

**VATICAN ABDICATOR  
(VATICAN ASSASSIN BOOK THREE)**

MIKE LUOMA

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VATICAN ABDICATOR: VATICAN ASSASSIN: PART THREE

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Dedicated to my sister and brother, their amazing and wonderful spouses, and my nieces and nephews. I love you all!

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Prologue

CLASSIFIED REPORT to Ibn Al-Salid, Universal Islamic Nation (UIN) from the UIN Intelligence Office, April 20, 2011.

INTELLIGENCE DOSSIER SUMMARY on Pope Peter the Fourth of The New catholic Church (NcC), aka Bernard Campion, aka "BC"

BORN 2080, United States of America

FMR AFFILIATION (prior to reunification & the NcC in 2104): Holy Redemption Church of Jesus (appears to have been cover for some sort of smuggling operation)

DANGER TO UIN: EXTREMELY HIGH! The Intelligence Office understands your holiness's interest in engaging in a dialogue with Campion. We advise against this most vigorously, on the basis of the threat posed by Campion as detailed below.

BERNARD CAMPION is an unlikely Pope. Recently elected by a plague-depleted College of Cardinals, Campion (now known as Pope Peter the Fourth) was formerly an agent in the Office of Papal Operations (OPO) under the previous Pope Peter the Second. Campion is known to the Universal Islamic Nation's Intelligence Office to have been a Vatican Assassin answering only to the Pope himself. Campion is the likely assassin of Lunar Prime Governor Meredith McEntyre at the Lunar Peace Conference on July 12, 2109. Compromised former UIN Intelligence Office Agent Nita Bendix was publicly blamed for the governor's death. See additional file summary on BENDIX, NITA, an apparent

triple agent now known to be ANITA CAPITUNA of Van Kilner's Project and a close confidant, possible lover of Campion's.

Campion is also the likely assassin of the cult figure known as THE LIGHT whose followers previously occupied FORTUNE STATION until their leader's death in November of 2109. The evidence is only circumstantial. Campion was known to be on a mission for the OPO at this time and disappeared for approximately two months. He was rumored to have been on Fortune Station for that length of time, and his return to Lunar Prime coincided with the death of The Light. The UTZ moved in and evacuated the cult at that time, relocating the surviving members to Dubuque, Iowa, United States of America, UTZ.

The Intelligence Office has unconfirmed reports that high dosages of psychotropic drugs were administered to Campion by the cult on Fortune Station, resulting in Campion's chronic, debilitating headaches (which have been witnessed and reported). These headaches of Campion's could be a useful weakness to exploit if needed.

After Our Great Retaliation of Christmas 2109, and the death of Pope Peter the Second, Campion's activities apparently became more peaceful. He was named acting and then full Vatican Ambassador to Lunar Prime by Peter the Second's successor Pope Linus the Second and began organizing the recent series of peace conferences on Lunar Prime.

As the last of the conferences ended with biological warfare and the infection of our delegation with the current plague that has wiped out a third of our population, it may be that Campion's "peace conferences" were merely an attempt to get us close enough to be infected. Granted, the UTZ's population has also been severely affected, but the accidental infection of their own population cannot be ruled out. The Intelligence Office cautions his holiness to regard this latest explanation that the plague is of extraterrestrial origin with some skepticism.

At this time, the Intelligence Office believes Campion's appointment to this highest office displays desperation on the part of the NcC leadership, and perhaps interference in the church's processes by Universal Trade Zone (UTZ) CEO Richard Wentworth. The alliance between the UTZ and the NcC lasted for many years before the declaration of the church's neutrality by Pope Linus last year. Given his past history, the Intelligence Office feels it would be unwise to assume that the NcC will remain neutral under the leadership of Bernard Campion, Pope Peter the Fourth.

## *2 Corinthians 10: 3*

*For although we are human, it is not by human methods that we do battle. The weapons with which we do battle are not those of human nature; they have divine power to demolish fortresses!*

## Chapter One

The Moon... Our bright light in the night sky.

Pope Peter the Fourth, Bernard Campion, looks up at the full Moon and sees the glint of light that marks the main dome of Lunar Prime.

*The dome over the atrium... I wonder... How tall are the new trees under there? How much have things grown back? How long has it been? Feels like only yesterday.*

As he watches, the stars around the Moon begin to burn brighter and brighter, nearly blinding him.

*That's not right!*

Suddenly, one of the stars drops out of the sky, disappearing below the horizon. Other stars follow, first one by one, then in a brilliant cascade of falling stars!

After the last star falls, the sky is left blank and black save for the bright, full Moon.

The Moon explodes! It shatters like glass! Sharp white shards glisten as they fall from the sky and pierce the ground around him.

BC looks up and sees a shard coming straight down at him. It pierces his shoulder and slices right through him! He's ripped in two by the shard of falling light from the full Moon.

*"AAAAaahhhhHH!"*

BC wakes up in a chilly sweat, realizes he's in a seat on the bridge of a ship. He collects his wits, remembers he's on his way to Wentworth Station on board one of Wentworth's ships.

*Richard Wentworth. Guess I owe him one now.*

*I don't like owing him anything! The man's a snake! I may be the head CEO of the Universal Trade Zone, but he's certainly the power behind the throne.*

*At least he sent his pilot Drex along with this ship to save my ass when everything went wrong on Mars.*

He was supposed to meet with Al Salid on Mars but the man threw him in a cell instead! A disguised and undercover Fiza helped BC escape and helped him hook up with Wentworth's rescue ship.

*Fiza! Finding her alive changed my mind about Wentworth. First he said she was dead, then he let me believe he was keeping her as a drugged up sex slave, or worse! And all along he had her working as an agent for him deep undercover in the Universal Islamic Nation on Mars.*

"Mornin' sunshine," Drex the pilot says, greeting BC. "You dozed off for a second there. Then you shouted out, 'The Moon!' or something! Then you screamed. Musta been some dream, anyways, huh?"

*"Yeah, some dream. A dream about the Moon."*

BC tries to clear his head of the vivid images.

*Guess I'm worried. What's not to worry about?*

*My plans are falling apart!*

*Well, not all of them. Wentworth says he'll work with me. With us. That's good. Maybe I can bring the Project and the UTZ together.*

*Otherwise?*

*It's all falling apart.*

*Thought Al Salid and I were going to be able to bring the UIN and the UTZ to the table together. Didn't expect Wentworth would have to send a ship to rescue me!*

*Al Salid... The guy threw me in a cell!*

*He wasn't himself. Didn't even seem to remember me... Or remember agreeing to meet with me after we'd both met with the Eldred. And it was his idea! It was as if he was forgetting me right in front of my eyes.*

*Is it Dolomay? On Mars? Felt like he was there, when he was in my head, when I was in Al-Salid's office!*

*Dolomay is on Mars. The Eldred lost track of him. Told us to find him And all signs point to Mars.*

*It felt like he mentally attacked me on Mars.*

*Those have to be the greater powers the Eldred said the Ancient Enemy possessed. Mental powers! And who knows how powerful the guy is?*

*The way the UIN is acting it has to be Dolomay pulling the strings. The UIN is now under his control.*

"You know, after you freshen up on the station, talk with Mr. Wentworth, whatever, I can take you *anywhere* you want to go. You don't *have* to go back to the Moon," Drex offers.

"Why wouldn't I want to go back to the Moon?" BC asks.

"I don't know. Just the way you shouted 'The Moon' before, there. Anyways, I *cant* take you back to the Moon, if you want. Or anywhere on Earth. Or in orbit. Doesn't matter to me, anyways. Not back to Mars though, right?" Drex chuckles at his own joke.

"Right," BC agrees grimly. "Not back to Mars," he mumbles, still grateful Drex rescued him from the planet's dusty surface after his plan to meet secretly with Al-Salid went horribly wrong.

*That whole mission was for nothing! Although, I did find out Fiza was okay. That was a surprise and a half! Hope she still is. Mars is a dangerous place.*

*It has to be Dolomay!*

*So... where to next?*

"Just back to the Moon, Drex, I guess," BC tells the pilot. "Unless something changes while I'm here. Thanks."

"No problem, padre."

BC settles back down in his seat and looks out the viewport at the carpet of stars.

*Good. They're all staying put.*

*What a strange dream. Killed by a shard from a broken Moon. Wonder if that means anything?*

BC watches out the viewport as the rescue ship arrives at Wentworth Station, watches the station loom larger as the ship approaches.

*It looks like a camera floating in space.*

The station has two sections. The lower, boxy section looks like an office building, topped with a shining, rotating cylindrical section. They approach the camera "body", the "lens" rising up into the "sky".

*Rotating for gravity... the original section of the station. The lower boxier part has artificial G. That's probably where we'll dock.*

Drex maneuvers the ship in to dock with a walkway extending from the lower section. He directs BC to the airlock, then tells BC he's staying on the ship.

"I'll wait for you. I've got everything I need onboard."

"I don't know how long I'll be here..."

"That's okay. Long as it takes, I'll be here. I can wait. Don't have much else to do, anyways," Drex assures him.

"See you when I get back, then."

BC leaves the ship, walks down the walkway and enters the station alone. It seems nearly deserted.

He stands in the lobby for a moment and takes in his surroundings: Marble floors, carpeted walls, tapestries...

*Not much has changed. Same color scheme, black and red. And silver. Or is that chrome?*

A greeter, a woman in a black and red environment suit, appears from behind a pair of sealed doors, and welcomes him aboard. She leads him down a red and black corridor. There's still no one else around.

BC follows the woman into a small, square room with blank gray walls and a wall-sized mirror opposite the entryway. There is a table with a single chair in the room.

*Utilitarian.*

The greeter ducks out and the door closes behind her, leaving BC alone in the room.

BC hears a voice say, "Clear!" The mirrored wall clears to transparency. It's now a window onto a nearly identical room. Richard Wentworth stands on the other side of the window, all business in his black three piece suit and slicked back gray-black hair.

*He hasn't changed. A snake in human skin.*

*At least he's on my side, for now. For so long as it benefits him.*

"Different. Love what you've done with the place," BC says with some attitude.

"Precautions," Wentworth says. "You are a disease carrier. And I still have not been exposed."

"You really know how to make a guest feel welcome! But it's sensible, I guess," BC admits. "You really don't think you've come in contact with the Eldred's plague yet?"

“Apparently not. I’ve tested negative for it. Best to be careful, eh? We keep ourselves alive by being sensible. Cautious. Careful. You understand,” Wentworth explains.

*Thanks for the fancy treatment. Only befitting the Pope and the chief CEO of the UTZ, huh? Trying to show me who’s in charge?*

“Is this what you call working together?” BC cracks. “Great way to start...”

“Precautions... So,” Wentworth continues, “on your way here from your debacle on Mars, you said on the com that you believe... you’re convinced... a million-year-old intergalactic war is about to flare up here in our ‘backyard’, as you put it?”

“I do believe it,” BC confirms.

“An ancient, intergalactic war? Being a bit dramatic, aren’t you?” Wentworth lectures him. “You’d have us focus on some vague alien threat? What about the UIN? Should we just ignore them?” BC hears the sarcasm in Wentworth’s voice.

“Not at all. They’re part of it,” BC replies calmly. He tries to keep his cool.

*Hard to work with a guy when you have to constantly struggle not to punch him! Arrogant prick...*

“I see. And these aliens you’ve mentioned before, they’re behind it, I gather, from what you wouldn’t say over the com?” Wentworth deduces. “And this goes above and beyond the plague they’ve already hit us with?”

“They are called the Eldred, and they are most definitely a part of it. And it most certainly does.”

“But you say there might not be anything we can do to stop it.”

“You say you never like to say never,” BC reminds him.

Wentworth paces back and forth on his side of the glass, thinking. He stops, looks across at BC.

“You think there’s some new player on Mars who has something to do with this ‘war’?” Wentworth asks.

“I not only *think* there is. I *know* he’s there. And he does,” BC admits.

*He knows something... What does Wentworth know about Dolomay?*

“Fiza’s told me a little about this new ‘player’,” Wentworth says, nearly answering BC’s unspoken question. “I gather you know more?”

“What do *you* know?” BC challenges him. “I’d rather not repeat information.”

*And I want to know what you know that I don’t!*

“Huh,” Wentworth grunts, surprised by BC’s tone, but he continues. “Fiza says there’s a new advisor to Al Salid, one who’s not a Muslim. According to her, he just showed up one day, after Al Salid returned from a secret journey.”

“That ‘secret journey’ was *Al Salid*’s trip out to Eldray to meet with the eldest of the Eldred. We each went out to meet with them, individually. And he and I had decided to secretly meet with each other after he got back,” BC explains. “That’s why I went to Mars.”

“That plan went well, then, eh?” Wentworth chides him.

“I think this ‘new player’ got in the way of the plan,” BC says.

“Fiza says they keep this ‘advisor’ out of sight, for the most part,” Wentworth informs BC. “But she’s seen him. ‘Course, Fiza is good at getting into the kind of places where people who don’t want to be seen go. Places people don’t want her to get into,” he says with a chuckle. “She said he had blonde hair when she first saw him, but he dyed it black soon after.”

*Well! That just about confirms it. And the descriptions I heard of him on Mars certainly matched the artist’s rendition we have of him from The Eldred.*

*Dolomay has to be on Mars. And he has Al Salid’s ear... and maybe his mind! Maybe he’s somehow controlling Al Salid - didn’t even seem like the same guy!*

*Maybe it was Dolomay in my head!*

*What did he learn in there?*

*Has it been him all along?*

*That first time, too, on Fortune Station?*

*Somehow, no.*

*That was different.*

“What is it, Champion? You got quiet.”

“Hold on. I’m thinking.”

“What do you know, Champion? I know you know more than you’re telling me!”

*Might as well fill him in...*

“I know a lot of things,” BC says. “When I met with the Eldred, Wentworth, I discovered that the human race is descended from a brutal race of galactic conquerors a million years dead, now referred to only as the ‘Ancient Enemy’.

“The Eldred helped overthrow the Ancient Enemy a million years ago, but the Ancient Enemy sent out ‘star seeds’ as the Eldred called them, small bundles of Ancient Enemy DNA and such, when their homeworld exploded.

“One of those star seeds landed here.”

“Okay...” Wentworth says cautiously. “Interesting story. But why didn’t the Eldred try to just wipe out these ‘star seeds’?”

“They did try! They have been trying,” BC tells him. “They told me they didn’t know at first that the star seeds even existed. When they began finding them, they started wiping them out.

“But it turns out some other alien races interfered in our case, kept our star seed hidden somehow after the Eldred paid their first visit to Earth hundreds of thousands of years ago.”

“The Eldred were here before?” Wentworth asks.

“They might have wiped out the Neanderthals,” BC says. “That’s just a theory.”

“And they’ve been trying to wipe us out with their plague, now that they’ve found us,”

Wentworth realizes, the truth dawning on him. “Now it makes some kind of sense... Not that I like it!”

“They say they’re only trying to ‘contain’ and ‘control’ us, that the plague won’t kill all of us,” BC tells him. “They want us to stop killing each other and confine ourselves within the orbit of Jupiter. If we agree to do that, they say, the plague will stop. They just want to keep us, um, manageable. They want the UTZ Council and the UIN to agree to their conditions.”

“Manageable?” Wentworth erupts. “I’ll give them manageable! Fuck that! They might as well be killing *all* of us, Champion. Look around! Our scientists are starting to work with the Project scientists, but we’re no closer to finding a cure,” Wentworth tries to calm himself, shakes his head. “Why not just attack us outright? Couldn’t be much worse than this.”

“I hate to say it,” BC says, “but it probably is worse, now that Dolomay is on Mars.”

