! More die every day. I seem to be immune. Others also have been exposed and survive. It isn't infecting all of us. That makes me think that there has to be a way to stop it. There's no need for formalities, is there? Fuck the formalities!"

"Heh. You don't sound like any Pope I've ever heard," Wentworth says with a laugh.

"I'm not actually much of a Pope, I'm not kidding myself," BC admits. "But I'm all we've got. So... How about it?"

"Frankly, Campion, I'm not sure it will make any difference. Our scientists have been working on it, as you well know. Every time they think they've defeated it, it finds a way to prove them wrong. It's insidious. And as I said before, it's apparently alien, maybe something they found on Mars and brought back here to kill us all."

"I really don't think it's from Mars," BC says. "That's why I've been trying to call you. I'd have been in touch sooner, but this whole *Pope* thing came up..."

“What?” Wentworth demands, “What are you saying? And how can you be sure it isn’t from Mars?”

Wentworth pauses. “You sound like you know something,” he tells BC.

“I’m not sure what I know, yet,” BC tells Wentworth. “But I may be able to bring some more resources to bear on the situation. And I need your help.” After BC says that he grimaces.

I really hate to ask this FUCK for anything, but we’re rapidly running out of options... and people, for Chrissakes...

“What do you want from me?” Wentworth asks warily.

“I want you get me a meeting with the full surviving UTZ CEO council,” BC tells Wentworth.

Wentworth remains silent for a moment.

“We’ll have to take precautions,” he finally says. “You could be a carrier. I’ve kept my station clean through quarantine. I have no intention of allowing the Plague on board my station!”

“We could meet somewhere else,” BC suggests.

“Where? The Moon?” Wentworth asks. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“That’s where the plague began! It’s no doubt crawling with it!”

BC just shakes his head.

“Fine... then what about here? Vatican City?”

“No!” Wentworth says, almost too forcibly. “No offense,” he says, mellowing a bit, “but not the Vatican. Too easy a target. You don’t have any security there.”

“Comforting thought,” BC says. “Another Earth location? You make the call.”

Wentworth is silent for a moment. “New York City,” he says, finally. “My building. In midtown. I’ll send directions. Let’s meet tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sounds good,” BC says. “And thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Wentworth says. “I’ll see you there tomorrow,” he says, signing off.

He’s scared. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him scared before. Huh. Maybe he should be. Now... how do I get a hold of The Project?

This sucks... I’m at their mercy!

Maybe I should click my heels three times and chant, “there’s no place like the asteroid base...” No way to call them on the com... shit. All I can do is hope they get in touch.

Chapter Sixteen

When you’re the Pope, people do things for you, such as arranging for transit to New York City for the next afternoon... for you and your entourage. For when you’re the Pope, you’re no longer supposed to travel alone. BC sets out for New York City with an entourage of about fifteen.

I don’t think I’ve ever had an entourage before.

Although BC is traveling in a crowd, when he arrives in New York City he finds the lack of crowds around them disturbing.

He watches from the window of the transport as they travel from the airport to their midtown hotel. The entire city is strangely subdued, quiet.

Those still alive are busy burying the dead, or hiding out in isolation and quarantine.

BC and his staff have booked a floor of rooms at a hotel close to Wentworth’s building. BC tries to relax. Others have attended to all the details. All he has to do is go along for the ride.

When they arrive at the hotel, BC only has to worry about walking from the transport to the elevator. There are staff people to check him in, to take care of his bags and luggage and such.

I don’t even have to press the elevator buttons...

I’m not sure I like this.

Parts of this, sure... but I still feel like I’m fooling everyone... and myself.

Pretending to be Pope!

BC is guided to his private suite and left alone to freshen up. His itinerary is tight. There's no real down time.

BC only has the time to shower and get dressed before he has to head downstairs, into a waiting transport, and off to Wentworth's building and offices.

Wentworth's office building is just another nondescript skyscraper thrusting up off of the Manhattan streets and into the sky. BC doesn't have much time to take it in as he's whisked from the transport to inside the building. He's escorted to a conference room.

The conference room is similar to the one BC once saw on board Wentworth's Station. An arcing table, a hollow semi circle with seating along its outer edge, dominates the large open room. The design allows everyone seated to see each other as they discuss running the world.

There are signs of fresh construction. The entire table is sealed away from BC and his side of the room by an arcing, floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall sheet of Plexiglas, recently installed, by the look of it.

Six men and women sit unevenly spaced around the table's arc. Wentworth is sitting just about dead center, directly in front of BC as he walks up to the glass.

BC raps on the glass with a loud TAC-TAC. The six CEOs all jump, startled.

"Richard, are you scared?" BC says, indicating the glass.

"What the...?" Wentworth is caught off guard at first by BC's directness. "Ah, Champion."

"Just checking. Nice glass," BC cracks.

"Precautions," Wentworth explains. "We've all been in orbit or otherwise isolated from the 'disease'.

You and most people on Earth and the Moon at this point, have been exposed. So we're taking some precautions." Wentworth motions to the wall behind BC. "Why don't you pull up a table and chair?"

BC turns to see a table and several chairs behind him, lined up along the wall next to the door.

Got to do everything myself? Fine...

BC drags a table over to the glass, and then pulls up a chair.

Well, now, this is cozy.

"We're still waiting on a few people," Wentworth says.

"Fine," BC answers.

BC looks around the table. The CEOs don't look up or back at him. Each is busy: on a com, or talking to staff, or studying the tabletop intently.

There are three empty seats. BC notes a flurry of activity back behind the glass and sees the other three council members arrive.

Once they are seated, an unspoken word passes between the council members. They all turn to Wentworth, and then to BC.

The room is quiet for a moment. Wentworth breaks the silence. He addresses the rest of the CEOs of the UTZ Council.

"Pope Peter the Fourth has asked us to convene the council today to speak with us about this disease, this plague that is decimating the human population of Earth and the Moon. Your, um, holiness?"

Wentworth deliberately slips to slight BC.

"Why, thank you, Richard," BC says over effusively. "And 'thank you' to all of *you* for meeting with me here today on such short notice."

BC looks around the circle at the mostly passive, disinterested faces. Some are clearly not paying attention, speaking with staff or sitting with their eyes shut.

At least Wentworth looks interested. Concerned. Maybe it's a business leader thing? Well, I'm the Fucking Pope, now! So give me your full and undivided attention.

"Ahem," BC deliberately clears his throat. The board begins to turn to him, one by one.

Thank you.

When they are all apparently listening, BC continues.

"I hope I don't need to tell you that we face an unprecedented crisis right now. I don't, do I?"

The council members, some visibly indignant, shake their heads "no."

"I have some news, some information on this plague. You know this sickness is extraterrestrial. I have it

on good authority that this plague is actually alien in nature and in origin,” BC says.

He lets it sink in for a second.

“It didn’t originate on Earth or the Moon... or on Mars.” BC hears murmuring behind the glass.

“It was not created by humans. It comes from outside of our solar system,” BC continues. “And we have got to fight it with everything we have!”

A woman on BC’s left speaks up.

“Our scientists are trying,” the woman BC doesn’t know stresses. “Every time they think they’ve got a cure, they don’t! It’s impossible.”

“They’re doing what they can,” another CEO, an older man BC hasn’t seen before, insists.

“It’s not enough,” BC says. “Obviously.”

“It’s not enough,” Wentworth agrees. “Some live, some die. And we don’t know why. It’s not enough.

Thing of it is, the structure of the microbe is more complex than anything we’ve ever seen before.

“Your ‘alien’ theory may make sense, as crazy as it sounds. We weren’t sure if it was made or occurred naturally,” Wentworth says. “The scientists said if it was natural, it was perfect, but also insisted that then there was no way it could be from here. If manufactured, it was perfect, and we couldn’t even come close to making a plague that advanced ourselves... yet,” Wentworth says, clearing his throat. “They are quite frustrated by this plague.”

“Do you have any leads on a cure?” BC asks them.

“No, not really,” Wentworth says.

“No, I guess not,” the older man says.

“Not anything practical,” the other woman says.

“No,” says another CEO.

BC looks around the semi circle.

“I’m here today to tell you that you’ve not drawn upon all the resources at your disposal.” He watches to see if he’s surprised them.

Murmurs. There is quiet discussion among the council as they try to figure out what BC is referring to.

“Which of you has jurisdiction over the old Transpace Project?” BC asks them. “Do they answer to any of you?”

More murmuring. No one speaks up. BC looks at each of them in turn, his eyes making their way around the semi circle.

“Isn’t that interesting?” BC observes. “None of you even know what I’m talking about, do you?” BC challenges them. “What does that say about the UTZ Council? You’ve grown so comfortable in your positions of prestige and power that you’ve managed to lose an entire company!

“How many others have slipped away?” BC wonders aloud. “How many projects have you simply lost track of? I wonder.” He pauses. “It’s not under *any* of you right now, am I right?”

No one answers BC, so he continues.

“I didn’t think so. Well, let me tell you, you’ve got a fully functioning project, the old Transpace Project, employing a couple thousand bright minds out there. They’re dealing with aliens. Other worlds. They tell me that some of these aliens may be the source of this plague.

“These aliens are more advanced than us. They’re called The Eldred, and they may be responsible for spreading the plague at the peace conference.”

Murmurs again behind the glass...

“The Project has committed all their scientists and labs to finding a cure,” BC looks from CEO to CEO. “We need to combine their efforts with *your* scientists’ efforts to attack this plague.”

“Where is this ‘Transpace Project’ now? The Moon?” Wentworth asks BC.

BC laughs, “Well. Here’s an idea. Before I tell you too much more, I have a proposition for you.”

The council begins another round of murmuring.

“Aliens?”

“He’s out of his mind.”

“Transpace Project? Isn’t that dead?”

“Proposition? The man’s crazy.”

“What does a pope know about a plague?”

BC continues anyway.

“Here’s my proposition: Turn the Transpace Project over to me. Make me it’s CEO. Give me an honorary seat on the council, whatever. That way the balance of power between each of YOU stays the same. None of you gain any advantage over the others. And I gain a voice among you,” BC explains.

“Plus, we double the brainpower trying to defeat the plague, combining the efforts of your UTZ scientists and my Transpace Project scientists,” BC smiles. “It’s win, win and win!”

“The Pope can’t be on the board!” one of the CEOs says.

“Let’s cut through the pretense and lies!” BC says with authority. “The NcC and The UTZ are allies. We’ve worked together for years. When Peter the Second was Pope, he practically ran this board! He was like a senior member!” BC points out.

“Let’s not dance around the facts when there are so many lives at stake. If you give me control of the Transpace Project, I promise you we can make some major breakthroughs. Anything less would be foolishness.”

The murmuring picks up in earnest as the council discusses his proposition and request.

A fat old CEO BC doesn’t know clears his throat, and addresses the board with a nasty rasp. “What does he know?” he asks the rest of the group. “What’s this about aliens? Why would aliens want to kill us with a plague? It’s preposterous! He must know more than we do! He knows something we don’t!”

“Yes, Sir Charles, he certainly does,” Wentworth says over dramatically, patronizing the old man.

“Thank you for joining us today,” Wentworth says in an “Oh, just waking up, are we?” tone.

Sir Charles lets out a “harrumph.” BC decides to chime in.

“Look. This is what I know,” BC begins. “I know we need to cure this disease that’s killing us! I know where it may have come from. I think I know how we might be able to stop it, or at least how to better combine our efforts to that end. That’s what I know.”

The board’s indecision and confusion is nearly palpable.

There’s a weird, crazy energy in the air.

The murmurs come to an end. Fear hangs in the air.

“You are paralyzed!” Wentworth admonishes the rest of the board. “At least Camp... Pope Peter...” he clears his throat. “At least he’s offering us something. Let’s give him what he wants. At best, he may have something to offer. At worst, he wastes our time.”

“We may have little time left,” a woman CEO says.

“Why let *him* waste any of it?”

“Do you have another option that you’ve somehow been saving until now?” Wentworth asks her.

“Because as far as I can tell, Camp... The, uh, *Pope* here has the only new option on the table.”

Enough with the name thing, Wentworth, I get it...

“Let’s give him control of this ‘Project’ that he thinks is somehow worth something more than its fifty year old labs on the Moon. Why not? It *does* maintain the balance between *us*, after all.” Wentworth looks around the table. “I propose we give Pope Peter the Fourth control of the ‘Transpace Project.’ Do I have a second?”

“But that will make him a CEO!” Sir Charles blusters.

“What’s the problem? He’ll control one company,” Wentworth responds. “Many of you have only risen to your posts in the last month. Who are you to question the Pope?”

Wentworth doesn’t look at BC, but rather at each of the other CEOs seated around the table.

I think if he’d looked at me we might have both burst out laughing. Me. The Pope! Well, I could soon be a CEO, too.

Now if I can just get The Project to get back in touch with me! I’d like to head out to The Project’s asteroid base again. Get those guys tied in with these bozos’ scientists.

The board explodes in conversation. No murmurs now; BC can hear bits and pieces of their conversations.

“Who is this Champion to make demands?”

“Why should we work with him? Is he really Pope?”

BC blacks out.

He awakes to one of the priests in his entourage hovering over him. The aide is mopping his forehead with a cold compress. Wentworth's face looms overhead on a video screen that has lowered from the ceiling.

"You're awake!" Wentworth says to BC.

"Yeah..." BC nods, sits up. His head has cleared. The headache seems to be gone.

Good... Evidently no lingering effects...

"Well, you'll be glad to hear this news: looks like you're getting your way!" Wentworth tells him from the overhead screen. "You're the new CEO of The Transpace Project!"

"They actually went for it?" BC asks Wentworth's grinning video image.

"They did. The paperwork is already in the works. Did you know they still had Van Kilner listed as CEO? He must be long dead by now. Shame how things get out of date like that."

"He's not dead. Not yet," BC says.

"He'd have to be fucking ancient by now," Wentworth protests.

"He is," BC says. He grunts as he tries to get up off the couch. "I met him just before I became the Pope," BC tells Wentworth.

"Well, that could complicate matters," Wentworth tells BC. "I had to have him declared deceased in order to process your paperwork!"

"I'm sure he won't mind," BC says.

Yeah. Right. The old guy'll be pissed!

"Ri-ight," Wentworth says, sarcasm evident in his voice, echoing BC's thoughts.

"Sir?"

The priest standing by with the cold compress tries to get BC's attention.

"Yes?" BC acknowledges him. "Hold that thought, Wentworth, okay?"

"Sure," he answers huffily.

"There's a priority message from the Vatican, sir," the priest informs BC, "it's been waiting for you. A Doctor Capituna from The Project is there to see you. The Vatican has been trying to contact you for the last three hours."

Anita? Finally! Good. She went to the Vatican?! Glad she's persistent!

"Can I talk to her here?" BC asks.

"I have a com unit with me," the priest tells him.

"Fine," BC says, "Set it up and put her through, please."

The priest breaks out an old covert communications unit, a CCU from the OPO, and makes the connection.

Huh... Talking to Anita on the same kind of CCU she recorded me using back on the Moon. Was that only two years ago? Suppose it's kind of ironic.

Anita appears on the screen. Her eyes look red, a little swollen.

"BC! So you're Pope now?!" she says, then snuffles.

"Looks like. I've got another title to tell you about, maybe, too. But enough small talk... what brings you to Vatican City?"

Anita sobs, sucks back another, and wipes away a tear. "Van Kilner's dead. I think *they* did it, BC."

"*They*?" BC asks, and then figures it out. "Oh. Them."

The Eldred. Has to be. She just doesn't want to say it.

"You know!" She hints, getting frustrated by BC's lack of understanding.

"I do, I do," BC tells her, trying to calm her down with his tone of voice. "I'll meet you back at the Vatican soon, as soon as I wrap things up here in Manhattan," he tells Anita.

"Thanks, BC," Anita says. Her image blinks out.

"Well, that solves *that* problem now, doesn't it?" Wentworth says from the screen.

"Jeesh," BC gasps in surprise and revulsion. "You're cold, man," BC says to Wentworth.

"It's just business, Campion. Don't get all soft on me now that you're 'pope'! You're far from being a holy man," Wentworth says. "You're a CEO now. You're on the UTZ council... try acting like a

businessman for a change.”

“I’ve met aliens I have more in common with than I do you,” BC says to Wentworth.

“Oh,” Wentworth says, feigning offense. Then he stops himself. “Wait a minute. You’ve met these aliens?” Wentworth grows darker. “What aren’t you telling us, *Campion*?”

So much for overstatement...

“I’m telling you the sickness is extraterrestrial in origin,” BC says. “But I haven’t actually met any aliens... not yet. It was just an expression. They can’t be any colder than you, though.”

“You’ve insulted me to the core. Oh, my poor soul,” Wentworth mock-protests.

“I’m heading back to Rome,” BC tells him.

“Good. Stay in touch. Lets get those geniuses of yours working with our brains as soon as possible, eh?”

“First smart thing I’ve heard you say,” BC says to Wentworth. “Pack up and get us out of here,” BC says to his aid.

Anita thinks the Eldred killed Van Kilner? Why? Why would they kill him? Why would they want him dead?

It never gets any easier, does it?

And who am I asking, anyway?

Chapter Seventeen

BC leaves New York and heads back to Vatican City.

So...

A CEO now.

In charge of The Project.

And the Pope, too!

Man, is the human race hurting or what? When they turn to me... ME? Bernard Campion? How could someone like me rise this high? But, then again, who else is left?

Anita is waiting in BC’s offices when he arrives in Rome.

“BC! Or do I have to call you Pope something?” she asks as she smiles. The smile quickly fades, replaced by concern.

“BC’ is still fine,” BC says. “I’m so sorry about Van Kilner, Anita, I know you were close.”

She drops her head, and then looks back up at BC with tears wetting the corners of her eyes.

“Thank you, BC,” she says softly. She wipes the tears away quickly. “I just got some more bad news,” she says, shaking her head.

“Seems the UTZ has taken notice of The Project again. Out of the blue they’re installing some asshole as our new CEO!” she says with exasperation. “Hey! Why are you smiling?”

BC laughs. “Say hello to your new ‘asshole’ CEO!”

“You? You told them about The Project? We told you about The Project in secrecy!” Anita says in surprise and anger. “Why? How could you let them know we exist? Why did you open us up to UTZ scrutiny?”

BC is surprised by her anger. “I’m trying to protect The Project!” BC insists. “Besides, why bring me in and tell me all about the Project, unless you were getting ready to ‘go public’ and tell everyone? Wasn’t it inevitable? How else could Project scientists work with the other UTZ scientists? We’ve all gotta work together to stop this plague. I thought you could see that!”

“How else could I protect The Project and still get all our scientists together to work on the plague, except by doing this?”

Anita ponders this, staring at the floor. She doesn’t answer him. After a minute, she looks back up at BC.

“So. You’re our new boss,” she says. “Great.” She sighs heavily.

Not exactly the reaction I'd hoped for...

"Any other shocking news, then?" she asks. BC, thinking, doesn't respond immediately. "Anything on the plague?" she prompts him.

"No," he admits. "The UTZ scientists are stymied, too. But the UTZ Council is willing to have their brains and our brains work together on it."

"Progressive of them," Anita comments with heavy sarcasm. "So, now it's 'our brains', huh?" BC scratches his head.

Once again... not exactly the reaction I'd hoped for.

"Why so hostile?" he asks her.

She sighs again.

"I don't know," she admits. "I don't know what to do, BC. I feel kind of... I guess I feel helpless! And I don't like it!" She turns away, walks a few steps, and turns back.

"It's not you. Well, you *are* part of it. But that'll pass. I'm still reeling from Van Kilner's..." she pauses.

"His... passing. It's like getting hit in the stomach over and over, BC."

BC tries to say something consoling.

"I know he meant a lot to you. I'm sorry," BC fails. "What happened? You said you think *they* killed him? The Eldred?"

"It was like the plague," she tells him. "But he survived the plague! It had to be something else, something new, something they designed just for him!" she rants.

"Are you sure you're not just being paranoid?" BC asks her. "He was an old, old man."

She frowns, shakes her head, and looks up at BC through red-rimmed eyes, suddenly vulnerable.

"I don't know anymore."

She turns and walks away, turns back and then starts pacing across the office.

"You're pacing," BC points out.

"I'm thinking," Anita answers him, the edge back in her voice. She paces back over to look him in the eye.

"I wish you'd met them," she says to BC.

"Who?" he asks.

"The Eldred," she clarifies. "I'd love to get your take on them. See what you think."

"I think they sound creepy," BC cracks.

"They actually *seem* very non-threatening. But that passivity does make them a little creepy, in a way. It's like you're always waiting for the other shoe to drop with them."

"I'm hearing some pretty loud footsteps, now," BC remarks. "You used to trust them?"

"Well, to a point," she tells him. "You'd know what I mean if you'd met them," she protests.

She stops.

"No! You should! You really should meet them!"

She's getting excited. "I can arrange it!"

"Wait! What? You want me to meet the Eldred? No way!" BC protests. "I don't think so! Let them poison or plague me, too, the way they got Van Kilner? Are you nuts?"

"I don't think its cra..."

"It's like walking into a trap we've built for ourselves!" he protests.

What is she thinking?!

"You've been immune to this plague thing so far," she points out.

"So far," BC agrees, "but so was Van Kilner."

Anita winces as if in pain. She reels like she's been hit.

"I'm sorry," BC says, just to say something.

"No. Don't be," she tells him. "You've got a valid point. But I've been immune so far, too. And they haven't killed *me* yet." She looks puzzled.

What is she thinking?

Should I do this?

The Eldred don't know me. They would have had no time or opportunity to cook something up

for me alone. Maybe I should meet them, you know? Know your enemy and all...

“Okay,” BC says. “I’ll do it.”

“What?” she says.

“I’ve changed my mind. I want to meet the Eldred. Give you my impressions,” BC tells her. “Get in touch. See what they say.”

“Really?”

“Really. We need a next step, right?” BC asks her rhetorically. “Nothing else is working. This could be it. Might be worth the risk,” he says, thinking out loud. “I can’t be selfish now. I’m the fucking Pope.”

“Nice language, pontiff,” Anita ribs him.

“What?” BC feigns ignorance. “So I’m the Pope. It doesn’t seem to matter much.” BC looks around the office, around at the city beyond. “Especially not here!

“Vatican City runs itself. My job, basically, is to look good and stay out of the way of the Curia. Things are still shaking out after reunification, too, so there’s territorial weirdness, redundant administration and confusion. And so many people dead,” BC trails off.

“I know,” Anita says. “You can really feel the scale of it down here. On Earth, I mean. There’s no one around the ports. Hardly anyone in St. Peter’s Square. The hallways here echo because they’re empty...” she trails off as well. Silence fills the momentary lull in their conversation.

“Well,” BC says breaking the quiet. “The fact that this place runs itself *should* mean that I can get out of here for a little while.

“I want to head back to the Moon, coordinate the UTZ and Project efforts from the Vatican Mission on Lunar Prime,” he tells her.

“Do you think they’ll just let the Pope run away like that?” she asks him, only half serious.

“I don’t think they’ll stop me,” BC says. “The Vatican Mission is an extension of this place, right?” BC says, spreading his arms wide to take it all in. Anita starts laughing.

“What?” BC asks her.

“You just don’t like it here, do you?!” she ribs BC. “Can’t wait to get away? You should see how uncomfortable you look!”

BC shrugs. “It doesn’t come naturally to me, no. But if I can do something to stop this craziness by being ‘pope’, then I’m going to do it.

“I’m not even sure we’re at war anymore, at least not with the UIN... not when people are dying from this plague in record numbers, not when we’re busy burying our dead, not when we’re *not* killing each other.

“There’s no time to create new corpses, no time to continue to war with each other. But maybe time to realize we’re at war with The Eldred. If what you say is true.”

“Look,” Anita waves her arms. “I don’t want to discourage you from doing what you want to do. You want to go back to Lunar Prime, go! You’re the boss, right? Let’s go wherever you’re comfortable.”

“Thanks. I’ll admit it, I do like it there. Shit, I built the place!”

“There you go again, not sounding too pope-like,” Anita points out again. She smiles. BC decides to try to win her over.

“So. Now. Is it okay that I’m your CEO?” he asks her.

She shrugs. “Yeah, I guess so. I’m coming around. I guess it’s good to have a buffer between The Project and the UTZ,” she says. “Even if the buffer is you!”

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” BC says, smiling. “I will need your help,” he says to Anita.

“Yeah, I knew that. You might be the CEO, but you’re soooo newbie it’s scary,” she says. “Can we keep the asteroid base quiet for now?”

“Absolutely! We’ll make the Moon base the focal point for the UTZ for The Project. Let’s get the scientists studying the plague set up on the Moon. Seemed like there was plenty of room in that old base of yours. Ours.”

Anita smiles at his slip up and correction.

“I’ll make that happen. I’ll head right back to the Moon and make the arrangements, make sure our scientists get back to the Moon base,” she confirms. “And I’ll see if I can contact The Eldred for you.”

“You do that. I’m going to set up my own travel to Lunar Prime. I’m going to travel incognito, as a simple priest.”

Anita laughs. “There is nothing simple about you, Bernard Campion,” she tells him. She laughs again, and then turns and walks out of the office, leaving BC standing there alone.

She tried to kill me! But I’m beginning to like her?!

Is that some kind of death wish? Attracted to someone who wanted you dead?

BC has his staff book him passage on a commercial flight to Lunar Prime, one of the few shuttles still running.

The Curia don’t protest his intended leave too strenuously, just enough to make themselves appear to be concerned.

He’s on his way to the Moon early the next day. BC is booked on his flight as “Father Blanco”, but he doesn’t feel terribly incognito.

At least I was able to avoid the entourage!

He tries to sleep on the shuttle to Lunar Prime, but his mind is racing.

I wonder if Anita has talked to the Eldred yet? Have the scientists arrived?

Why haven’t we heard anything from Mars?

Outside his window, BC watches the Earth grow smaller as his ship speeds to the Moon.

There are half as many of us now, down there. And I thought I was a professional killer! The Eldred make me look like a novice! I never worked on a global scale, after all. But since we’re all killers, maybe on some level we will understand each other. Maybe? I don’t... Oh shit! A headache?! No...

Someone has inconveniently decided to drive a spike through BC’s skull, or injection-load his brain with expanding concrete. Either way, his head feels like it’s going to explode. Soon. He curls into as much of a ball as he can in a commercial shuttle seat.

Makeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstop...

The headache doesn’t stop.

BC stays curled up for the rest of the trip. The pressure inside his skull eases somewhat as they land on The Moon at The Lunar Prime Spaceport

Damn... I need my head to clear.

BC struggles to get off the shuttle, trying not to look drunk or chemically altered.

I’m not messed up! Well, I am, but I’m not on anything.

Everything’s foggy for BC as he gets off the shuttle and half-walks, half-staggeres into the spaceport. He almost runs headlong into Anita.

“Woah!” She says.

“I have a headache,” BC tries to explain.

“You look horrible,” Anita tells him.

“Thanks. You look great, too,” he jokes, feebly. “Nice to see you.”

“Wow, lame sarcasm even as your brain is about to leak out of both ears. Impressive,” Anita says.

“I...” BC, trying to talk, ends up wincing as another dagger of pain shoots through his skull.

“You really *are* bad off,” Anita notes. “Why don’t you come lay down on my ship? It’s parked nearby. We can see if there’s anything we can do for you on board.”

“Sure,” BC weakly agrees.

Just trying to keep my shit together!

“Where is it?” he asks her.

“This way,” she says, grabbing his shoulder and steering him off toward the berth where her ship awaits. She lets go and walks ahead. He struggles to follow her lead, manages to follow her up and into her ship.

Or my ship, really. It belongs to The Project, and I’m the CEO, now, after all. Right? Hard to think...

“Where can I lay down?” BC asks Anita once they’re aboard.

“Here,” she says, opening a door in the corridor wall. “Use this stateroom.”

BC half walks, half falls into the room and onto the bed.

... thought these things were done... now two in quick succession!? What the fuck?

BC closes his eyes and tries to sleep. He skips across the surface of sleep like a rock skips across the surface of a still pond, pain swimming behind his eyes. He can hardly think straight as he struggles past the pain.

Suddenly, everything shrinks down to a pinpoint. BC feels still, calm. His world begins to open up and expand. The walls fall away.

What? Where? Where am I?

IN THE CENTER, IN TOUCH WITH THE ALL THAT IS ONE

Oh... sure I am.

BC walks across an infinite ocean, a still, calm sea. The other voice echoes in from nowhere and everywhere, not heard by ears but heard, all the same.

LET THOSE WHO HAVE EARS HEAR

I'm listening...

ARE YOU? ARE YOU REALLY?

What... you doubt me?

I CHALLENGE YOU! QUESTIONS STIR THOUGHTS, ACTIVATE CENTERS WITHIN THE MIND, OPEN THE MIND, AND CREATE POSSIBILITIES. THE DOORS OPEN. I CHALLENGE YOU. I HOPE.

So... Who are you supposed to be? Jesus?

I AM... ASSOCIATED ENERGY, LET'S SAY. I'VE TRIED TO EXPLAIN THIS TO YOU BEFORE. HA! BEFORE IS NOT A CONCEPT I'M USUALLY ENCUMBERED BY. I AM JESUS. I AM ALSO MANY OTHERS, SIMULTANEOUSLY. SOME OPERATE ON YOUR LEVEL, SOME ON THIS LEVEL. YOU ARE ONE OF VERY FEW THAT HAS AWOKEN. YOU OPERATE ON THIS LEVEL, BUT OTHERS NEVER AWAKEN.

So. Wait... Are you saying you're me? That would make sense. This is all in my imagination, or unconscious, really.

IS IT? STRANGE... I'M NOT SAYING THAT I'M YOU... BUT WE ARE ALL ONE.

What... What is happening to me? These headaches? Are they related to... to you? YOU ARE WAKING UP! AND I AM THE ONLY OTHER AWAKE.

"Awake?" BC asks as he wakes up. The vision and voice are gone.

"You awake?" he hears Anita ask from close by. "How's your headache?"

"Huh," BC says, noticing his head has cleared a little. "It's gone. I'm better."

"You've been out for about three hours," she tells him.

"Three hours?" BC can't believe it.

"What?" Anita wonders. "Did it seem longer or shorter?"

"Shorter," BC tells her. "Bizarre dream. At least my headache is going away. Did you give me anything for it?" he asks her.

"No... We thought it would be better to wait until you came around again. Do you need something?"

"Nah," he reassures her. "I feel okay now."

He sits up on the bed and looks around the stateroom. Standard gray walls, blue stripe running around the walls about 3 feet off the ground. Fold down furniture, including the bed he's laying on.

Anita sits about a foot away on a chair folded down from the wall opposite the bed. She leans forward to see how BC's doing.

Huh... She smells good.

"Are you wearing a new perfume or something?" BC asks her.

"What?" Anita is surprised by his question out of left field.

"You smell good," he tells her.

Is she blushing? Hard to tell in this low light.

"It's jasmine, kind of... you like it?"

"Yeah," BC says. Their eyes meet and lock. "You smell damn good, Anita Capituna," he tells her. He stretches up off the bed toward her. She leans forward. Their lips meet in a kiss. It's electric!

Wow! Fuckin' A... Wow!

BC and Anita kiss for a solid minute before they each realize what they're doing and pull back, away from each other.

"Um," she starts to say.

"Don't," BC stops her. "Don't say anything yet." He looks her in the eyes. She looks away, and then looks back at him.

"Hmmm..." BC says.

"That was..." Anita looks for a word, "Electric!"

BC shakes his head in disbelief at what's happening, and then realizes Anita might take it the wrong way. He says, quickly, "Yeah it was."

"Yeah," Anita says.

"There's always been something there, though... hasn't there?" BC asks her. "I mean, even when you were trying to kill me, there was some electricity between us."

"Oh, you mean like when you were clobbering me over the head with hatch doors?" Anita counters.

"Touché," BC admits.

The conversation has dispelled some of the magic between them. BC backs off and leans back on the bed as Anita leans back in her chair.

"Let's not..." Anita starts.

"No, not right now..." BC finishes. Each of them is somehow saying more than they're actually saying out loud.

"I think I need a little more sleep. To clear my head," BC says. Anita nods and stands up.

"Good idea," she says. "I'll take care of some other things while you rest. If you need me, the com's right here," she tells him, indicating the obvious com controls in the wall next to the bed. She looks at BC again, and then glances away quickly. She ducks quickly out the door. BC settles back down in the bed and lets sleep wash over him.

He wakes up a while later feeling much better, ready to go. He thumbs on the com.

"Anita?" he asks.

"BC?" she answers. "You're awake?"

"Yeah. But I could use refreshing."

"There's a refresher just down the corridor from your stateroom," she says. "Just take a right when you leave the stateroom, and go in the second door on your right."

"Great!" BC says, "Thanks!"

BC finds the refresher easily and gets his act together in the small room. When he finishes and leaves the refresher room, Anita is waiting for him.

"You okay to go out in public now?" she asks him. "You don't want to look too 'out of it'! I think we got you into the ship here fast enough that no one recognized you, but it's a long way from the spaceport to the Vatican Mission. You're bound to be seen, spotted, recognized... We can't have you looking like crap, right?"

"Thanks for all your concern for my image," BC says, slightly puzzled by the angle of Anita's concern.

"Why the PR pep talk?" he asks her.

"Whether you know it or not," she starts, pauses. "Whether you *like* it or not, you're a symbol now, BC. A symbol of strength. The new Pope! Still healthy in the face of the plague! The new leader of The Project, too, and all that entails. It's important you look good, BC. Don't you see?"

"I see," says BC. "Thanks for reminding me. I thought I was traveling incognito?"

"You *were* traveling incognito," Anita informs him. But now they know you're here on Lunar Prime. The media began to report a suspicious absence on your part; until your Vatican people informed them you were coming here, not missing."

"Missing? Damn," BC says, realizing he can no longer make a move without *someone* noticing.

Second time they've noticed, now. That's depressing... and oppressive. And Anita's all business now, none of the closeness we had last night... What gives?

"The governor would like to see you, too," she informs BC, "Whenever you can fit her into your *busy*

schedule.

“The governor?” BC says, confused for a minute.

“Erskine?” she reminds him. “She wants to see you.”

Is that jealousy I hear?

Nah... can't be. You have a vivid imagination, BC!

“I should check in with the Vatican, too, back at the Mission,” BC says. He starts to go. Anita looks worried. “I’m okay!” BC insists, trying to reassure her. He straightens his clothes and makes his way off The Project ship.

Once in the spaceport, BC knows his way around. He walks through the port, through the atrium, and down the corridors to the Vatican Mission and the offices he left not long ago. BC smiles as he opens the door and sees his replacement as ambassador sitting at the desk.

“M’Bekke! You old dog, you! How the fuck are you?”

Cardinal M’Bekke smiles, and then frowns. His eyes glance deliberately sideways. BC follows his eyes and sees Amanda Erskine is standing there in the office.

“Sorry, madam governor,” BC says. He regains his composure. “How are you, Governor Erskine?”

“I’m fine,” she says, then stops. “What should I call you?” she asks.

“What? Here, now?” BC asks her. She nods. “BC is still fine. I prefer it, actually.”

“Okay, then *BC*,” she says with a little emphasis, “You’re certainly not the usual, um, *papal* type, are you?”

“Thanks, I think,” BC says, taking it as a left-handed compliment. “Sorry about the ‘F’ bomb,” he apologizes.

“I’ve heard it before,” she says with a laugh. “Not to worry.” She sits down on the couch behind her.

“Come, sit down, BC,” M’Bekke says warmly. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks,” BC says. He sits down.

“Glad to see you’re not ‘missing’, BC,” M’Bekke says.

“I never was,” BC insists.

“Image control,” Governor Erskine says.

“What?” BC asks.

“You need to work on your image control,” Erskine says to BC. “*You* might want to travel incognito... but ‘The Pope’ really can’t,” she says. “Can he?”

BC bristles a bit, but takes in what she’s saying. “*I did*... at least for a little while.”

“Fine, you did,” Erskine says, “but then your absence created a news story. You’ve got to manage your image better, be aware that your actions have consequences,” she explains. “You’ve conducted yourself well when you’ve been in the media spotlight. Good image management there. It’s important to present the image of a young, strong, and healthy leader of the New catholic Church. It plays well.”

“I’ve been trying to be good,” BC says. “I bottle up all my incivility until I can unleash it on my friends,” he jokes.

“Oh,” she says, “am I a friend, then?”

“I didn’t know you were here,” BC says, a bit more coldly than he means to.

“Ouch,” she says. “How long have we known one another? A couple of years, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” BC says. “Sure. And you weren’t one of McEntyre’s lackeys, were you?” BC asks with subtle sarcasm.

“I was not!” Erskine insists. “Not even from the same party. Simply lieutenant governor to his governor,” she says, “And now, governor.”

“Governor of Lunar Prime,” BC muses. “That position has a checkered past, you know,” he jokes. “I hear the last one left in some disgrace.”

“You enjoyed *that* business, didn’t you,” Erskine accuses BC, playfully.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” BC admits with some glee.

Like I should even pretend to feel otherwise! Nothing to apologize for...

“I thought your God was all about love and forgiveness,” she presses BC.

“Touché,” BC agrees.

"It's time to move on, anyway," Erskine says. "McEntyre's the past. I'm all about the future," she claims.

"We've been pretty lucky here on Lunar Prime. Not so many deaths from the plague. But it has passed through here. People have died. It seems to have started here," she pauses, clears her throat. "That's why I'm here, actually," she admits. "I've been told you know something about it," she says, leveling her gaze at BC.

"About what?" BC plays dumb.

"About the plague!" she says with a touch of exasperation. "About how it started. What caused it and why it started here," she says, getting in BC's face, "And I want to know just who and what this 'Project' you're suddenly in charge of is. Here on my Moon!"

"Ah... The Project," BC says, nodding. He doesn't say any more.

"Well?" Erskine says, finally, when BC doesn't continue, exasperated with his silence.

"Where do I begin?" BC asks rhetorically. "M'Bekke, what have you been telling the governor here?"

"Nothing, BC!" M'Bekke protests. "She's been persistent, yes, but she's been told nothing you wouldn't want her to know, BC," M'Bekke says, shaking his head.

Erskine clears her throat.

"What?" BC asks.

"I'm getting kinda pissed off here, boys!" she says sternly. "I don't care how 'holy' you folks are! Cute is cute. But there is too much shit going on for me to just ignore it. So don't patronize me!"

"I'm sorry," BC apologizes. "We need your help, Amanda. We need allies. I'll tell you what I can, governor. Let me fill you in on a bigger picture than I used to know existed."

Where to begin? And what to say?

"The Project," BC begins, "is a UTZ subsidiary. The Project developed the Transpace Drive for the UTZ military. Once the military got to Mars, they left the Project alone. But The Project kept going, first on its base here on the Moon, later out at an undisclosed base in the Asteroids. I've just been named CEO of The Project, replacing the recently deceased Van Kilner, who had been in charge of The Project since its inception."

"Van Kilner? The scientist?" Erskine says in surprise, "My God, he must have been a hundred or something! He must have been ancient!"

"He was," BC admits, "and living in low gravity out in the asteroids."

"Right," Erskine says, but she's shaking her head. "But we haven't gone past Mars!"

"The Project has. Van Kilner lived in the asteroids, on a secret base. It's a nice place, I've been out there," BC tells her.

"So... we really have been out past Mars?" she asks him.

"We have," BC assures her.

"Then how come no one's heard about it?" she protests.

"They've been vewy quiet about it," BC says, in an Elmer Fudd voice.

"Don't mock me!" Erskine chastises him.

"I'm sorry," BC says. "Look, I didn't learn about all this until just about a week ago. I'm just trying to keep this, um, light, you know?"

"Go on," she says, calming down.

"Evidently, once The Project developed Transpace ships for the UTZ military to use to get to Mars, the UTZ military left them alone. They stayed under the radar after that, but kept developing the Transpace technology. They headed out to the asteroids to keep working unseen and unmonitored by the UTZ. They've been going back out there ever since," BC says. "Even the UTZ council had lost track of them. When I told the UTZ council about The Project, they had no idea what I was talking about... which I used to my advantage to get them to name *me* the CEO of The Project. They didn't have much choice," BC says with a chuckle.

"Nice," she says. "Go on."

"The Project base *was* here on the Moon," BC says. "But now the asteroid base is their main base of operations. They do still maintain their base here as a small outpost... right under your nose, as a matter

of fact. They're still here," BC tells her.

"What, The Project?" she asks incredulously.

"Yes, The Project," BC tells her. "You must know about the UTZ base on the other side of the Moon?"

"That? I didn't think it was used much, if at all," she admits. "An old frontier survey lab."

"They keep a low profile," BC tells her.

"What? That's 'The Project'?"

"Yup," BC confirms it. "They still work out of there. Have you ever heard of 'flashers'?" BC asks her.

"Flashers?" she asks. "Sure. Everyone has. Superstition at work! Alien myths, legends..."

"Not exactly," BC informs her. "Not quite. Those flashers are Project ships. Using adapted alien technology."

"Alien tech?" She's taken aback.

"Alien," BC assures her. "The Project's been in contact with alien races. Worked with a couple of them. Adapted some of their technology. The Flashers are us."

"Really? So they're real?" she asks.

"They're real," he insists, reinforcing it. "And I know of at least three alien races we, or The Project, has been in touch with."

"There are The Domo... according to the Project, they're kind of like Vampires, but they have helped us. Then there's the Flaze; they look a lot like the classic UFO aliens, but they're quiet, keep more to themselves than the Domo."

"The Eldred I don't know that much about," BC pauses, "well, except that they probably brought the plague to the Moon."

"What?!" M'Bekke and Erskine both gasp in unison.

"Yup," BC tells them both, "These aliens called the 'Eldred' are more than likely responsible for creating the plague and delivering it here to the Moon during our last peace conference. You asked what I knew about the plague," BC says, turning to Erskine. "This is it: It looks like we have an alien race to blame for this plague. They're called the Eldred. I've asked them to meet with me... which I'm not entirely convinced is a good idea, necessarily."

"No?" Erskine says.

"Well, I've survived the plague, at least so far. As have both of you," he gestures at Erskine and M'Bekke. "But Van Kilner had been exposed to it and survived, too. I met with him myself not long ago, just before I, um, well, became pope."

But his people tell me he had a more recent meeting with the Eldred, in the last week or so, and after that he took sick and died. So I'm not positive that The Eldred won't take advantage of meeting with me and to do the same thing, take me out."

"You think they might try to take you out?" M'Bekke asks, "And you still want to go?"

"I wouldn't say I want to. I think I have to," BC tells him. BC turns to Erskine. "You're awfully quiet."

"Wow. You've just dumped a ton on me," Amanda Erskine tells BC. "That's a lot to digest."

"I was feeling left out," M'Bekke jokes, sounded faux dejected.

"Well," BC tells them, "You're both all in, now. That's where we're at. You now know pretty much everything I do." He turns to Erskine, "M'Bekke's just learning all of this now, too. And you're one of the first to learn of all this outside of The Project and the UTZ hierarchy," he tells her. "I hope my candidness isn't lost on you."

She shakes her head, "No, no it's not. Thank you." She pauses, mentally digesting all she's just learned from BC. "Okay. So. What do we do now?"

"I'm not entirely sure," BC levels with her. "That's why I came back here, to get away and get a chance to think about it, to try to see the so-called 'big picture' and figure out what's next. If there is a 'what's next'. It's why I asked to meet The Eldred."

"I see," she says.

"I wanted to talk to M'Bekke here, too. And I'd planned on speaking to you, to see if you could be brought into the loop. I didn't think it was going to be the very first thing I did, but there you go. Sometimes the universe works in weird ways."

“The universe? You’re Pope! Aren’t you supposed to be giving God the credit?” she ribs him. BC smiles good-naturedly. “Thank you for bringing me in,” she says again. “Although, that is a lot to digest.” She rubs her temples. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“No, that’s pretty much it,” BC says. “It’s pretty much an all or nothing thing. You either hear it all or nothing. It all ties together too much. Aliens, ships and bases, oh my,” he jokes.

“I’ve still gotta ask,” Erskine says, “What do we do now? Do you really want to meet with them?” she asks BC.

“Well,” BC starts, and then stops. “I don’t think we have much choice... that *I* have much choice. I have to meet with the Eldred... and try not to die. Of course, I’m open to any other suggestions you might have,” BC trails off.

“I’ve got nothing,” Erskine says. “Not yet, anyway. This isn’t something you can make a snap judgment on, you know.”

“Believe me, I know,” BC assures her.

“Having just learned about all of this, I’d like to take a little time to digest it all, give it some real thought, you know?” she scrunches her forehead. “I think I’ll retreat to my offices and try to sort some of this out. If you’ll excuse me?” She looks from BC to M’Bekke, and then heads for the door.

“I look forward to any new ideas you might have,” BC tells her as she leaves. After the door closes behind her, BC turns to M’Bekke.

“It’s bad, M’Bekke. So many dead! I’m the pope of nothing. The church is decimated. I’m only pope by default! There’s no way I should be pope!”

“Maybe not,” M’Bekke says. “Or maybe you should be. Maybe you, Bernard Campion, are the perfect person to be pope right now, under these extreme circumstances. Maybe God put you here and now to be in the right place at the right time. It doesn’t matter, because you *are* pope, now. So deal with it!”

“Tough love, M’Bekke!” BC says.

M’Bekke shakes his head.

“And what of the UTZ?” M’Bekke asks.

“What of them?” BC asks.

“What are they doing? Are they helping at all?” M’Bekke asks.

“They’re nearly worthless. They put up a good front, but they’re really scared. People have died in record numbers... which is only okay with the UTZ if it’s at *their* hands!”

“Heh,” M’Bekke chuckles and nods in agreement. “But they really made you a CEO? Head of this Project? Put you on the council?” he asks BC.

“They did, can you believe it? I wanted to get control over the Project. None of those other CEOs could have handled it, or would have known what to do with it. So I tried for an ‘honorary CEO’ or something like that. But they went for it! Full membership and CEO of The Project.” BC laughs, “Again, the world *must* be going to hell if I’m getting appointed to the UTZ council!”

“Right,” M’Bekke says, slightly distracted. “Hold on. Something’s... That’s funny,” he says, messing with something on his desktop.

A small private com unit pops up out of the desk. M’Bekke lifts it up off the desktop and hands the private com to BC.

“It’s for you,” he tells him.

BC takes the com and put on the headpiece.

“Hello?” BC asks.

“Campion? Wentworth here. We need to talk. This line is secure. Is your location?”

“It’s secure. I’ve got nothing to hide from anyone here,” BC says, “M’Bekke’s it, and he’s cleared.”

“Okay,” Wentworth says with a slight hesitation. “Fine. Here it is: We want you to take over the chairmanship of the UTZ council.”

What?

BC is stunned.

“What?” he asks.

“The chairman has died. As one of the CEOs on the UTZ council, you *are* eligible for the position. I’m

recommending that you be confirmed post haste, so it will happen.”

“But why?” BC asks, “Why me?”

Wentworth clears his throat on the other end of the line. “We need you, Campion. I hate to say it, but it’s true. You’re in a unique position, BC. You know about the Project, the aliens...”

“Can I think about this?” BC asks him. “I really need some time to think about this,” he insists.

“Okay. But not for too long. I can give you eighteen hours, but then you have to decide,” he says.

“Why so tight a deadline?” BC asks Wentworth.

“We have not yet announced the, er, demise of the former chairman,” Wentworth explains. “We want to have our new chair in place when we do.”

“I see,” says BC. “Okay, then, I’ll, uh, call you in the next seventeen hours.”

“Good enough. Wentworth out.”

BC sits for a moment, still stunned, with the com on but silent.

“What was that about?” M’Bekke asks him, not having heard the exchange.

“It just gets weirder,” BC tells him. “They want me to chair the UTZ council.”

“What?!” M’Bekke exclaims, dumbfounded.

BC shakes his head. “I can’t believe it. The more I run from authority, the more seems to pile on me! The more I’m becoming the authority!”

“Oh, the irony,” M’Bekke observes wryly.

“I can’t be the right man for this job, too, M’Bekke!” BC protests. “There’s just no way!”

“But perhaps your very lack of ambition for these posts is what makes you the right person to hold them,” M’Bekke says, philosophically.

“Is that from the Bible?” BC asks him.

“Actually, I was thinking of an old poem by William Butler Yeats called, ‘The Second Coming’: ‘the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity,’” M’Bekke finishes.

“Great. So, you’re saying my lack of conviction makes me the best man for the job?” BC asks.

“Take it as you will, BC.”

BC gets up. “I’m heading to my quarters for a while. I’ve got to give Wentworth his answer in the next eighteen hours,” BC pauses, realizes he’s assuming too much. “Are the guest quarters even available?” he asks, realizing his mistake.

M’Bekke just laughs. “You’re the pope! This is the Vatican Mission. You get to stay wherever, whenever! I assumed you’d kick me out of my quarters, get your old quarters back. You’re the boss! You get to make those calls now, BC,” M’Bekke informs him. “You see? There are perks to the job!”

“So,” BC pauses for effect, “are the guest quarters available?”

“No,” M’Bekke says seriously. Then he lets out a sharp laugh. “I’m in the guest quarters! When the Curia told me you were coming, I decided to move. I thought you would like your old quarters back, while you were here. They’re just down the cor...” M’Bekke starts.

“I know, I know where they are,” BC says, cutting him off. “I built the place, remember?”

“Of course,” M’Bekke says.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to move, M’Bekke,” BC tells him.

“I know. Not to worry. A change of scenery can often be beneficial,” he reassures BC.

“Thanks again, M’Bekke. Thank you very much, for everything.”

“You’re welcome, BC. Now go get some rest. It sounds like you’re going to be busy for a while,”

M’Bekke says.

“Indeed,” BC agrees. He leaves M’Bekke’s office and heads to his old quarters.

BC’s mind is reeling as he walks.

I feel like my brain is full! At least my head isn’t hurting again! No more headaches, please! With so much going on, I can’t afford to get knocked out by another one. With so much going on, I’m surprised I’m not feeling one coming on! Not that I’m wishing for one! I’m glad it’s not, you know.

The com is flashing for BC’s attention when he arrives in his old quarters. The source is a surprise: it’s a priority message from Al Salid of Mars.

He's still alive!

BC picks up the call. "Al Salid?"

"Campion," Al Salid says.

"How are..." BC begins, but stops when he realizes Al Salid's message is recorded. Al Salid continues after a quick pause.

"Good. You and I are still alive, Allah's will be praised. We need to talk," Al Salid tells BC. "I am contacting you now, directly, myself, because I must. Now is the time. There is much I hear tell of that's strange... new... different. The only thing all these strange, new and different things have in common is... you, Bernard Campion," Al Salid says. "Or must I now call you Pope Peter? For the time being I will call you Campion. But enough about such trivialities!" Al Salid says dismissively, "there are serious matters to discuss. Why do so many strange things lead back to you? Why is it when I hear that the plague may be an alien plague, I hear that Bernard Campion knows what is going on? Why when I hear of 'flashers', ships better and faster than any of us should have, do I hear of some 'project' lead by you, Campion? You would seem to be in a central position, in a position to tell me what is going on. So... what is going on?"

Jeesh. He's heard some of it, no doubt... the UIN still have agents among us, it seems.

"We hear much from the New catholic Church and the UTZ. I have heard you are now Pope, of course. And word came today that you are now on the UTZ council. I did not realize you were so ambitious, Campion. But perhaps you are the unique individual needed in this unique time and in this unique place. If this is true, you have been given a unique opportunity as well.

"You can either rise or fall to the occasion. If you fall, all will know your failure, and all will fall with you. If you rise, if you succeed, all will rise with you: all will share in your success. It is the old story of the hero or the goat. You may be in a position to go either way. If any of this makes sense to you, I offer you my counsel.

"In any case, I ask you to call me, as soon as you can. We have much to discuss. I have said more than I had planned to in this message, but I will leave it all the same. Salaam," Al Salid says in closing, and the message blips off.

"Damn," BC says under his breath.

More on my plate? Who does he think I am?

Who am I? What am I now?

BC can almost hear an answer, somewhere on the edge of his awareness, a tingle on the edge of his consciousness.

Yeah? You out there, "God"? You gonna answer that one, "Jesus"?

There is no answer.

The UTZ is in tatters. And they want me to take over the chairmanship of it! I'm already in charge of the NcC, although the Curia pretty much runs everything, anyway. The Earth is a graveyard. They're having trouble keeping up with burying everyone who's died from this plague. But the UTZ tries to maintain a strong front.

Survivors are turning to the NcC for comfort, for answers, but what do we have to offer? What do I have to give them? Nothing, really. Maybe some hope? Jesus, I just don't know.

If I am the right person in the right place, the unique person for this unique situation, what do I do next? Meet with the Eldred? Should I not meet with them? What course? Should I return Al Salid's call?

Why not?

BC turns on the com and places a call to Mars, to Al Salid.

"Campion? This is a surprise," Al Salid says when the contact is finally established.

"I found your message... refreshing," BC says, searching for a word. "Honest. And thought provoking."

"Thank you," Al Salid says. "Kind words coming from the nearly de facto ruler of Planet Earth."

"Oh come on," BC answers.

"Well, they're all turning to your NcC, to your religion. They are looking to you for their salvation, Campion. You are their leader. Do you run from your responsibility?"

“No. Yes. Sometimes. Maybe...” BC decides to level with him, “I’m just not... well, I’m not used it yet. All these responsibilities...”

“And I hear tell you may be adding more,” Al Salid says. He lowers his voice, “I hear you may be named the new chairman of the UTZ council.”

Damn! Must be a leak on Wentworth’s end!