Wentworth looks confused.

“That’s the new player you mentioned, Al-Salid’s new ‘advisor’,” BC explains.

“Dolomay, huh? Strange name.”

“Yeah. He’s not from around here.”

“So... Why does he make it worse?” Wentworth probes.

“Because the Eldred are afraid of Dolomay, and what he represents. And we should probably be aware of what he represents, too, if not afraid of him. He’s ruthless, inhuman. He comes from a time and culture more technologically advanced than we are, so he gives the UIN an unfair tech advantage by siding with them against us. There are lots of ways Dolomay makes it worse.”

“The Eldred are afraid of Dolomay? Why?” Wentworth thinks out loud. “Wait a minute... How old is this Dolomay?”

“Ancient,” BC says.

“Ancient?” Wentworth asks, and then pauses. “As in ‘Ancient Enemy’ ancient? How could he still be... Holy shit! If you weren’t the pope I’d say you were lying. As it is, I’ve got to wonder about your mental state!”

“I wish I was crazy,” BC cracks.

“But how could one of *them* be here now?”

“Well, it’s a long story...”

“We’ve got time,” Wentworth says, but then he corrects himself. “Huh, well, maybe not too much time, though... The appearance of this Dolomay on Mars... That’s what has you talking about a

million year old intergalactic war, isn't it?" A crooked grin twists across Wentworth's mouth. "Can't we just stand aside and let the Eldred wipe out the UIN?"

"I'm not sure the Eldred appreciate the subtle differences in politics and religion that divide us humans," BC tells him. "They may see us as all one race. And if they feel Dolomay is somehow, I don't know, 'tainting' us, they may feel justified in wiping *all* of us out, as the last vestige of the Ancient Enemy."

"Right... Let me back up for a second. We're sick because of these aliens. Our human 'Project' is in touch with them?" Wentworth asks. "The Project set up your trip out to see them?"

"The Project is in contact with the Eldred and those other aliens I mentioned before," BC says.

"The ones who kept us hidden from the Eldred?"

"Exactly. There are several alien races in our area," BC tells him. "But the Eldred seem to be the most powerful. Aside from the Ancient Enemy."

"And the Ancient Enemy are *our* ancestors?" Wentworth asks for clarification. "And it's one of *them* on Mars?"

"Something like that," BC says.

"He's one of them? The Ancient Enemy?" Wentworth is still trying to wrap his head around the idea. "So tell me, then: How did he end up on Mars?" Wentworth asks.

"I'm guessing he left Eldray stowed away on board the Eldred ship that carried Al Salid back home to Mars."

"Shitty security," Wentworth mumbles. "But that doesn't explain how it is he's alive here and now in the first place!"

"The Eldred and another race found him in deep space, in a suspended animation capsule that used technology beyond their own," BC explains to him. "Dolomay had been placed in the stasis capsule in orbit around the home planet of the Ancient Enemy in punishment for crimes against his people. The capsule was set free, floating off through space by the same explosion that destroyed the Ancient Enemy's homeworld and launched the star seeds."

"Oh. Great," Wentworth exclaims. "So this guy was actually a *criminal* among those ancient brutes? Just great."

"It gets better," BC tells him. "When I got back from Eldray, even before I could talk to you, the Eldred got back in touch through the Project to demand another meeting. I met them at the Project's asteroid base..."

"Wait a minute... The Project has an asteroid base?" Wentworth stops him.

"Didn't I mention that?"

"I don't think so," Wentworth says cautiously. "You made it sound like they were based on the Moon."

"The Project has a base in the asteroids, too," BC says matter-of-factly, but with a hint of sarcasm.

"Thanks."

"Just trying to be open and honest. You know, our new, um, relationship."

"Working together," Wentworth says, with a touch of irony. "Anyway. At the asteroid base meeting, the Eldred basically told me about Dolomay, said he was headed this way, and then told me now it was our problem! They demanded that we deal with it."

"You're kidding. They expect us to take care of this guy?" Wentworth asks.

"That's pretty much how they left it," BC tells him.

"Did they know he was on Mars?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so," BC guesses. "I didn't know myself until I went there to meet with Al Salid."

*And even then I wasn't positive until you confirmed it as well. Fiza told me some, and Wentworth filled in the gaps.*

*Should I tell him about the mental stuff?*

*What do I know about it anyway?*

*I mean really know?*

*I don't know.*

"This guy could be extremely dangerous," BC says.

"Really?" Wentworth challenges him. "Based on whose information? The aliens who are already trying to kill us? Or your Project? I'm afraid that neither seems at all credible at this point, Champion. We only have their word that he's even a member of that ancient race," Wentworth points out. "You chastised the board for lacking control over the Project. It doesn't seem like you've got much control, either. You see my point?"

"You know, I do. I really do, point taken. But they cozied up to these alien races under Van Kilner's leadership, not mine," BC says. "Wentworth, if this 'new player' is this Dolomay? This 'Ancient Enemy'? He's more powerful than the average guy. Because there's one more thing. Something the Eldred weren't all that forthcoming with." BC pauses.

*I'm still not sure I should tell Wentworth this...*

"What? Don't hold back now, Champion!" Wentworth cautions.

"I believe the Ancient Enemy had psionic abilities," BC tells him. "They could get inside your head, communicate telepathically, maybe even move things with their minds."

"They were telepathic? Telekinetic?" Wentworth asks incredulously, shaking his head. "You're kidding me."

"You can see why I hesitated to tell you."

"That's a lot to swallow, Champion."

"Do you believe me?" Champion asks.

"I do," Wentworth says to reassure him. "I believe you. I just don't believe the people *you* believe. Hell, they're not even people, right? The Eldred are the ones that look like little blue koala bears, right?!"

"They might be cute and fuzzy... but don't underestimate them," BC cautions. "They've killed off more than half the human race," BC points out.

He looks around at the room he's in. "Or have you put me in this isolation chamber because I smell bad?" BC jokes half-heartedly.

"Touché," Wentworth says. "You know, judging by what they've said, you may be safe."

"Judging by what *they've* said," BC says, "those of us who haven't died yet probably won't. If we're willing to believe the 'little blue koalas'?"

"I don't know. That psychic stuff sounds too far-fetched," Wentworth declares.

"They weren't 'psychic'! Psionic. And the Eldred didn't say anything about that at first. It's what I've discovered! The Ancient Enemy used more of their brains, somehow. I don't know how. They were telepathic. And the Eldred didn't say anything about that. Only confirmed it when I confronted them about it."

"They didn't tell you about it at first, eh? Where did you get the information, then?"

*Should I tell him? Why not?*

"I'm pretty sure I heard Dolomay in my head, Wentworth. I know that sounds crazy, but, please, listen to me!" BC asks. "I've heard him in my mind. It's real."

"*You've* heard him. In *your* head? Are you sure?"

"Not entirely sure. But I'm pretty sure. It's disconcerting! And I'm even beginning to think my ability to 'hear' him has something to do with those headaches I've been getting."

*I am? I do? I guess I'm beginning to... it makes some kind of sense to me as I explain it out loud to Wentworth. Maybe the headaches are the birth pangs of new mental powers on my part! Psycho-Man!*

*Yeah, right!*

"Really?" Wentworth looks at BC quizzically through the glass. "So you can hear him."

"I can. I have. I didn't realize what it was, or who it was, at first. I heard him in my mind when I visited the Eldred's planet, Eldray. That must have been when he was waking up!" BC realizes. "The Eldred think that my presence on their world somehow triggered the mechanisms of Dolomay's suspension capsule, turned them on and made them automatically thaw him out," he explains. "When I was on Mars

I 'heard' him again, louder, stronger, somehow. I figured out how to block him out after a while."

Wentworth looks down, shakes his head slowly back and forth.

"This... this all sounds ridiculous!" he ends with a shout, lifting his head to glare back at BC through the wall of glass, unconvinced.

"I don't care how it sounds!" BC shouts back at the glass. "If Dolomay has already taken the UIN's side, that could turn the war. Whether you believe he has the power to bend men's will to his own or not, he comes from a time of superior technology, from a people known for their brutal superiority in war. I'm thinking this may give the UIN a bit of a tactical advantage, huh?"

"No need for sarcasm," Wentworth frowns. "Fiza's reports bear out much of what you say."

"Fill in the blanks and the pieces of the puzzle fit together," BC says. "Who else do you think Fiza's mysterious stranger, this 'new advisor', is?"

"I don't know yet," Wentworth insists. "I don't think we can be certain it's this 'Dolomay'."

"I think we can be."

Wentworth shakes his head.

"Wentworth!" BC shouts at him. "Watch the UIN, Wentworth. See if their ships don't all of a sudden get better, start demonstrating technological advances we don't have! See if this new stranger Fiza mentions doesn't start taking over more and more control. Watch for the signs. Be ready for them to take a shot at us... and be ready to strike back hard! It's the only way Dolomay knows!"

"Look, Champion. This is all very farfetched," Wentworth says. He gets a cold and distant look in his eyes as he continues. "I want to thank you for taking the time to stop by today and fill me in on these very important details. I'll look into them and we'll discuss this at the next meeting of the UTZ board. Thank you."

Even as Wentworth says "Thank you," the glass wall turns opaque and BC finds himself staring at himself in the mirror.

*What the fuck? Come off it! Don't shut me off! Don't shut me out!*

"Don't take too much time, Wentworth!" BC shouts at the mirror. "I know it's a lot to think about, but we don't have time to spare! The reappearance of Dolomay has not made the Eldred reconsider their stance on humanity and the plague," BC cautions, "even if his escape is their fault! We face two threats, Dolomay and the plague!"

"Clear," Wentworth says.

The mirror turns transparent once again, revealing Wentworth still standing on the other side.

"Where do *you* suggest we go from here, then, Champion?" Wentworth asks him.

BC looks him square in the eye.

"We watch. We wait. And *we* prepare for the worst."

"If you're right, Champion. But that's a big if..."

"So what are we going to do about it?" BC challenges him. "Because it's up to us now, Wentworth. No one else is left! Me? I'm thinking I'm going to direct the Project to ramp up Transpace ship construction and production. And you? You can help me arm those ships. We have war coming our way, on all fronts. What else can we do? What can you do?"

"Such as?"

"Will you let me turn the Project brain trust loose on your shipyards on the Moon? Double our efforts? Build some killer ships? Find a way to put up some sort of fight?"

"How many of us do you think will be left standing to fight after this alien plague runs its course?"

Wentworth asks rhetorically. "Don't you know how many have died? Are dying?"

BC shakes his head. "I know. But what else can we do?" BC laughs. "How pathetic is it that the fate of the human race is dependent on us two?"

"Who knew it would get this bad?" Wentworth ponders. "I'm in," he tells BC. "No reason *notto* combine our efforts! If the UIN protests politically, let 'em. It'll just force the issue already at hand. Let's do it."

"Good. We need to be together on this," BC says. "Speaking of which, do you really need to keep me isolated like this?"

“Huh, let me see,” Wentworth says, consulting some readout in front of him. “Well, the sweepers say you’re clean, even though you’ve been in the plague zones. As far as our instruments can tell. Still worries me.”

“I really do think that if you haven’t died yet, you’re not going to,” BC insists. “So they said.”

“Sure... but who’s to say they didn’t infect you with something new to take back to take out the rest of us?”

“Aw, now you’re just trying to cheer me up,” BC jokes.

“I don’t trust the Eldred. Why should we?” Wentworth insists.

“We don’t really have an option,” BC tells him. He laughs. “But I can’t believe you’ve ever ‘trusted’ anyone? Why start with the Eldred?”

“Touché,” Wentworth says with a smile. “Where to next?” he asks BC.

“I think I’m heading back to Lunar Prime.”

“Home base? Or your home away from home, now that you have the Vatican?”

“Yeah, it’s funny, the Moon is one of the few places I do feel at home,” BC admits. “I can relax and regroup there. Think this through a little.”

“You need some time to think?”

“I need all *kinds* of time. We need all kinds of time. Time to think. Time to strategize. Time to build, and to rebuild. Time to at least try to contact The Eldred. Tell them we know where Dolomay is,” BC explains.

“Are you really sure that’s a good idea?” Wentworth questions BC.

“Why not? Despite my doubts, maybe we *can* get them to help us, make them see the difference between us and the UIN! If the Ancient Enemy is working with the UIN, maybe we can make the Eldred see that we are on their side. Maybe they can still come in on our side. The ‘enemy of my enemy’ and all that?”

“Right.” Wentworth turns away from the glass wall and begins walking away.

“Stay in touch, won’t you, Champion? Let me know what’s going on?” he says over his shoulder.

“Absolutely. So... you’re not going to come see me off?”

“I’m seeing you off right now, Champion! Good-bye!”

Wentworth leaves the room on the other side of the glass.

“Prick,” BC says under his breath.

“I heard that!” Wentworth says, unseen, an echo from the hall coming over the loudspeaker.

“Scary, man,” BC says, knowing Wentworth is still listening.

“Thank you,” Wentworth says over the speaker.

The room door slides open. BC walks out into the corridor. There’s no sign of the greeter, so BC finds his own way back to the ship. Drex is there waiting for him in the walkway outside the ship.

“You’re not afraid of the sickness?” BC asks him as he walks up.

“Me? Nah,” the pilot says. “Your time comes, it comes. You die, you die,” he says dryly.

“Very pragmatic of you,” BC observes.

“So, you still want to go to the Moon?” Drex asks.

“Yup.”

The two board the ship. BC settles in for the trip to Lunar Prime as Drex gets them underway.

## Chapter Two

BC’s thoughts wander as he travels.

*Back to the Moon. Get my shit together there before I head back down to the Vatican. The Vatican. Huh.*

*I soooooo do not want to go back there. That can’t be good.*

*I just don't want to be the fucking pope!*

*Damn.*

*I should get in touch with Anita.*

"Drex, can you put me through to someone on the com?"

"Sure."

"I need to reach a scientist with The Project. Her name's Anita Capituna."

"And she's on the Moon?"

*Huh... good question. Not sure what her plans were for the week.*

"I think so."

"I'll try"

Drex calls in to the Moon and somehow manages to get Anita on the other end of the com.

"BC?! What happened? You're... like, five and a half days early! We didn't pick you up... Whose ship are you on?"

"Things didn't go so well on Mars, Anita. I think Dolomay is already there. I'm pretty sure he's gotten to Al-Salid... Instead of meeting with me, Al-Salid threw me in a cell! Wentworth's people helped me out, got me out of there and off of Mars," BC tells her.

"Should you be saying all this on an open channel?" she cautions.

"Dolomay can read minds, Anita. Do you think channels matter?"

"What did you say? He can read minds? BC? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. The Eldred said the Ancient Enemy were more powerful than we are, right?"

"Right..." she agrees, tentatively.

"Well, it turns out some of that power is mental power. Psionic ability. And Dolomay's using that power, *his* power, to twist Al-Salid. He was all set to cooperate and suggested this meeting! We were supposed to meet to work out a unified front against The Eldred! Instead, Al-Salid turned on me as if we'd never spoken before! He sounded belligerent, ready to fight. It had to be Dolomay, messing with his head! I figure Dolomay plans on taking over the UIN from behind the scenes," BC tells her. "He could remember high tech from the distant past that's more advanced than what we have now. He may be able to help the UIN arm themselves with more advanced weapons, get them ready to fight. Think of the advantage that gives them!"

"This is bad, then, isn't it?" Anita asks him.

"Yup."

"This is weird."

"Weird?" BC asks, confused.

"I'm talking to you. But sitting here next to me is your simulacrum. Dell and his scientists did a pretty good job making your double. I'm talking to the real you over the com, thousands of miles away, and yet "you" are sitting here in my room, staring at me blankly. It's eerie. It'll be good to see the real you. Are you coming back here or going to Rome?"