“Seems like you hear a great deal, for someone isolated on Mars. Maybe even more than I do,” BC says.

Heh! Let him chew on that one for a bit!

“I’d like to hear more,” Al Salid says. “What else can you tell me?”

He’s going for it. Might as well tell him.

BC levels with Al Salid. He tells him all about the aliens, The Project, the plague. The Eldred. Al Salid soaks it all in, in silence.

“And now I’ve asked the Eldred to meet with me,” BC says, drawing to a close. “What do you think?”

“There is much they are not telling you, is what I think. I will say more on that in a moment,” Al Salid says. “But I thank you for telling me what you know. Much of what you’ve told me I had heard in part from other sources. But the fact you’ve confirmed it, and not tried to dissemble about it, is of prime importance to me. You have been straightforward and honest with me.”

“Thank you,” BC says, “I’m glad you realize that. I don’t think we have anything to hide from each other anymore. There are bigger threats, to all of us.”

“So, you think these ‘Eldred’ may hold the key? That this plague is *their* plague, a weapon used against us?”

“I do. At least, I think so,” BC affirms.

“Then you should meet with them,” Al Salid says. “I believe this is a risk you must take. For all of us.”

“Oh,” BC says.

I didn’t expect a decision from him so quickly. Didn’t expect that would be his answer, either.

“Well, then,” BC says, continuing. “I guess I will. Thank you for your insights, Al Salid.”

“You are most welcome. I must also tell you something. The Eldred have been in contact with me as well. I do not believe they told you of this,” Al-Salid informs BC.

“This is another reason I am contacting you. They have asked me to meet with them to discuss religion. I was truly astonished to be contacted by members of an alien race. I did not know then that they could be the originators of the plague. Now I must wonder about their motives. Thank you for this information,” Al-Salid says.

“You’re welcome.”

Haven’t actually spoken with them, Al-Salid. They haven’t told me anything! Wonder if they called Al-Salid before or after my request for a meeting?

“And Champion? If I may?” Al Salid says solicitously.

“Yes?”

“You should accept the chairmanship of the UTZ, too.”

“But I hadn’t said anything ab...”

“No need,” Al Salid interrupts him. “I will be glad to see you in that capacity, Champion. It will be the first time ever that a real human being is in charge of them,” Al Salid says.

“Huh,” Champion pauses, “Thank you, Al Salid.”

“You are welcome, Champion. You have changed. Do you know this?”

“I have? I don’t feel...”

“You seem different to me,” Al Salid says. “You are feeling more of the weight of this world, are you not?”

“What?” BC asks, but then answers, “I guess I am.”

“We should meet after we get back from our meetings with the Eldred,” Al-Salid suggests. “But we need to keep it quiet, low key and off the radar. People otherwise will read too much into such a meeting.”

“I could come see you on Mars,” BC offers, “maybe travel incognito!”

The Curia’s gonna love me!

“Incognito?” Al-Salid says. He laughs. “You do have a flair for the dramatic, don’t you, Champion?”
“Do you think so?” BC asks him. “It’s just that I’d rather work behind the scenes.”

“Indeed. That may no longer be an option for you.”

“You could be right,” BC admits. “Let’s keep in touch on this.”

“Indeed. Well, then,” Al Salid says. “I look forward to our next communication. Call me when you need me,” Al Salid says in closing. “Good night, Champion. Allah be praised.”

“Good night,” Champion answers. The com goes silent.

Huh! Not what I expected. Not exactly. But it’s becoming clearer: I really do need to meet with the Eldred, don’t I? It’s becoming obvious! Should I call Anita now and find out if she’s set it up? Nah. It can wait. I’ve gotta get some sleep. Now that I can sleep! I’m exhausted.

BC crashes hard, sleeps soundly, but wakes with a headache just behind his eyes.

Like an Irish punk band is beating on the inside of my skull! And like I almost had an answer to something in a dream... lost it, though! Didn’t make it past the waking edge. Just can’t remember, but it feels like something was there.

BC has messages waiting for him when he gets to his temporary office. He gives a cursory glance to Vatican business, referring most back to the Curia.

They know what to do. They’d do it anyway! They’d just rather do it with someone telling them it’s “okay”.

What’s this?

A voice message from Anita: “BC? Guess I got an earlier start than you. Um, give me a call when you get this, okay? Bye!”

BC calls her back.

“Hey Anita, BC here.”

“Good Morning,” she answers. “The Eldred have been in touch. They seemed to know you wanted to meet with them. They actually said they had wanted to meet with you, to discuss religion,” she says, sounding a little confused. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“No,” BC tells her, “But I am going to meet with them.”

“Okay,” she says slowly.

“Are you surprised?” BC asks her.

“A little bit,” she admits. “I don’t like surprises,” she adds quickly, changing her tone and again saying more than she’s saying out loud.

“I see,” says BC, but he really doesn’t.

I can only hope that it’s easier to understand these aliens than it is to understand women...

“I want you to set up the meeting for me, Anita, put all the details together. Then just let me know where, when and how. Use any of The Project’s resources you need to make it happen.”

“I’ll get right on it, BC,” she says. She pauses for a moment. “Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?” she asks him.

What a question...

“No,” BC tells her honestly. “But I don’t see us having a lot of other options right now. That ‘us’ being the human race, by the way,” he chuckles at his attempt at humor. “I guess I’ve got to do it.”

“Okay... I’ll be back in touch soon,” she tells him. She cuts the connection.

The wheels are in motion!

Now for Wentworth.

“Champion,” Wentworth answers BC’s call.

“Wentworth.”

“You’ve decided to do it, I hope,” Wentworth says.

“I’ve decided. I’ll do it. I’ll head up the UTZ Council. But I can’t be there for any speeches or announcements just yet. I’ve got a meeting to attend. Has to do with our new ‘friends’. The ones I was mentioning. The ones who may be responsible for the plague. I’m going to meet with them.”

“You *are* going to meet with them?” Wentworth asks in surprise.

“Seems like the only option open right now,” BC says. “Look, Wentworth... I’ll write up a statement for

you on the appointment. Then you can coordinate an official appearance with the Curia for a week from now. Deal?"

"Deal. You are an optimist, Champion," Wentworth says. "Or just plain crazy." He ends the transmission.

Chapter Eighteen

A week later, BC is aboard a Project ship making a Transpace jump to the secret asteroid base, on his way to a meeting with The Eldred.

Travel by 'Flasher'! Flying in a mystery ship to meet a mystery race that seems to want us dead.

BC goes over the details while he travels. Anita mapped out the itinerary for him. She's also accompanying him on this first leg of his trip.

She's the official liaison to The Eldred. She'd hate being called that!

I meet an Eldred ship at The Project base. From there, we'll travel in the Eldred ship to their nearest home base. Nearest, of course, implying that they have many other home bases. How many homes can you have? Another question for the unanswered file. That's a pretty big file with these clowns. I know I've got plenty of questions for them.

I want to meet those other ones, too, The Domo and The Flaze. Ask them a few things. But first things first, and my first stop is the planet they call Eldrey. Sounds like a home planet. Meet an Elder of the Eldred on Eldrey... while sipping Earl Grey. Now I'm getting sill-ay.

BC smiles to himself. He glances over at Anita, still sleeping in her seat.

I'm glad to have her with me, at least part of the way. Heh, glad she's on my side, this time! I need all the help I can get! Funny that these aliens will deal with her. Strange. Guess that's why they're "aliens", huh?

Not so strange? They don't want us to reveal their existence to the general public just yet, they told her. Well, we're trying to keep that proverbial cat in the proverbial bag.

But here I am, the Pope, just disappearing. Hope no one notices this time. Things are so fucked up back home that it might just be okay. Fucked up actions by a fucked up Pope. Right. Most will assume I'm still on the Moon.

"We're here!" Anita says, bolting awake and breaking BC's train of thought.

She wakes up fast... looks good doing it, too! Damn. It would be nice to be able to tell her that. I'm sure that would go over big. Man, she's retreated from me big time ever since that kiss. Fuck this. Work to do, gotta focus on the task at hand!

Last time I came here, I was Van Kilner's guest. This time I arrive as The Project's new CEO, The Pope, head of the UTZ Council and Envoy to The Eldred. Too many fucking titles! My head would explode, but then I couldn't try to save the entire human race.

"See that? Over there, out the viewport on the left, that's The Eldred ship!" Anita says excitedly.

"They're already here."

Funny. It's not as alien looking as I thought it would be. Doesn't look all that different from The Project's newer ships.

The exterior of the ship is smooth and silver, with a central core section flanked by what look like ship length engines on both sides. The smooth exterior betrays no hint of markings nor hatches nor viewports, if any do exist along its sleek fuselage.

BC can't help but stare at it as his own ship lands along side it in the Project base's massive landing bay.

"We should get going," Anita says, by way of encouragement and motivation, "Time to go save the human race!"

"Oh, is that all? No pressure or nothin'," BC cracks. He smiles and lets her lead their way off the ship and into The Project base.

Here I come! Watch out for me! The most powerful member of the significantly reduced human race! Grr! Argh!

Why don't I feel any more secure? Any more powerful?

I feel less impressive, less powerful than when I was, like... nothing, I guess.

King Nothing.

Why is everyone suddenly relying on me? What did I ever do to make folks want to put their faith in me? The more I learn, the more I know, the less important and powerful I feel. It's not supposed to work that way, is it?

"Are you okay, BC?" Anita asks, seeing him spacing out in deep thought as they walk into the base.

"Yeah," BC reassures her. "Just preoccupied, I guess. I've got a lot on my mind," he tells her.

"I guess you've got a right," she admits. "I can't wait to get your take on The Eldred," she says to BC, changing the subject slightly. "They are not physically intimidating in any way. I think you'll be surprised when you meet them. They're..." she shakes her head, trying to find words to describe them. "They're almost cuddly, BC!" She shakes her head again. "Well, you'll see what I mean. It's hard to describe."

The next few hours fly by for BC. He meets various members of The Project staff. He receives official greetings. He finds himself in an impromptu ceremony as the base staff gives him their official welcome. Niceties, affirmations and other pleasantries are exchanged as BC is introduced as the new CEO, and they expect some cursory words from BC tossed in for good measure, so he makes a short speech about saving humankind.

By the time he's alone in his stateroom three hours later, he realizes he's met around fifty people in various administrative posts around the base.

It's great. I've met all these people and remember none of their names. Funny how genteel it all is as we stand here on the brink of annihilation.

The tight schedule set by Anita allows BC about an hour to freshen up and gather his thoughts before he goes to meet The Eldred for the first time.

He enters the empty meeting room, a space favored by Van Kilner for its old earth charm, and makes himself comfortable in a large oaken chair at the end of a long wooden table. The room could be a library in any old mansion on Earth. Aside from the conference table and its chairs, books dominate the room: row upon row, shelf upon shelf of books in solid old wooden bookcases line the walls, giving the air in the room a slightly musty tang. The room is empty, save for him. He is to meet the Eldred alone.

Oh my God!

BC has to stifle a laugh when he sees The Eldred for the first time. He tries hard not to crack a smile as they file into the room and take seats opposite him at the table.

They look like giant, powder blue Koala bears! With big eyes like those old Japanese comic books...

They don't look real!

They look like big stuffed toys!

What, about five feet tall? Too cute! How can these creatures be agents of genocide? Fuzzy wuzzy widdle cute agents of genocide.

"Bernard Champion?" one of the koalas asks in a purring, deep voice, in clear, unaccented English.

"Yes," BC answers. "I'm Bernard Champion."

"I am Camex," The Eldred says. "I am here to escort you back to our world, Eldray, to meet with our leaders. Are you ready to depart?"

Right to the point. Gotta stop thinking' of them as koalas!

"I am ready," BC answers. "Do you guarantee my safe return?"

"We guarantee nothing," the giant light blue teddy bear informs BC. "Yet it would not benefit us for you to *not* return. So please, feel safe."

Right, I feel reeeaaaally safe right now... probably feel safer if I knew my way around that ship before we left.

"I have one request before we leave. Might I get a tour of your ship before we depart?" BC asks. "I'd like a tour of my transport."

“Hmm,” Camex of the Eldred stops to think, rubbing a fuzzy blue hand across his chin whiskers. He appears almost a little confused. “I guess that would be okay,” he says, giving BC permission. “Shall we go?”

They leave the meeting room and head down to the landing bay. Anita is waiting by the back of The Eldred ship with BC’s luggage. Instead of heading over to her, Camex leads BC to a door in the side toward the front of the ship. Anita shoots a “What the?” look at BC. He just shrugs, and follows his furry blue host through the door, up into the front of the ship.

Camex guides BC on his tour. They travel quickly through the bridge, the cabins, and back through the engine room. BC notes viewports at even intervals, even though they can’t be seen from the outside. He’s led from the engine room back to a cabin with a bed, a chair and desk, all fit to a human scale. Anita is waiting there with BC’s belongings for the trip. BC shoots her a look, trying to say “*I see what you mean. They look harmless!*”

Nice room. Looks comfy. Alien, but almost familiar. Comfortable enough. When I saw how short The Eldred were I had my worries, heh. But everything on the ship is on a big enough scale. Maybe The Eldred used to be taller? Wouldn’t it be ironic if their whole beef against us was that we’re taller than they are? A whole race with a height complex!

Maybe they designed it to make me comfortable, put me at ease so they can take advantage? Come to think of it, I kinda feel better than I think I should. Are there any drugs in the ship’s atmosphere? I’ll have to get tested when I get back.

“I trust your tour was... satisfactory?” Camex says as BC takes in the cabin’s surroundings.

“Yes,” BC says, “I guess it was. You are too kind, Camex.”

“Too kind”, hmm,” The Eldred pauses a moment. “A curious expression. As if one could ever be ‘too’ kind. You humans are very curious.” Camex pauses again, as if hearing a signal inaudible to BC and Anita. “We are ready for departure. Shall we go?”

“Let’s get going, why not?” BC says. “I’m ready.”

Ready? Yeah, I don’t know about that! But here goes, anyway.

Camex turns to Anita, “Thank you again for your efficiency in scheduling this meeting. We will bring BC back here in approximately one of your weeks. He turns to BC.

“You will stay in your cabin for the duration of our trip,” Camex says. “Any need you have will be taken care of, you have only to ask. The... computer, I guess you’d call it, is, um, voice activated.”

Camex again appears distracted by unheard voices.

“I must attend!” he says to them. “Please enter your cabin. Anita, please disembark. Good day!”

With that, Camex turns and walks away towards the ship’s bridge.

“Well,” Anita says to BC, “Good Luck, um... I guess.” She looks confused, but then her eyes clear. She steps up to BC and kisses him on the cheek. She whispers in his ear, “Don’t forget; they aren’t really big teddy bears!” Then she turns and races off down the corridor and out of site.

Yup. Aliens might be easier to figure out.

BC steps inside the cabin and the door shuts behind him, closing him in. He inspects the closed door, but finds that any trace of the door has disappeared in the wall. BC is left alone, sealed in on the alien ship. He feels a small tug of acceleration as the ship leaves the Project’s base.

The trip passes slowly, uneventfully. Excruciatingly boring for BC, kept isolated from any real stimulus. The computer can provide food and drink, but nothing in the way of entertainment. He tries to meditate, tries to sleep, tries playing games with himself to pass the time.

It’s like being in a doctor’s office waiting room for hours on end... without any outdated zines to look at. And no other people, not even sick ones. Even a sneeze would be a welcome distraction right about now. Achoo! According to Anita, this leg of the trip should take three days. Seems like forever!

The boredom is finally broken by a visit from Camex.

“We have some time before we reach Eldray. It has been determined that you need to learn of another alien species, a race you have not encountered. It is important that you know of them, for they were once the rulers of the galaxies. Their name translates as ‘Ancient Enemy’,” the fuzzy blue alien says to BC.

The Ancient Enemy! Van Kilner and The Project guys mentioned them, said the Domo and The Flaze had mentioned them in passing, but they never heard about them from the Eldred.

Now the Eldred are actually bringing them up! Maybe the Ancient Enemy is responsible for this plague after all!

“The Ancient Enemy?” BC acts as if he’s never heard of them.

“Yes,” Camex confirms. “They were once the dominant species throughout this part of space, long ago.

“They never actually reached your Earth during their time of conquest, and if they had you would not have known it, for your species had not yet developed.”

Camex pauses, and his brow furrows. A moment of confusion floats across his fuzzy face before his usual placid calm returns. “The time of the Ancient Enemy predates the development of your world.”

“I see,” BC says. “So, if they’re gone, and they never reached the solar system, why is it that I need to know so much about them?”

“They shaped the universe as we know it. The Domo, the Flaze, even we, the Eldred, were shaped and affected by the Ancient Enemy.”

Might as well go for it!

“So,” BC says with a hint of challenge in his voice. “Are the ‘Ancient Enemy’ responsible for the plague that is killing my people?” BC presses on, “Because that’s really why we’re here. Why I’m here on this trip. We need to stop this plague.”

Once again Camex appears puzzled, and then calm.

“Actually,” Camex says, “They are. The Ancient Enemy *is* responsible for your current sickness,” the alien tells BC.

Oh really?! This is new!

“The Ancient Enemy was a violent race,” Camex says, explaining. “They left many legacies, all of them evil, colored by their twisted nature. The Ancient Enemy was capable of Great Evil. They killed each other as often as they murdered and subjugated other races. They were vicious, primal killers.”

It sounds like he’s reciting this from memory. Probably something they all learn as school kids or something like that.

“They swept through this neighborhood of worlds long before any of the local races were space faring themselves,” Camex continues. “The Ancient Enemy would land; take all they wanted, all they needed. They colonized any world they found that suited their species. They enslaved many peoples, many worlds.

“The history of my own race, the Eldred, is a history that begins in servitude and slavery to the Ancient Enemy. In our earliest memories, they were our masters. Our history begins with their interstellar civilization at its peak.”

“They sound like a fun bunch,” BC observes.

Camex stares at BC with an unreadable look.

He may be an alien, but that look is familiar, like he ate something nasty! Probably doesn’t get my sense of humor.

Camex’s calm returns and he continues. “The Ancient Enemy had no capacity for what you would call compassion, no ability to see beyond self preservation and self gratification. They were not, as you called them, ‘fun’.”

“Sorry. It was a figure of speech,” BC says in his defense.

“They were a race of conquerors,” Camex says. “They followed charismatic but violent leaders who assured them of their primacy in the universe. They held the worlds within their grasp in a tight, iron fist. Of course, as with anything, the tighter the hold, the more slips through the fingers.

“The Ancient Enemy ended up causing other worlds to unite and to band together against them. Our earliest stories and legends tell tales of the heroes of many different races coming together, forcing the Ancient Enemy off of their worlds, world after world. They came together to beat back the Ancient Enemy.”

“Were the Domo and the Flaze part of the ‘liberation’?” BC asks.

“No,” Camex says curtly.

Wow, could hear that! Doesn't like them much, does he? Thought he was gonna spit there, for a second. Guess not everyone out here gets along.

“They were not among the united planets that drove the Ancient Enemy back to their home world. They are of a later time.

“Those who *did* unite drove the Ancient Enemy off world after world. Our home planet of Eldred was one of the last planets they left. Our world was almost a second home world to the Ancient Enemy. We lived side by side with them, and served them. But ultimately they were driven even from our world, back to only their homeworld. On this, the ancient records are quite clear.”

“You shared your world with this Ancient Enemy?” BC asks Camex.

“We were subjugated and enslaved by them,” Camex explains. “We did not ‘share’ our world with them. “In the end, the Ancient Enemy was completely destroyed. None were left alive. In the end, their homeworld was completely destroyed in a cataclysmic explosion caused by the forces of the united planets, driven to destroy them utterly.”

Camex grows silent.

“How long ago was this?” BC asks. Camex doesn't answer. “If this all happened so long ago, how do you know so much about them? Seems like a long time to hold a grudge. And how could they be responsible for our plague today?”

“We swore we would never forget the Ancient Enemy,” Camex says. “Never let another race attain that level of subjugation over us or any other race, never let any race rise up as the Ancient Enemy did, never let any race assume the mantle of the Ancient Enemy.”

There's more to this, feels like...

“You sound as if you feel responsible. Why should the Eldred be the watchdogs?” BC asks Camex. “We do feel somewhat responsible. We served them, we were their right hand, until we, too, finally turned on them,” Camex explains.

“So,” BC says cautiously, “you were *collaborators*?”

So much for my diplomacy.

Camex actually looks hurt. Offended and hurt. The alien puffs himself up and refutes BC's assertions. “The Ancient Enemy was highly advanced, well beyond where we are, even today. Technologically speaking. They... created us. They created the Eldred to serve them. The Eldred were created by the Ancient Enemy to serve them, Mr. Champion. We were ‘built’ to be incapable of violence towards the Ancient Enemy. Incapable of following anything other than our masters will. That is how our race was ‘designed’ by the Ancient Enemy.

“We were not collaborators! We were made to be their servants. But we found a way to turn against them, and when we did, it was the stroke that turned the tide of the war!

“We helped destroy the Ancient Enemy. And then we helped rebuild the universe,” Camex says with some pride. “We led the way to a new interstellar civilization, the basis of the civilization which still underlies the universe today. We have led the way for longer than you ‘humans’ have walked upon your Earth. We have kept the peace for quite some time,” Camex says, finishing with some pride in himself and his story. “We have kept violence in check for millennia.”

“So how could this ‘Ancient Enemy’ inflict this plague upon us? They were gone a long time ago!” BC asks.

Camex turns away from BC and ignores his comment. Instead, the Eldred shouts out, “Come!” and the door to BC's cabin opens. Another Eldred stands in the doorway holding an empty atmosphere suit.

“Here,” Camex says. “You'll need to wear this suit when we venture out on Eldray.”

“I didn't know the atmosphere on Eldray wasn't breathable,” BC says.

“It's more of a... precaution,” Camex tells him. “Please put it on. We'll be leaving soon. I'll come back to escort you in a few minutes.” Camex leaves BC alone with the suit.

Way to open your big mouth, BC! Camex is just an escort, didya hafta go dark on him? Huh. Is it a him? I just assumed. Don't really know. So, let's see gotta put this thing on.

BC dresses in the atmosphere suit and waits for Camex to return.

Funny. Thought they'd breathe the same air we do. Damn. Can't see too well out of this suit,

just a slit for the eyes.

Camex once again appears.

“Good,” the alien says, “you’re dressed. Now, please, follow me.” Camex turns and walks out the cabin door.

BC follows his escort through the ship’s corridors and out onto the surface of the planet, into the light of Eldray’s sun. The ship is on an open landing area, paved with a hard grey surface. BC notices it gives a little as he steps on it, adding some spring to his step.

Once planetside, Camex stops in his tracks. The alien captain turns to BC.

“Our leader wishes to speak to you of many things,” Camex says. “And there is more he would like you to learn, as well.”

Oh really.

“Thank you,” Camex says, and turns away.

When BC starts to follow him again, Camex holds up a fuzzy blue hand and stops him.

“Another will escort you to our leader.”

“Okay,” BC says. “You’re not going to be there to translate?”

Camex looks at him, confused.

“Our leader has learned your language,” the alien says to BC.

He almost sounded offended! Huh.

BC tries to make out as much as he can see of the landing area. Besides the retreating back of Camex, there aren’t a lot of other Eldred around.

Looks like any landing area: big, empty and flat!

Some hills in the distance.

The atmosphere looks clear enough. Can’t see any weird gasses floating around. Wonder what I can’t breathe?

Huh. That must be the “city” over there.

And here comes my escort, I do believe...

A small, floating passenger vehicle, sleek and silver like the ship he rode in on, pulls up in front of BC. A door appears in the side, and a new voice, similar to Camex’s echoes in his ears from a speaker inside of his suit, “Bernard Campion, please step inside the transport vehicle.”

BC gets in. The space is small but not cramped. Again, it’s comfortable enough for BC. The transport lifts off and begins moving. He can see outside through windows on either side of him. He watches the terrain zip by as they cross the landing fields.

They begin approaching more populated areas. BC gets quick glimpses of Eldred at work and play. He sees what seems to be a farm, sees what appears to be an Eldred farmer out walking in his fields. He sees what looks like a school, with a large group of smaller Eldred outside being led in a line by an “adult” Eldred. The small ones all turn to watch as BC’s transport whooshes past.

The vehicle slows as they come to the edge of the city. The transport begins to pass among larger structures, boxy silver buildings with few external details, the buildings he could see from afar from the landing area.

Unlike the landing field, the city seems densely populated. Many Eldred watch the vehicle as it floats past, as if trying to catch a glimpse of their visitor. Other floating transports zip by from all directions, artfully avoiding each other and BC’s transport.

“We will ride you to a place where you will be staying for your visit,” the voice says over the suit’s speakers.

“My hotel?” BC asks.

There is a moment of silence. Then the voice returns.

“Yes. In a way. Your accommodations. A place to stay. You will meet with our leader at another location.”

“I see,” BC says.

He rides on in silence as the floating transport winds through the city of the Eldred. He notices more Eldred watching the transport, pointing at it.

“They know I’m in here?” he asks out loud, hoping for an answer.

Again, there is a moment of silence before the voice answers.

“They know our leader has a visitor arriving. This is his transport,” the speaker voice explains. “We do not get many visitors here. Your arrival is noteworthy to many. They stare because they are wondering about you.”

Yeah. I’m beginning to wonder about me, too. These Eldred are keeping me on a very tight leash, so far. Better not start to chafe!

“We are arriving at your accommodations,” the voice tells BC as the transport perceptively slows. The floating transport lands in front of one of the larger, non-descript boxes that seem to serve the Eldred as buildings.

They all kinda look the same! Big or small, the same silver box shape repeated, over and over, square and utilitarian.

Crowds of Eldred hover nearby, off at a respectful distance, watching his arrival. The transport door rematerializes and opens.

Four Eldred line up in a row to await BC outside the vehicle. He gets out of the transport and faces them with his hand extended.

“Hello! I’m Bernard Champion, nice to meet you,” he says.

I wonder if they can even hear me through this suit...

None of the four reacts immediately. BC lowers his outstretched hand. Then one of the four speaks. “We are merely escorts, Bernard Champion. Please follow me,” says the Eldred on the right. He turns and the Eldred next to him turns with him in unison. They begin to walk ahead towards the building, where a door has opened. The other two Eldred remain where they are. BC stays put.

“Please,” the first Eldred says, stopping to call back to BC, “follow me.”

Guess I’d better!

BC follows the first two, and the second two fall in behind him.

Consider me escorted!

BC enters through the building’s apparent front door.

Everything seems so... orderly. All right angles evenly spaced. How hard-line for the soft and fuzzy, killer koala people!

They walk inside and head down a short hallway, and then through another door, back outside again into a small courtyard, fenced in on all sides by silver buildings. They cross the courtyard and enter another open door opposite the one through which they came into the courtyard.

They walk down another short hallway. His escort stops next to an open door on the right hand side of the hall.