"There. The Moon. I'm going to duck in and replace my double there next to you, slip back in as if nothing happened. Is the charade still working?"

"So far. You've kept a pretty low profile."

"Good."

"See you when you get back here."

"Bye, Anita."

BC signs off.

"So, the Pope has a girlfriend, huh?" Drex cracks.

"No!" BC answers with a hint of defensiveness. "Why do you say that?"

"The way you talked to each other," Drex explains. "Just the way you both sounded, something about that. Sorry. Didn't realize it was a touchy subject, anyways."

"It's not. I mean, we're not..." BC stops. "Never mind."

The rest of the trip is quiet.

BC watches through the viewport as the Moon slowly grows larger. Sunlight glints off the main dome.

The flashes would be blinding if not for the filters built into the window. The ship makes the final approach to Lunar Prime's port on a course that takes them over the city.

They come in low over the Vatican Mission, rebuilt just over a year ago after being leveled in the UIN attacks on Christmas Day, 2109. BC can't help but smile.

*I'm glad Marc Edwards made me pitch in and start rebuilding. Can't help but feel proud when I see the place I helped build. God! Ninety percent of the station is new, after about eighty percent of the old place was destroyed in the UIN's Christmas raids. Funny. Everyone calls it "Lunar Prime" now. Used to always be "Reagan Station". But Meredith McEntyre and her husband, even Governor Erskine, have tried to make it "Lunar Prime" exclusively. Mostly to assert their independence, their neutrality. Seems to have worked.*

There are few other ships in the port. A commercial supply freighter is leaving as Drex maneuvers their ship in for a landing. The port is quiet as BC and Drex disembark. Armed Lunar Security Corps members stand guard near the exits, stationed in greater numbers since Governor Erskine announced her quarantine back in March.

"Hey."

BC almost jumps, startled to see Anita standing there.

"I didn't see you there."

"Didn't mean to scare you," she says with a grin.

BC catches Drex smirking. The pilot gives him a wink.

*She does sound glad to see me.*

"Here, put this on."

She hands him a blonde wig and hooded robe. She looks around to see if anyone is watching them.

"My disguise?" BC asks, wrinkling his brow.

"Just put it on!" She snaps, getting frustrated with him.

BC throws on the "disguise". He brings the hood up to cover his new blonde tresses. Dressed in his disguise, he follows Anita out of the spaceport.

BC inhales the humid air as they cross the atrium, enjoying the aroma of the growing vegetation. He looks up at the young trees reaching for the bright dome overhead.

*Still have a way to go to replace the old ones, but they're getting there. Probably grow faster in the lower gravity.*

BC and Anita pass a few people making their way across the public space, but no one pays any notice. They leave the open space of the dome and walk on through the winding corridors that lead to the Vatican Mission and his quarters.

BC can't help but do a double take as they enter his rooms. His manufactured double sits facing the door staring out into space, immobile.

*So... that's what I look like? Weird.*

"No jokes about being beside yourself," Anita warns BC with a smile. BC takes off the hooded robe, lifts the wig off of his head and puts it loosely on the simulacrum.

"Huh. Now I know what I *just* like."

"Check this out," Anita says. She takes out a small control device. She points it at the double, and the face begins to melt and shift. Suddenly it no longer looks like BC. The features have shifted to resemble someone else, or have perhaps reset to some neutral expression and looks.

"Keyword: twin. Command word: homecoming," Anita says to the simulacrum. The no-longer-BC's double gets up silently. It starts to walk. The wig falls from its head as it leaves the room.

"What did you do?" BC asks Anita.

"I triggered his homing beacon. He's heading back to Dell and Krish, preprogrammed to find his way back to the Project base on the dark side." She looks BC up and down, and her nose wrinkles. "Are you going to change?"

BC only just realizes he's been wearing the same tech jumpsuit for a couple of days.

*Heh... I've gotta be kinda ripe!*

"And refresh," BC says. "Will you excuse me?"

“Certainly.”

BC leaves Anita in his living room and heads for the refresher and a clean change of clothes. After he gets out of the refresher, he finds himself frozen as he stares at the pressed white three piece suits that hang in his closet in front of him, his papal “uniforms”, the white suits he had the Vatican Tailors create for him in an attempt to modernize the Pope’s wardrobe.

*Don’t really want to wear one of those suits again! It doesn’t feel right! Really don’t think I can do this anymore... the Pope part, anyway. Two and a half months of this is too much! Besides... How can I be Pope and lead our war efforts? Think I’ll put on some civvies for now...*

BC opts for a simple t-shirt and jeans instead of his papal attire. He walks back into the living room and discovers a guest.

“BC, look who’s here. Your ambassador,” Anita says.

M’Bekke stands resplendent in a red patterned robe that combines traditional African attire with his New catholic Church Cardinal’s gear. His bright smile for BC shines out from his dark ebony complexion. His brown eyes glow with the warmth of friendship.

“M’Bekke!” BC smiles, greeting his old friend.

“BC! So good to have the real you back!” M’Bekke exclaims.

“What? You didn’t like my body double?” BC jokingly asks.

“Just not the same. Although he was better behaved...”

“Hey, thanks.”

“No suit?” Anita asks, noticing BC’s casual dress.

“Nah.” BC says, letting it trail. He looks at M’Bekke, tagged out in full regalia, and an idea hits him. A way out...

*Brilliant! That’s it. Can I do that?*

*Fuck it, I’m doing it. I’m the fucking Pope! For now...*

“I have heard things didn’t work out so well on Mars,” M’Bekke says to BC. “Al Salid was not as responsive as you’d hoped?”

“Did not go well. No,” BC admits, sounding distracted. He’s a little preoccupied by his new idea.

“M’Bekke, how would you feel about a promotion?”

“A promotion?”

“A Promotion,” BC confirms, smiling broadly at M’Bekke. “I have a great idea!”

“Uh-oh,” Anita and M’Bekke say nearly in unison.

“M’Bekke. Anita... I’m going to abdicate. I just can’t be pope anymore!” BC blurts it out.

“What?” Anita and M’Bekke ask, again almost together.

“I can’t be pope anymore. It’s not me. I’m not it!” BC shakes his head. “We’re facing the renewed battle between The Eldred and the Ancient Enemy, and we’re caught right in the middle. I need to be able to do things, and go places, that the Pope just can’t do, or go to. I can’t be Pope and lead the war against the Eldred.”

“There were military Popes, back in medieval times,” M’Bekke observes. BC keeps shaking his head.

“I mean, look at it: I shouldn’t have gone on this trip to Mars, because I’m the fucking pope!” he says, a little louder than he meant to. He calms himself. “But I’m going to have to do stuff like that if there is a war. So I’m naming you Pope in my absence, M’Bekke. I’m abdicating, and I name you as my successor!”

Anita and M’Bekke can only stare in wonder at BC.

BC returns their stares with a smile.

“You’re insane,” Anita says, breaking the silence. She glares at him. “You can’t do this.”

“Um... Yeah,” M’Bekke finally speaks. “What she said.”

“C’mon,” BC insists. “It just makes sense. I’m too many things. It’s too much! I’m Pope. I’m CEO of The Project. Head CEO of the UTZ Council. It’s crazy! So I’m making *you* Pope, M’Bekke,” BC tells him. “It looks like we’ve got a war to fight. Personally, I can’t reconcile waging a war with being Pope.”

“This from the guy who used to kill for the Pope?” Anita says in disbelief.

“Really, now, BC, I don’t think anyone knows your resume better!” M’Bekke protests.

“I’ve... um, evolved. I think,” BC says. He shakes his head. “I’m not the same guy I used to be. And I just can’t do the Pope thing anymore.”

“Can I talk you out of this? Any of it? Like, say, the part where you’re making *me* Pope?” M’Bekke protests.

“Nope. It all flooded into my mind when I saw you, M’Bekke. Maybe it’s divine inspiration!” BC’s smile drops. “I’ve had a lot on my mind. I’m pretty sure we’re on the brink of war. The Eldred are scared. With Dolomay loose among the Muslims, the Eldred may start to treat all of us humans as if we are the Ancient Enemy. I’m also worried Dolomay will give the UIN a technological advantage against us, especially with their weapons,” BC says. He pauses for a little effect before he asks, “Who know what ancient but advanced knowledge he has?” BC looks back and forth at M’Bekke and Anita. “I think we have to figure either the UIN or the Eldred, or both, will be attacking us soon.”

“We’ll get hit by both sides!” Anita realizes.

“Caught in the middle of a million year old war,” M’Bekke observes. BC nods. He looks Anita in the eye.

“Anita, we’ve got to get The Project’s shipyard’s production ramped up. We’re gonna need as many armed Transpace Ships as The Project can crank out, fast.”

“Ramped up?” she says incredulously. “Our facilities aren’t even geared towards mass production, BC,” Anita breaks the news to him. “We haven’t been about mass production for years!”

“Fine. But you used to be, right?” She nods. “So... you could be back in business with the right help, right? UTZ help: scientists, workforce, resources... They’re all at your disposal, Anita,” he informs her. “Here’s an idea: Why not make the shipyard out at the asteroid base work on smaller ships, and turn the UTZ shipyard here on the Moon into *your* major shipyard. It’s all at your disposal! You’re in charge! But we need this, like, yesterday! I’m putting you in charge because I know you can do it,” BC tells her, trying to sound confident and encouraging.

“We... I guess we could. We can try,” she says a little reluctantly. “We’ve got more of a custom ‘shop’ on the asteroid base than a ‘shipyard’ these days, so I guess we will have to build up the UTZ yards on the Moon. It makes the most sense. Although... We could build up another shipyard near the asteroid base, start from scratch using some of the old assembly line equipment from back when Dell and the boys were building UTZ ships,” she says, more to herself than to BC and M’Bekke. Anita gathers steam as she begins to think the process through. “We haven’t done weapons on a large scale in decades. We’ll need supplies...” she says, thinking out loud.

“You’ll have them,” BC assures her. “Wentworth has promised us whatever we need. Have our people contact his people. They’ll get you whatever you ask for.”

“Okay. Sure. Great. So... Anything else?” she asks him.

“That’s not enough?”

“Oh, it’s plenty,” she says with a quick laugh. “I thought we’d have a few days to relax before you got back here with *good* news from Mars. Instead you’re back early and all hell’s breaking loose!” she exclaims. “We’re about to be hit by an attack from either the UIN or the Eldred, or both; you’re trying to abdicate as Pope and throw poor M’Bekke here under *that* bus, and you want me to instantly ramp up ship production in facilities that are either inadequate, outdated or don’t yet exist. Does that about sum it up?” she asks, an angry edge creeping into her voice.

“How soon can you get started?” BC asks her, joking, trying to lighten the mood, but she scowls, frowns, makes a strange face.

“No time like the present, huh?” she says with a touch of venom in her voice. She gives BC a glaring look, then turns and leaves the room. BC watches her go, a little dazed. He stares at the space where she was.

*I think she wanted to slap me just then. Why? What did I say? I thought she and I were maybe getting somewhere, but...*

“You’re still insane, BC. I like that,” M’Bekke says, interrupting BC’s confusion. “So... Do you really think you can just make me the Pope?”

“I do. Hell, M’Bekke, you’re so much more suited to the job than I am! Plus, you look good in a robe,” BC says with a nod at M’Bekke’s garments.

“You’re serious! I can’t believe you’re serious.”

BC smiles.

*Funny, I’ve felt at peace since the thought occurred to me. Makes total sense. I’m tired of the contradictions. Tired of trying to be something I’m not.*

“I’m serious,” BC assures him. “You won’t be the first black Pope, but you might be the first openly gay Pontiff.”

“Good thing you added that ‘openly’ part or I was going to have to correct you,” M’Bekke says with a laugh. He grows suddenly quiet.

*The immensity of the office hitting him? I know how that feels. Overwhelming.*

“BC...” M’Bekke starts to say something. He stops, closes his eyes. They snap open and he waves his arms.

“No! I can’t do this!” he protests.

“Too late,” BC tells him. “It’s done. You’re the new Pope. Deal with it. I had to.”

“Yes. And you have obviously handled it immensely well,” M’Bekke cracks.

“Don’t be a bitch, M’Bekke. You’re the Pope now. It’s not becoming of you.”

“Never stopped you,” M’Bekke parries.

Silence falls for a long moment. M’Bekke finally breaks it.

“You’re sure?” he asks again.

“Yup.”

“Okay, then. What about the whole election process? Will the NcC even accept your decision? How is this legal? Binding?”

“It is because I say it is. It’s like a battlefield promotion in an emergency situation,” BC explains his logic to M’Bekke. “And you better *start* acting like the Pope because I’m going to *stop* acting like the Pope, and if you don’t act like the Pope, well... then no one will, and there’ll be no Pope. Worse case scenario: they call you ‘acting pope’.”

“Okay, then,” M’Bekke says. “I’m gonna go now, BC. I must wrap my head around all the shit you have just laid on me,” M’Bekke says with a sigh.

“Well. That’s understandable,” BC says. “Thank you, M’Bekke.”

“I have to give you this, BC: it’s never dull around you these days.” M’Bekke gives BC a slight bow and leaves.

*What’s with the bow? Jeesh!*

*Huh... after THAT I think I can finally relax, maybe get some rest. I hope I haven’t alienated either M’Bekke or Anita... it’s a lot to put on each of them... but they’re the only people I can trust to do these things. They’ll be fine...*

BC secures his rooms and then settles in to rest. He lies down, closes his eyes, and tries to get a good night’s sleep.

## Chapter Three

Despite frenzied preparations for war, BC has slept like a baby since he walked away from the papacy three months ago. The shift in responsibilities has worked out well. He’s spent most of his time on Lunar Prime, coordinating ship building efforts between the Project and the UTZ, directing plague victim relief efforts, keeping the peace in the UTZ, all while he tries to find out what’s going on with Dolomay and Al Salid on Mars.

Al Salid has responded to new overtures from BC, but only to acknowledge them. He has agreed to meetings on Lunar Prime with BC and M’Bekke, but continually postpones and reschedules the meetings

as they approach.

Wentworth has been as good as his word, working with Anita all through the summer to get the shipyards up and running. BC hasn't had to get too closely involved. Both Anita and Wentworth are more than capable of working without his supervision; both probably function better without him getting in their way. They've kept him in the loop with daily reports.

It's been a slow process. But like a rusty old machine oiled up and cranked into life, the assembly lines have begun to function a little faster each day, with slightly greater efficiency. They're finally building new ships and arming them with the new weaponry developed by the Project's reverse engineering of alien tech.

And so BC can sleep.

BC lays on a cushion in a berth as he travels on one of Wentworth's ships to meet with M'Bekke and Wentworth down at Vatican City. He drifts into consciousness awash in memories of three months ago.

*Abdicate! Best decision I made in a while... M'Bekke makes a good pope. And I've been able to stay away from the Vatican for three months.*

*Guess I had to return eventually.*

*Funny to not be meeting on Wentworth Station... But Wentworth will still be at the meeting. He says he's got updated figures on ships and readiness from Anita. And we may have cracked the plague's code, finally. Hope we can stop it from changing... and killing more of us. Wentworth Station... Huh. I've kinda gotten used to the place. I remember how intimidating it used to be. Course, the place never looked as good to me as it did when I got there after failing miserably on Mars.*

*What's that noise?*

BC opens his eyes, as Drex, once again his pilot, turns on a newsfeed. The voice echoes through the bridge.

"In tonight's news, Ibn Al-Salid of Mars again postponed the peace conference which had been proposed to take place on the Moon this coming weekend."

"Goddamn..." BC can't help but let out his disappointment. He gets up out of the berth at the back of the bridge and comes forward to sit up next to the pilot.

"Salid blamed the delay on his continuing health problems," the newsfeed continues. "But this is the fifth time Salid has caused a postponement in the talks.

"Pope John Paul the Fourth, acting pope for three months now, again indicated the NcC's readiness to attend the talks. The pope gave as an example the continued presence on the Moon of the former Pope, and current Vatican Envoy and UTZ Council Chair Bernard Campion, the NcC and UTZ representative and chief delegate for the talks.

"Campion, who could not be reached for comment, maintains a residence on Lunar Prime, so this is not the unilateral play for peace that it might at first seem to be on its surface. When the Pope *himself* bothers to make the trip, then there may be more to report.

"This is the Lunar Prime News Network."

*Cynical bastards. But I'm not on the Moon right now! Can't even get their facts straight.*

BC chuckles as the ship continues down to Earth.

"Alright, Drex! They don't know where I am!"

"Guess not. Guess it's good that I do then, huh? We're almost at Vatican City, anyways."

"Thanks, Drex," BC says, still chuckling to himself over the report placing him on the Moon.

*It is kind of comforting to know that they don't know where I am at all times. Not that they don't try. It's not quite as bad as when I was Pope.*

The drop down to Earth is uneventful. His appearance at the Vatican is not. No one speaks to him directly, but everyone is looking at him, either staring or glancing sidelong.

*Damn... I'm the center of attention! Feel like a walking freak show. Guess it serves me right. I did walk away from them, abandoned them. Like Fortune Station on a grand scale. Always disappointing someone, aren't you, BC?*

*Had to be done.*

BC ignores the eyes and walks on to the Papal Office Building. He soon finds himself in M'Bekke's study.

"M'Bekke! Great to see you!"

"BC! But you know it's John Paul now..."

"The Fourth!" BC exclaims as he shakes M'Bekke's hand and then gives him a quick hug. "You'll always be M'Bekke to me."

BC and M'Bekke catch up briefly, but their talk soon turns to more serious business.

"Is he here yet?" BC asks.

"Just landed. I see his ship on the display. He'll be here soon enough, by the look of it," M'Bekke speculates.

A brief commotion stirs outside the doors of the study. The doors open. Wentworth enters. He's dressed in an environment suit that mimics the look of his usual business attire yet keeps him isolated from the outside and from potential exposure to the plague.

"Gentlemen!" Wentworth trumpets out as he makes his entrance. He strides in and shakes each man's hand.

"Your eminence," he says, deferring to M'Bekke, "Pope John Paul the Fourth. Campion," he says with a nod to BC. Wentworth smiles. He looks from M'Bekke to BC. "You know, this makes more sense to me. I'm a lot more comfortable with you as head of the UTZ than as the Pope," he tells BC. "Just suits you better."

"Yeah," BC agrees, "M'Bekke, uh, John Paul... excuse me... is a natural, isn't he?" M'Bekke smiles at the compliment.

Wentworth brings out a small valise. He opens it, revealing a small three dimensional display of charts and figures.

"Let's get right to it. As you can see," he says, addressing the other two men and getting down to business, "We now have fifty-two of these new Transpace Jumpships. We're calling them 'Stingers'. Figured the originals were 'Flashers', so we'll call these Stingers. The only problem we're running into now is training up crews to fly them all. We're actually building 'em faster than we can crew them up!"

"How many crew on each one?" BC asks.

"Three," Wentworth answers, "Pilot, gunner and engineer."

"How long 'til we have crew for all fifty-two?"

"We've got thirty-two of them crewed up and battle ready now. Figure we'll have another ten up in a month. But, you see, by then, we'll have seventy-five ships ready, at the pace Anita's got the Moon's shipyards running, so we'll need another ninety-nine crew members."

"We'll be constantly playing catch-up," BC says with dismay. "Isn't there any way we can train up more people simultaneously?"

"We're working on that," Wentworth says, "but it's a question of who we can spare to actually *do* the training. We take too many trainers off of ship's crews and we're going backwards."

BC thinks a moment. "We might need to take a step back, if it will afford us a greater capacity to train larger numbers. But I'm not sure we have the luxury of the time that'll take."

Wentworth looks BC square in the eye. "How much time do you think we have?"

"Two months? Maybe?" BC speculates.

"I don't believe we have two months," M'Bekke cuts in darkly.

"What?" Wentworth asks.

"Why?" BC wants to know.

"You both need to see a communiqué I received yesterday," M'Bekke says. "It's the reason I called you both down here." He presses a couple of buttons on his desk. The floating head of a dark-haired man appears over the desk. The hair is darker, but BC knows who it is immediately, before the image even speaks.

*I've never actually seen him... but I KNOW it's him!*

"Greetings, your holiness," the man begins. "I wish to speak to you, teacher to teacher, holy man to holy man. Due to his ongoing illness, his holiness Ibn Al Salid has designated me as his emissary to the

upcoming talks. My name is Ibn Al Dolomé, and I was hoping we could discuss the agenda for the meetings prior to the convening of the conference.”

M’Bekke pauses the image. Dolomay’s head hangs in the air over the desk.

“Holy shit,” BC says quietly. “It IS him.”

“So,” Wentworth says cautiously, “That’s him? Finally out in the open? The Ancient Enemy? That’s Dolomay, the one you told me about? The psychic?”

“Not ‘psychic,’” BC corrects him. “Psionic. Telepathic. He can read minds, influence others through the strength of his mind, communicate by thought.”

“Right,” Wentworth acknowledges. “Telepathic. Well. There he is, anyway.”

“This only confirms what we already know,” BC says. “I say we play along. We don’t want Dolomay and the UIN to know that *weknow* who he *really* is.”

“Don’t you think they know we already know?” M’Bekke questions.

“I don’t know,” BC admits. “But I don’t think so. He knows he made contact with another mind. But I don’t think he knows exactly *who* I am. Only that I exist. And can resist him.”

“You resisted him?” M’Bekke asks.

“So he says,” Wentworth says, dubiously.

“He’s got the ability to bend other people’s minds to his will, according to the Eldred,” BC says. “But I was able to shut him out. I think. Al Salid was certainly affected by something,” he says, shaking his head as he thinks back to his ill-fated trip to Mars. “But, yeah. They may *not* know that we know who he really is.”

“I wonder what that communiqué really means,” Wentworth says. “I don’t think they intend on attending any peace conference,” he speculates.

“No?” BC asks. “Why keep stringing us along?” he wonders aloud.

“So they’ll have time to build more of these,” Wentworth says. He switches to a new page on his valise. A fuzzy picture appears in the air over the case.

“Is that a shipyard?” BC asks.

“On Mars. Hold on,” Wentworth says. He leans in and focuses the picture into clarity. “Our mole on Mars,” he looks at BC knowingly, “got these for us. Seems they’re building a new fleet, just like we are. Remember when you said we needed to watch to see if they were modifying their ships?”

Wentworth asks BC.

“Of course.”

“Well, here’s the proof they *are*. A full scale operation, bigger and more overt than we feared.”

“So, they tell us they want peace while they arm for war,” M’Bekke observes. “As we do, I suppose.”

“Well,” BC says, “They’re not ready yet, I don’t think. Or they wouldn’t be talking to us. But that still doesn’t explain why Dolomay is contacting you, M’Bekke.”

M’Bekke nods at the hovering head above his desk. “He goes on to say he wants to meet with me in secret, off the record.”

“Right!” BC figures it out. “That’s it! He wants to get you alone so he can fuck with your head! No doubt!”

“Do you think so?” M’Bekke asks.

“Of course!” BC insists, convinced. “Think about it. If he could get to you, mess with your head, turn you to his side... He probably figures he could take over without bloodshed, and then use our combined forces to go after his real enemy.”

“And who might that be?” Wentworth asks sarcastically. “Not us?”

“Not us. We’re probably a distant second on his list,” BC says. “Dolomay’s number one enemy is the Eldred. But he might fight us to make points with the UIN population.”

“And what about the Eldred?” Wentworth asks. “Any word from them?”

BC shakes his head. “No. They haven’t contacted The Project in sometime. And we have no way to contact them,” he admits.

“Pretty one-sided communication,” M’Bekke observes.

“Always has been, from what

I'm told," BC says. "They have never been very forthcoming. On anything. We told them we'd found Dolomay on Mars a couple months ago. They hardly even acknowledged the transmission. They thanked us for the information, but since then... nothing."

"Great!" Wentworth exclaims, the word dripping with sarcasm. "With friends like these..."

"Don't kid yourself," BC cautions Wentworth. "They are not our friends. Matter of fact, I figure they may be gearing up for an all-out assault... against all of us. Mars, the Moon, Earth, Dolomay, the UIN, the UTZ, the NcC... all of us."

"This keeps getting better," Wentworth grumbles.

"Did you respond to Dolomay?" BC asks M'Bekke.

"No," he tells BC, "I didn't know what to say."

"Good," BC answers. "Call him back. Get in touch and tell him you'll meet with him."

"What?" M'Bekke and Wentworth react simultaneously with shock to BC's suggestion.

"Why not? We arrange a meeting and then take him out. Bang, done. Why not?" BC proposes.

*Seems plain enough to me...*

"Will that work?" Wentworth asks.

"I don't know. We're no good against him one on one, we need to face him with numbers. That at least might work. Maybe we can overwhelm him. I don't know the extent of his mental abilities. But you can bet we're better off surprising him."

A quiet alarm bell rings out.

"What's that?" Wentworth asks.

"The com," M'Bekke explains, and then takes the call. "Uh huh. Yup. He's right here."

M'Bekke hands BC an earpiece. "It's for you. It's Anita. The Project's asteroid base – It's under attack!"

"Put her through," BC says.

"Hey BC," Anita says over the link.

"Hey yourself. What's up? What's going on?"

"I'm here at the asteroid base. We're looking at a fleet of about thirty UIN ships. At least, I think they're UIN. Their ships look... different. Haven't seen anything like them before. Anyway, they're surrounding the base. No shots yet, but they certainly look threatening. How did they know where we were, BC?" she asks.

BC has a guess.

"Dolomay."

The three of them look at each other.

*So, then... this is it. Is this how it starts?*

"Wentworth," BC starts, "Scramble the thirty-two ships that are ready and any others we have that can make the jump out to the asteroids. Have one of them pick me up here. Let's get out there," BC says. "It appears the war has started back up, gentlemen, whether we want it or not. I need to be out there. Now," BC says with the voice of authority.

## Chapter Four

BC's ship jumps back into "normal" space as close to the Project's asteroid base as possible.

"Get us in there now!" he barks at the pilot, who ignores BC to concentrate on weaving the ship's way through the chaotic flying rock field.

"They still haven't attacked!" Anita tells BC over the com. They've kept in contact since she called the Vatican five hours ago.

"Well... Keep your eyes on them," BC tells her. "They might attack at any minute, especially when they see our greeting committee."

BC's pilot steers their ship in past the UIN ships. They scoot in towards the asteroid base, apparently without attracting notice. The UIN ships don't so much as flinch.

*They're obviously waiting for something... but what?*

"Mr. Wentworth on the com for you, sir," the pilot tells BC.

"Wentworth! We're landing on the base now. The UIN cruisers are holding position for the moment. Nothing from them yet. Did M'Bekke call Dolomay?"

"He did, but Dolomay's people told him he'd get back to him. He delayed his response."

"Interesting," BC muses. "Why the feint? Why call M'Bekke while sending ships out here?"

BOOM-CHANG!

The ship rocks sideways and BC is thrown to the deck.

"I think we've got action!" BC states the obvious. "Contact our other ships. Find out what's happening. Give 'em permission to engage the UIN ships! Auurgh!"

BC's head erupts in pain.

*YOU AGAIN, EH?*

*Fuck you!*

*ARE YOU IN COMMAND OF THESE POOR EXCUSES FOR WARRIORS? NOT TOO IMPRESSIVE! I EXPECTED SO MUCH MORE FROM THIS LEGENDARY 'PROJECT' I'VE HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT.*

*How do you know...*

*BYE NOW!*

BC is blinded by pain.

He blacks out.

He comes to lying on the deck of the bridge of his ship. He looks up to see stars and rocks whirling past the viewscreen.

*Back out in space off the base... must be in the battle!*

"Sir, you're awake!" the pilot says.

"Yeah," BC acknowledges.

"We're getting clobbered, sir!" the pilot informs him. "These UIN ships are new! Better! It's a lot different fighting them now – they're modified or something, faster, a lot more controlled. More deadly!"

BC can't tell from the viewscreen where they are. The stars and asteroids reel by chaotically. There are no other ships in sight.

"Where are we?"

"On the other side of the asteroid base, opposite the main action," the pilot informs him. "Our guns got hit. We're kind of useless right now. And you've been unconscious, so I guessed this was where we should hang out for now."

"Is he awake yet?" BC hears Anita's voice on the com.

"Anita!" BC calls out. "What's happening?"

"It's bad, BC. Where are you now? And... wait a minute... What the fuck?"

"Anita?"

"We've got more ships here!"

"What?"

"More ships, flashing in out of Transpace. If these are their reinforcements, we're screwed!"

*More ships...*

"BC, it's The Eldred!"

"The Eldred?"

There's no answer.

"We've lost contact with the base," the pilot tells him.

"Bring us around the front of the asteroid base," BC commands.

They come around the asteroid and see flashes, flares, and lingering explosions in space, the battle raging before them.

“Who’s who?” BC asks.

“Heads up display!” the pilot calls out. A graphic overlay lights up across the viewscreen with combatants labeled in red, light blue and green.

“Shit,” BC lets out.

There are a few green dots representing the UTZ ships left intact and maneuvering. None of the still intact UTZ craft currently appear to be engaged in fighting.

There aren’t many of the red dots – UIN ships – left, either. A line of light blue dots is sweeping through the red dots, and as they do the red dots are disappearing.

*The Eldred!*

BC watches the blue dots, the ships of the Eldred, surround the red lights, the UIN ships, and then methodically disable and destroy them.

Even as the line of Eldred ships approach UIN ships that the heads up display has labeled apparently disabled, they destroy them.

BC calls up small displays in front of him to try to get a closer view from one of the other UTZ ships. He finds a feed from one of their ships that shows a line of four sleek, silver Eldred ships approaching two UIN craft.

The UIN ships are heavily damaged, ragged gashes torn in their sides. Blast holes, back where their engines used to be, spark and glow with orange fire.

The Eldred ships approach the crippled craft and fire repeated blasts into the wreckage, reducing them to small glowing pieces.

*Brutal! At least the Eldred seem to be distinguishing between the UIN and the UTZ ships.*

“Can we pick up any UIN communications?” BC asks the captain.

“Depends on the channel,” he tells BC. “Let me try to pick ‘em up. Let’s see...”

The com comes to life. A panicked voice pleads in Arabic.

“Can we translate that?”

“Here it comes.”

“...please! No! We are standing down! Do not fi...”

“Aiiiiieee...”

They hear many voices begging for mercy. Pleading to be spared. The Eldred ignore the cries and continue eliminating the UIN forces ship by ship, sweeping through, killing in a methodical fashion, one UIN ship at a time, no matter if the ship is disabled and non-threatening.

“Can we get in their way?” BC asks the captain.

“What?” The captain can’t believe what BC just asked him.

“I want to get their attention,” BC explains. “Let’s go get the Eldred’s attention!”

The captain shakes his head but does as BC asks. Their ship zips up in front of the advancing Eldred ships, among the few remaining UIN ships.

“Open all channels,” BC tells him. “Let’s say hello!”