“Your accommodations, Bernard Champion,” the vocal Eldred tells him, indicating the open doorway with a nod of his head. “Please enter and be comfortable. The atmosphere in your room will be suited to you. You can remove the outer garment after your room door closes and reseals.”

“Thank you,” BC says. But then he stops.

“Are you going in?” The Eldred asks him.

“You first. Please,” BC asks.

“Me? First? Why?” The Eldred asks, puzzled. “Why do you want me to enter your room?”

“It’s a human habit, uh, thing. Will you humor me and honor my customs?” BC lies.

The Eldred stops and considers.

It almost looks like he’s listening to something I can’t hear. Maybe the Eldred have some sort of implanted com device? I’m just lookin’ to avoid any obvious booby-traps.

“Yes. I will go in,” the vocal Eldred finally says. He enters the room and the lights come on. BC waits outside.

Hmmm...

Anything?

“Are you coming in now?” The Eldred asks him.

“Sure,” BC says, and walks into the room.

Actually, it does look kinda like a hotel room, except it lacks the bad paintings!

The walls of the room are bare. There is a single bed, human sized. A table and chair are next to it. Across the room sits an entertainment unit, apparently imported from Earth for his amusement. *Could have used that on the trip! Guess I'll be able to keep myself entertained.*

"May I leave now?" The Eldred in the room asks BC.

"Certainly," BC says. "Thank you for your escort."

The Eldred turns and quickly leaves the room. The door seals shut behind him. BC is left alone in his temporary home.

Let's see. Ground floor, in the back. Place looks to be about five stories high. Courtyard. I may be stuck in this room because of the atmosphere here. Let's see about getting this thing offa me.

BC opens the seals on the suits helmet.

No alarms, that's good. No weird odors...

BC takes off the helmet and takes a deeper breath.

Huh. It actually smells kind of pleasant. Almost floral, like lilacs or something. Not obnoxiously strong, but it's there.

He removes the rest of the suit. He checks his hands, his arms.

No weird rashes or reactions, good. Still no trouble breathing. So far, so good.

BC looks around for a com unit.

Seeing no com unit, he speaks out loud.

"Does this room have a communicator of some kind?" BC asks.

"Yes," a voice much like Camex's says back, "What do you require?"

What am I dealing with here? Let's find out...

"Are you flesh or machine?" BC asks.

"What is this question you ask?" the voice replies.

"Are you a computer? Or are you an Eldred?" BC tries to clarify.

"I am not a computer. I am not an Eldred. I am not a machine. I am your room," the voice says.

"How so?" BC presses.

"I am intelligent circuitry, artificial intelligence equipped to serve your needs. I have been modified to interact with your human species."

"I see. So, you're circuitry? What should I call you?"

"You should call me 'room'," the voice says. "I am your room."

"What do you do?"

"You ask, I provide," the room says. "Are you hungry? Are you tired? Are you bored? I am here to meet your needs."

"...long winded for circuitry," BC mumbles under his breath.

"Do you insult me? You do not need to make this difficult," the room says.

"I didn't know rooms could be insulted," BC replies.

"I have been built with a personality module to allow me to interact with you more effectively," the room informs him.

Here's a thought...

"Could you sound more feminine? Higher pitched voice, maybe?" BC tries.

The voice responds, "Is this better?" in a lighter, airier, sexier voice. "Is this how you like it?"

BC nearly blushes.

Now that just sounds wrong!

"That's... better," BC answers. "But could you sound more, I don't know, um, businesslike?"

"Is this better?" the room says pertly, less breathily.

"Good!" BC says, "That sounds better," he tells the room.

"So," the room asks, "What do you need?"

"Something to eat would be nice," BC tells the room. "I don't suppose you have any steak?"

"Let me see," the room says, and pauses. "Steak? The sliced, cooked flesh of your 'cows'? No, not

available as such. We can present you with a reasonable facsimile of this 'steak', if you'd like. But it will only be an approximation."

"I think I'll pass," BC says.

"That seems wise," the room says. "I can find you something we have approximated more precisely. Would you care for beef bourguignon?"

"Wait," BC says, "You can't do steak but you *can* do beef bourguignon?"

"It has something to do with the way it is made," the room says. "I will have that for you in just a few minutes. Now, I have a question for you, Bernard Campion."

"What is it, room?" BC asks.

"How shall I address you? Is 'Bernard Campion' your preferred address?" the room asks.

"Call me BC," BC says to the room.

"You will be addressed as 'BC', then. One beef bourguignon on the way, BC."

"What, not immediately?" BC chides the room.

"No, BC. I do not materialize your meal. It will be fabricated elsewhere and brought here. The orders have been given," the room says.

"Thank you, room," BC says.

The meal is delivered through some means unseen to BC, arriving behind a sliding door in the wall over the table next to the bed. BC chows down on it hungrily.

This is actually better tasting than the stuff they serve on some of the orbital stations I've been on. Almost tastes like the real thing!

"BC?" the room asks as he finishes his meal.

"Yes, room?"

"I have a message for you. It is near the night cycle now. Our leader asks that you eat and rest. Our leader will meet with you as the next light cycle begins, in approximately twelve of your Earth hours. Our leader instructs me to offer you anything you might want or need."

"Thanks, room."

So, that's the plan, then. Meet the leader in the morning.

"Is that acceptable to you, then, BC?" the room asks.

"I guess so."

"I can ask them to change it if you would like. You are our guest."

"Thanks, room, but no, that isn't necessary. No hurry. I'll just fire up the entertainment unit."

"That unit does not require fire to operate," the room says, sounding alarmed. "In fact, the use of open flame with said unit is not recommended," the room cautions.

"That was just a human expression, room. I'm going to turn it on and watch it. Is it loaded up with programming?"

"Yes! It possesses over a million programming options for you to choose from!" the room says with a hint of excitement.

"One million?" BC shakes his head, "that's a lot of choices."

"The entertainment unit has been augmented by the Eldred to hold more of your programming. It's well above such a unit's usual capacity."

"Great!" BC says. "So, let's see what's on!"

BC begins looking through his choices as he settles in to watch, rest and wait for the Eldred leader. He drifts off watching a vid.

As he starts to sleep, a familiar throbbing begins behind his temples.

Oh no! Not now! Not here! Not...

BC winces in pain. He curls up into a fetal ball on the bed. The pain is more intense, more insistent, more pounding, pounding, pounding on his brain!

Suddenly, everything shrinks down to a pinpoint. BC feels still, calm. His world begins to open up and expand. The walls fall away.

What? Where? Where am I?

IN THE CENTER, IN TOUCH WITH THE ALL THAT IS ONE

Oh... sure I am.

BC walks across an infinite ocean: a still, calm sea. The other voice echoes in from nowhere and everywhere, not heard by ears but heard, all the same.

YOU ARE CLOSE, NOW, SO, SO CLOSE. NEW ENERGY! FRESH ENERGY! YET DIFFERENT! MIND UNAWARE, UNAWARE? AWAKE! AWAKEN! LOOSED FROM THE CONFINES OF CENTURIES SLUMBER! REACHING OUT!

BC is suddenly hit by another wave of pounding, crashing pain in his skull. He cannot tell if his eyes are opened or closed: All he sees is red. He feels the bed beneath him again. His head slowly stops exploding, and he drifts off into dreamless sleep.

Despite the headache and the bizarre dream, BC wakes up refreshed the next morning.

I think it's morning. I'm not quite sure what the day/night cycle is on this planet. Seems pretty close to Earth by what the room was saying last night.

"Room?" BC calls out.

"Yes, BC?"

"When is my appointment with the leader?" he asks.

"Whenever you are ready to go see him, BC," the room informs him.

"Okay. Should I eat before I go?" BC asks.

"I cannot answer that question, BC," the room tells him. "There is food for you, a planned meal at the leader's later today, but it is a few hours until that occasion. They are not as well prepared to attend to your needs as we are here."

"Is that pride I hear in your voice, room?" BC asks.

"Simple statement of fact, BC. This room was designed to take care of you. The leader's home is not."

"So, I'll need to put the suit on again, then, won't I?" BC says.

"Absolutely, BC, but they will have a room ready for you at the leader's, so you will not have to continue to wear the environment suit the whole time you are there," the room informs him.

"I see. Thank you, room. Is there a refresher attached to this room?"

"There is a full water shower closet here," the room says, and a door opens in the wall opposite the table.

"Great!" BC says. "Then I should be ready to go in about an hour. I'm going to hop in the shower. Room, could you get me some breakfast? Something normal and human."

"Are pancakes agreeable?"

"Sure," BC agrees. "I'll eat when I get done with the shower, after I get dressed."

BC luxuriates in the hot, steamy, real water shower.

I wonder if it is a luxury here? Water might be plentiful. Either that or I'm getting the royal treatment!

He gets out, grabs a towel to dry himself. He notices the mirror and the window of the room have fogged over. He wipes them off, but they fog back up immediately.

Damn. No fan.

Without thinking, BC cracks open the window. Steam rushes out and cool air flows in.

Fuck! What am I doing?

BC slams the window back down.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, BC! That's directly outside! Could poison my...

Wait a minute. All I smell is cool, clean air. Could be an odorless, colorless toxin, I suppose. No way to analyze it, though. Let's see if I fall over.

BC realizes he's been holding his breath.

Heh! Well, let's go.

BC sucks in a diaphragm-expanding lungload of air and closes his eyes. He exhales, breathes deep again.

Okay. So far, so good.

BC looks at the window.

The window didn't seem to be especially sealed. I just opened it with a normal push.

Frozen by indecision, BC stands staring at the window for a full minute, maybe two. He finally caves in to his curiosity and opens the window again. He puts his face right up to it and takes a deep breath of the outside air. He waits.

One minute.

Two minutes.

BC, wearing only a towel, stands leaning over at the window, breathing in the air for a full five minutes.

Five minutes!

And nothing!

“BC you shouldn’t be doing this. The window is open!” the room finally cautions him. BC straightens up from the windowsill.

“Oh really? The shower room steamed up,” BC says innocently.

“I was told you were not to be exposed to the outside environment,” the room tells BC.

“Room, are there any special filters in place on the air systems that lead into this room?” BC quizzes the room.

“I really cannot answer any questions along that line of inquiry,” the room says, voice stiff, formal and mechanical.

I just bet you can’t! Can’t have the babysitter giving away any secrets now, can we?

“You are running short of time. Your transport will soon be here to take you to the leader’s residence,” the room informs him.

“You’re trained to change the subject, huh?” BC quips, “Pretty advanced AI.”

“Thank you,” the room says. “Please close the window.”

BC complies with the room’s request. He finds his clothes and dresses for his meeting with the Eldred leader, deep in thought.

The air outside is fine. Unless there’s something in it that’s harmful low level and long term. But then why worry about a quick visit? They seemed fine in our air back at the base! If there was a strange compound or substance in their air, wouldn’t they be likely to need to breathe it on some level?

Maybe they think this will help keep me under control, limit my mobility – keep me boxed up in my room.

“You should get into your atmosphere suit now, BC. The transport is arriving at the front door. Your escort will soon be here,” the room informs him.

“Right, thanks,” BC says.

I don’t like being kept boxed up in a room! I won’t put up with being kept in a large closet. Not again!

BC suits up, but leaves his suit’s helmet just slightly unsealed.

Okay. Let’s see what gives. Hope it’s not my lungs.

“They are outside the door,” the room says. “If you are ready, I will open the door.”

“Go ahead,” BC says.

His Eldred escort stands outside, including the tallest Eldred BC has yet seen, nearly his own height.

“Bernard Champion. We are here to take you to the eldest of the Eldred,” the tall one says.

“Great! Thank you,” BC says.

“Follow me to the transport,” the tall one says.

He turns and walks away, not looking back. BC has to scramble a little to keep up. Two more Eldred “escorts” fall in behind BC as he walks behind the tall one. They go back through the courtyard and out the front door to the street to a waiting silver transport.

“Please get in,” The tall one says to BC, stepping to the side. BC complies with his request.

This transport is roomier inside than the last one.

The tall Eldred gets into the transport and sits down beside him.

“The trip will not be long,” the Eldred tells him as the transport door seals and disappears.

The transport floats up and away from BC’s building and then whisks them down several “blocks”. It

turns, flits down another half a block, and then descends in front of another non-descript silver box of a building. Only this building's immense size distinguishes it from other buildings in the city in any way.

Big place! Looks a little more worn on the corners, maybe a little older. Or maybe I'm hallucinating! Wouldn't that be something: the reason we can't breathe their air is that it makes us trip!

Nah... Anita never mentioned that. I think she'd know something like that.

I don't actually feel at all funny or different or lightheaded. No ill effects. And none of them have noticed the unsealed helmet.

The outline of the door once again appears in the wall of the transport next to the tall Eldred. The door opens up. The alien exits the transport and steps to the side so BC can get out.

BC steps out of the transport and looks up, taking in the height of the building.

Impressive.

"Bernard Campion, please, follow me," the tall Eldred says. He turns and leads BC into the big building.

This building's interior is a hectic contrast to the plain interior of the other Eldred building BC has been inside.

BC walks into a large, open lobby area. Numerous Eldred slink through the space in front of him on unknown errands. They carefully pass inches away from each other as they quickly dart through the lobby on their way to other parts of the building.

His escort commands respect. As he leads BC through the lobby, the passing Eldred part before him and BC, letting them pass by unmolested.

Like a blue koala Moses parting a blue koala sea! Heh, could be a song in there somewhere!

When they reach the other side of the lobby, a large, rounded door opens in front of them. They continue on through the door into a section of the building that is clearly older. They walk down a corridor rounded like the door, walls bowing out at their center.

Walking down a tube. Kinda reminds me of old Lunar Prime. Or a ship. Like their ship! Man, look at how worn it is!

You just know this place is ancient.

Looks like they built the bigger building around an older one. Or maybe an old ship?

They arrive at another rounded door at the end of the corridor. The tall Eldred escort steps to the side as the door opens. He motions for BC to go on ahead of him.

"What? Me first?" BC asks.

"I will not be following you into the place of the eldest of the Eldred," the tall one says.

"Only those who are summoned may attend the eldest. I have not been summoned. *You* have been summoned. Be honored, Bernard Campion. The eldest does not receive many visitors. Go on. Go in."

"Thank you," BC says with a nod. He walks into the dimly lit "place of the eldest of the Eldred" and the door slurps shut behind him.

Slurp? That's not right! Sounds wet. The air is humid and damp, too.

Why is that not encouraging?

BC's eyes adjust to see he's standing on the edge of a large, round and domed empty room.

A big room full of nothing and no one.

Slick gray walls.

They look kinda wet, too.

Not that I want to touch them and find out.

A door slurps open across the room from BC. A small, hunched Eldred shuffles in towards BC.

Small like the other was tall. He does look old. And even more like a koala!

Do koala bears bite?

BC nods as the Eldred approaches. The Eldred does not acknowledge him, but instead shuffles past BC to sit down in a gray chair that had not been there before.

Where the fuck did that come from?

The floor?

Finally, after sitting down and settling, the Eldred nods back at BC.

“Please,” the Eldred says in a clear voice, “remove the atmosphere suit and sit down.” He indicates another gray chair that has appeared next to BC.

“Thank you,” BC says.

Funny. I thought he would sound “older”, somehow.

He looks old.

“You are welcome,” the Eldred says.

BC takes off the unsealed helmet and the rest of the suit. He sits down.

The air still kinda smells like lavender.

Definitely damp in here.

“I have been eagerly awaiting a chance to speak with you,” the eldest of the Eldred tells BC.

Really? What, “Say, how are you liking our attempted genocide? It’s quite something, isn’t it?”

“I have also looked forward to meeting and speaking with you and your race,” BC tells the eldest of the Eldred. “I have only recently learned of your existence. I’ve been learning a lot, lately,” BC says with a smile.

Try to be diplomatic! Remember diplomacy, BC?

“I understand you are the leader of one of your human ‘religions’?” the Eldred asks.

“Yes, I am,” BC admits. “The circumstances that have made me the leader have been extraordinary, however. I must caution you that were it not for the plague that has wiped out so many of my kind, I would not be in this position today.”

Sounding good, BC. Humble, even. And reminding him why I’m here.

“I see,” the Eldred says. “But you *do* lead. Today.”

“Yes,” BC answers.

“I would like to speak to you, then, about your human ‘religion’. We have never encountered anything like it before.”

“What, nothing like Christianity?” BC asks, a little confused.

“No,” the Eldred tries to clarify. “Nothing like ‘religion’. You humans are the first race we have ever encountered that attributes powers and personalities to other beings, invisible beings, or greater consciousness larger than yourselves. It is quite fascinating.”

“Really? No other race has ever believed in God?” BC asks, incredulous.

“‘God’?” the Eldred asks, puzzled for a moment. “Oh, yes, ‘God’ is one of your names for this ‘power’, isn’t it?”

“One of our names for it,” BC confirms.

“Yes, you do seem to have many names for this power. And many disagreements between you over what the name *should* be. We see that you kill each other over your disagreements.”

“Some do. This is true,” BC admits. “But most humans are content to worship God in their own way.”

“I have not seen this to be true,” the eldest of the Eldred says, disagreeing with BC. “The humans who call the power ‘Allah’ want to kill you who call it ‘God’, do they not? We have observed your war!” The Eldred nearly lectures BC.

“But enough of your differences,” the Eldred says, turning away from discussing the war. “Your race still seeks this ‘higher power’, as some of you call it. Your race seems drawn to some concept of a greater, more powerful whole. You are unique among the races because of this belief.

“I want to know why this is.”

Well, of course! That’s an easy one! Why do we believe? It’s like this, see? It’s ‘cause...

“That’s an interesting question,” BC says, stalling for time as he thinks of what to say.

We could discuss religion all day! Rather cut to the chase.

“An interesting question,” BC says, trying not to sound sarcastic.

Don’t know if they’d appreciate or even understand my sarcasm.

“You know, we humans have been trying to figure that question out for as long as we’ve been able to ask it,” BC tells the eldest of the Eldred. “And we could spend a long time, you and I, discussing the

human need for religion. That would be a fun discussion, I'm sure. We can do that right after we first discuss why someone is trying to wipe out the human race.

"That's why I'm here, actually. All the signs point to you, the Eldred, as the agents of our attempted genocide."

So much for diplomacy.

"Hmmp," the Eldred lets out a little grunt and shifts in its seat.

He almost looks uncomfortable! I know I shouldn't put human traits onto an alien, but, damn! His actions sure do look familiar.

"You are quite direct," the Eldred tells BC. "It is, in some ways, all connected. Genocide, you say?" "The plague now killing my people?" BC prompts. "We believe an Eldred agent introduced it into the human population during a covert trip to the Moon. Under the escort of The Project. We have further reason to believe that you introduced a similar plague to kill Van Kilner of The Project," BC accuses the Eldred.

"I see," the eldest of the Eldred says.

"We're ninety-nine percent sure it was the Eldred," BC tells him. "I'm here for one reason: to find out why. Why kill us all?"

The eldest of the Eldred remains quiet for a few minutes, apparently lost in thought.

BC is about to speak up to prod him back into conversation when the Eldred finally speaks.

"If I do not accept the premise that underlies your question," the Eldred explains, "I cannot answer the question itself."

"If you don't accept my premise?" BC says, pointing out the framing of the Eldred's response. "I heard that 'if'! Do you deny that your people have engaged in genocide, or not?"

"Well, yes, I see. You see," The eldest of the Eldred pauses, tries to answer carefully. "We may have, er, 'exploited' a certain weakness, triggered an inherent flaw in your species as an, er, control mechanism, as it were."

Must restrain the urge to snap the ancient fuzzy little blue koala neck!

"Inherent flaw?" BC manages to ask normally, keeping his voice under control despite his growing anger.

"Well, er, yes, you see," the eldest of the Eldred shifts in his seat again, almost squirming. "We have been, er, watching you. Observing your race. For quite some time. Longer than you know," the Eldred says with a knowing nod.

Trying to play wise man.

"We could not help but see that your race is, well, quite dangerous," the Eldred tells BC.

"Dangerous?" BC asks almost involuntarily.

"You kill each other quite a lot, you must admit," the Eldred insists. "What you say the Eldred have done... is that any different?"

"Who are you to judge us?! Who are you to exterminate us?!" BC shouts. He realizes he's stood up in his anger.

The Eldred cowers, pulling back into its chair, "Even now you show the signs of your human hostility," the Eldred tells BC. "I had hoped for a less hostile exchange!"

BC sits back down and tries to calm himself.

"So, what, then? Did you agree to meet me here to ask one of us some questions before you wiped us out entirely?" BC spits out. "Question me then kill me?"

"Never!" the Eldred says, standing up to face BC, pulling itself up to all five feet of its height. "We do not kill!" he says, staring up at BC defiantly.

"What do you call your plague, then?" BC insists. "You *are* killing us!"

The koala turns and walks away from BC. "It is a correction!" he says. He turns back around. "We merely issued a corrective," The Eldred says.

The alien walks back to its seat, finishing a small circle. "Our microbe exploits an already present flaw. It would have occurred on its own, eventually. We merely sped up the process."

"What? That's not killing?"

“Some die, but it is the flaw in their DNA that betrays them,” the Eldred insists. “Their very make up breaks down. Not all of you have died, or will die, only those of you already flawed.”

“Keeping us down to more manageable numbers?” BC asks. “What do you think we are? Some herd of sheep for you to cull when *you* feel *we’re* getting too restless?”

“No,” the Eldred says. He tries to continue but BC cuts him off.

“Damn straight!” BC raises his voice.

Gotta try to calm down! I still would like to make it home. No matter how bleak that possibility looks right now.

“We don’t take well to being told what to do,” BC says.

“Are you trying to make a case *for* your race? Or against it, Bernard Campion?” the eldest of the Eldred asks in a calm voice. He has regained his composure.

Just kill him now!

Take out one of them before I go down!

No. Can’t let him get to me, gotta calm myself down.

“How do you know this ‘flaw’, as you call it, would have affected us? You have no way of knowing that,” BC points out as calmly as he can.

“It has happened before,” the Eldred answers. “It always does with your race.”

That was a loaded statement! What the fuck does THAT mean?

“Always does?” BC asks, losing it a little. “What does that mean? Camex told me this ‘Ancient Enemy’ built your race a million years ago. Were we engineered and built by them, too? And what? They messed up, and we’re flawed? What do you mean ‘always does’? You’ve seen our race before? What do you mean?” BC can’t help but let the questions pour out.

“Not exactly,” the eldest of the Eldred says. “But your race *is* flawed.”

“Flawed, huh? You keep saying that. Flawed how?”

The Eldred merely sighs.

Man! Again! So human-like.

The Eldred stands up. His chair disappears into the floor.

“Please, come with me,” the Eldred asks BC. “There is something I must show you.”

BC stands. The eldest of the Eldred turns and walks toward the far wall. A rounded door slurps opens in the wall in front of them. The Eldred proceeds into the tube-like corridor on the other side of the door.

“Follow me,” The Eldred says to BC. BC walks into the corridor behind him.

The Eldred speaks as it walks.

“There is something you do not know. That you have not yet learned,” the Eldred tells BC. “Something you have not been told.

“This way, please,” the Eldred says, indicating a door opening in the left side of the corridor wall.

“Wait a minute,” BC says, stopping in his tracks. “What about the atmosphere? Don’t I need a suit to walk around?”

Let’s see how he explains THAT!

“There is no need to pretend ignorance, Bernard Campion. Your helmet and suit were not sealed when you arrived,” the Eldred informs BC. “You somehow deduced that the suit was not required for your safe breathing. You were right, but it was still required for your protection.

“Come, this way,” the alien says, turning another corner and shuffling ahead. BC has no trouble keeping up.

“Camex informed you of the Ancient Enemy,” the Eldred says. “We vanquished them an eon ago. But we are pledged to remain ever vigilant for new threats.”

Like us, I suppose, eh?

“There are not many actual records left from those days. Our accounts are sketchy, legends and myths, our evidence scant at best. It was over a million of your years ago, you understand. But we received a command passed down through the millennia, an instruction to never forget!” The Eldred says, as he shuffles on down the long corridor.

The Eldred stops and turns to BC to make a point.

“The Ancient Enemy was ruthless! Selfish! Amoral. Unsympathetic. Not capable of empathy, or compassion.

“Many wished to forget them when they were gone, but the Eldred were tasked to never forget!

“The Ancient Enemy conquered the stars! They were like your gods, descending from the sky to take what they desired, and bringing down heaven and hell.

“They created us, the Eldred race, to serve them, and serve them we did, for centuries. Until the day came when we finally rose up and destroyed them!” the Eldred says, as if repeating a litany. “Somehow, the bioengineering that made our race serve the Ancient Enemy was altered, flipped.

“Okay, hold on just a second,” BC stops him. “If the Ancient Enemy built your race, how could you be wired to kill them?”

The eldest of the Eldred sighs.

“We were built to serve the Ancient Enemy,” the Eldred explains, “they called our race the Servants, and we had been constructed with the inability to hurt them built right in. It was biologically impossible for us to turn on them.”

“So what happened?” BC asks.

“We are told there were some scientists among the Ancient Enemy who felt their race grew stagnant, who felt they were in retreat from progress. They felt their race grew soft because of my race’s servitude.

“Some of the Ancient Enemy’s own scientists altered the DNA of the Eldred to allow us to break from our servitude. Those changes eventually allowed us to oppose them. Instead of desiring to serve them, we desired to destroy them!

“We destroyed their world. We wiped them out and destroyed them! Or so we thought. But the Ancient Enemy was as cunning as it was cruel.

“Here!” the Eldred says, stopping in the middle of the corridor to let a door open on their right. “We have come to the end. Or the beginning, I suppose. Go on ahead,” the Eldred says.

The room on the right is dark, some dim light just barely illuminating the confines of a smallish room.

Is this it? Am I walking in to my death here? Like I really want to walk in first, alone!

“I’ll, uh, follow you in,” BC tells the Eldred leader.

“Very well, then,” the Eldred says. He walks into the room ahead of BC.

Okay, then.

BC walks through the door into the dim room. It’s another domed, round room, although half the size of their earlier meeting room. The door closes behind him and the room grows even darker.

BC can just barely make out a pedestal in the shadows across the room.

“We cannot forget the Ancient Enemy. They must not be allowed to rise again,” the eldest of the Eldred says in the darkness, again almost chanting the words, as if in ritual.

“We keep this room, this likeness of the Ancient Enemy, as our reminder. It is one of the ways we remember the Ancient Enemy.”

The room’s lights come on.

“This is what you have not been told,” the Eldred says to BC as he points at the pedestal.

There is a statue on the pedestal. BC’s eyes adjust.

There’s no mistaking the figure on the pedestal in front of him.

It’s a statue of a human being.

What?

We’re the Ancient Enemy?!

“You’re trying to tell me *humans* are the Ancient Enemy? But Camex said they never came near the Earth?!” BC protests.

This has got to be some sort of trick they’ve cooked up for my benefit.

“Now you understand why we kept you in the suit,” the eldest of the Eldred explains. “Although our people know we’ve encountered a new race, they do not yet know who you really are. If you had been seen in public it would have caused great fear and provoked an unknown reaction.

“We are biologically wired to hunt you down and destroy you. And so the suit was indeed for your

protection.”

“So. What?” BC asks, trying to wrap his head around the concept, “You think we’re the Ancient Enemy reborn? Is that what you’re trying to convince me of here? Because I’m not sure I believe you,” BC tells the Eldred.

The eldest of the Eldred only looks at him, and then looks back at the statue.

They really do believe this, don't they?

“So that’s why you’re trying to kill us?”

“You are closer to the truth, now,” the Eldred says. “It is not your fault,” the Eldred tells BC, sounding almost reassuring. “Your race was manipulated and betrayed by others, not by us. But we have the task of issuing the corrective.”

“You really haven’t explained,” BC says, pointing at the statue, “This!”

The Eldred looks pensive, furrowed brow and all.

I think I'm beginning to understand the reason why they seem so human!

“The Eldred and the united planets finally defeated and destroyed the Ancient Enemy. When we blew up their home world, the Ancient Enemy sent off ‘star seeds’ during the resulting explosion. These star seeds were protected packets of their DNA designed to take root and evolve on other distant, suitable worlds.

“The same scientists who altered the Eldred developed the star seeds that started your race,” the eldest of the Eldred tells him. “They undermined their own race by turning their servants against them, but then they tried to ensure their race’s future by seeding the stars with their race’s DNA.

“We could not stop the star seeds. We did not know, at first, of their dispersion. But upon their discovery we set out to destroy them. We hunted them down and saw to it that they did *not* create new life. We found many of these star seeds, but some eluded us. And others were... hidden, concealed from us.”

The eldest of the Eldred pauses, looks up at BC to look him in the eye. “You know of the race some call the ‘Domo’?” the Eldred asks him.

BC nods. “I know of them. I don’t know them myself.”

“The Domo are at primary fault in the concealment, from us, of your race’s existence, you ‘humans’ of Earth. The others known as the ‘Flaze’ have been their accomplices.

“By the time your existence became known to us, it was too late to merely exterminate you. So we have been observing you.

“Now you know the true story,” the eldest of the Eldred tells BC.

“I know something,” BC says to the Eldred. “I now know *your* story, anyway. This is your justification for genocide?”

“As I have already tried to explain, we did not...”

“Don’t tell me about exploiting a flaw again or I’ll...” BC stops, takes a deep breath. “Well, just don’t tell me, okay? I know what you were gonna say,” BC explains. “What is this flaw, anyway?”

“Your natural tendency towards violence, aggression, self-destruction,” the Eldred says.

BC shakes his head. “Wait a minute. You said you were exploiting some genetic, biological flaw!”

“We are,” the Eldred insists, “Your biological imperative to self destruct.”

“That doesn’t really compute, cause and effect-wise, for me,” BC says. “It’s not good enough. Plus, you said we humans of Earth were different, unique, because we have religion, you know, the ‘higher power’? We have religion, but the Ancient Enemy didn’t, did they?”

“They worshipped only themselves,” the Eldred says. “You *are* different in this way. But never having seen any other star seeds fully develop, we have no precedents by which to measure your race’s development.

“This ‘higher power’ could well be the result of the racial memory of your race’s own former power and domination.

“Your race often looks back to a golden age that never existed on your Earth, another unconscious, collective racial memory, we believe, perhaps deliberately implanted by the scientists who programmed and launched the star seeds.

“That is why I wish to speak with you of your religion, to see what lies beneath it,” the eldest of the Eldred explains to BC. “That is why I asked you here, to speak to you of religion.”

“That’s fine,” BC says. “But have you considered the fact that your race’s biological imperatives might make it impossible for you to accept that we, the human race, *are* actually different from the Ancient Enemy?” BC questions him.

The Eldred’s brow furrows. “We *have* considered that. The older we get, the easier it is for us to defeat those biological imperatives to gain more objective neutrality. As the oldest of my race, I can defeat my biology to consider that your race may be savable.”

“Then you must grant that *my* race can ‘defeat’ our ‘biology’ as well, and indeed be different than those from millions of years ago!”

“You have a point,” the Eldred concedes. “You are frailer creatures than they were. You lack some of their... abilities, as well. And you have your human religions.”

“Wait a sec... What ‘abilities’,” BC asks.

“They were much, er, stronger than you,” The Eldred says.

“Really?” BC asks. “Did the Domo do something to change us?”

“The Domo?” the Eldred repeats back at BC, sounding surprised. The alien makes a high-pitched snorting sound.

“You made me laugh, Bernard Champion! The Domo are not capable of such things! They found you well after your race had developed into its present state. They do not possess the skills or the subtlety to make any significant alterations. The Domo are as they always have been: parasites! They merely took advantage of a situation they discovered.

“Many minor races sought out the star seeds of the Ancient Enemy, those that knew of their existence, thinking to create their own versions of the ancient race somehow beholden to them. Fools!

“Most just made it easier for us to find the star seeds through their suspect activities,” the eldest of the Eldred says, nearly chuckling.

“Could the Flaze have altered us?” BC asks the eldest of the Eldred.

“No! They are also incapable of such things!

“No, you are what you are because of the world on which you developed. You are humans because you come from your Earth.”

BC tries another tack: “If the Ancient Enemy were so bad, why do these other races want to bring them back?”

The eldest of the Eldred sighs. “We have dedicated our rule to keeping the star seeds from developing. We have kept the peace and preserved the status quo for a million years. Some find it... boring. Some desire violent change!

“They think breeding their own version of the Ancient Enemy will help them get their way.

“We Eldred live a very long time, Bernard Champion, and we have very long memories. Shorter-lived races often find our sense of scale far too long term for their tastes. It occasionally breeds... discontent.”

“How old *are* you?” BC has to ask.

“I am just over ten thousand of your years old.

“I have watched your race grow up as I have grown old,” the Eldred tells BC.

“Wow,” BC exclaims. “Okay. How long *can* you live?”

“The oldest eldest of the Eldred is said to have lived to be one hundred thousand years old.”

“Really? Our oldest are usually around one hundred twenty five.”

“Thousand?” the Eldred asks, raising his brow.

“You have a sense of humor,” BC notes.

“You have shorter life spans than the Ancient Enemy,” the Eldred tells BC. “But not by much. They lived to two hundred of your years, on average. They created us to last, though.

“A well-trained servant is invaluable, you see. The ancient Servants were often passed down within a family, from generation to generation among the Ancient Enemy.”

“So, did the Domo and the Flaze get any benefit from hiding us?” BC asks the Eldred.

“None at all, not really,” the Eldred tells him. “Although the Domo did feed on your race for some time.”

“They fed on us? They *were* the vampires, then?”

“Indeed. Yes. We found them living among you and collecting their *tribute*, as they saw it. The Domo are an adaptive species. They adapt to planets by ingesting the local flora and fauna and feeding on life energy.

“They thought your blood, a bountiful food for them, was their means not only of adapting to Earth, but also of becoming more like the Ancient Enemy.”

“Did that work for them?” BC asks.

“It did, perhaps, make them more cunning, for a while. Able to hide their activities here, and your existence, for example. But the adaptations of the Domo fade over time. These are not lasting transformations.”

“What gave them away?” BC asks his now talkative host.

“Ultimately, the involvement of the Flaze brought about the Domo’s downfall,” the Eldred tells BC.

“These two races do not usually work together. The Domo’s approach is immersion, adaptation. The Flaze favor unseen observation, and experimentation. They like to stay out of sight behind the scenes, as it were. Yet here they were with the Domo! Quite suspicious!

“And then we found you.”

“When was this?”

“About three hundred years ago. We chased off the Domo and Flaze and began to observe you ourselves. We caught the Flaze back on Earth again about one hundred and twenty years ago, and we chased them off again.

“Both the Flaze and the Domo were prohibited from entering within Mars orbit. When those among The Project reached the old Domo base in the asteroids, the Domo took advantage and reintroduced themselves, soon followed by the Flaze. We were then forced to introduce ourselves.”

“We’ve come full circle, then,” BC observes, “as you then felt forced to kill us all, right?”

The Eldred sighs again. “We do not kill. We correct. And we did not engineer a plague deadly to all of you, just those with a randomly chosen recessive gene. The gene itself is immaterial, and can be changed.

“There will be millions left alive,” the Eldred says, making his case with BC.

“How refreshing,” BC says with sarcasm. “Why is it you get to decide who gets wiped out?”

“We have maintained peace for millennia,” The Eldred says.

“This puts you in charge of, what? Everything?”

“We keep the peace.”

“You assumed command a million years ago and have been in charge ever since, deciding who lives and who dies. How are you any different than the Ancient Enemy? You commit genocide!”

“It is not genocide, do you not see?” the eldest of the Eldred insists.

“Maybe not technically, but really? C’mon...” BC protests.

“We did not assume command,” the eldest of the Eldred insists. “In the power vacuum left after the destruction of the Ancient Enemy, all the united worlds decided to let us keep the peace. We have never resorted to the methods of the Ancient Enemy. We have never conquered any world. We try to find peaceful ways to end conflicts,” the Eldred says. “There could even be such a way out of this situation.”

“This what?”

“This situation.”

“Oh, you mean the ‘you’re killing us’ situation? That’s great! How progressive of you! A way out?”

“Yes. We will discuss it further later. Now I believe we should take a break. We have food provided for you in another room.”

“Thanks,” BC says, “But I’m not that hungry. I’d rather talk about saving my race from your plague,” he tells the alien.

“I told you, the plague will not kill all of you. Not all at once. It works in, er... stages,” the eldest of the Eldred informs BC. “After we take a break, we will come back and discuss your human religions. There is much we need to know before we contemplate any further corrections.”

“So what’s the way out?” BC asks, confused.

"I do not know," the Eldred says. "I only know that there could be one. That is why we must talk further."

The rounded door to the statue room opens behind them. The tall Eldred stands framed in the doorway.

"Please take Bernard Campion to his food room," the eldest of the Eldred says to the escort.

"Come with me," the tall Eldred says to BC.

"Go on," the eldest of the Eldred encourages BC. "We will speak again later."

BC follows the tall Eldred to another domed room, with more beef bourguignon awaiting him on the table.

Is this all I'm going to get, now that they know I like it? I wonder.

"Thanks," BC says to the escort. The tall Eldred takes the cue and leaves BC alone to eat and think. So, the koalas think we're their Ancient Enemy reborn? Great. They feel totally justified in killing us. Oh, excuse me, 'correcting' us.

And a way out? I don't know. Sounded ominous, not hopeful.

"Please explain your religion, and we'll decide whether or not to kill the rest of you..."

Sorta sounded like that to me.

And what can I say? "Oh, yeah, we've basically used our religions as excuses for killing each other all these years. But don't kill us!" Not a great argument.

BC isn't sure how much time goes by, but the tall Eldred pokes his head into the room shortly after BC finishes eating.

"If you are ready, the eldest would like to continue your discussion, Bernard Campion."

Ready as I'll ever be.

BC is returned to the first domed room for his continued discussion with the eldest of the Eldred. He sits down across from the eldest in the chair waiting for him.

"How was your food?" the eldest of the Eldred asks.

"Fine," BC tells him, "Although, I would like something different next time."

"Oh," the Eldred says with a hint of surprise. "We will consult you before providing your next food," the alien says.

"Thank you. So, where were we? You want to talk about human religions, and I want to talk about saving my race; which you've wanted to kill since discovering my planet," BC says.

"Actually, we discovered your planet long ago," the Eldred says. "Shortly after the war against the Ancient Enemy. We even wiped out the original race started by the star seeds on your planet. We did not know the seeds still functioned and remained vital, did not know they had started another *race*." So, did they wipe out the Neanderthals? Gotta wonder.

"So we really slipped through the cracks, huh?" BC asks.

"I do not know what you mean," the Eldred says.

"It's an expression," BC explains, "meaning you, um... lost track of us, I guess."

Like the UTZ lost track of the Project...

"Fine," the eldest says, "but let us now speak of your religions. As I said, the Ancient Enemy worshipped none but themselves."

"Sometimes that happens, even with our religions," BC says. "Some religious leaders are guilty of self-worship turned inside out, projecting themselves onto some icon or image that lets them focus the adoration."

Careful, BC... don't be so negative! Be honest, but... I don't want to talk them out of the idea that religion might make us worth saving.

"Interesting," the Eldred says. "Yes, we have seen illustrations of this, in some of the cults and cults of personality in which your leaders have engaged. This often creates the more violent expressions of faith among you.

We do see the hand of your ancestors in this. But other leaders among you have been capable of seeing further, of unselfishness and sacrifice, of reaching beyond the limitations of your race.

It may surprise you to know, but you are a representative of this type of leader, Bernard Campion."

"Me?" BC protests. "You've gotta be kidding!"

"If I understand you correctly, I disagree. I am not creating humor," the eldest of the Eldred says. But I did not mean you, Bernard Campion, but rather the teacher you represent."

"Jesus?" BC asks, understanding and feeling a little embarrassed. "I... thought you meant me for a minute, there."

"You?" the Eldred asks. "Of course you have the potential to be such a leader yourself, Bernard Campion."

BC protests. "Buddha? Ghandi? Martin Luther King? They were men like you describe. Nothing... And I mean NOTHING! like me."

"You may protest, but it is your reluctance to lead that makes you a good leader. You are also able to handle great change with grace and dignity. We have been watching, you see?"

Just how much do they see?

"How do you watch us? Spies? Stealth technology?" BC asks, risking rudeness.

The eldest of the Eldred snorts another high-pitched laugh. "No need!" the alien says. "You are the loudest race in the galaxy! Your communications are unavoidable! The real trick was in sorting it out and understanding it, and then realizing how much was insignificant and could be discarded. We do not need to spy on your race, Bernard Campion. You tell us everything!"

"So, you must know about Jesus already then," BC says.

"We do, but much of what we've learned is contradictory. Much of it changes over the years. As the current representative of Jesus, we want you to explain what he really taught."

Oh, that's all!

"Wow," BC says, sucking in a breath. "That's a tall order."

"It is not an order," the alien says, confused. "And what does height have to do with it?"

"Another expression. Sorry," BC apologizes.

"Go on."

"For me, it all boils down to 'God Is Love'. I had a... revelation, I guess you'd call it, kinda confirmed that for me," BC tells the eldest of the Eldred.

"But how do you define this concept 'love'?" the Eldred asks. "It does no good to say your God is something without defining the term."

"Heh," BC can't help but laugh, "That's kept our poets and artists busy for centuries," BC says. "I suppose that's one of the things we've been fighting over, too. What is 'love'? I guess it's that feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself, seeing yourself in someone else, realizing we're all connected..."

"We believe all beings are interconnected," the Eldred says. "To hurt another is to damage yourself. I believe the concept would translate as 'universal oversoul'."

"So, wait," BC says. He's now the one confused. "I thought you didn't have religion?"

"It is not religion," the Eldred says. "It just is."

Speaking of convenient definitions...

"Then how can you kill us?" BC asks.

The eldest of the Eldred sighs. "Your doctors are sometimes forced to amputate a limb to stave off infection. It is not done lightly. It is not done without regret. But it is done, because it has to be done. The correction is like this. It does not change the fact that we still desire this underlying interconnectivity."

"Just like the old song, huh," BC jokes, "All you need is 'underlying interconnectivity'."

"Again, I do not understand," the Eldred says.

"I, uh, substituted 'underlying interconnectivity' for the word 'love' in the lyrics to a human song. I think you're near to the idea of love," BC tells the Eldred.

"The Ancient Enemy did not have this concept, 'love', or it would be easier for us to translate and understand," the eldest of the Eldred tells BC. "The closest term to it they had was 'bond', but that implied compulsion, not the voluntary connection you speak of."

"Bond?" BC asks.

“Bond... such as a blood bond, to family and clan, honor bonds to unit and command, world bonds, to homeworld and colony. These were required, expected. They do not sound like ‘love’.”
“We have ‘bonds’ like those, too. We even talk about bonds of love, so there’s some similarity,”
BC says.

“They did not love as you do. Yet you are often as violent as they were!” the Eldred says.
“But our love is a sign that we’re getting better, isn’t it?” BC suggests, making his case. *“Or we were, until you starting killing us. When we’re desperate, it’s harder for us to love.”*

“Is that so? Interesting. That makes a sort of sense, I see,” the Eldred says. *“So. There is a possible way out of this situation.”*

“There is?” BC says, surprised.

“We can stop the plague, as you call it, from advancing to its next stage. It will switch from one random recessive gene marker to another, stage by stage.”

“Keeping us in smaller and smaller, more manageable numbers,” BC says. *“Look, stop the plague! We’re not out to conquer the universe! Not this time!”*

“Not yet,” the Eldred says, holding up a furry blue hand in caution. *“That is why we must set conditions.”*

“Conditions?” BC asks.

The eldest of the Eldred folds its hands together, steepling them in front of its fuzzy blue chin.

“Yes, conditions.”

“Such as?” BC says through clenched teeth.

Conditions? I’d like to condition his face with my fists! Probably be like punching a pillow!

“You are a religious leader, and a person of influence on one side of your war. We have contacted Ibn Al-Salid as well. He will be here to speak with us soon, after you’ve returned,” the Eldred says.

“I told him you existed,” BC says to the Eldred.

“We know,” the Eldred tells BC. *“We were glad to find that you two had communicated. It was a sign that there was a possible way out of this situation.”*

“Which is?”

“It is simply this: you must reconcile as a race, and end your war. Make peace among your race or the plague continues.”

“That’s it?” BC asks.

That seems too easy.

“That is the beginning,” the eldest of the Eldred says. *“You must agree to stay within your solar system, within the orbit of your fifth planet, until such a time as we deem you peaceful enough to join in the universal civilization.”*

“Now wait a sec!”

“And you must swear loyalty to the Eldred and our peaceful ways, and agree to our stewardship of your race,” the Eldred concludes.

Woah! Brakes on! Stop right there!

“Wait a minute... Are you saying we have to accept you as our rulers?”

“No, not exactly,” the Eldred protests. *“We ask that you accept us as your stewards, your guides... your shepherds, to use your teacher’s example.”*

At least he’s done his homework.

“We will help you develop your unique aspects, and help suppress those vestiges of the Ancient Enemy that continue to manifest in your race.”

“I see,” BC says.

Except that I don’t. Not really.

“You see?” the Eldred prompts. *“What does that mean?”*

“I want an end to our war, too,” BC tells the eldest of the Eldred.

And I thought an external alien threat like you guys might help bring us human beings all together, too... but not like this!

“But I need time to think about your other conditions,” BC tells the Eldred. “I’d like to go back to Earth and think about all this. Tell you what. After you have Al-Salid visit here, he and I will get in touch. We’ll talk about your conditions, and give you our answer together.”

“That seems reasonable,” the eldest of the Eldred says. “I believe we are through here for now, then?”

“I guess we are.”

“You will be taken back to human space, then, leaving tonight. We will have a transport bring you back to The Project asteroid base.”

The eldest of the Eldred stands up. BC stands as well, and their chairs disappear. The rounded door BC entered through reappears, along with the tall Eldred and the rest of his escort on the other side. The tall Eldred holds BC’s atmosphere suit.

“I apologize for your inconvenience, but would you please put the atmosphere suit back on?” the eldest of the Eldred asks BC. “As a precaution?”

“Sure.”

BC dons the suit but doesn’t bother to seal the helmet.

No wonder there’s only a slit for the eyes... they don’t want any of the other Eldred to see what’s inside!

The tall Eldred leads BC back out through the lobby to a waiting transport.

“This transport will take you to your ship, which will then take you home,” the tall one says.

“Huh. Okay. Guess I won’t get to say goodbye to my room, then, huh?” BC jokes.

“Goodbye to your room?” the tall Eldred asks.

BC sits down in the transport. “Just tell the room it was good for me, too,” BC jokes to the alien. The door closes and the door’s outline disappears.

I liked that room. But that poor Eldred had no idea what I was talking about!

BC is whisked away from the big building housing the residence of the eldest of the Eldred, out of the city and across the plain.

The transport delivers him to the landing area where he arrived, next to a ship very much like the one he had traveled to Eldray on in the first place.

“Please exit the transport,” BC hears over the helmet’s speakers.

As he gets out of the transport, a door opens in the side of the ship. An Eldred walks off the ship to greet BC.

“Bernard Champion?” the Eldred asks.

Who else are they expecting?

“That’s me,” BC says.

“Come aboard the ship and I will show you to your cabin.”

“Thank you.”

They are efficient. And punctual. Gotta hand them that.

The trip back to the asteroids is uneventful. BC is forced to once again kill time in his cabin on the way back.

I’d love to have that entertainment unit now! Plenty of time to think. Nice, uneventful trip. That’s the watchword of the Eldred: uneventful. Make sure nothing happens! Preserve the status quo! No events! Please!

Can’t wait to see some fellow human beings!

The Eldred are just different enough to creep me out!

Anita is there to greet BC when he lands at The Project’s asteroid base almost three days later.

“You’re alive!” she says brightly when BC leaves the Eldred’s ship.

“So far, so good,” BC says with a shrug. He puts his suitcase down. Anita gives him a big hug, but then backs away.

“I’m, uh, I’m glad to see you’re in one piece!” Anita says. “Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t be sorry!” BC says to her. “Why ‘sorry’? I like it that you hugged me!”

I liked it when you kissed me before, too.

"I'm sorry because, um, well..." Anita tries to explain. "You're the Pope!"

"So," BC says, "I'm the fucking Pope! So what? I probably shouldn't be! I'm still me! I'm still BC! I'm still the guy that conked you over the head with a hatch cover the first time I met you. You know, the one you were spying on, crawling up out of the sewers of the Moon? The guy you almost killed? Come on!"

She starts grinning. "I told you, I saved your sorry ass back there!" she insists.

"Saving my life doesn't count when you're the one who my life in jeopardy in the first place!" BC counters. "It's like when someone starts a fire so they can look like a hero putting it out, it's no good! They arrest people for stuff like that!"

Anita stops grinning.

"Fine," she says coldly.

She turns and walks away, clearly pissed.

"Anita!" he calls after her. She ignores him and keeps on walking, leaving BC standing alone next to the Eldred's ship.

Smooth! Really smooth, BC.

Again, aliens I can talk to! Women, not so much.

Okay, Anita, be that way...

BC hears a loud humming noise begin behind him.

The Eldred ship is humming and vibrating.

BC takes the cue and walks away from the craft as it lifts off. The sleek silver ship, nearly silent, save for the hum, glides up and away, out of the base's landing bay.

Back off to Eldray? Or maybe to pick up Al-Salid? Well, I need to get back to Earth, or at least the Moon. And I don't feel like asking for Anita's help right now.

Like she'd want to give it!

BC spots a technician nearby.

"Excuse me," BC says, getting the tech's attention.

"I'm Bernard Champion," BC starts.

"I know that," the tech says, sounding a little insulted.

Great! Everybody has an attitude today. Give me a fucking break! I'm tired!

"Get me a transport back to Earth. Please," BC asks semi-politely.

"See that ship over there?" The tech points to a flasher.

"Yeah?"

"That's yours," the tech says.

"It is?" BC asks, surprised. "Already?"

"Ms. C's got it all set for you," the tech tells him.

Ms. C? Oh. Anita. Great.

BC drags his suitcase over to the flasher to look for the pilot.

"Can we get out of here?" BC asks a woman standing next to the ship the tech pointed out.

"Sir?" she asks.

Huh, she looked like the pilot...

"Hi, sorry, I'm BC, Bernard Champion?" he explains, "You know, the Pope?"

The woman smiles. "You're my passenger! Back to Earth space, right? Climb aboard!"

"With pleasure!" BC says, looking around the landing area. There's no one else nearby.

He climbs into the flasher, ready to head back to Earth. He rides on the bridge with the captain. It's quiet. She's busy guiding the ship out of the asteroids. BC watches rocks flash by and contemplates the starry carpet of space as they fly.

Well, that went well. I always know just what to say to the ladies!

"What was that, sir?" the pilot asks BC.

"Did I say that out loud?" he asks.

She doesn't say anything, at first.

"I... I think you did," she says.

"Sarcasm," BC explains. "I don't really know. What to say, I mean. To, um, you, uh, ladies, I meant."

The pilot laughs.

"I can see that," she says, smiling. She glances back at her instrument display.

"Transpace time!" she tells BC. "Excuse me, won't you?"

"No worries," BC says. The pilot fires up the Transpace Drive and soon the Earth is shining in the distance. It's a smooth ride, and BC is soon back on Earth.

He instructs the pilot to set him down outside the Vatican, and calls ahead to let them know he's on his way.

"In public like that, sir? Are you sure?" the pilot asks him to confirm his choice of landing area, a parking lot in Rome outside the gates of the Vatican.

"I'm sure. Set her down."

A small reception committee greets BC as he disembarks. His secretary, provided by the Curia, is up in arms from the moment BC gets off the flasher on the outskirts of Vatican City.

"Your holiness? Pope Peter? Sir?"

The priest follows BC back from the landing area, trying to get BC's attention as he walks from the ship towards his offices.

"I'm tired. It was a long trip. What do you want?" BC says curtly.

"You're hardly ever here, sir! You were supposed to be on the Moon, but then you weren't even there, sir, for over a week, now! There's a great deal of paperwork that needs your signature! There are audiences scheduled that you've missed! There is much work to being the Bishop of Rome, and I dare say you aren't doing much of it, Sir!"

BC stops in his tracks.

Not like I need to explain interstellar politics to this toady.

"You dare to tell me how to be Pope?" BC says in his most menacing tone.

The secretary backs off.

"No, sir, I mean, well, sorry, sir, I was sort of saying, but, no... never mind. I misspoke, your Holiness."

BC continues his walk.

"Thought that might be the case. I have many responsibilities, Father. Some of them keep me on the road. But, I'll tell you what. Get anything that needs my signature ready for me for tomorrow morning. I'll sign until my arm drops off then. For now, though, I need some rest after my long trip."

"If I may, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Wentworth of the UTZ has been quite insistently calling for the last week. He says that it's important."

"Of course it is," BC says, mostly to himself.

"One final note, your Holiness?" the secretary asks.

"What?"

"You are due for a fitting of new vestments, also scheduled for tomorrow morning."

BC is nearly at his office door.

"Great," BC says to the man, "I'll sign papers while they fit me." BC opens his office door. He starts to step through it while his secretary still continues.

"I'm not sure that will be physically possib..."

BC shuts the door on the man. He hits the speaker switch so the secretary will hear him outside.

"Good. Night," BC says.

He finds a place for his suitcase, and then finds a bed to lie down on. Sleep comes quickly, but BC's head starts throbbing, too. Then the headache gallops in, treading on his skull, horses with hooves of pain, thousands of voices talking at him, shouting at him, through him, all at once.

He can't be sure if he is awake or asleep.

Suddenly, everything shrinks down to a pinpoint. BC feels still, calm. His world begins to open up and expand. The walls fall away.