“You’re on.”

BC clears his throat.

*Let’s see if this works...*

“This is Bernard Campion calling the Eldred Fleet. I am in the ship that has just approached you. Do not fire. I repeat, this is Bernard Campion of Earth to the Eldred Fleet...”

“This is the Leader of Responsibility for the Eldred fleet responding. Hello, Bernard Campion,” an Eldred responds in a mellow, calm, even-toned voice.

“Uh, yeah, hello yourself,” BC says, surprised by the quick response. “What are you doing?!”

“We are eliminating the enemy,” the calm alien voice responds.

“Right,” BC says. “But you’re killing, destroying, ships that aren’t even a threat anymore. Why are you blowing up disabled ships here?”

“Your assessment of the situation is not accurate,” the Eldred says. “The threat is greater than you know. We detected the presence of Dolomay among these ships. He is a primary threat, and requires the most extreme measures.”

"I see. Dolomay is..." BC starts to answer.

"You are distracting us in our hunt for Dolomay," the Eldred says, cutting BC off. "Do you try to aid him?"

"You dare to suggest this?!" BC says, trying to muster all the indignation he can. "I have spoken with the eldest of the Eldred. I have been a guest on Eldray. I could be your ally!"

"And yet you help Dolomay escape," the Eldred says.

"I do no such thing!" BC yells at the com, at the Eldred, at everyone.

*Frustrating Fucks!*

"BC!" Anita's voice cuts in over the com. "The Eldred just destroyed one of *our* ships! There were six people on board!"

"Okay, now you're blowing up *our* ships, mister 'Leader of Responsibility' of the Eldred!" BC yells.

"Stop this now!" he thunders at the com.

"Our apologies, Bernard Champion. We were unsure of the status of that ship," the even-toned voice of the Eldred leader tells him. "We have entered a situation where Dolomay's whereabouts are now unknown. Thus all human ships are now legitimate targets."

*Great! So how long until they blow up?*

"Bernard Champion," the Eldred speaks again suddenly. "There has been a change," the even-toned alien voice informs them. "We have received word that Dolomay has returned to Mars. This battle is over, for now."

The Eldred ships begin disappearing from the screen, light blue dots blinking out, clearing the space around the Project's asteroid base. BC notices all the red dots are gone from the display, too.

*That went well...*

"Anita?"

"Go ahead, BC."

"Seems to be over out here for now. We're coming in."

"See you when you're down," she says, and clicks off.

BC watches through the viewscreen as the ship maneuvers around battered UTZ ships and flying asteroids. The captain weaves and waltzes their ship's way past crippled craft, debris and random rocks into the asteroid base's landing bay. They touch down amid other battle blasted UTZ ships and their battered and wounded crews.

BC finds Anita waiting for him as he gets off the ship.

"Anita!"

"BC! Good to see you in one piece!" she says. She hesitantly approaches, and he gives her a friendly hug. She pulls away a little too quickly.

*She's hard to figure out! Is she happy to see me?*

"Good to be seen in one piece," BC tells her, smiling.

*But you know... I do like this woman...*

"Dolomay is making a public broadcast from Mars," she tells BC. She motions for him to follow her, and she leads him over to the wall of the landing bay.

"He's on right now! That's obviously how the Eldred knew he was gone... He has announced himself as the new leader of the UIN, BC!" she says as she walks.

"Ibn Al-Salid was standing next to him, announced he was stepping down because of his health and that 'Ibn Al-Dolomé' was being installed in his stead."

"And when did this happen?" BC asks.

"It's happening live!" Anita tells him as she turns on a nearby news screen built into the bay wall. The announcer cuts in as a picture of Al-Salid and another man, evidently, Dolomay, standing side by side appears.

"The new head of the Universal Islamic Nation, Ibn Al-Dolomé, appeared briefly before the media earlier after what he described as a 'dust up' with UTZ forces," the newscaster reports.

"These UTZ forces have been described by Ibn Al-Dolomé as new hybrid UTZ ships produced

with the help of the previously clandestine government group known as 'The Project'. The attack reportedly occurred at a formerly secret base out in the asteroid belt run by this mysterious group, led by head UTZ CEO Bernard Campion, the former pope."

*Damn. What's Dolomay doing? Dragging all this out into the open in his own skewed way.*

The news announcer continues his report.

"Ibn Al-Dolomé promised to make a lengthier statement about this 'dust up' in about an hour. But he finished his current statement by repeating that the Universal Islamic Nation will not be deterred in what he described as their 'quest to follow the Prophet, Mohammed, to the greater glory of Allah...'"

CLICK.

BC turns the news screen off.

"Hey," Anita protests.

"Old news, now," BC insists.

"It's strange for me to hear The Project talked about on the news," she tells BC. "I guess we are in the public eye, now..."

"About the Project, maybe. But it's not *all* out. Not really," BC argues. "The media have no idea about Dolomay's background. They've never heard about the Ancient Enemy. Maybe they've heard something about aliens being responsible for the plague. Maybe," BC insists, "but they don't know who the Eldred are. Dolomay made no mention of their involvement, did you notice that?"

"I did," Anita sighs.

"The average person out there still has no idea aliens are fucking with us... Have been fucking with us for some time! They don't know *Dolomay's* an alien. The general public still don't know that the Domo, The Flaze, or even that the Eldred exist, never mind what they've been up to."

"They don't know those new hybrid ships Dolomay mentioned actually use reverse engineered Domo and Flaze tech," Anita points out. "Dolomay only mentioned that the UTZ and The Project were collaborating. He didn't actually mention that we were using alien technology."

"You see my point, then?"

"Not exactly," Anita plays obtuse.

"It's what Dolomay is leaving out," BC tells her, "On purpose! He doesn't want anyone to know about the Eldred, especially the people on Mars. Any talk about the Eldred, or any of the aliens, would lead to talk about the Ancient Enemy." BC is thinking out loud. "I would bet you there's no way Dolomay wants talk of them to get out, because that could lead to the revelation of who he really is," BC figures.

"Right," Anita says uncertainly. "Sure... Maybe. I'm not sure humanity is ready to grasp the concept that we come from ancient, alien stock, either," she says. "And even if they get that? They might embrace Dolomay as an ancestor; hold him up as a hero," she says, shaking her head.

"He could play himself off as the hope of the UIN and the human race against hostile aliens. Maybe," she theorizes. "Then we begin to look like the bad guys!"

"So you're an optimist, then?" BC cracks.

"I'm a realist," she protests. "The UIN hierarchy already mastered the whole 'us against them' mentality, BC! Dolomay at least appears to be human. The Eldred and the others are definitely more alien and strange. You don't get much more 'us versus them'-y than humans versus aliens," she finishes. BC sees her eyes focus as another thought crosses her mind.

*'Us versus them-y'? Well, I know what she means. And I had been hoping that would work for us, not against us.*

"Let's head into the base," she says, off on her next thought. "You can survey the damage from our command center."

"Sounds like a plan," BC agrees.

He follows Anita into the base. They leave the landing bay through a neat gray corridor and travel up two levels to the base's control deck. The elevator door opens on a large room whose walls are lined with view screens.

The screens display the outer rock of the base and the surrounding space. Some screens have colorful graphic overlays, others offer simple yet breathtaking views of deep space.

The room is full of busy people, technicians and engineers checking on damage, ship landings, casualties and other technical aspects of the battle just past.

"I notice the base itself doesn't seem to have taken much damage," BC observes. "Or am I just not seeing it?"

"No, you're right," Anita confirms. "We were lucky. We finished up some new modifications to our Domo-based defense screens just in time. We were able to deflect most of the UIN ships' attacks." She looks serious as a darker thought occurs to her.

"I don't think even our modified screens will stand up to those Eldred weapons, though, BC. Did you see them? We were able to get some energy readings from our ship, the one they attacked, before it was destroyed. The readings were off the scale!"

"Yeah," BC agrees, "For mellow little blue koala guys, they sure do pack a wallop."

"Wonder if they learned their tricks from the Ancient Enemy?" Anita speculates, "and if they did... Will Dolomay be able to get the UIN weapons to function at that level? And how soon?"

"Jeesh," BC exclaims, caught a little off guard by Anita's pessimism. "You must be a lot of fun at parties," he jokes.

"You have no idea."

"Mr. Champion?" A tech calls out to BC. "Sorry to interrupt, sir, but I've got Mr. Wentworth on the com for you."

"Is there a room I could use to take his call?" BC asks Anita.

"Sure, there's a conference room over here."

She leads him across the room to a door between the view screens. "Route the call to conference room two," she tells the technician.

BC laughs as he walks into conference room two and startles two scientists sitting in the room, the remnants of their lunch strewn across the conference room table. Apparently Doctors Krishnavarti and Dundell had previously taken over the small conference room for their use as a cafeteria.

"Hello Dell. Hi Krish," BC greets the two scientists. Dell waves as he chews.

"Lo ee-ee," Krish gets out past a mouthful of food.

"What are you doing in here?" Anita asks them.

"Didn't mean to interrupt your lunch," BC cracks.

Dell finishes swallowing his last bite and speaks up. "Not to worry. We were supposed to eat just before the battle commenced. This was the first pause we've had since then. We thought we'd eat in here so we'd be close by the command center, in case we're needed."

"Don't worry about it," BC reassures him. He looks over at Anita, who just shakes her head, trying not to laugh. "Eat your lunch," BC tells them. "You two mind if I take a call in here?"

"Not at all," Dell says.

"Ope," Krish says, still eating.

"Here's the com," Anita says, showing BC the private headset unit. He turns it on. A transparent image of Wentworth appears in the air in front of BC.

"Hello, Wentworth!"

"Champion! You okay?"

"I'm fine. We lost a lot of ships, though."

"How many?"

BC turns to Anita.

"How many?"

"What?" she says. "How many what?"

*Oh, she can't see or hear him at all! Very cool tech!*

"How many ships did we lose?"

"Twenty one. And one is missing," she says somberly. "We've got ten ships left from the original thirty-two. Maybe five of those are completely intact and ready to fly again. Those are the early reports,

anyway.”

“Did you hear that?” he asks Wentworth.

“What?”

“What Anita just said.”

“No.”

BC repeats what she said, and then turns back to Anita.

“Can you put him on, like, a speaker or something, so he can hear you and you him?” he asks her. “I don’t think this conversation needs to be so private.”

“Sure. Hold on a second.” She reaches over and takes the headset off of BC and places it on the table. She hits a button on the side and Wentworth’s face appears in miniature hovering in the air above the unit.

“Good!” BC says. “Now we won’t have to keep repeating ourselves.”

“What about the base’s shipyard?” Wentworth asks. “Were the ships on the line damaged? How many of those ships will be ready... and how soon?”

“It’s a small operation here,” Anita says. “We’ve got seven operational or near operational. Eight, maybe nine close to full mobility.”

“I think it’s becoming obvious we need to ramp up that second shipyard you’ve been setting up out there, make it a much bigger one, make it match or exceed the output of the one on the Moon,” Wentworth proclaims. “But first? Right now we need to deal with the UIN and this ‘Ibn Al-Dolomé’ and the fact that the Eldred have shown *thirteenth*.”

“I’ll say,” Anita says.

“It bothers me that Dolomay knew where this base was, and knew it was important enough to make it a target,” BC chimes in. “Let’s set up flyby patrols, get some scouts out there watching for any more UIN ships in the neighborhood.”

“Done,” Anita says. “Your last ten ships are still out there on watch. I’ll have our seven that are ready to go head out there to take over for them.”

“Fine, but let’s mix the shifts up, so your seasoned asteroid pilots can help our earth based guys,” BC offers.

“Good idea.”

“Thanks,” BC says. “I’ve gotta figure that as soon as the UIN... as soon as Dolomay, that is, figures the Eldred aren’t paying close attention, they’ll strike here again.”

“Speaking of the Eldred,” Wentworth says, “Apparently they *can* distinguish between our ships and the UIN. That’s some good news.”

“They still took out one of ours,” Anita points out.

“By the way, what happened to you at the start of the battle, BC?” Krish asks, interrupting. “Your pilot said you blacked out. More headaches?”

“That’s true, you were out,” Wentworth agrees.

*Gee, thanks a lot for bringing that up, Krish. Might as well tell them the truth.*

“It was Dolomay. He was on one of the UIN ships,” BC explains.

“Dolomay made you black out? How?” Anita asks.

“You’re going to love this part,” Wentworth cracks.

“With his mind,” BC tells them. “I’ve heard Dolomay in my head. He has telepathic powers. I think all of the Ancient Enemy had psionic powers. Dolomay reached out with his mind and... somehow, attacked me.”

“Really?” Dell says with an arched eyebrow.

“From what I’ve been able to figure out, The Ancient Enemy could speak mind to mind,” BC tells them, “attack mind to mind, read minds, maybe even move things with their minds and influence the minds of weaker people. For some reason, I seem to be on a similar ‘wavelength’ or something to Dolomay. I’m aware of him. He can sense me, knows I can hear him. He’s tried to get into my thoughts. So far, I’ve been able to battle back and keep him out. I think.”

“You think?” Wentworth asks.

"Maybe he found the location of this base within your mind," Dell suggests. "What else might he have gotten from you? You don't know."

*There is no way he...*

Anita shakes her head. "I'm still not sure we can totally trust the Eldred's version of the story. If we... if we humans come from star seeds sent out by this Ancient Enemy, why don't we have powers like these?"

"I think their 'star seeds' worked with the native DNA back on Earth to create us, so we're kind of a combination of Earth and Ancient Enemy, if I understand it right," BC says.

"So even though Dolomay looks like us, he probably isn't the same biologically?" Wentworth asks.

"One would assume he has an alien physiology," Dell confirms.

"But Dolomay can still work on the minds of those around him. I think that's what happened to Al-Salid. I think Dolomay took him over. He's powerful and dangerous."

"Beyond the spooky stuff," Wentworth says somewhat sarcastically, "he's obviously helped the UIN to modify their ships and weaponry."

"Has there been any sign of new UIN activity around the Earth or the Moon? Any sign of UIN scouts?" BC asks Wentworth.

"Not so far," Wentworth reports. "Troops and ships are all on alert, but it looks like the raid on the asteroid base was an isolated attack."

"No doubt to test our readiness and our defenses," Dell observes.

"Perhaps," Wentworth agrees cautiously with the scientist. "I don't think they'll attack any 'visible' targets just yet," Wentworth speculates. "I believe they attacked the asteroid base because it is, or was, 'off the map', if you know what I mean."

"Now it's 'on the map' and all over the news," Anita grumbles.

"But they could hit the asteroid base with some impunity because most people didn't know it existed. Hell, I didn't even know it was there until three months ago," Wentworth quips. "It was an inconspicuous target."

"Great," Anita sighs with sarcasm.

"Ees ack on," Krish says through another full mouth as he points at the small newscreen in front of him. On the screen is an image of Dolomay with the caption, "UTZ Collaborates with Aliens!"

"So much for your theory," Anita says to BC.

"He must be making another statement," BC says. He looks over at Anita. "You were right, he's going us against them-y."

For some reason, Anita turns slightly red and says, "I was right?"

Wentworth interrupts.

"We have word back from Mars that Dolomay returned with only two ships. He hasn't made another public statement, but he did address the faithful on Mars after landing. The news must be picking up reports on that.

"Word is, Dolomay accused the UTZ of conspiring with aliens, of forging secret alien alliances, and he told the crowd of UIN faithful that advanced alien ships helped the UTZ hybrid ships defeat the superior UIN forces.

"Evidently, he had suggested that they would return with all their ships intact and full of new technology that was rightfully theirs. He had to explain to them why it didn't happen that way."