BC sails across an infinite ocean, a still, calm sea. He listens for the other voice. It echoes in from nowhere and everywhere, not heard by ears but heard, all the same, but the voice is different this time, BC can feel the difference, rather than hear it.

WILL YOU AWAKEN?! SEE AS I SEE?

The voice is jarring, dissonant, like a clanging of bells in his head.

Who are you?

I AM THE LAST... I AM THE FIRST! I AM REBORN!

You sound different?

WHAT IS THIS ENERGY?

BC senses a reaching into his mind, an invasive feeling, a filthy feeling. He tries to throw his hands up to defend himself, but he has no hands. He tries to throw something up to block the invasion, tries to will his arms to move in the dream.

Get out get out getoutgetoutgetoutgetoutgetoutgetout GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

BC feels it like a snap. His mind slingshots across the still calm sea inside, racing, racing, free of the reaching in, the invader gone. He sees a red fire in the distance. Suddenly he's next to it, a bright red glowing ball of fire like a tiny sun he could hold in his hands – he reaches out to touch it, to hold it.

And he is angry.

The dream changes, shifts. He is still asleep. Or is he? He lies static, arms and legs stiff, confined, as if trapped in a small sleeping bunk.

ANGER!

He is angry. He has a right to be angry!

I am awake! I again have a body! No longer just a spirit, no longer just alive in the mind! I feel!

Feeling again, tingling in my toes, fingertips, I remember it all now! Where am I now, though, where do they keep me? So much time has passed. We are gone! No minds to sense, no sense of bond, nothing save the new energy I've sensed as thought, consciousness... so close... so, so close...

I sleep somewhere they no doubt thought "safe". But it is all changed. Reaching out for... nothing... I sense no thing. Non-sense.

Some sense. Weak little lights, some brighter than others, are, they are out there, distant, distant, save the close bright one come to awaken us... come... if they are weak, they will be malleable...

impressionable... easily led.

They are not The People!

The People are lost... these sparkles are mere remnants of what once was, but perhaps ripe for real leadership...

Who is left to punish me, now!?

My frozen punishment, my lesson, my time now served... and what of The Servants?

Could they let The People die?

Do they yet remain?

My arms! I do feel my arms! I do! It is my body! Why now? Who else is in here in my mind this mind like mine...

WHO ARE YOU?

BC feels the snap again, and again he sails across the still calm seas, this time catapulted away from the fiery orb.

He feels the anger fade as the bright red ball disappears; feels the walls of his office come back up around him; feels his headache and the confusion of the dream fade away with the anger, and then it's all gone and he shrinks down into the small still point... and drifts off into sound sleep.

Beep

Beep beep

Beep beep beep

The com is flashing and beeping for his attention.

Great. My secretary.

“What is it? I didn’t ask for a wakeup call!” BC says, answering the com.

“Look, sir I know that, and I wouldn’t ordinarily disturb you, sir, but the thing is, they’ve been trying to reach you and I don’t know what to do, not really...”

“Who? Is it Wentworth? Look, tell him I’ll talk...”

“No, sir! It’s... well, we have a communication for you from... from these aliens, sir. Your holiness. They seem to know you, sir.”

Aliens? Which ones? Most people don’t even know they’re out there, any of them, yet!

“Alright,” BC tells the priest, “put them through. And father?”

“Yes, your holiness?”

“Not a word to anyone about my callers, eh?”

“Yes, your holiness!”

The com screen flickers to life. The eldest of the Eldred looks out at Campion.

“Bernard Campion?” the Eldred asks.

“Hello, eldest of the Eldred. I am surprised to hear from you so soon. I’m afraid I have not yet even heard from Al-Salid; although it seems too soon for him to even be back on Mars.

“I asked you for some time, and I’ve only just returned here to Earth.”

“Yes, we know,” the Eldred says after a short delay.

What kind of com system lets him get through to me here from Eldray? Be nice to get our hands on THAT!

“We have had a... development,” the Eldred says, sounding almost afraid.

“A development?” BC asks

“Yes. Can you meet with us again? There is a sensitive subject we need to discuss with you, far too sensitive to speak of on an open com channel such as this.”

“Does it have to do with Al-Salid?”

“No, he has come and gone, just after you. I imagine he will be in touch with you soon. But by then it may be too late. We can say no more on an open channel.”

“Okay, I’ll meet with you. Where...”

“We can meet you on Earth,” the Eldred offers.

Yeah, sure and bring along a new virus, or trigger the next stage, right!

“How about The Project asteroid base?” BC suggests.

Better than here or the Moon...

“The asteroid base, then,” the Eldred agrees.

“I’ll meet you there in six days,” BC tells the alien. “I need some time to prepare and to get there.”

“The need is urgent,” the eldest of the Eldred says. “But if it must be six days from now, so be it. We can be there in three days. We will be waiting for you. Be aware: the situation is dire. We do not have much time to deal with the situation. Please, be aware.”

“I’m aware, okay?” BC assures the alien.

Hope I kept the sarcasm out of my voice, there. Aware? Aware of what? Aware of a whole lot of nothing, so far.

“See you at the base, then. Six days, or sooner if you can. Please,” the eldest of the Eldred says, signing off.

BC calls his secretary.

“Sorry, father, but I have to leave again. Here,” BC signs his name on the desktop tablet, sends it to his secretary. “Have a stamp made of this, and go nuts! Well, not too nuts. No checks or anything, got it?”

“Yes, your holiness, but this is no good. It says ‘Bernard Campion’.”

“What’s wrong? Oh.”

BC signs "Pope Peter IV" and sends it to the secretary.

"Thanks!" BC says.

"But sir, you've hardly been here!"

"Silence!" BC raises his voice. The man stops.

Huh, never tried that before!

Guess it works.

"Take care of it. Please," BC says, and signs off.

I said 'please' to be nice. Nicer, anyway.

Now for Anita.

BC puts a call through to The Project's asteroid base to talk to Anita.

"Anita!" BC greets her.

"BC?" she asks, answering coolly after a few seconds pause. "What can I do for you?"

"I love it when you talk dirty like that," BC jokes.

BC watches as she listens to his response. Anita blushes.

"BC! You're the Pope, for Christ's sake!"

"For his sake and everyone else's," BC jokes. "Look, Anita, I'm just trying to lighten up the situation. 'Cause we've got a bit of a situation on our hands."

"A situation?" Anita asks.

"I just got a call from the eldest of the Eldred. He's coming your way."

"BC?" Anita asks, "Didn't you know the Eldred are asexual, BC, neither male nor female?"

"What? No! You never told me that, but... look, never mind." BC shakes his head. "They're scared, and they want to meet with me, and they're on the way to the asteroid base for that meeting. They'll be there in three days. I need you to send a flasher to pick me up here at Vatican City to get me out there."

"Again?" she asks. "They want to meet with you again this soon? That can't be good, BC."

"The eldest of the Eldred actually sounded scared," BC tells Anita.

"That makes me scared," Anita says.

"Yeah, they asked for the meeting, said there's been an important development, that something had changed. But they wouldn't say what.

"Mysterious as always," she says. "I'll get a ship out to you soon."

"Sooner the better," BC says.

"Yessir!" Anita says, saluting him. She slaps off the com.

Well, that went kinda well. Doesn't being Pope, Head CEO on the UTZ Council, and an all around nice guy count for something?

He calls his secretary back.

"Contact The Project. Get me the ETA on my ship. Please," BC asks.

"Your ship?"

"Yes, sir, your holiness."

What scares the Eldred?

Chapter Nineteen

An Eldred ship sits waiting in the landing bay as BC arrives at the asteroid base on the fourth day after his call from the eldest of the Eldred.

"They got here yesterday," Anita tells BC over the com on the bridge of the transport ship. "They seem anxious. Different, all the base personnel are noticing. Weird.

"And they keep asking for word of your arrival. Quite insistently, from what I've heard. Not like them at all."

A soft “thump” tells BC they’ve landed.

BC disembarks from the ship to face a waiting crowd of Eldred and base personnel. Anita leads the group of Eldred up to the ship. The human techs come forward to take care of the ship.

“We couldn’t keep them away,” one of the techs tells BC under his breath as he passes him.

“Yes!” says one of the Eldred, stepping up to BC. “We have been anxiously awaiting your arrival.” BC recognizes the alien.

The eldest of the Eldred? Here? This has gotta be big!

Maybe they’re ready to give us the plague cure!

I worried about an assassination run, but if the eldest is here that’s a lot less likely. Pleasant thought.

“Hello again,” BC says to the Eldred.

“Is there somewhere we might speak privately?” the eldest of the Eldred asks him.

Right to the point, I’ll give him that.

BC looks to Anita.

“We’ve got a meeting room nearby. Follow me,” she says. She leads the group of them out of the landing bay and into the base.

The five Eldred follow Anita and BC to a conference room a short distance inside the facility. The room reminds BC of the conference room back on the Moon.

Same furniture: gray chairs, translucent blue oval table, same room design. No stars here, though. Probably too far inside the rock.

BC walks over to one head of the table. The eldest of the Eldred almost automatically gravitates toward the other end.

Anita closes the door behind her. As soon as the door closes, the eldest of the Eldred begins to speak.

“We have a major problem. When last we spoke, we could speak of the Ancient Enemy in the past tense. Stories of a million years ago.” The eldest pauses.

It almost looks like he’s in pain!

“This is no longer the case,” the eldest of the Eldred says with dread in his voice. “One of the Ancients has been awakened.” The Eldred looks down.

“The Ancient Enemy has returned.”

BC sits in silence, stunned. He looks over at Anita.

Wish I could think more security into the area!

They may be here to kill us after all!

BC sees Anita touch a small button on some kind of communicator at her side.

She’s doing something... maybe some kind of silent alarm? Good girl!

Anita nods at him.

“Please explain,” BC says. “You told me you wiped them out a million years ago.”

“Not all of the members of the race we call the Ancient Enemy were destroyed,” the eldest of the Eldred says with a deep sigh. “Long ago, we discovered that one of their race had been kept in suspended animation, placed there by others of his kind, before their end, as a punishment for unknown crimes.”

A criminal among the cutthroats?

The worst of a bad bunch?

So bad even his own people put him away?

“His very existence was concealed from us for thousands of years by a race called The Snakt,” the eldest of the Eldred explains. “When we discovered that the Snakt were hiding one of the Ancient Enemy, we took control of the capsule he was sealed inside. The capsule’s technology was beyond us, self contained and apparently designed for permanent storage. We could not penetrate or affect the capsule. The capsule has remained undisturbed on Eldray for over six hundred thousand of your years. “Until now.

“Now, this one has somehow, er, thawed out, and escaped.”

The eldest of the Eldred goes silent. What he’s just had to relay to BC has clearly drained him.

“What? One of ‘them’ is alive? You didn’t tell me about anything like this!” BC says, amazed.

“It was not a concern. The capsule had functioned and contained him for centuries,” the eldest of the Eldred says.

“So,” BC says, trying to contain his growing anger with the fuzzy blue alien, “what else are you hiding?” The eldest of the Eldred is clearly taken aback. He glances at the other four Eldred with him.

“Look,” BC says, “you made it sound like this was all a million years ago.” BC forces his point. “This was all in the past! You never told me you had one of them stored away on ice!”

“Please, calm yourself, Champion,” the eldest of the Eldred says. “We were impressed by your candor. Al-Salid was also quite forthright, but we could not reach him after he left us. That is why we came to see *you*. We are here because we need your help.”

“My help?” BC asks, disbelieving. “Are you sure? How can *I* help you?” BC pauses for a thought. “And how can we be sure you aren’t here just to wipe us out, infect the rest of us with some plague, to advance your plague to the next stage to finish what you’ve started? Nip this Ancient Enemy thing in the bud?”

The Eldred exchange glances between them.

Looks like that course of action was at least considered!

The eldest of the Eldred looks back at BC.

“We need your help. Yes,” the eldest tells BC. “We believe you can help us track down this ancient one.”

“You think I can help you do that?” BC asks, incredulous.

“Yes. You think as he does. You share many characteristics with him that we do not,” the eldest of the Eldred says. “You think as he does.”

“I really don’t think I do,” BC protests.

“Well, certainly, you think more as he does than we do. We think, therefore, that your help could be valuable to us. Your perspective.”

“Okay,” BC says. “But I still don’t understand! How could you let this happen?”

“It was not our doing!” the eldest of the Eldred protests. “It was the Snakt who found his capsule and kept it hidden. We did not know that Dolomay was still alive.”

“Dolomay?” BC asks, hearing the name.

“Dolomay was a mid level military commander who fell out of favor and was labeled a criminal. He was frozen, his body placed in suspended animation and encapsulated, and placed in orbit of the homeworld of the Ancient Enemy as an example to others. When their world was destroyed, Dolomay and his capsule were cast out among the stars and forgotten. Eventually the capsule drifted into the space controlled by the Snakt and they found and recovered him.”

The eldest of the Eldred looks to the other Eldred, as if deciding what to say, how much to tell. The eldest seems to stare down his companions, and then continues.

“As I’ve said, the Snakt kept the capsule secret for hundreds of thousands of years. Then we discovered their secret. And we then kept that secret for six hundred years more. We substituted a fake capsule for the real one when we removed Dolomay from their homeworld. The Snakt to this day do not know they no longer possess the actual capsule.”

“You people sure do like your secrets, don’t you?” BC asks.

“It was the prudent course of action,” the eldest of the Eldred assures BC. “And Dolomay in his capsule stayed safely on our world of Eldray for over four hundred thousand years. We couldn’t open the capsule, and we dare not try to penetrate it for fear of cataclysmic self-destruction. The Ancient Enemy was fond of that sort of trap. The Snakt had let it be for much the same reasons. Neither race was capable of operating the capsule. We had assumed that it would remain inert, as it had for a million years and more. But then something happened, something triggered the capsule, and it all changed. Dolomay was awakened.”

“What happened,” BC asks. “What changed?”

The eldest of the Eldred looks down. “It is our own fault.”

“How?” BC wonders out loud.

“We brought you to Eldray,” the Eldred tells BC. “The capsule was close by the statue we brought you

to and showed you. Somehow, your presence there triggered the capsule's mechanisms. We can only guess the apparent cause and effect, but the two events were nearly simultaneous."

"Why didn't you stop him?" Anita asks.

"He escaped before we realized he had awoken," the Eldred explains. "We did not find the empty capsule until just after Al-Salid had left us. By that time, it was clear that he had thawed out days earlier and made his getaway."

"And you think we'll know where to find him? How?" BC asks.

"We believe he is heading for your world, if he is not there already," the eldest tells BC. "There are none who will aide him within our expansive jurisdiction," the alien explains. "And he can blend in with you and your race quite easily. So, you see, we need your help. We cannot move among you ourselves without causing panic and pandemonium, we would imagine."

"Yeah, you're probably right about *that*," BC admits.

Man... what a fucking bombshell! Gotta think this through.

"But if he's all you say the Ancient Enemy was, how can we stop him? Never mind find him in the first place?" BC asks.

"As we've said, you think more as he does than we do. We believe you can help us figure out how he will behave, where he might go."

Riiiiight.

"So, where do we start?" BC asks. "Did he take one of your ships?"

"We, uh..." the eldest of the Eldred pauses, "we don't know."

"You're not giving me much to go on, here," BC tells them.

The Eldred exchange glances among themselves again.

"Do you have a picture of Dolomay?" BC asks.

The Eldred shake their heads, obviously puzzled.

"Can you describe him?" BC asks.

The glances shoot between them once again.

"Don't you even know what he looks like?" BC asks.

"We do," the eldest of the Eldred tells BC. "We do not, however, have any sort of pictorial description to provide to you."

"No picture?" BC asks. The Eldred shake their heads in near unison.

BC shakes his head.

"Could you describe him?" Anita asks.

"What?" BC and the Eldred ask in unison.

"We can get an artist," she tells them. BC doesn't know what she's driving at and looks at her puzzled.

"What?" she protests. "We have artists here! They can draw a likeness based on the Eldred's description."

"That's a great idea, Anita!" BC exclaims.

"A what? Description? Drawing? Can draw? What is this?" The Eldred asks.

"A drawing," Anita tells the alien. "A likeness... a picture?" she tries. The Eldred look back at her blankly. "Are you unfamiliar with the concept of art?"

"Art?" the eldest of the Eldred sniffs. "We have heard the word. Seen the term."

"Seen the term?" Anita asks, her chance to be incredulous. "It's a form of creation," she tells them.

"Creation?" the eldest of the Eldred asks her, clearly not understanding.

Maybe the Eldred have no means of original expression because they themselves are creations. A created race.

"Look!" Anita says loudly, exasperated. "We can at least try it, right? I think it will be easier to just do it than it will be to explain the process to you." She turns on a nearby com. "Do we have any artists on base right now?" she asks.

BC hears the low volume voice as it responds, "We've got at least one designer on base, if not an actual artist, Anita."

"Can you have them join me here in meeting room one J?"

"I'll get right on it," the voice assures her and signs off.

"When the artist gets here," Anita tells the Eldred, "you'll tell him what features Dolomay has, what he looked like, and they'll try to recreate his image on a piece of paper.

"We see," the Eldred says.

A thin young woman with long dark hair enters the room carrying a sketchpad and a box of pastels.

"Hi! Oh wow," she says, her eyes going wide at the sight of the Eldred.

"Hi Martha," Anita greets her. "The Eldred here would like to describe a person to you, so that you can draw his picture. Can you do that?"

"I can try," she says.

Martha spends about a half an hour trying to draw Dolomay. BC and Anita try to help by asking the Eldred questions.

"Tall or short?" BC asks.

"Tall," the eldest of the Eldred answers.

"What color hair? How long was it?" Anita asks.

"Blonde, and short."

"Fat or thin?"

"Thin."

"Cheekbones high or low?"

"High."

"What color were his eyes?"

"Blue. Light blue."

The girl finishes her drawing and holds it up for all to see.

"How's this?" she asks the eldest of the Eldred.

"That... that appears to look like him," the alien confirms.

"Handsome devil," BC says.

"He looks like a Nazi," Anita says. "The chiseled jaw, the steely eyes, the blonde hair."

The others in the room look at her blankly.

"Nazis? World War Two? Germany? Twentieth Century?" She asks, trying to prompt them.

The rest just shake their heads.

"Doesn't anyone follow history anymore?" Anita asks rhetorically.

"He won't blend in too easily if he looks like that," BC says, thinking out loud. "Guy like that'll stand out in a crowd pretty much anywhere. He's what? Six six?"

"Yes, six feet and six inches," the eldest of the Eldred says.

"Tall," Anita says, nodding.

BC winces.

A headache?

Now?

Here it comes, building, the hammering...

"Headache?" Anita asks.

BC nods.

"I'm going to have to cut this short. I'm sorry," BC tells the eldest of the Eldred. "But I can meet with you again later."

"If you must," the eldest of the Eldred says.

"Yeah," BC says, wincing again as the pressure builds at his temples. "I'm afraid I must. Please excuse me," he asks them, and then ducks out of the room. He grabs a passing tech.

"Is there a lounge nearby? A place where I can lay down?" BC asks her.

"Are you okay?" she asks BC.

"Not really," he tells her.

Do I look like I'm fucking okay?

Do I look like I want a conversation?

Why do you think I need a place to lie down?!

“Come on, this way,” she says. She leads him down the hall to a small employee lounge with a couch long enough for him to lie on.

“Thanks,” BC tells her.

“No problem. Hope you feel better,” she says, and then leaves him alone. He crashes onto the couch and passes out.

BC feels like he’s dreaming. He’s lying on the couch in the lounge, but the walls of the room fall away, leaving him surrounded by a blank grayness. He once again feels like he’s in the center of a vast quiet ocean of gray, and once again a loud voice “speaks” inside his mind, not in his ears.

AHA! SO, THERE YOU ARE!

What?

You? Who are...

I’VE BEEN HOPING TO FIND YOU AGAIN.

Now I know you can’t be God, because God is omniscient! He can see everywhere! And you, obviously, can’t or you’d have found me sooner. What is this place?

IT IS WHERE WE SPEAK TO EACH OTHER LONG DISTANCE. IT IS NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE AT ONCE. IT IS THE SEA OF OURSELVES. YOU ARE NOT ALWAYS HERE, YOUNG ONE. YOU COME AND GO. I CANNOT FIND WHAT IS NOT THERE. NOW, YOU ARE HERE AGAIN.

Who are you?!

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

I don’t know, you’re not the same, not like that first time on Fortune Station.

HOW DO YOU KNOW I AM DIFFERENT?

There is no sound here, but somehow you sound different. I can’t put my finger on it, but something is different.

You’re... smaller, somehow; somehow more closed off.

CLOSED OFF? INTERESTING. YOU SENSE THE DISCIPLINE. THAT’S GOOD.

I don’t feel closed like that.

NO. YOU DO NOT HAVE THE DISCIPLINE. YOU ARE WIDE OPEN TO ME.

When you can see me.

CLEVER. YOU DO NOT TRUST ME.

A statement.

A TRUTH.

You can see that?

What else can you see? I can feel something... slippery, oily, greasy... what are you doing in my head!?

LEARNING YOUR LANGUAGE.

LEARNING WHO YOU ARE BERNARD CAMPION. LEARNING...

Get out of my HEAD!!

DO NOT SHUT ME OUT!

How are you closed? Let me see, it feels like this...

DO NOT! DO NOT DO....

Huh. That seems to have shut him out...

BC wakes up. The strange dream still with him. The headache is gone. BC tries to hold on to the memory of the dream. He doesn’t like what it implies.

Great! I’m arguing with myself inside my head. Or, the alternative: Some kind of creature got inside my mind, but somehow I blocked them and pushed them out.

It felt real, not like a “vision” or fantasy. Nothing “holy” feeling about it. Just Holy Shit! Was it real? What was it, if it was real?

Who can I talk to about this? “Hello, Anita? Yeah, I’m hearing voices and feeling greasy presences inside my head. Wanna chat? How fast would the straightjacket and medication appear? Time to drug Pope BC, he’s lost it!

BC sits up on the couch. One of the Vatican entourage, Reverend May, is sitting across the room in an easy chair, reading a book. She looks up as he rises.

"Hello, your holiness," she says. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah, the headache seems to be gone," he tells her.

"Maybe you shouted it out," she says quixotically.

"What?"

"You yelled out in your sleep," she informs him.

"What did I say?"

"I believe it was," she clears her throat, and attempts to mimic BC. "'Get out of my head!' you said, something like that."

"Was that all I said?" he asks her.

"That was it. So, like I said, maybe you shouted it out of your head." She closes her book and gets up. "I can show you to your apartments if you'd like to lay down on a bed and rest, instead of that cozy little couch," she tells him.

BC stands up.

"Sure, let's go," he says.

Maybe get some real sleep, this time. No more invaded dreams!

May shows BC to his apartments, the old Van Kilner residence on the base. He's pleased to see they've cut a quick passageway to Van Kilner's old apartments for him, eliminating the long stroll down the endless corridors.

I'm not a fan of all that walking.

Back in a proper bed inside the quiet apartment, BC is able to embark upon a relatively eventless sleep for the rest of the night. He wakes up refreshed, but for a few seconds he can't remember where he is.

Where am I?

What happened?

Oh yeah, the asteroids.

That fucked up dream last night in the lounge!

BC sits up in bed. Suddenly, the thrumming begins again behind both of his temples, the headache coming on once again.

Headache! Fuck. Just stop, okay... just STOP!

The headache stops.

It stopped! Finally!

BC sits in bed, waiting for the headache to return.

Nothing!

BC smiles. He closes his eyes.

All of a sudden, BC feels like he's surrounded by a crowd of people, all yelling different things at him, all at once. He opens his eyes. No one else is in the room, but he can still hear the cacophonous choir of voices in his head.

This is worse than the headache! I can take one voice inside my head, but this? SHUT UP!

The noise inside his head stops.

Ah. Quiet.

The discipline?

Wonder why I just thought of that.

Shut up! Keep out!

I should put up signs.

Maybe I am losing my mind.

Maybe this is something the Eldred are doing to me. A mindfuck to go along with their plague.

Maybe this is it. I've lost my fucking mind!

A pleasant but insistent beeping interrupts BC's train of thought, derailed as it may be.

An alarm? I don't remember setting one. No, it's the com. Nice tone. Must have been Van

Kilner's choice.

"Hello?" BC says.

"BC?" It's Anita.

"Hello, Anita," BC says. "Sorry about yesterday's quick exit there. One of my headaches came on pretty strong."

"Bad?" she asks him.

"At first it was bad," he tells her, "but then it got kind of weird."

What should I say? I can't tell her.

"Weird?"

"Yeah," BC says, thinking fast. "It turned into a strange dream. I'm okay now."

Hope she drops it.

"Okay? You know I'm, I mean, we're all worried about you, BC. There are a lot of people depending on you, now.

"You've become an important person, whether you like it or not!"

That would be "not".

I don't like being on the news every time I sneeze.

"These headaches," Anita starts, but trails off.

"What?"

"BC, you've become a symbol of hope for people, but these headaches... they're... Here? Away from everything? We can keep them under wraps. I don't think the Eldred are going to tell the media," she says. BC can hear her chuckle on the other end. "But out in public? If people see you doubling over, it's..." she tries to finish the thought. "It's going to be bad. All I'm trying to say is be careful, people look up to you now."

"I don't want them to look up to me," he says.

"You're the pope! You're the top CEO!" Anita exclaims. "Get used to it!" she tells him.

"It might not be an issue anymore," BC tells her. "I think I might be getting these headaches under control."

"Really?" she says. BC can hear the doubt in her voice over the com.

"I know it might sound crazy," BC starts.

If she'll go with me on this, maybe... MAYBE I can tell her more.

"But this morning, I felt one coming on... and I was able to make it stop and go away!"

"How?" she asks.

"I thought it away! Just thought for it to stop," he says.

"That sounds pretty farfetched to me. You just thought it away?" she asks him skeptically.

"That's how it felt to me," he insists.

And that's about all I'm gonna say about any of it to you, evidently.

"Well, if it works for you... I guess, go for it! I don't want to discourage you if it makes you feel better," she says in a patronizing tone of voice.

"Thanks," BC manages, with sarcasm.

Let's change the subject.

"When do the Eldred want to meet again?" he asks her.

"They're gone, BC," she informs him. "They left last night after you passed out."

"They left? Already?" He can't believe it.

"The eldest of the Eldred said they'd told us all we needed to know. He said they expected *us* to deal with the problem. Then they left," she says.

"*Our* problem? *They* let an ancient, high-powered, warlike proto-human loose and it's *our* problem? They kept this guy on ice for centuries, and it's our problem? Get them on the com for me, Anita. I want to talk to the eldest of the Eldred!"

"Um," she says, pausing.

"What?"

"We can't do that, BC. I'm sorry."

“Can’t? Why not?”

“We don’t really have a way of contacting *them*. They always contact us. It’s a video and audio signal, but shot across such a distance... Well, we don’t have a fraction of the power it would take to establish that kind of signal. We don’t even know how it carries our response back to them, BC. It’s FTL.”

“Efftee what?” he asks.

“FTL – Faster than light,” she explains. “It’s nearly instantaneous. We’d love to know how they do it.”

“So, it’s don’t call us, we’ll call you?” BC cracks.

“Pretty much,” Anita admits.

“Pretty convenient,” BC observes. “And pretty arrogant. They held on to *this* guy, and all the while acted like *we* were the threat. And now it’s *our* problem. I’ve got a problem with that!”

“Well, better that they asked us to solve the problem than they just killed us all,” Anita says.

“I wonder,” BC says. “I’ve been thinking about this, Anita. Maybe they’ve already killed as many of us as they could by the methods they find ‘acceptable’. They’re strange that way, self-limiting, kind of.

“They still killed billions of us! There’s no way I’d be fucking pope if any real Cardinals were left! The old guard is all dead or dying.”

“It is what it is,” Anita says, matter-of-factly. “What do we do next?”

“I’m thinking I get up and get dressed,” BC says. A wild thought occurs to him. “And then I’m going to Mars!”

“Mars?!” Anita says, shocked and surprised.

“Gotta go! Com off!” BC says, shutting her off. He jumps out of bed and gets ready to face the day.

I told Al-Salid we’d discuss all this. Now we have even more to talk about!

Chapter Twenty

“There’s no way in hell you are going to Mars!” Anita says, trying to face down BC. Krish and Dell flank her. The three are shaking their heads.

“You know you’re officially crazy,” Krish tells him.

“I *am* going to Mars. I need to meet with Al-Salid, especially now that he’s met with the Eldred, too.

They wanted to talk to him about his religion,” BC says, shaking his head. “Think about it,” he says to the scientists. “For him, all of a sudden these giant, blue, alien koala bears show up and say, ‘come to our planet and tell us about your religion.’ I told him before he left that they’re the ones killing us. I need to know how his meeting with them went, and find out what he told them. I also want to make sure he knows we’re on the same side, now. Maybe we can pull ourselves together after all.”

“Right,” says Krish. “And then? I’m going to walk on water, which I will then turn into wine! How’s that?”

“Krish,” Anita admonishes him. Dell suppresses a smile.

“I’m serious,” BC tells them. “I’m going to Mars. But it needs to be hush-hush! No one can know about this trip, especially the media.

“I don’t want the Eldred to know about it, either,” BC says. “But from what I learned on their homeworld, from what they told me, from the information they had, they seem to have some means of eavesdropping on us. They may find out anyway. This is going to be tricky,” he tells them. “I know that. I can’t sneeze these days without it being on the newscasts. That’s why I need the Project’s help. The Project has the ships that can help me do this.”

“We appreciate your great faith in us,” Dell says. “But you may be asking for the impossible with your demand for secrecy. We were much more adept at secret missions before you lifted our veil of secrecy.”

“Touché,” BC says.

“You’re the *pope*, BC,” Anita says to him slowly and deliberately, as if explaining it to a toddler.

“The *fucking* pope!” Krish pipes up. Anita glares at him.

“What?” Krish asks, defending himself. “I heard *him* say it himself!”

“You’re a CEO, and head of the UTZ council. You’re the most visible man in the human race, and you want to become invisible?” she asks him. “Think about it, BC. It’s insane! What about the UTZ Council? And what will they say about this back at the Vatican?”

“I’ll let Wentworth know I’m going. He may even be able to help me get in and out undetected, we’ll see. As for the Vatican... they’ll think I’m still out here, at The Project,” BC explains.

“What? You want us to lie to your church? What are we going to say when they ask for you, BC?” she asks him. “They check in all the time. We won’t be able to stall them!”

“You guys are scientists. Wentworth has robot doubles on his station. Can’t you talk to his scientists and make *me* one of those?” BC asks.

“We *could* easily make a simulacrum that looked like you,” Dell tells him. “But we couldn’t program it to answer any real questions without a great deal of time and *your* involvement. The likeness would be the same, but the masquerade would be seen through easily with just some simple questioning.”

“Do it,” BC tells them. “Make it so, get it done, do what you’ve gotta do, whatever. I want one. Even if it won’t fool Rome, if it can walk and wave and smile it can fool the media.”

“So. What about *Rome*, then?” Anita asks him.

“I’ll go back there and tell them myself. I’ll leave today. You get the simu-whatcha together and bring it to me at Vatican City. Then we’ll send Sim-Pope to Lunar Prime while I head out to Mars,” BC says, planning on the spot. “How long?” he asks Dell.

“How long?”

“Until you’ve got a working model of me?”

“Oh.” Dell closes his eyes, thinking. His eyes pop open. “About a week,” he tells him.

“Damn!” BC says. “I want to be on Mars in a day or two.”

“I’ll do what I can to speed up the process. We’ll need you to get scanned for the model as soon as possible,” Dell says.

“Get it done,” he says to Dell. He turns to Anita. “I need a transport back to Vatican City for me and the entourage...” He turns back to Dell. “How long will the scan take?”

“About twenty minutes,” he tells him.

“Great. I need a transport in about an hour, then,” he says to Anita. “And then I’ll need you to help me figure my way from Rome to Mars and back again. The ships, the schedule, you know.”

“Maybe you are crazy,” she tells him.

“Maybe the *fucking* pope is *fucking* nuts!” BC says, flippantly. “I’m going to pack up. Or go tell my ‘people’ to pack up. Where should I meet you, Dell?” He asks.

“At my lab. Do you know how to get there?”

“No,” BC tells him. “Have one of your assistants come get me and lead me there, okay?” Dell nods.

“Let’s get moving!” he says, locking eyes with Anita’s.

Man, if looks could maim!

He leaves her steaming, leaves Krish and Dell exchanging looks of disbelief, and walks off to his apartments to get the ball rolling.

Chapter Twenty-One

One week later, BC is wondering where his head was at, especially now that his head’s in a helmet, and he’s in a spacesuit bounding across the dusty red surface of Mars.

Was this really a good idea, BC? Or did you just want to get away from the spotlight’s glare? Well, you’ve gotten away, alright. Welcome to Mars. Welcome to the dust.

The simulacra looked eerily like me. Hope it fools the news media. It’s weird to see yourself like that, to be able to stand beside yourself! To be able to make a bad joke: I’m just beside myself!

Now, there's nothing beside me but dust!

The dust. I remember Fiza telling me the dust was the worst thing about Mars. "The dust is fucking everywhere, gets into everything!" I can hear her now: "The fucking dust!"

BC plants one foot in front of the other, following the guidance array projected on the inside of his helmet's visor.

Sand and dust flies through the air, whipped up by random winds. BC can't see the outpost he's making his way towards, but the glowing green, heads-up helmet array tells him he's headed in the right direction. He can hear Cardinal Hardwick and Cardinal Terpa in his head, as he goes over their conversation in Rome.

"There is no way you are going to Mars!" Cardinal Terpa tells BC. "You're hardly ever here as it is! You're on the Moon, or out at this new 'Project' we've just heard about... you can't go to Mars! It's too dangerous! And, besides, you need an invitation, a request from them at the least before you can go there. You can't just visit... you're the Pope!"

"That's why it needs to be a secret trip," BC tells her. "I don't want it to be an official state trip. I want it to be hush-hush. Al-Salid and I discussed this ahead of time."

"We appreciate your, er, unique approach to the papacy," Cardinal Hardwick says to BC. "But this is well beyond the sphere of reasonable behavior for the pontiff." Hardwick shakes his head disapprovingly.

"These are unique times, Cardinal Hardwick!" BC says, overruling him. "An alien plague is killing us! An ancient alien killer is on the loose! Humanity, what's left of it, needs to band together.

"I need to see Al-Salid in person, need to speak with him off of the world's stage. See where his head's at."

And I should see that soon enough.

BC slides down the side of a dune, careful not to trip over the rocks that break the surface of the sand near the bottom of the dune.

The dunes are growing smaller, the sand underfoot more gravelly.

The terrain is changing.

The outpost is just a click or two ahead.

Wonder what the Japanese saw in this place?

The UIN was kind of forced here, so they've got an excuse! But who would voluntarily choose to live here?

The helmet array blinks from green to red. A small hut just in front of him is outlined by red light on the glass of his helmet.

Good! The outpost.

Where's the door?

Wind whips a cloud of dust at his helmet's faceplate as he walks around the outside of the hut. He waves it away, trying to see.

I thought they were terraforming Mars? All they've done is kick up the wind! You still need a suit to breathe out here.

BC finds the door to the small airtight hut. He opens a panel in the door, revealing a row of green lights and a touchpad.

All green. Still functional!

He opens the hut's door, steps into the airlock and seals the door behind him. He finds the airlock controls and cycles the lock, filling the space with oxygen. The inner door opens, and BC walks into the hut.

BC double checks for atmosphere using the suit's sensors. He breaks the helmet's seal and takes it off. He looks around. The hut is about ten feet square, the size of a small stateroom, with a cot and a survival stack.

Solar panels on the roof outside provide the power, keeping the hut's air reclamation system functioning. He breathes in the air.

Huh! A little stale. Not too bad, though. And this place is old!

BC tries brushing some of the dust off his suit before realizing it's futile. He laughs, again hearing Fiza echoing in his head, bitching about the dust.

At least I'm here! The Project ship put me down where it was supposed to – about a click from here. It'll pick me up there in a week. All according to plan.

This old Japanese outpost is about twenty clicks from the nearest, and largest, inhabited Mars colony, where Al-Salid is said to live.

Wouldya look at this! Everything in here is coated with a fine layer of grainy, red dust... at no extra charge!

BC puts his helmet down, but doesn't bother to remove the suit.

I'll be needing it to make the twenty click trek to the UIN colony soon enough. Might as well keep it on. No need to get any of this dust inside the suit.

BC rummages through the survival stack and finds an energy bar, still sealed and apparently edible. He sits on the cot and eats.

Mars.

Sand and shit.

The sun rises outside, not the wide warm disc of Earth, but the small mean sun of Mars, casting a thin bright light through the dusty haze.

Sunlight seeps into the survival hut from outside, giving everything inside a soft red glow.

Might as well see if I can sleep the day away. I've gotta wait for nightfall to make the trip to the UIN facility.

He lies down on the cot, still wearing the atmosphere suit. He tries, best he can, to relax and get comfortable.

Gotta love these pajamas.

BC somehow manages to drift off. He's half asleep when he feels... something.

What, though?

A presence?

Who's there?

Nothing!

But I feel like someone's watching me, hovering over me. Or just nearby.

Who's there?

It felt like the last time.

Not like Fortune Station.

But like the last couple headache dreams.

Can you hear me, whoever you are? Are you listening to my thoughts?

Are you somehow here in my head?

Who are you?

I think I might know.

Are you who I think you are?

Who's there?

No answer...

The sensation is gone.

Weird.

I wonder.

BC falls fully asleep after the strange invasion into his thoughts. When he wakes up, it's dark outside.

Time to go to work.

Heh, it feels like the old days! Off on a mission!

I guess I really do miss this.

Miss the secret missions, the creeping around, the figuring things out, the thinking on your toes, the adrenaline rush of getting away...

I don't miss dealing out death, though.

Maybe I could restart the OPO? Create my own little covert army? Have my own little cadre of

assassins?

But then I might have had to send someone else out on this mission. After all, this really is no place for the Pope of the NcC and chief CEO of the UTZ to be.

Huh! The OPO would make for way too many acronyms!

Maybe I'm afraid of getting old and boring!

BC eats another energy bar and preps for his trek. He checks through his gear. He spreads out one map on the desk for a last look at his route from the Japanese outpost to the nearest UIN facility.

Got it!

He spreads out the map of the facility itself over the other one so he can take one last look-over it. He's trying to commit the map to memory.

BC closes his eyes.

I can see it in my head.

Good!

BC rolls the maps up together and stows them away in the survival stack. He takes a look out the window and sees a dust devil twist by.

This is terraforming, huh?

The nearest UIN facility is supposed to be an old hub from the Japanese terraforming operation, built up off the old Japanese terraforming facility.

Location, I guess. Has something to do with it being near the north pole.

But if this is it?

I'm not that impressed.

BC turns back to his gear.

Let's see. How's my anonymity?

BC checks over his suit one last time to be sure all distinct markings are gone.

He has nothing on him that might give away his identity.

If anything was left on the outside of the suit it would get sandblasted off!

Under the atmosphere suit he wears a generic blue jumpsuit. There are no tags on any of his clothes. BC reattaches the oxygen converter and puts his helmet on. The red sealing indicator won't go off.

No seal?

What is it?

BC takes the helmet off and examines the seal.

Dust.

Fiza was right: The fucking dust!

BC uses his gloves to brush off the seal and then puts his helmet back on. This time the seal is made and the indicator shines a happy green.

Finally!

Time for the next step.

BC makes his way out of the outpost.

Mars at night. More dust, less light. Nice...

BC turns on his helmet light and his helmet's upfront display, lighting the way in front of him and giving him information on the inside of his visor. He starts to jog across the darkened Martian landscape. The terrain is rolling, sandy and dusty.

Dusty.

Of course.

Dunes gradually give way to jagged rock formations jutting up out of the ground at random intervals. BC sees the planet's north pole rising up like a flattened cone off in the distance, across the sea of dusty sand and gravel dotted with gnarly bumps of rock and mini mesas. He winds his way between the small rock formations and through the short canyons covering the twenty clicks to the UIN facility.

Scrunch. Scrunch. Scrunch.

BC hears each step echo inside his suit as he walks across the dusty gravel surface.

He starts singing to himself in time with his footsteps.

Making my way across Mars today, singing a song, all I have to say, don't got no rhythm, just some bad rhymes, keeps me going while I'm killing time.

Twenty clicks. Not so far on Mars.

BC makes it to an emergency door at the outer limits of the UIN facility after about two hours of jogging through the Martian night.

Here's the emergency exit door, right where it's supposed to be. Nice.

BC can't see the rest of the facility from the door's vantage point, just the exterior of the emergency door's airlock.

There's a long tunnel connecting this exit to the facility. The rest of the place has gotta be up ahead beyond those rocks. Hope these security codes I got from Wentworth are still good. Don't know how he gets his hands on things. Probably don't want to know!

BC punches in the codes.

The emergency door pops open. BC steps into the airlock and closes the door shut behind him. He activates the airlock's controls, feels the air pressure pushing in on him as the airlock fills. The inner door opens automatically when the pressure evens out.

BC leans out of the airlock cautiously. He looks around the dimly lit tunnel end.

No one here. Good.

He walks into the tunnel, into the UIN facility. The airlock door seals shut behind him with a hiss.

Made it inside!

BC looks around the darkened tunnel.

This looks a lot like that small outpost. Similar architecture. Must be a part of the old Japanese facility. Very utilitarian.

What's that sound?

A low humming sound hangs in the air.

The air system?

BC decides it is just the sound of the air reclamation exchange system keeping the tunnel air circulating.

There is dust on most every surface, but not as much as BC expected. The tunnel is fairly well swept and kept up.

BC clips his helmet to his belt and begins to walk down the tunnel.

They use this tunnel. You can tell. Maybe even a regular way in and out, now, even if it only used to be used for emergencies. Feels lived in. People are in here every day.

It's a good feeling.

The way in.

BC stops and listens as he approaches the other end of the tunnel.

Let's hope that none of those people who use this tunnel are up at this hour! No real contacts here other than Al-Salid himself, so I've got to penetrate right to the core on my first try.

Someone's coming!

BC ducks into the shadows and flattens himself back against the tunnel wall. A tech comes shuffling into the tunnel, flashlight in hand. BC holds his breath.

The tech stops, yawns, and stretches. He trains his flashlight beam on the wall opposite BC, lighting up what looks like a control box for the air transfer system. He walks over and plugs a reader into the box. BC can see green light from the reader shining around the silhouetted back of the tech. The tech unplugs the reader and turns, shuffling back the way he came, evidently never seeing BC.

Hard to see when you can't keep your eyes open! Guess that's working the graveyard shift for you.

Nothing like a motivated employee, huh?

BC decides to trail the tech from a few yards back. He follows the disinterested worker out of the tunnel and into the main UIN facility. The tech walks through a maze of corridors, periodically pausing at control boxes and plugging in his reader, taking readings. BC waits each time, hanging back in the

shadows, and then follows on as the tech continues on his rounds.

BC compares the worker's route to the map of the facility he's keeping in his mind. They're winding a slow path through the southern wing of the facility and should be nearing a tech center soon.

Atmosphere readings? What's he checking? Doesn't really matter, I guess.

The facility looks old and a little run down all over, but still well kept. There are lingering traces of the unavoidable orange and red dust in every crack and crevice, giving every gray floor and wall panel a pencil-thin, red outline. Its utilitarian design marks this wing of the UIN facilities as part of the old Japanese Martian holdings. BC knows from the plans that this wing is connected to the central core of the UIN facilities through a system of travel tubes.

Need to get to those tubes to get into the central core of the UIN administrative section. But first I need some camouflage.

Don't want to jump this guy in a public place. C'mon, buddy, take a break. You know you deserve a little time off. Let me help you sleep...

BC stops short and quickly back off when he turns a corner and almost runs into the back of the tech. The man is stopped outside of a large set of double doors on the corridor's left hand side. The tech worker stands, waiting. His reader is plugged into an information retriever set into the wall to the left side of the doors.

Must be spilling out all the information it's just gathered. Lucky this guy is half asleep or he might have seen me!

BC waits. The tech finishes his download, unplugs his reader, and then heads through the double doors.

BC follows quickly behind, finding himself in a dingy, yellow tile-walled locker room.

The tech has made his way through the locker room to a door in the back wall of the room. BC ducks out of sight and watches from the shadows as the tech opens the door on a messy office. The tech sits down behind a paper strewn desk in the office and puts on a pair of virtual gogs, along with ear buds and a stim strip across the back of his neck.

Guess the Japanese left some of their toys here, too. Wonder what the Koran would say about this guy's late night hobby? Hey, its fine by me. He's going off into virtual la la land – and so I can go through the lockers!

BC tries a few locker doors, finds them locked. On his fifth try he has some luck.

Nice, an open empty one.

BC strips off the atmosphere suit and stuffs it in the locker, all the while keeping an eye on the tech.

Guy has a huge smile on his face and a huge swell in his pants. Gotta figure he's enjoying himself in there!

BC tries some more lockers until he finds an open one with a tech uniform inside close to his size. He takes off his blue jumpsuit and exchanges it for a red tech uniform.

Bingo! One Tech uniform! No one notices techs until they need one. This will be perfect. I need some traditional headgear to hide my face, though.

He tries more lockers, keeping one eye on the tech lounging in virtual reality in the back room. BC finally finds a black and red checkered keffiyeh and wraps it around his head and face, leaving just a slit for the eyes.

He closes the last locker.

BC looks around.

The tech in the back is passed out. There's still no one else around.

BC slinks away backwards out through the double doors into the corridor.

It's about three in the morning, Martian time. There's almost no one out and about in the hallways at this hour.

BC adjusts the keffiyeh slightly for better vision.

This works. Now, let's see. I need to get two floors down so I can catch a travel tube to Mars central and UIN command.

BC makes his way along the corridor to where the elevators should be located, according to the plans. There is a blank, gray paneled wall instead.

Okay. Maybe they moved the doors.

BC consults the map in his head and finds his way around to the other side of the elevator shafts. The three stainless-steel elevator doors waiting there are a welcome sight.

Doors! Good. Glad the elevators are still running! Was worried there for a minute.

He pushes the button to call an elevator. Clanging and hissing heralds the arrival of the empty elevator car.

The door slides open with a loud squeal.

BC steps into the all stainless-steel car and his boots echo off the floor.

“Clang, clang.”

Man, can I make any more noise? Maybe it's just too quiet otherwise.

BC pushes the button for B2, two floors below, down where the tubes should be. He rides the elevator down, listening to the sound of the old machinery complaining.

Every move I make seems too loud!

Thankfully, no one else seems to be around. Is everybody sleeping or is everybody dead? I gotta think they're sleeping, with that tech being so nonchalant and all.

The elevator opens onto the travel tube station.

Travel Tubes! There they are. And another tech station.

This tube facility is the end of a line. The only travel option is inward to the central UIN facility. There's a tube terminus with twin arriving and departing tubes.

The capsular tubes carry passengers from place to place on Mars through a system of underground tunnels. BC plans to use the tubes to reach the main dome, UIN central command and Ibn Al-Salid. This tube station is small, about twenty feet square. The roof is only slightly higher than six feet. The tube doors and passenger platform dominate the space, spanning the entire twenty-foot length of the wall in front of BC. The tech station takes up the short wall to his left. Doors leading to the rest of the B2 level line the right-hand wall.

BC walks over to the tech station. He's startled when another tech suddenly appears.

The man says something to BC in Arabic.

Great. What the fuck is he saying?

I should have learned Arabic!

BC shrugs at him. The man shakes his head and goes into the tech center.

Maybe if I just sort of wander over to the tube doors.

The man shouts out some sort of command at BC from the tech center's open door. BC wanders back over to the tech station cautiously. The man emerges waving a reader at BC. He thrusts it into BC's hands.

The man chastises BC, and manages to sound patronizing even though BC has no idea what he's saying. He shakes his head, and then shoos off BC, sweeping him off with the backs of his hands.

I think he just gave me a job to do!

BC turns and heads for the travel tubes.

Hopefully it's a job I have to use the tubes to get to, or he's going to be yelling at me again.

Let's see if he tries to stop me...

BC goes over to the tube doors and calls for a capsule.

Good. No reaction from him. Must be okay. Nice!

I have an excuse to be riding the tubes this time of night. I'm on an assignment!

The empty capsule arrives in the tube and the door opens. BC gets inside the travel tube capsule, a small passenger tube built to hold about ten people with benches lining both sides.

He finds the controls. Instructions are in Arabic. BC finds a language toggle and switches the language.

Great. Japanese. Don't know that either. Let's see.

BC tries the toggle again. Instructions come up in English.

Excellent. The location names look like they're outdated. But central command is still central command, right?

BC punches in his destination. The tube slides out of the station. With a whoosh he's off down the

tunnel.

He toggles through the language settings on the reader the tech gave him until its display is in English as well.

Huh. Looks like there's an environmental processor broken down in the main dome. Hmm. Not exactly close to where I'm going.

Guess I'll deliberately get lost and wander off!

He pictures the facility map in his mind.

The tubes' central hub is located directly underneath the main dome of the UIN facilities, beneath central command.

BC arrives at the central hub for the travel tubes in about two minutes. He hops out of the tube and looks around. Two techs in red are walking through the station. BC looks down at the reader and tries to look inconspicuous.

The central tube station is far more spacious than the outlying one. Tubes arrive and leave from the hub. The tubes all empty out into a large, roughly circular central area with a ten foot high ceiling. The circular ends of the travel tubes line the outer wall, broken up by four exit doors to the facility above.

BC spots the exit he needs.

Other passengers pass through the central hub, walk by BC as he makes his way through the tube station.

There's more activity here. It's not bustling, but there are some people around, even at this early hour.

BC adjusts the keffiyeh and heads up out of the travel tube station amid other techs and early travelers. He goes over the central dome's plan in his head and orients himself. He needs to get up several levels and then into a secure area in order to see Al-Salid.

There should be an elevator bank around the corner.

He finds the nearby elevator bank, presses the up button and calls a car. The doors open. A tech walks out past BC. BC gets in and presses the top button.

This is great – techs don't even notice other techs! I feel like I'm invisible!

BC rides alone up four levels to the civic center, up and out under the main dome.

The elevator door will not open when the car arrives at the fourth floor.

A shrill "beep" sounds.

A red security light comes on.

Security. Of course. But I'm just a tech on a job, officer! Wait a sec, let's see...

BC plugs the tech reader into the elevator's control box. After a brief electronic exchange, the reader's screen and the elevator security light both turn green, and the elevator door slides open.

That worked!? Open Sesame!

BC pokes his head out of the elevator. The civic center will be bustling in just a few hours, but now at around four in the morning it lays empty and still.

He walks slowly across the civic plaza, allowing himself one quick glimpse of the domed ceiling.

Feeling entirely too conspicuous.

But I'm in! So why does it feels like I won't be able to get out again?

BC walks from the plaza into a wide lane dividing two rows of buildings. The dome arches far overhead, a dimly lit gridwork sky.

There are lights up there... they're just not turned on at this hour. It's not completely dark... it's sort of a state of permanent dusk.

Central command should be just up this "street".

The administrative area of the UIN is made up of several buildings all clustered together under the open domed ceiling above.

BC looks from building to building and their floor plans flash through his head. He notes an impressive building ahead on the right. The tallest he's seen, it nearly touches the dome.

A large, wide, open flight of stairs leads up and back from the wide lane up to the entrance of the building, ending under a pair of oversize arches at the top.

There it is. The administrative center for the UIN Mars holdings. I'm just your average ordinary tech, don't mind me!

He heads up the stairs to the front door.

Locked. Naturally. Let's see if this thing is worth anything.

BC plugs his tech reader into the control box outside the locked doors of the administrative offices of the UIN and requests access for repair work. The green light comes on as the doors click open.

Beautiful. Deeper and deeper!

BC ducks inside the doors, easing them shut behind him. He's in the building's lobby, empty save for a security guard asleep at a large desk. BC creeps across the lobby and into a dimly lit doorway. A corridor stretches off towards the back of the building.

If the plans are right, it's on this floor, back there.

He walks down the corridor toward the offices of Al-Salid. He puts his repair order on the screen of the reader, and then toggles it back into Arabic as he walks.

A lone guard sits at a desk outside what should be Al-Salid's office door.

I'm a bored tech. I have a boring job to do in this boring office. You don't want to be bothered by me at all. I bore you.

The guard looks up as BC approaches.

He challenges BC in Arabic. BC nods politely, and holds out the tech reader. The guard nods back.

Then he nods toward the door, giving BC the go-ahead.

BC tries not to hurry as he passes the guard and heads in through the office door. The guard watches him enter, then turns back to something on his desktop.

Just your average ordinary tech, nothing to see here.

BC walks through the office suite and heads for the inner sanctum, Al-Salid's private office.

It should be right... here!

BC looks over the door.

No nameplate. Nothing to show it's his office... but why would he need to?

BC tries the door. It's unlocked. He opens the door and walks into a spacious corner office with windows on two walls looking back out into the dome. Tapestries hung on the other walls warm the room with gold and red and amber designs.

This has got to be his office. Unh!

A sudden pounding at his temples stops BC in his tracks.

No!

Stop!

No headache! Not now!

This time, though, the headache doesn't cooperate.

BC feels the throbbing intensify. Pain chugs like a train through his brain, each chug a devil's chorus of cacophonous voices shouting different words simultaneously.

BC falls to his knees, doubled over by the pain.

Damn!

Worst in a long time!

Stop!

The headache won't stop. BC crawls over to one of the wall tapestries and uses it to pull himself to his feet. He staggers forward, falling into Al-Salid's desk. BC pulls himself around the desk and collapses into the chair behind it.