"So, he thought he could raid this base and take what he wanted, huh?" BC comments.

*Maybe we need to take what want... What do we want? What do we need? We need an edge, an advantage over Dolomay and the UIN. And over the Eldred.*

A thought occurs to BC.

*I know what we need. What we want. But how do we take it?*

"Damn... I think I know what we need to do next," BC says to the group. "We need to get our hands on an Eldred ship."

"What?"

“You’re kidding!”

“You’ve been wrong about everything else...”

“No way.”

“Crazy.”

Everyone shoots BC down at once. The comments vary, but the sentiment is the same.

BC argues for his idea.

“Think about it! They have advanced weapons. Their maneuvering and drive systems are apparently better than ours. They’re just more advanced than we are. Technologically, I mean. They swatted those UIN ships like flies! If we could get one of their ships, you Project scientists here could reverse engineer it!”

Anita gives him an exaggerated eye-popping look of disbelief.

“Oh, c’mon, Anita,” BC protests, “It’s what the Project is known for! How many Domo and Flaze inventions have you reverse engineered into useful technology?”

“It is what we are known for,” Dell agrees with BC.

“All the time!” Krish pipes up enthusiastically. “Bring ‘em on! You get a ship and we’ll find a way to make the thing work for us!”

“See?” BC says to Anita with a smile. “It’s an idea! A way to counter both the Eldred *and* Dolomay!”

“It’s not a bad idea. It will take some work, to be sure,” Wentworth agrees over the com. “But it can’t be our *only* idea. How *else* can we go about stopping the Eldred... and Dolomay?”

“Hey, he’s back on!” Krish interrupts to inform them of Dolomay’s new appearance on the newscreen, with the caption, “Ibn Al-Dolomé makes Public Statement.”

“Hello. I am Ibn Al-Dolomé, the leader of the Universal Islamic Nation. I speak now not only to my own people, but to all members of the human race, indeed, to all the creatures of Allah, may his name be forever praised.

“I do not mean to sound ‘crazy’ or ‘alarmist’, but our UIN ships have recently discovered alien races spying on us all... from a secret base in the asteroids!

“I hope you do not find this farfetched... it is far too real! And for the greater good of all humanity we set out to investigate, to find this secret base and, once we found it, to explore the base and meet our covert observers.

“But when we found the base we were attacked! A fleet of alien and human ships *together* came at us out of nowhere! They, unfortunately, had the element of shock, of surprise, and wiped out many of our ships before we could even react.

“My fear? Now that we have unknowingly provoked them by kicking the proverbial ‘hornet’s nest’, my fear is that they will come and attack us here, on Mars. For the saddest fact of all in this is that the UTZ has allied themselves with aliens! The UTZ forces were there, on the base, *mingling* with these aliens! And they attacked us, we who are their human brothers, alongside the evil alien fiends, their allies, those uncreated devils!

“We have no choice but to consider the attack on our ships and the discovery of collusion with aliens to be acts of war by the UTZ, and from here on consider the UIN to once again be at war with the Universal Trade Zone! Any UTZ ships that approach Mars will be shot down. Any UTZ citizen found in UIN space must convert to Islam and swear allegiance to me or suffer penalty of exile or death!

“And I say unto you, citizens of the UTZ, that your government leads you down a path away from Allah, alongside creatures not of his making, and you damn yourselves!”

The newsclip ends.

“Cheery guy,” BC cracks.

“I don’t think his people are going to believe him,” Wentworth says. “I think he came off a bit unhinged there, don’t you?” He looks at them over the com. “It’s a bit early in his reign to be going on the offensive.”

“You think so?” BC says sarcastically. “Is it ever too early if you can bend people’s minds?”

“He obviously told his people that he’d return from the asteroids with great riches. Now he’s

trying to explain his failure, to shift the blame through bluster and hyperbole,” Wentworth snarls.

An alarm begins to sound. The conference room door opens and a tech leans in through the doorway.

“We’ve got a report of Eldred ships in orbit around Mars,” she says.

“Great,” BC sighs.

*I thought we might get a breather. No such luck.*

## Chapter Five

BC, Anita and the scientists leave the conference room and join the techs in the main control room.

“How many Eldred ships are surrounding Mars?” BC asks as he looks at the main viewscreen. A strategic graphic display of Mars and its moons is dotted with small blue blips.

“We don’t have a number on them yet,” a tech explains.

“Mr. Wentworth is on the com,” another tech informs BC.

“Looks like your war is upon us, Champion,” Wentworth says over the open com. “Bound to happen. Your million-year-old intergalactic conflict, as predicted, right in our own backyard.”

“Our ‘backyard’ is Mars, I guess,” BC says.

“We’re going to Mars?” Anita says.

“No rest for the wicked,” BC quips.

“I thought that was the weary,” Anita corrects him.

“Works either way,” he replies.

“We need to be careful. How many ships can you bring with you from there?” Wentworth asks.

“We should leave some here to protect the base,” Anita cautions. “Seven? Split the forces here?”

“Seven ships. Won’t be too threatening,” BC says in disappointment.

“We have twenty Stinger ships ready to go here, but no crews,” Wentworth says. “Send any surviving crewmembers that no longer have fully functioning ships back here to crew our waiting ships. We can team experienced crew up with new crew members and increase our numbers.”

“What about conventional Transpace ships? Let’s bring in some UTZ regular forces,” BC suggests.

“They won’t stand much of a chance against those new UIN ships we just saw,” Anita says dismissively.

“I don’t think they have too many of those ships left,” BC responds.

“And then there’s the Eldred,” she says, trailing off.

“Ah, the Eldred. Well, none of us probably stand a chance against them and their ships,” BC cracks. “I’m hoping we can speak to them, try to keep them from killing everyone.”

“Comforting thought,” Wentworth responds. “Hoping for humanity from aliens. I’ll get a squadron of UTZ regulars to back you up. Strength in numbers. Maybe.”

“Maybe we’ll get a chance to grab an Eldred ship,” BC muses.

“Really?” Krish pipes up. “Can I come?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea...” BC says.

“I’m not sure there’ll be much of Mars left to go to if we don’t go soon,” Anita tells them. “The Eldred have already opened fire! They’re surrounding the planet and are shooting down any ships in the area.”

“Guess we should go, then?” BC says.

*Damn. I’m tired. Can’t rest.*

“So...” BC asks. “Who wants to go for a ride?”

*Ha! That’s everybody. All aboard!*

*Okay, Mars... here we come!*

BC arrives over Mars in one of the new Stinger ships along with Anita, Krish, Dell and the ship's three crew members. Six other Stingers flash out of Transpace with them.

"There are the Eldred!" The pilot points out a swarm of over fifty light blue dots on the heads up display overlaid on the bridge's view screen. The dots surround the planet and chase random red dots that appear and all too quickly disappear. A mass of green blips appears off to their right as a forty ship squadron of UTZ regulars flies in.

"Our backup," BC notes.

"Green Squadron reporting, Mr. Champion!" A young woman's voice comes over the com. "This is Squad Leader Lishnikov, over."

"Call me BC, Lishnikov. We're going to hang back for a bit. Why don't you spread the squadron out behind us along the elliptic in an orbital arc, watching for flankers, all sides."

"Roger that."

The green dots begin spreading out across the display, some disappearing behind their ship.

"Give me all open channels," BC tells the pilot. "I want to try to reach the Eldred."

"You're on."

"This is Bernard Champion calling the leader of responsibility of the Eldred Fleet now firing on Mars! Please respond!" BC calls out.

"Can you make that repeat until we get a response?" BC asks the pilot.

"Done. Oh, but we have a response. Here you go."

"Hello Bernard Champion," a calm Eldred voice purrs over the com. "We are seeking Dolomay. Do you seek to delay us?"

"I do not seek to delay your quest for Dolomay. But I do seek to delay you from killing other humans unnecessarily!" BC fires back.

"Dolomay hides among them. We are forced to fire upon many targets. We do, of course, regret this collateral damage."

"Regret my ass," BC mumbles. "The Eldest of the Eldred told me your plague had already killed 'enough' of us," he tells the alien leader. "You're going a lot further every time you blow up another ship! When is 'enough' enough?"

"When Dolomay is dead," the Eldred says in an "isn't it obvious" tone of voice.

"This is Ibn Al-Dolome," another voice rings out over the com.

"All channels are open," the pilot explains. "He must be broadcasting to the people on Mars."

"Please remain calm. The alien threat above us can only be met by cool courage and hardened fortitude. This is the time to pray to Allah for strength to hold back these alien infidels. We must fight back..."

The message ends suddenly, and a huge explosion blossoms up from the Martian surface below them.

"The Eldred just blew up the communications center and main government dome," the pilot reports. "They triangulated in on the source of the signal."

The pilot puts a view of Mars on the main screen, and zooms down toward the surface to scan for damage. A crater marks the main dome where BC had failed in his meeting with Al Salid just over three months ago.

The view suddenly shakes and the picture goes gray on the screen. On another screen, BC sees more explosions erupt around the impact crater from the first.

The captain pulls the zoom back on the surface view and they can see a ring of silver, oval Eldred ships floating a mile above the Martian surface.

Each ship in its turn blasts another hole in the surface next to the original one, destroying domes and tunnels in an expanding ring, surrounding the first crater with craters. Then they start another, wider circle around the last, moving outward creating spreading concentric bands of craters, methodically leveling UIN structures and killing who knows how many thousands of people.

"This is Bernard Champion to the Eldred! You've got to stop this! You're destroying everything!"

“Dolomay’s signal originated from that central dome. We destroyed that, and now seek to cut off his escape,” the Eldred responds calmly.

“His signal did, but that doesn’t mean he was there!” BC shouts at the com. “He could have recorded that speech, or relayed it from a different location, you don’t know!”

“They’ve stopped the bombardment,” the pilot reports.

“You believe he may have already escaped?” the Eldred asks over the com.

“I’m saying he could have! Stop killing people!!” BC demands.

The Eldred appear to be considering their next move. Suddenly, an alarm goes off on the bridge, a quick series of beeps. Everybody jumps at the sudden sound.

“Private call,” the pilot says. “From the surface! It’s for you, BC.”

“Put it on.”

“BC is that really fuckin’ you? Tell me it’s you!”

*Fiza! She’s alive!*

“It’s me, Fiza. Are you okay?”

“AM I OKAY?!” she screams back, distorting the speakers. “I’m pretty fucking far from okay right now, okay?”

“I’ve got you on the speakers, by the way.”

“Great. I don’t really fucking care who hears me, okay? How ‘bout you get me on that ship of yours, by the way! You know, return the favor!”

“Where are you?”

“I’m near the spaceport. I’ve been trying to get here and get on a ship ever since those fucking ships first appeared! It’s been pretty shitty going since the fucking explosions began! Everybody’s going fuckin’ crazy!”

“Can we land at the spaceport and pick her up?” BC asks the pilot. The pilot just stares back at him.

“You’re kidding, right?” Anita asks.

“Who the fuck’s that?” Fiza demands over the speaker.

“She helped save my sorry ass three months ago,” BC says to Anita sharply, getting angry. “I owe her my life.”

“BC, there’s something weird here,” Fiza comes back. “There’s a group of people walking calmly through the chaos. It’s weird, man, the crowd’s kinda melting around them, letting them by. They’re coming this wa... It’s him, BC, Ibn Al-Dolomé! He’s in the center of the group but they’re all moving with him, a bunch of fucking people walking almost like in fucking sync with him!”

“Don’t get too close to him, Fiza! He’s dangerous!”

“What was that BC? Look, Ibn Al-Dolomé and his zombies are getting on a ship. I’m gonna try to stow aboard and escape.”

“No! Fiza! Don’t do it! We’ll be there to get you soo...”

“Thanks for fuckin’ nuthin’ BC!”

The connection goes dead.

The Eldred move their ships in over the spaceport and begin to blast down at the surface.

“They must have been listening in,” the pilot offers obviously. BC just briefly glares at the man before he notices something.

“What’s that?”

Three red dots rise off Mars on the heads up display. One of the blue dots is blinking.

“Those UIN ships managed to do some damage to one of the Eldred ships! It’s going down, crashing to the surface, looks like,” the pilot explains.

“Take us down to the surface! Follow them! I want that ship!” BC demands.

The pilot waits, looking at BC for confirmation of the slightly crazy command.

“What?” BC says with exasperation. “Do it!”

“What about Dolomay? Look, he’s escaping!” Anita says.

BC turns to the view screen and focuses on the three red dots rising up. One blips out. As BC

watches, a second red dot grows larger, filling his sight until his entire vision is glowing red.

BC is suddenly in a world gone red.

*Okay, that's not normal.*

*YOU, AGAIN?! HERE! NOW!*

*Closing Doors closing doors closingdoorsclosingdoors...*

*GOOD BYE!*

*Fuck you!*

*Unh!*

BC feels a farewell mind blast from Dolomay, but it seems muted. He tries to blast back, but isn't sure anything really happens.

BC blinks and the red clears from his vision. He looks up at the view screen and the last two red dots are gone.

"That was Dolomay!" BC screams out over the com at the Eldred. "Are you listening to me? He got away!"

"The Eldred ships continue firing at the surface," the pilot reports. "And we've got an incoming call for you again, BC."

"Fiza?"

"No sir."

"Who is it this time?"

"It's Ibn Al-Salid," the pilot says, disbelief in his voice.

"Put him on," BC says, "But keep following that Eldred ship down."

"Will do, sir."

"Al Salid?"

"Campion! We are under attack by your alien allies! Call them off! We surrender! Ibn Al-Dolomé has fled! We do not wish to fight anymore, please!" Al Salid begs and pleads.

*Damn, the guy's desperate.*

"Greetings, Al Salid," BC begins. "It is Bernard Campion here. I wish I could accept your surrender and stop this, I do," BC says, over earnestly. "But I'm afraid 'Ibn Al-Dolomé' lied to you. Those aliens are not our allies!"

"I begin to see that Al-Dolomé lied about many things. But I am only now seeing this all, far too late."

"I have been trying to reason with them!" BC tells Al Salid, trying to reassure him a little.

"I have heard you. You have been broadcasting on every channel."

"Yeah, that's the only way I know of to get their attention. Let me try again," BC says with reassurance.

"Thank you. I am sorry, BC," Al Salid tells him.

"So am I." BC shakes his head. "Leader of responsibility of this Eldred fleet, I Bernard Campion demand your attention!"

"You do not demand," the Eldred voice says sharply.

*Was that a hint of anger?*

The Eldred ships still pound down at the ground, blasting away what's left of the Martian colony.

"Eldred leader, please respond!"

There's no answer. The bombardment continues.

*Okay then. I asked nicely...*

"Al Salid?"

"Yes BC?"

"Do you have any ships left?"

"Some. They've been hanging back, in a distant orbit out past your UTZ ships."

"It looks like we're going to have to fight this out with the Eldred. Bring your ships in, and join ours."

"I will do this," Al Salid agrees. There is a brief pause. "The ships are coming in. May Allah be

with us all.”

BC looks at Anita and the pilot.

“Take us over there,” he says, nodding at the screen with the Eldred ships firing at the surface. “And remember we want one of those Eldred ships as a souvenir to take home with us, so try not to blow them completely up.”

“Right,” the pilot humors BC. “You want all the Stinger and Project ships to go?”

“Yes I do! Lishnikov?”

“Here!”

“Follow us in, three-dee cone wedge formation. We’re targeting the group of ships actively firing at the surface. I need you to provide cover fire for us, to engage the rest of the Eldred ships in skirmishes.”

“Roger that.”

“Eldred ships in firing range!” the pilot cries out.

“Fire!”