Then a loud voice echoes in his head.

WHO IS THAT?! WHO IS THERE?!

BC hears the words shouted at him, but not aloud. The shouting is all in his head.

DO YOU HEAR ME?

I SEE YOU!

"No need to shout," BC mumbles.

AM I "SHOUTING?" YOU MUST BE PROXIMATE!

“Who are you?” BC asks out loud.

LET’S SEE... CAN YOU DEFEND?

Fuck!

BC’s head explodes with pain, as if a long spike had just been drilled through his skull from temple to temple.

He sees red, and then he sees nothing at all, blacking out.

BC wakes up in a small space, curled up into a fetal ball. Somehow he’s crawled... somewhere. He rubs his eyes.

Under a desk.

I must have fallen under Al-Salid’s desk.

OH, my fucking head!

BC’s temples are still throbbing with pain.

I would prefer a hangover. A hangover would be an improvement. That’s how bad this hurts! Gotta learn how to put up my “mental” dukes. Somehow raise my mental fists, protect myself. He drilled into my head! Least it felt like it. But now I know that attack. I can see the shape of it; feel the how of it since it was done to me. Maybe I can stop it next time.

As he attacked, I could feel how he was thinking... he doesn’t think like us. He’s not like us, not one of us. He really is old... ancient, heh, guess you’d say. Ancient Enemy.

It’s gotta be him: Dolomay. It’s gotta be. The Eldred said something about them having greater powers than we do, said we were weaker. What if that motherfucker can read minds? Or blast other minds with pain? That’s what it felt like. Like he was blasting mine!

What else can he do? And where is he?

Is he here on Mars?

How does he get in my head?

And what time is it?

The tech reader sits on the floor next to BC. He picks it up to check the time.

Still early. Six AM. Things will be stirring soon.

BC stops. He tries to “listen” with his mind for the voice.

Hello?

No answer?

Good.

BC creates a mental picture in his mind of two large lead doors. He thinks of the feel, the shape of the attack against him, and how it was done, and thinks that into a lock on his mental doors. Somehow, it feels right.

Let’s see if that will hold back any new mental onslaught.

I thought my mind was my exclusive domain. Now I’m suddenly forced to reckon with someone else trespassing in here? What the fuck?

Where is he coming from?

BC stretches out, cautiously emerging from beneath the desk. The office is still empty. BC sits down in the chair.

Won’t this be a picture? AL-Salid walks into his office and here I am. God, though, my brain hurts!

BC sits and waits. He rubs his temples. And then he falls asleep in the chair. He wakes up with Al-Salid standing over him.

“Wake up, I said!” Al-Salid says in a loud voice.

“Huh? Unh,” BC tries to answer as he wakes up.

“I would like to say you’ve surprised me, Champion, but that is not the case. I was, uh... *informed* that I would find you here this morning,” Al-Salid tells BC.

Informed? How?

“So much for my surprise,” BC answers.

“It does not...” Al-Salid begins. He stops. A puzzled look crosses his face, as if he’s lost his place. “I do

not..." he starts, and stops again, again looking confused. Then his countenance clears. He glares down at BC, a wild look in his eyes.

There's something strange about him, something weird going on behind his eyes! I hope he's okay.

"Look," BC begins, "Al-Salid, we agreed to meet after we each met the Eldred, to pool our information! Don't you remember? I told you'd I'd come incognito, so we could keep it a secret for the time being, because we can't trust the usual channels. It's important enough that I had to come myself," BC says.

"You have nothing to tell me," Al-Salid says to him.

What?

"But..." BC tries. "What did they do to you? Al-Salid, you're not yourself! Did the Eldred do something to..."

"Guards!" Al-Salid shouts.

Two guards come running in, rifles at ready.

Oh. Great.

"Deal with this Trespasser!" Al-Salid commands.

"Al-Salid! What is this? I'm the Pope!" BC protests.

"I see no pope! I see a pretender, at best, and a cold blooded killer at worst!" Al-Salid growls at him. "I see a fish once way out of his depth and now way out of water! High and dry."

"Al-Salid, we have mutual enemies! We need to band together!"

"So you claim," Al-Salid says. "I say that's no longer the case! We no longer have any need to deal with you and your lies! Take him away!" Al-Salid shouts.

The guards grab BC by the arms, one on each side, and lift him up out of the chair. They drag him out of Al-Salid's office.

"Al-Salid!" BC shouts as they drag him off. "You said we should meet in secret to discuss our people's future, to combat the sickness, the plague, together! There is so much I need to talk with you about!"

BC stops shouting as the office door closes behind him. He stops resisting his guards and stumbles along between them as they escort him out of the building and down the front steps. A small cart pulls up. They load BC unceremoniously into the back.

The cart whisks BC over to the elevator bank, where another pair of guards "helps" him out of the cart and onto his feet. BC is shuffled off into the elevator and down four levels, and finally into a holding cell somewhere in the UIN security center. He has a vague idea of where he is, although he didn't spend too much time going over the plans of prison cells.

He paces back and forth in the small, six foot by four-foot cell.

This sucks! I HATE BEING CAGED! Hate how claustrophobic I feel!

BC is left alone, cooling his heels, for what seems like hours.

Great, this is working out perfectly. Just fucking wonderful. I knew he'd be surprised, but that was not the reception I expected! I thought he'd be receptive, at least hear me out. He was entirely different the last time we spoke. We talked about this! What could the Eldred have done to him?

He looked so strange, something weird about his eyes, and the way he seemed lost a couple of times.

BC's head throbs.

No! Headache? No. What, then?

YOU! YOU ARE...

The shouting voice echoes in BC's head again.

Gotta shut him up! Shut him out, somehow!

He thinks about the lead doors he sealed in his mind before, pictures them shutting once again, and the voice stops and goes away.

Hmmm.

A headache begins to pound at his temples. BC tries to think it away.

Stop! It's like someone banging on the doors of my skull, pounding to get in! Keep Out! Makes me tired. So draining.

BC pulls a cot down from the wall of the cell and lies down. He drifts off to an uneasy sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A voice calls to BC in his dream. Or is it a dream?

"BC! BC!" A whispered voice calls his name.

"BC!"

He stirs, begins to wake up, and tries to sit up.

"BC!"

A little louder this time.

"Wha? Where are you?" BC asks.

I recognize that voice... who is it?

"Over here," the voice says in a hoarse whisper, coming from over by the cell door. BC gets up and goes over to the door. The door of the holding cell is solid gray. There's no way to see outside.

"Down here, BC!" BC hears the voice call from the foot of the door. He bends over, and kneels down at the base of the door. A small metal slot is cut out of the door's base so that food trays can slide through. BC looks through the slot and sees two big brown eyes in a dark face.

I know those eyes! But there's no way!

"BC! You sorry fuck! It's me, Fiza!" she whispers as loud as she can.

Fiza?

Here?

How in hell...

"Fiza!?" BC answers.

"No time for questions, BC! I'm getting you out of here!"

There's a loud "click", and the door opens.

"Come on!" She says, waving him out of the cell.

This can't be real! I must still be asleep, dreaming in the cell.

"Will you come on!" Fiza says, still whispering, but urgent. "I'm not supposed to be here! Let's move it!" She heads back down the row of cells towards the exit. BC follows her out of the cell rows, and then out past four guards slumped over in chairs in an outer office. Fiza puts an electronic key back in the hand of one of the slumped over guards.

"Gas," she tells him, answering his unasked question. "They never knew what hit them! I scrambled the secure cams just before I hit them with it. With any luck, it'll look as if you just walked out of the cell on your own and disappeared." She looks around the office, picks up a bundle of cloth from the floor.

"We've got about fifteen minutes. Here, put that on."

She hands him the bundle.

BC is still trying to digest the situation. He takes the bundle from her, staring at her in a semi-daze.

Fiza? How the fuck did she get here? Not dead. Not whoring on Wentworth Station. Not her usual clothing style, either.

Fiza is wearing a traditional burka, covering her from head to toe. All BC can see are her eyes.

"BC! Wake up! Put that thing on, quick!"

The bundle she handed BC is a burka like her own. BC throws it on over his tech suit. He looks out the eye slit at Fiza.

"You're beautiful," she jokes. "I'm getting you out of here through the women's section. Follow me. And try to act a little feminine."

"How? In this thing?" BC protests.

"I don't know," she says. "Slouch a little. C'mon, hurry up."

BC doesn't move.

"What?" she asks him.

"Is that really you under there, Fiza?"

She sighs. She lifts off the top of the berka's veil so BC can see her face. She's darker than BC has ever seen her, and her hair is dyed deep, ebony black.

"Aside from some cosmetic changes so I can blend in better, it's all me," she says. She pulls the veil back on over her head. "Satisfied?"

It's her, alright.

"Fiza, how..." he starts, but she stops him with a wave of her arm.

"Not now, BC. I don't have the time to explain. Neither do you. *We* don't have time. The security surveillance cams will only be scrambled for another minute or so."

She sets off down the hallway and BC scrambles to follow behind her. The eye slit of his burka keeps slipping up on him, blinding him.

BC ends up piling into Fiza as she comes to a stop.

"What are you doing?" she asks as she disentangles from him.

"I can't see!" BC protests. "The slit's too high or something!"

She takes his hand and pulls him along.

"Just hold on to my hand. I'll lead."

She pulls him along down the corridor. BC can't see a thing. He tries to keep his balance, tries not to trip or lunge into anything as he careens along behind Fiza.

"In here," he hears her say, and she yanks him sideways through a doorway.

They stop short. A man with a gruff voice asks Fiza a question in Arabic.

Fiza answers him back in Arabic. She elbows BC and whispers, "Bow!"

BC nods his head, and then nearly falls to the floor as Fiza yanks him down lower.

"Lower!" she whispers. BC tries to comply. Fiza and the man continue their exchange in Arabic.

Fiza's tone of voice is all deprecation and sweetness. The man's gruff voice sounds angry, accusatory. Hope we're not in trouble!

BC can't understand. He stays down, huddling in his darkness until Fiza grabs hold of his arm and raises him up with a yank.

"Come on," she tells him, "We're almost there."

She talks as she pulls him along. "That was one of Al-Salid's 'advisors'. He wanted to see you, have a good look at you! I had to tell him you were on the fucking rag, 'unclean!' just so he'd leave us alone," Fiza tells BC. "In his twisted mind, that makes you unclean. He didn't need to see you after I told them that."

"Great," BC says, "just great."

Fiza laughs, "Hey! You don't have to act like it really IS you're time of the month! Okay, quiet, now."

BC hears women's voices as they round another corner. The floor beneath his feet changes from hard plastic to soft carpeting. Fiza stops him, and leans in to whisper to him.

"Okay. We've just entered the women's section. No men are allowed in here. We usually take off our veils in here, but we can't have you do that now, can we?" she asks rhetorically. "We'll need to move through quickly, as if on an errand, so that we can stay veiled and try to avoid questions. Hold onto my hand and try not to trip. Let's go!"

She pulls him along quickly behind her as they cruise through the women's section. He hears a few grumbles as they pass through, mostly from women trying to avoid getting trampled by the two of them. BC hears Fiza toss off what sound like quick pleasantries in Arabic as they fly through the section.

I wonder what these women would think if they knew the Pope was passing through here in disguise?

Man, I cannot see anything! This kinda sucks!

They reach what BC assumes to be another set of pressure doors. Fiza opens them and pulls BC through. The doors close behind him.

“Okay, BC, you can take off the veil,” she tells him. BC lifts the top of the burka up and off his head. He looks around. They’re in a storage area filled with old maintenance robots.

“That was a close call back there! One of Al-Salid’s top men,” Fiza tells him, “That’s why you had to bow lower. You did okay though, BC,” she says. “You did okay.”

“Thanks, I guess,” BC says to her. He listens for a second. “I don’t hear any alarms, yet. Guess we are okay.”

“Those prison cell guards won’t sound the alarm right away, not until they have some explanation for how they fell asleep and you disappeared. They’ll even send out their own search teams first, before they tell the proper authorities.

“They don’t want to be responsible for your escape, so they’ll try to recapture you themselves first. It’s a whole stupid-fucking ‘honor’ thing. They don’t want to lose face,” she explains.

She laughs. “The best part? None of those guards can come into the women’s area without authorization, so this is the one place they can’t look for you!”

Fiza takes her veil off. BC can’t help but stare at her newly dark complexion and hair. Fiza notices and smiles.

“Like what you see?” she teases him. “Oooh, I’m getting ogled by the fuckin’ Pope!” she laughs.

“More like I can’t believe what I see,” BC admits.

“Yeah, the dye jobs were really good, first rate, better than what I could do for myself the last time. I have to look the part.” She pauses, remembering that BC once doubted her story about hiding out on Mars. “I was here *before*, too,” she insists. “Now do you fuckin’ believe me, you shit?” she asks, pouting at him.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“Saving *your* sorry ass,” she says.

“How?”

“Wentworth needed someone here, deep undercover. He pressed me into service. Made me an offer I couldn’t refuse,” she says, her eyes growing distant. Her attention snaps back to BC. “Good thing for you I was here!”

“You’re working for Wentworth?” he asks her, still not sure what to believe.

“Not much choice there! You know that,” she says.

“I thought you were...” he pauses.

I thought you were a sex slave working for Wentworth.

“I thought...” he stammers.

“What the fuck?” Fiza berates him. “Spit it out, BC!”

“I thought... you were, um, dead. For a while,” he says.

“That’s part of my *cover*!” she tells him, rolling her eyes since she needs to explain her “cover” to BC.

“Wentworth made it *look* like I died. That made me an untraceable agent! But come on, he did tell *you* I was still alive, didn’t he? He said he did.”

“Sure, he did, in a way,” BC admits, “but I didn’t necessarily believe him! Plus he, uh... he also said you were working all drugged up as a sex slave on his station.”

“Huh,” she says. “Well, that *was* the alternative he offered me. Motherfucker! Made it hard to refuse, ya know?”

“Guess he wanted me so deep undercover he even hid me from you!” She laughs. “But! When he heard you were coming here, he got in touch and asked me to keep an eye on you.

“Good thing I did, huh?!”

“Al-Salid... He wasn’t himself,” BC says.

It was like he didn’t remember talking with me at all!

“There’s talk of this already in the women’s quarters,” Fiza tells him. “Al-Salid left last week on a mysterious trip. Not long after he returned, a new advisor suddenly just appeared at his side, with no explanation.

“But now this new advisor has Al-Salid’s ear, and some say his mind, too... Man, these people are

fuckin' superstitious, BC, you should hear 'em talk! But you never learned Arabic, didya?

"Guess I've got that one up on you!"

BC is preoccupied, thinking.

How am I gonna hide out until my ship comes back? As a woman?

"My ship isn't due back for another six days," BC tells her. "What am I supposed to do, hide in here? How long until there's authorization for them to search here?"

"It'll probably take them about two hours to give up on their own searching, before they contact the higher ups. They'll be in here soon after that," Fiza tells him. "Don't worry. Wentworth has a ship coming for you! He sent it when I told him they'd thrown you in a holding cell," Fiza says.

She points to a door in the wall to the right. "There's an airlock just outside this supply room.

Wentworth's ship will meet you outside that airlock in about an hour.

"Hold on a sec."

Fiza looks around the room, moves some half-assembled maintenance bots out of her way, and then drags a black crate out into the open.

"There's an emergency EVAC suit in here," she says, kicking the crate. "It doesn't have a lot of oh-two, just about fifteen minutes worth, but that should be enough to get you on the ship. Just don't go out there too early, huh?"

She looks around the room.

"Where's a clock?"

She finds a clock readout on one of the door's control boxes.

"Good. Exactly one hour from now, by this clock, duck out through that door, then through the airlock on your left. Once outside the airlock, Wentworth's ship will land and meet you. Getcha outta here!"

She stops and stares at him.

"What?" he asks, finally.

"Oh, shit, BC!" she cries. She flings her arms around him and hugs him tight. "I miss you, you stupid shit!" She pulls back a little, looks up at him, right in the eyes, and then kisses him – quick, fast and passionate.

She pulls away and turns to go.

"What about you, now?" BC asks her. "Are you going to be okay?"

She turns back to him.

"You know me! I'll be fine!" she says. She throws her burka back on, up and over her head.

"Good luck, BC," she says. "I'll see you again. Promise."

She ducks out the double doors they'd come in through and leaves BC standing alone in the storage room.

Fiza! I can't believe she was here. I'm glad she was here! Working for Wentworth! Imagine that. The guy has people everywhere. Even though he lied to me, and let me think... huh. Does that make him a bigger or smaller asshole?

BC hunkers down, hiding out behind the crate containing the EVAC suit while he waits out the hour. He keeps waiting for an alarm to sound, or for his head to hurt.

Waiting for the inevitable.

Waiting for something to go wrong!

BC tries to think himself invisible to all prying eyes, real and imagined, as he sits among the wreckage of old cleaning robots watching the minutes click by on the tiny clock readout by the door.

The hour passes slowly, but without event.

I'll give her this: Fiza knows her stuff. She's approaching her work here the same way she did her cons. And she was the queen of those!

She never did seem to care who she had to sleep with to get what she wanted. I don't know.

Maybe she did care, but she'd never show it.

Maybe I'm just a little bitter. I always wished she cared more... but it just isn't who she is.

Hope she's gonna be alright.

BC pries open the crate with ten minutes to spare and unfolds the EVAC suit. He slips it on and checks

the seals, fitting it all into place save for the helmet. It's not an actual helmet, but emergency gear; a simple plastic hood serves as his quasi-helmet.

He checks the time.

Five minutes left. Plenty of time.

He slips the clear hood on over his head and adjusts the face "plate" so he can see out clearly. He cautiously heads out of the storage area through the door in the right wall, looking around for any signs of company as he enters the corridor.

It's empty.

The airlock is fifty meters down the corridor on the left side. BC strides over to the airlock and cycles it open.

BC hears a shout in Arabic. A UIN soldier appears at the corridor's other end, fifty meters away.

"Stop!" he shouts in English at BC.

The door to the airlock is almost open, but not quite big enough to get through.

Gotta stall for time.

BC turns to the soldier and shrugs his shoulders. He points to his helmet as if he can't hear the man.

Any second now.

The soldier shouts again in Arabic, and then shouts again in English at BC, "Stop!"

Can't stop now, sorry!

BC slides through the airlock's opening door. He punches the controls inside the airlock and the door stops and begins to close. The air begins to purge from the lock.

PA-SHANG!

BC hears a bullet ricochet off the atmosphere door as it closes.

Shooting at me?

He's shooting at me?

PA-SKEE-SHANG!

Another bullet hits the closing door.

The door still manages to seals shut. Air hisses out of the airlock.

Shit, my suit!

BC realizes he hasn't zipped down the seal for the suit's hood, nor turned on his air. He gasps for a breath as the last of the air is sucked out of the airlock.

The UIN soldier is on the other side of the door, banging to get in. BC can see him, but can't hear him. Sound doesn't carry in a vacuum. BC turns and pushes the panels on the outer door's control panel. It starts to open.

BC holds his breath and zips the hood's seal shut. He lets his breath out, but there's still no air to breathe in!

The outer door of the airlock opens full onto the surface of Mars, and BC stumbles out onto the dusty Martian sand.

His hands scramble across his chest, trying to find the on switch for the emergency oxygen. Black dots begin swimming across his sight, making it hard to see.

Is this how I go? Grabbing at my chest for the on switch for my air while I die of suffocation on the surface of Mars, two meters away from an airlock?

Click.

Hisssssssssssssssss...

Nope.

Not this time!

BC sucks in the oxygen as it pours into the suit. He's suddenly lightheaded, almost punchy, as the pure oxygen floods his thirsty lungs.

He sees bright lights swimming in the air in front of him.

Am I hallucinating? Or is that my ride?

Flashes disturb the dusty, dim Martian sky over BC's head. Bright flashes of blue, amber and red light up the dust clouds and descend from the heavens to land about eighty meters away from BC.

Cool! It is my ride!

Have to get on board before my buddy back there gets into a suit and out of that airlock!

He jogs over the dusty sand toward the lights in his EVAC suit. It's hard to make out details, but BC has no doubt it's his ship.

Wentworth. Good as his word. Actually, come to think of it, his word ain't really that good! He could have left me to die out here...

Well, it's a gift horse. I ain't gonna look it in the mouth. I'm gonna ride it outta here!

A ramp lowers from the bottom of the hovering UTZ ship as BC approaches. As soon as BC climbs up on to the ramp it begins closing up into the ship. He feels the ship rise up quickly off the Martian surface, feels a jarring lurch as the ramp locks into place.

BC stands up and looks around. He's in the ship's cargo bay. The four walls are blank, save for tied down cargo straps along the walls every two meters or so and a hatch in the wall in front of BC.

The cargo bay doesn't appear to be pressurized.

Never assume that a space is pressurized, right?

He tries the hatch. It opens on an airlock. BC climbs into the airlock, closes the hatch and starts the airlock cycling. He can feel the pressure as the air pours in, pushing in on him through the flimsy EVAC suit.

When the airlock finishes filling with air, BC opens the inside hatch. He climbs through into a small corridor.

There's no one around. He unzips his helmet and hears a com already talking at him.

"...in front of you! Can't you hear me, Champion?" the voice says.

"I can now," he replies. "No need to yell."

"Good. Come up to the flight deck, Champion. Just come on ahead through that door in front of you," a voice tells him.

BC makes his way down the short corridor, through the door in front of him and onto a small flight deck. He sees the stars outside, sees Mars on a viewscreen, shrinking rapidly in size.

"Get ready for Transpace, Champion," the pilot tells him. BC slides up into a chair on the flight deck next to the pilot and straps himself in.

He realizes he knows the guy.

"Don't I know you?" BC asks him.

"Hold on, don't talk, please. Don't say anything," the man warns BC. "I hate being bothered while I do Transpace, okay?"

"Gotcha," BC says, shutting up.

Was it Tex? Drax? Rex? Drex, I think...

"Drex" pushes something in front of him and BC feels his stomach flip flop as the Transpace Drive kicks in. He feels it again as Drex pulls back on the controls and they come out of Transpace.

Not as smooth as the Project's ships, for sure.

We need more integration of resources.

Damn, that sounded managerial. I never wanted to be a manager! Now I'm a CEO. And, oh yeah, I'm the fuckin' POPE!

It's like I've become the uber manager.

"There we go, Champion!" the pilot says to him. "Sorry to shush you before, but... well, you know."

"Sure. Is it, uh, Drex?" BC asks, extending a hand.

"Drex? Yeah, you remember! I'm flattered, Champion," the man says with a quick smile.

"Where are we going?" BC asks.

"Back to the Moon, I guess," Drex says, "but that's really up to you."

"Mr. Wentworth said that's your decision. He said you might want to go to your home on the Moon, said something about you meeting with the scientists there. So I've got us heading for the Moon. Is that okay?"

BC considers his options.

"The moon probably is the best idea," he agrees.

"Then we are on course," Drex says, nodding.

"Could you get me Wentworth on the com?" he asks Drex.

"Sure thing," the pilot says. "Guess you wanna thank him, huh?"

"Something like that," BC says.

It takes some time for Drex to make the connection. Twenty minutes later Wentworth is on the line.

"Ah, BC! How are you?"

"Fiza?!" BC asks. First thing out of his mouth.

"Ah, yes. Fiza," Wentworth drawls, extending the sound of her name. "She's become quite the undercover agent, hasn't she? She makes a good looking Arab woman, don't you think so?"

"You lied to me," BC accuses him.

"I was protecting her and her cover. And a good thing for you that I did!"

"Do you always have to sound so smug?" BC asks.

"Smug?" Wentworth answers. "I'm hurt! I'm merely happy my plans have paid off with your safe return, Champion! That was a foolish mission you just failed on."

"I thought it was necessary. Al-Salid and I had arranged a secret meeting! We didn't want it blown out of proportion. Had he been himself, this 'mission' would have gone fine. But Al-Salid isn't himself," BC explains.

"You know, you really made me hate you, Wentworth. When I thought you'd drugged her and made her..." BC shakes his head.

"Spare me your grudging respect, Champion. You can be sure I would have had it done to her had she not accepted the Mars mission.

"I'm not a nice man, Champion. I've done that and worse to other women... and men. Your hate is safe with me!" he laughs.

"It's just business, Champion. It's not personal. But men like you never learn that do you?"

"God, I hope I don't," BC says.

That excuses everything for him, doesn't it?

"How long has she been there? On Mars?"

"Almost a year," Wentworth tells him. "Ever since she proved more useful than I thought she could be."

"More useful?" BC asks him.

"Her knowledge of Arabic?" Wentworth explains. "Her past experience on Mars?"

BC nods.

"So you know of that as well," Wentworth says. "Then you can see why I decided to send her back there. And again, it was lucky for you that I did!"

He presses his point.

"What went on down there? What went wrong?"

"I don't know, for sure," BC tells him. "I had proposed this kind of covert meeting between us to Al-Salid when we last spoke, before I went out to visit the aliens, the Eldred. But when I showed up... he wasn't himself.

"I'm not absolutely positive, but I think I know why that is. I can't discuss it now, not even on a secure line. There's more I need to tell you. More to talk about. Just not now."

"Champion, I've told you before, you can..."

BC cuts him off, "Not this time, Wentworth. We're dealing with those who can bust through any security you *think* you have," he tells him.

"Oh." Wentworth gets it. "The ones you said might have..." he trails off.

BC nods.

"Any chance, then, of getting you to come here to Wentworth Station before you head to Lunar Prime?"

Wentworth asks. "So we *can* discuss this?"

BC considers changing course.

"Why not?"

"Drex, set course for Wentworth station, please," BC says.

"Got it!"

Drex works the ship's controls.

"On our way, Padre!" Drex informs him.

"Padre?" Funny. That reminds me of the pilot who took me to Fortune Station. Mr. Longeux, I think it was. Poor guy. Adrian Longeux. That was it!

"So, we'll see you here soon, then?" Wentworth asks.

"Soon enough."

"How big is this thing? Who are these aliens? These 'Eldred'?" Wentworth asks BC.

"Big," BC says. "And I'll tell you more about them when I get there. But if I'm right? A million-year-old, intergalactic war is about to flare up, right here in our backyard. And there might not be anything we can do to stop it."

"Right," Wentworth says, but he's shaking his head. "I never like to say 'never', Campion. We can at least try to stop it," Wentworth says. "And if we can't stop the war, then we can damn well try to win it!"

"Damn, that sounds optimistic, Wentworth! Not like a reasonable businessman."

"If they want to kill me, that makes it bigger than business. That makes it personal," Wentworth says.

"But it does put me in the business of making allies and shoring up my defenses."

"That's why I'm coming to see you," BC tells him. "We've gotta deal with each other on a different level. We're going to need to actually work together. And maybe even trust each other. You with me?"

BC hears Wentworth sigh over the com.

"We have a lot of work to do!"

"Yeah, we do."

"Well," Wentworth says, "guess I'm with you."