BC watches the viewscreen. Bright laser fire flicks, flashes out at the five sleek Eldred ships in front of them. Advanced defense systems on the Eldred craft deflect most of the blasts, but a couple manage to strike and do damage.

Did you see that?” BC asks. “We can hit them! The blasts that actually hit scored near the engines. That may be a weak point!” BC leans over to shout at the com. “This is Champion! Focus your fire on their engines, on the area near the back of their ships! Nothing else is getting through!”

Their ship begins shaking.

“What’s that?” BC asks.

“Concussive waves,” the pilot says. “There are a lot of explosions going on over us.”

“Lishnikov! Report!”

“Her ship is gone, sir. This is Wang, on Green Seven. We’re shooting for their engines, but these aliens are doing heavy damage, sir!” the scared, young voice says over the com.

“Keep firing! Keep it up, Wang!”

Anita gives him a look.

“What?”

“Got one!” the pilot shouts. One of the first five Eldred ships they engaged is erupting into flame and molten metal in front of them on the view screen. “Hit ‘em right between the engines!”

Another Eldred ship explodes, followed rapidly by the last two of the first five.

*Nothing salvageable, dammit. When their ships go, they go!*

“Alright, let’s go help green squadron,” BC says. But as they rise up away from the planet’s surface they find themselves dodging the ruins and wreckage of what’s left of most of the UTZ fighters. Shimmering clouds of fine debris mark the spaces where ships were vaporized.

“Are there any of them left? Green Squadron, anyone report!”

“Lucky Green Thirteen here, Commander, sir!”

“Roger, this is green twenty-five, we are enga...”

The signal is cut off abruptly. Another pilot comes on.

“Green Thirty-Eight. Confirm kill on twenty-five.”

“Roger.”

“Thirty-eight reporting. There are maybe three of us left, sir. Thirteen, myself and Twenty-Seven, but we haven’t seen her, so we aren’t sure. We’ve taken heavy casualties, but we took out a bunch of them first!”

The Stinger ships meet up with Green Thirty-Eight and Thirteen as they flank an action between UIN ships and a handful of remaining Eldred ships.

“...four, five, six. Wow, you guys have done well!” BC exclaims. “I didn’t realize you’d thinned their numbers so well!”

“Yeah, I know, you can’t really tell,” Green Thirty-Eight says. “A lot of their ships, they get damaged, they jump away. If they’re too damaged, they seem to self destruct, destroy themselves. I

don't think they want us to get our hands on them."

*Probably right. Damn it if they're not reading my mind! I guess it's maybe an obvious thing to their way of thinking.*

"Don't want us stealing their technology, huh?" BC asks his sudden soul mate.

"Ha!" Thirty-Eight laughs. "That's a good idea, but I was thinking they don't want our hands around their scrawny, fuzzy little necks! Ker-rack! Y'know!"

"Un huh," BC grunts in response.

*Maybe not such a soul mate.*

"Anyways, there ain't much left of them."

"I still want one of their ships!" BC says to Anita.

"Well, looks like you're not getting any of those," Anita says, nodding at the viewscreen. Two of the six ships are rippling in the early stages of self destruction, as the last four flash out of sight. Twin suns erupt briefly and die as more Eldred ships keep themselves from BC's grasp.

"Uh, commander?" Green Thirteen comes over the com. "Those UIN ships are targeting *us* now, sir. Shall I regard them as hostiles now?"

*What the fuck?*

"All channels open? Good. Hey! Al Salid! What are you doing? Why are your ships targeting us? We just helped chase those aliens off! Come on, stand down! Please!!" BC yells over the com.

"UIN ships standing down," they hear a UIN captain announce on an open channel. The UIN ships break off from approaching the Stingers and UTZ regulars and head back down towards the surface of Mars.

*Good! Back to their bases, I guess. If there's anything left of them.*

"See if Al Salid is still alive down there," BC says to the pilot.

The pilot complies with his order.

"Got him!"

"You stopped them, BC!" Al Salid sounds jubilant.

"We ran off a small force, and took heavy casualties doing it," BC tells him, deflating his jubilation. "They'll be back. And they have a lot more ships than what we just saw here. They'll be back soon. Are your people in shelters?"

"Some. *Some* the shelters actually provided shelter from the ships' blasts," Al Salid says with a touch of sadness and sarcasm in his voice. "But, yes, some of us have survived."

"I'll have our ships take up defensive positions," BC informs him. "Can we talk?"

"Yes. I would like to talk about these aliens. You seem to know them, even if you say they are not your allies. I would like to hear what you know," Al Salid says cautiously.

"You know them, Al Salid. The Eldred were the aliens attacking you!"

"The Eldred?" Al Salid questions. "No, Al Dolomé called them Kaliknaga, said it meant 'Servants'."

"Servants? Yeah, I could see that. That was their old name."

"Why would I know these, what did you call them, these 'Eldred'? How would I know aliens?" Al Salid sounds confused.

*Damn, Al Salid... what did he do to you?*

"Al Salid... I don't know if you'll believe me, but you *have* met the Eldred. You've even been to one of their planets, Eldray."

"I have what? No," he protests. "This is hard to... but there is something..." Al Salid is quiet for a moment. "I would like to meet with you," he finally says.

"Where can we meet?" BC asks. "Can we pick you up? Can you give us some coordinates?"

"Yes and yes," Al Salid says. "The coordinates are on their way on a sub channel. See you soon."

"Com off," BC commands. "Captain, how long until we can reach those coordinates?"

"Let's see... ten minutes?" the pilot guesses.

"Good. Com on. We'll be there for you in about ten minutes, Al Salid. See you then."

"I will be waiting."

"Com off." BC finishes one conversation, and knows he has to start another. "Get me Wentworth, please," BC asks the pilot.

"Wentworth here."

"Campion here, Wentworth."

"Campion! There are another ten Stingers on their way to you. The cavalry are on their way!"

"I'm tempted to tell you to call them back. We're okay for now. But there's not much left of us here, so let them come! Any sign of the Eldred?"

"Besides on Mars?"

"They're not here anymore..."

"Sorry, just making a small joke. No, so far they've just been out in the asteroids and on Mars. I was following what happened there. We lost a lot of ships."

"Did you see what happened on the ground?"

"I know the Eldred started blasting once Dolomay broadcast his spiel."

"They took out the communication center, and then began blasting out from the center methodically in expanding circles."

"They lack imagination, these aliens," Wentworth observes.

"They do!" BC laughs. "Maybe it's because they're a created race. They were made by the Ancient Enemy to be servants. Born to serve their creators... who they later turned on and killed. Well, all except for Dolomay."

"Looks like they're working pretty hard on that, though, now, doesn't it?" Anita observes wryly.

"It's been a million years, but they still pursue the Ancient Enemy," BC says. "Now Dolomay raises that threat again, and here *we* are, the bastard children of the Ancient Enemy, ripe to follow a newly risen leader."

"God, Campion, you sound almost poetic," Wentworth chimes in with a laugh.

"Guess it feels kind of epic. The Eldred seemed to be fascinated by our religions, our imaginations, our ideas about love. Maybe they were truly interested in our ideas and concepts. Or maybe they were just studying us, looking for signs..."

"Our resident expert on the Eldred, ladies and gentlemen," Wentworth cracks.

"We're landing," the pilot interrupts.

"Gotta go, Wentworth. We're picking up Al Salid for a pow wow."

"Oh really?" Wentworth sounds genuinely surprised. "And all it took was an alien bombardment. If only we'd known sooner! War makes strange bedfellows, eh, BC?"

"Wouldn't know. I'm gonna talk to the guy, not sleep with him," BC cracks back at Wentworth.

"Wentworth out."

## Chapter Six

BC's ship bumps down with a soft thud. He waits on the bridge while Al Salid is brought on board. The ship is only on the ground for about thirty seconds, and then it surges up and away off the surface.

Al Salid appears on the bridge. His eyes are sunken, red-rimmed and underlined with dark circles, as if he hasn't slept in days. Deep creases now line his face, his skull sharply outlined underneath his weathered brown skin.

*My god... he looks twenty years older!*

"I am... beginning to remember *things*. I have not been myself. I must apologize." Al Salid bows.

"Please," BC says, "You were under the mental influence of Dolomay. He is not what he seems!"

“Yes. I see that now. I am beginning to see much that was not clear to me. It is as if... clouds are clearing, as if a darkness is lifting...”

“Dolomay is an alien, Al Salid, a very old and very powerful alien. He might look like us, but he’s not *really* us. His people lived a million years ago. The human race are somehow offspring of theirs, of his race, but we are not like them,” BC tries to explain.

“How do you know all this? And how do you know so much of these aliens, The Eldred, if you were not allied with them?” Al Salid presses.

“Damn, I wish you could remember,” BC says, shaking his head. “You used to know all this... you met with them yourself! The Eldred were in contact with The Project for a couple of years, but they weren’t our *allies*. I’ve only heard of them in the recent past. I traveled to Eldray... like you did! I spoke to the eldest of the Eldred... just as you did!”

Frowning, Al Salid shakes his head. “I have no memory of that.”

“The Eldred were trying to figure us out. They had already sent the plague to cut our numbers. They wanted to understand these wars we fight. They called each of us out there to explain our religions, our ideas about God, stuff like that.”

“I think I would remember that,” Al Salid sniffs. “And why would they call you out to speak of religion?”

“I... I was the Pope,” BC explains.

*My God, how much of his memory did Dolomay wipe away?*

“Really?” Al Salid arches an eyebrow. “Not anymore?”

“Not anymore. I thought it would get in the way of the ‘war’ stuff, you know? But both you and I visited the Eldred. And then I was supposed to visit you on Mars. But when I did, you threw me in a cell!”

“That I remember,” Al Salid admits. His forehead scrunches up. “I don’t remember much before that. The plague, of course. Al Dolomé said it was the Kaliknaga, your ‘Eldred’... But these Eldred were curious about us humans, were they?”

“They were. We were different enough from the Ancient Enemy that they didn’t know what to expect from us. We kept them curious and off guard, I guess. Until Dolomay arrived. Then it all changed. They seem to have decided that despite our curiosities we now pose an inherent danger that they can no longer suffer to live!”

Al Salid shakes his head. “I feel... pieces... missing, in my memory. And... so... I believe you! Ibn Al-Dolomé has done something to me! I did not think such things were possible! If these are the ways of the Ancient Enemy...”

“I do not believe we are like the Ancient Enemy, Champion. The mistakes of the past should not be repeated. But we must stand up to these aliens, Kaliknaga or Eldred, whatever they are called. Look at what they’ve done! They will destroy us ‘for our own good’ I’m sure – I know this line of thinking!”

“Sir? We’ve got company. On the display.”

BC sees ten new green dots appear.

“Must be the ships Wentworth sent.”

“Uh oh... we’ve got more company coming in, sir,” the pilot says.

The heads up display begins to fill with small light blue dots. The Eldred are returning in force.

“Alright, begin transmitting and loop it when I tell you to,” BC says. “Attention Eldred craft! This is Bernard Champion! I am in command of the fleet you see in front of you. Mars is now under my protection! Dolomay has left this planet and its orbit. Your war is with him! Not us! Do not fire on these targets or there will be no turning back! We will be at war. All you could learn from us, all we could share will be lost!”

BC watches the display continue to fill with light blue dots. “Loop it and keep sending it on all channels.”

There are so many light blue dots BC can’t count them anymore. More continue to appear.

“Are you repeating that message?” BC asks the pilot.

“Yes sir. No response yet.”

“What’s happening with their ships?”

“They’re hanging just beyond our weapons range.”

*Interesting.*

“Any response?”

“No sir, not yet.”

BC turns from the graphic heads up display and looks at another view screen that shows a distant close up on the Eldred ships, countless sleek silvery slivers shimmering on a field of stars. Even as he looks back over at the heads up, more light blue dots blip in.

“Bernard Campion,” a quiet, measured Eldred voice says over the com.

“Here!” he replies.

*Reminds me of an old school teacher!*

“We know Dolomay has gone. We have dispatched our forces to try and track down his ship. But this place, and these people, have been tainted. Contaminated by the Ancient Enemy. Our inclination is to finish destroying all the holdings left on this planet. But we are not unreasonable. And we know you, Bernard Campion. If you will speak for Mars, we will listen.”

“Look, I can’t speak for Mars, but their leader is right he...”

Several Eldred ships open fire, blasting energy beams down toward the Martian surface.

“Christ! Cut that out right now! No firing on the planet or this is total war!”

“If you cannot speak for the planet, you cannot do as we ask. Do we misunderstand you?”

“Yes! No – I mean... look. The leader of Mars is Al Salid, he’s right here, and I’m sure he’ll be willing to...”

“He has the Taint of Dolomay,” the Eldred says in a matter-of-fact tone. “He also abdicated in favor of Dolomay. Therefore, he is not the leader. And so I ask again, are you, Bernard Campion, their leader?”

BC looks around. Al Salid is dejected, looking at the floor, his right hand massaging his forehead as he struggles to retrieve his stolen memories. Everyone else in the room is looking right back at BC.

Al Salid looks up at BC. “I’ll sign something that says you’re in charge, Campion, if that helps,” Al Salid says. “They at least seem to listen to you.”

Anita clears her throat, and then pulls out a document sheet from a nearby printer tray. She hands it to BC.

“Here, I just wrote this up. It basically cedes Mars to the emergency powers of one Bernard Campion, signed Al Salid.”

“That was fast,” BC says, impressed.

“I kinda saw this coming,” Anta says.

“Hey captain, can we send a visual and audio signal to the Eldred?”

“Absolutely. It’s done. The camera’s here,” the captain says, pointing to a panel in front of him.

“Thank you,” BC says. “Okay. I’m Bernard Campion. This is Al Salid here,” he says, gesturing over at Al Salid. “And we are signing this document.” He holds it up to the camera. “This puts me, BC, in charge of Mars. Okay?” BC nods to Al Salid, “Let’s do this.”

BC puts the paper down on the slim desktop built into the captain’s seat. Before he can ask, Anita hands him a pen.

“Thanks.”

BC signs and then hands the pen to Al Salid. Al Salid sighs, but then leans in and signs the document.

“Okay? I’m in charge here, now.” BC again holds the paper up to the camera’s eye.

“Yes,” the Eldred says in a neutral voice void of emotion. “As long as it matters to you. These sort of papers do seem to be important to you ‘humans’.”

“They are!” Al Salid pipes up, trying to be helpful.

“Okay,” BC says, looking right into the camera. “Now it’s official, I *do* speak for Mars. I am not tainted by Dolomay. This planet is no longer a threat to you! Dolomay is the threat! I suggest you pursue him!”

“We are pursuing him, I assure you. We will leave this world alone for now,” the Eldred finishes.

Their ships begin disappearing from the view screen, waves of blue dots blipping off the heads up display. The tension on the bridge melts and the gathered group lets out a collective sigh of relief.

The brief breath and break in the tension is broken as an alarm suddenly rings out. Wentworth’s voice begins bursting out of the bridge’s com system.

“This is Wentworth to Champion. Do you read? We’ve been attacked!”

“What the fuck?” BC can’t help his outburst.

“It’s the next station over, Robelardier. It was just hit by a UIN ship!”

“Dolomay!”

*Who else but? Gotta be the last surviving Ancient Enemy. Probably attacking with the same ship he just used to escape from Mars.*

“It was a raid,” Wentworth says. “They hit the station, grabbed supplies and people, destroyed the other ships docked there, and then took off. Hit and run. Totally different tactics than we’ve seen from any UIN ship before. And the ship was fast, too. None of our ships could keep up with it.”

“I’ll bet Dolomay’s tuning that ship up as they fly,” BC speculates.

“That’s what I’d do,” Krish says. “Speaking of ships...”

“...Weren’t we going to go after that Eldred ship that crashed?” Dell asks, finishing the thought.

“That’s cute, the way you finish each other’s sentences,” Anita quips.

“Can’t wait to get your hands on it can you, Dell?” BC laughs. He turns to the com.

“Wentworth, we’ll send what ships we can to Earth orbit. I’m using this ship for a salvage mission. We’re going to try to recover an Eldred ship that went down on Mars during the battle. Do you have any idea where Dolomay went after the attack?”

“None. What’s happening with the Eldred?”

“I don’t know,” BC says, shaking his head. “They’ve left Mars alone for now. I was able to get them to back off.”

“How did you accomplish that?” Wentworth says with clear disbelief in his voice.

“I, um... I told them I was now in charge of Mars. Al Salid signed a paper, backing me up. It convinced them to leave!”

“Very well... Do you think we should convene the UTZ council?” Wentworth asks him.

“Will it do any good?” BC asks.

“That I don’t know,” Wentworth admits. “But we should take stock of what’s left, what resources we still have, and look at how we might be able to modify our production lines to speed things up.”

“Alright, then, call a meeting. And spread the word to watch out for Dolomay. He could be anywhere. You can be sure he’ll strike again, if only to keep his ship fueled and his crew fed,” BC says. *Some crew. Shipload of Zombies, more like. I wonder if Fiza is one of them?*

“Wentworth out.”

BC looks around the bridge. Al Salid catches his eye. Al Salid looks him directly in the eyes.

“So. *YOU* are the leader of Mars, now,” the tired old Arab says to BC, his gaze fixed on BC.

“Only emergency powers, Al Salid. I need you to really run things, to take care of the survivors here, and rebuild this place.”

“Rebuild? I thought we should evacuate.”

*Never surrender, Al Salid...*

“Evacuate? Admit defeat? Retreat? Not really my style,” BC tells him.

“Since when?” Anita cracks.

BC shoots her a look.

“You’ll have whatever resources I can get you. Anything the UTZ can provide. I’ll make sure of it when the council meets.”

“Well, then... okay,” he sighs. Exhaustion weighs heavy in his voice. “I will agree to this,” he says, looking down at the deck. He looks back up at BC. “I should be going. Could you put me back down on the surface? There is much work to do,” Al Salid says.

“We can,” BC tells him.

The pilot brings the ship down. They land near what’s left of the spaceport and seal their ship up to an emergency airlock in the side of one of the remaining domes.

Al Salid nods to BC. He turns and leaves the bridge. After a minute, the pilot informs BC, “He’s clear.”

“Alright! Let’s go see if there’s anything left of that Eldred ship!” BC can’t hide his excitement.

“Yes sir. Taking off now.”

Their Stinger Ship rises from the surface, kicking up clouds of sand and dust as they blast off. They accelerate sharply, but a moment later they slow down.

“How long until we’re at the crash site?” BC asks the pilot.

“We’re here. It impacted right here... but, damn.”

“Damn?”

“There’s nothing left.”

The pilot puts a close-up of the nearby surface of Mars on the view screen. A crater marks where the Eldred ship came down, but the only sign left of their vessel is a spray of fine silver shards lining one side of the crater.

“Looks like we go back empty handed this time,” Krish observes.

“It would have been nice to take a look at their technology,” Dell muses in disappointment.

“We need to find a way to disable and capture an Eldred ship. Before its crew has a chance to self-destruct the thing,” BC declares. “Well Krish, Dell... there’s your new project. Come up with a way to capture an Eldred ship!”

“What? Now it’s *our* job?” Krish mock-complains.

“I always enjoy a challenge,” Dell says with the hint of a smile crossing his face.

“Shit,” BC says.

“What is it, BC?” Anita asks with concern in her voice.

“Now I’ve got to go to the UTZ meeting,” BC says, frowning.

“There are worse things,” Krish points out.

“You can put it off a little longer,” Dell observes. “As you need to give us a ride back to the asteroid base.”

“An *excellent* point, Dell! Best news I’ve heard today.”

BC smiles. “Pilot, let’s go back to base!”

“On our way, sir,” the captain answers. The ship pulls up and away from the red planet.

## Chapter Seven

“BC’s shuttle service!” BC jokes with the pilot of his Stinger Ship as he gets ready to disembark on Wentworth Station. “Hope I haven’t been too much trouble! Me and all my friends.”

“Not at all, sir. It’s been a fun assignment for me, traveling out to the asteroids, to the Moon, up here, all over the solar system,” she says. “And the Eldred have been quiet, too, so that’s been nice.” She pauses, wondering about what she wants to say. She smiles as she decides. “Those scientists are real characters, aren’t they, sir?”

BC smiles.

“They are.”

“That first leg of the trip with everyone on board was pretty noisy,” she says. “Don’t get me wrong, it was a fun noisy. I had fun. That Indian scientist, Doctor Krish... he knows a lot of stuff.”

“And he’s all too willing to share his knowledge,” BC cracks.

“Doctor Dell seems like the quiet type, but when he talks he’s almost *scary* smart.” The pilot again ponders her next statement. “Seems like you and Doctor Capituna are kind of a couple, huh?”

That's nice, if you ask me. Not that you did. I'm sorry, is that bad?"

"No, s'okay." BC admits, "I think we are, kind of."

"Yeah. Still. It was a lot quieter going back to Lunar Prime, and then here. Are you okay, sir?"

"Oh, I'm fine, captain! Just not looking forward to these UTZ Council meetings," BC explains his quiet mood. "They always bore me to tears. It takes forever to accomplish anything, so nothing really gets done!"

"Well, sir, as much as I'd like to keep talking with you and give you an excuse to procrastinate longer before you get off the ship, I've got to get going. I'm sorry," she apologizes.

"Not to worry. You've been a great pilot, thank you!"

"Good luck with your meetings. And with staying awake!"

"Thanks!"

BC notices some changes as he enters Wentworth Station. The isolation glass is gone. Wentworth himself is out walking in the open to greet BC as he arrives.

"Campion!"

"Wentworth? Is that really you or is it one of your doubles?"

"It's me," he says. He comes up to BC to shake his hand.

"All done worrying about the plague?" BC asks, surprised.

"We've stopped the current strain, BC! Good news!" Wentworth exclaims. "I wanted to break the news to you in person. We've stopped it! Unless it mutates again. We're okay, for now."

"Really? Huh. Well, that is some great news... Have you begun mass producing the antidote?"

"It's not an antidote, more a vaccine," Wentworth says. "We've begun to mass produce the vaccine. We've started inoculations here at our meeting."

*Making sure you and yours are safe first, of course, Wentworth.*

*'Tell me about it in person.'*

*Right.*

*Man, people never change, not even in the face of death, or war... damn. It doesn't bring out the best in us. So typical of Wentworth. "Work together to find a cure... that I can use first!"*

M'Bekke arrives for the meetings to represent the NcC. BC meets him in the station's port.

"Hello, BC!"

"M'Bek... Pope John Paul the Fourth, how are you?"

M'Bekke smiles. "I am well. Did you hear? The college of cardinals has finally confirmed my papacy! I am officially the Pope now!"

"You've been 'officially the Pope' since I abdicated, M'Bekke," BC insists. "I don't care what anyone else says."

"Thank you, BC. But it is nice to have their nod. Officially."

It takes a couple more days for Wentworth to pull the meetings together. Dolomay surfaces briefly. He and his crew hit three new targets, all isolated orbital stations. The news media identifies them as "rogue UIN elements", after a UTZ spokesman calls them that in a press briefing. Like modern pirates, Dolomay and his crew descend on their targets and wreak havoc, grabbing supplies, kidnapping and killing, and usually destroying any other ships that happen to be docked.

BC gets the news of their raids as he waits for the rest of the council to arrive on the station. Wentworth won't call the first meeting until all the UTZ council members arrive. BC waits three days before Wentworth finally makes a general announcement over the com that they'll be starting the meetings the next morning. Council members are paged a half-hour prior to their first meeting, and instructed to assemble in the main hall.

The first day is preliminary and boring. BC acquiesces to Wentworth for most of the formalities. BC only lets himself get bossy and heated when pressing for faster distribution of the vaccine. The details and logistics of distribution then occupy council business for most of the afternoon.

The council breaks for dinner. BC sits at the council table after the other members have gone, massaging his temples and trying to stave off a headache.

*I think my head's going to explode! And this has nothing to do with those headaches.*

“Ping!”

A small light glows in the table top in front of BC.

*Must be the com?*

BC pushes the light.

“Mr. Campion?” the table top speaks.

“Yes?”

“Ms. Capituna on the com for you.”

“Put her through, thank you.”

“BC?”

“Hey Anita,” BC answers. “What’s up?”

“Couple things. Dolomay just hit Mars,” she informs him.

“What?” BC can’t believe it.

*Like he hasn’t already done enough damage there!*

“Just got the word from Al Salid,” she says. “We sent a couple ships to see what’s up.”

“That’s good. Probably wise to keep patrols going around the clock where you are, too.”

“We’ve got a couple ships out dodging rocks at all times. That’s a no-brainer,” Anita says, sounding insulted.

“Sorry,” BC apologizes. “What was the other thing?” he asks her, trying to change the subject.

“Ceres.”

“A series of what?”

“Not *series*. Ceres, the asteroid. First discovered? The largest?”

“Gotcha,” BC says, figuring it out. “What about it?”

“I think we should move some of our facilities there, start building ships nearby. Ceres’ size gives us room we don’t have here,” she explains. “We’ve been discussing options.”

“What other ‘options’ do we have?”

“We could move the facilities to one of The Project outposts. Crankshaft might be best suited for it. Rigel Four is too small, and too close to The Flaze. Dimwit’s too close to The Domo worlds. And Cat’s Eye turned out to be too close to the Eldred.”

“I think we’re asking for trouble with the Eldred if we go outside of the solar system and start building ships,” BC tells her. “I don’t want to provoke them. Yet. Defend against them, sure. But not provoke them.”

“Do you think your council would support this?”

“We’ll see. I’m sure we’ll have to discuss it at length, over and over,” BC sighs and rolls his eyes.

“Enjoying the council are you?” Anita says with an evil chuckle.

“You betcha. At this rate, we’ll be here for weeks! I was hoping for a couple of days, but there’s no way.”

“Poor baby BC,” she laughs. “Keep me informed, huh? Talk to you later,” she signs off.

The first week, the UTZ Council meetings are occasionally interrupted by sporadic reports of attacks by Dolomay. His ship is spotted raiding sites on Earth as he gets bolder. Bolder still, the second week Dolomay and his crew raid the UTZ shipyards, stealing a Transpace engine off the assembly line.

BC and Wentworth leave the meetings to visit the shipyard and survey the damage.

*At least it’s a break from the monotony.*

“Ceres, huh?” Wentworth asks. BC is filling him in on Anita’s ideas as they travel. “You’re bringing this up with the council?”

“Will you support it?”

Wentworth pauses, thinking.

“Well?” BC prods when Wentworth doesn’t answer.

“I’ll support it. Why not? We should try to keep it secret, though, eh?”

“Try. Of course.” BC chuckles. “The Project is actually pretty good when it comes to secrecy.”

Wentworth smiles. “Indeed. But the council might not be. Let’s just make this happen, without

subjecting it to endless discussion, shall we?"

"I'm all for *that!*" BC can't help his enthusiastic outburst. "But... can you do that?"

Wentworth actually laughs out loud. "That's what I do, BC! I make things happen."

"Can you make these meetings happen any faster? I've been through tortures that were easier to take! Let me tell you, there was this one time this cult..."

"One more week, probably," Wentworth answers, interrupting BC. "If I know my UTZ Council meetings."

The meetings do drag on for another week, but Dolomay is strangely silent, off the radar. No attack reports to break up the monotony.

The Eldred remain drawn back, silent and aloof while the UTZ Council considers their demands. Wentworth and BC explain the stakes of the war and the Eldred demand that humanity stay within the orbit of Jupiter. No Eldred ships appear during the two weeks of meetings.

The UTZ Council agrees to reject the Eldred's demands and restrictions, but also agrees they'll keep the decision secret. They will offer no official response. They also decide not to acknowledge the existence of the Eldred, or the alien nature of Dolomay, or any other aliens to the general public. The UTZ spokespeople will continue to identify Dolomay's ship as "A rogue UIN group." They see no need to tell the public about the Eldred attacks on Mars, either. They officially dismiss Dolomay's allegations of alien collaboration as "fantasy", the "ravings of a madman."

BC disagrees with the decisions, but lets the majority of the council have their way. In his final address to the council he wonders aloud at how long they can fool the public and keep them in the dark.

Anita calls BC from the Project asteroid base as the meetings end.

"We've got a problem," she tells him.

"Tell me about it," BC says. "I've been on Wentworth Station for two weeks now. I'm getting stir crazy! At least there have been no new attacks by Dolomay."

"Actually," Anita corrects him, "that's the problem. I just heard from the Flaze. The Domo called earlier today, too. Dolomay's out *there*, BC. He's hitting *them*, now. They want to hit back. And they may not care to distinguish one rogue human crew from the rest of us."

"Don't they know about the Ancient Enemy?"

"Of course they do. But they're still pissed off. At us! They know it's a crew of *humans* following Dolomay's command."

"Don't they know he's controlling them? If they know about the Ancient Enemy?"

"I don't know. They might regret shielding our development from the Eldred, at this point. Their tone was kind of ominous. As if the Eldred were right, and we will turn into *them*."

"Maybe the question is whether we will *become* the Ancient Enemy or," BC pauses for effect, "Whether we already *are* the Ancient Enemy. Whether we like it or not."

"So, now you're saying the Eldred are right?!" Anita snaps back at him.

"No!" BC gets defensive. "I'm saying they might be. But I don't think they are. Just considering all possibilities."

"I was worried. Thought your brain might be turning to mush with all that exposure to bureaucrats," she jokes.

The lights around BC turn red as an alarm begins to sound.

*Uh-oh.*

"What's going on there?" Anita asks.

"Don't know," BC admits. "But I think I should go."

"Bu –" Anita is cut off as the com switches over to an emergency channel.

"Campion!" Wentworth calls over the com. "Come up to my station's command center. Dolomay is attacking a nearby station! We're scrambling ships."

*Guess he's not out anymore...*

"I'll be right there!"

BC finds his way to the command center with the help of one of Wentworth's robot doubles.

"Apogee Station," Wentworth fills BC in as he arrives. "And Dolomay has *two* ships. With

Transpace drives.”

“Great.”

“We’ve sent ships. But if he’s got two ships... Now they’ll start hitting two places at once!”

“Not likely,” BC disagrees. “Dolomay needs to be near his crew members so he can keep them under his control.”

“Again the mind control thing? You’re sure that’s real?” Wentworth is still skeptical.

“I’m sure. You watch. Even if he adds ships, they’ll work together. Unless he’s more powerful than I think he is.”

“Well, that’s good to know, I guess.”

Two minutes later Wentworth gets reports back from Apogee Station.

“They made short work of Apogee,” Wentworth says. “A supply raid. Oxygen, food. Cleaned the place out.”

“Damn. Did any of our ships get a chance to engage his?”

“Nah, he was in and out too quickly. But we’re picking up survivors, the ones left.”

“What now?” BC asks.

“We’re on red alert in case they come here next.”

“Any sign of them nearby?”

“No... It was Dolomay’s first attack in a while. Guess they ran out of some supplies. Where do you suppose they’re hiding out? Somewhere in the asteroids?”

“They haven’t been ‘hiding out,’” BC tells him. “I just heard from Anita that the Domo and the Flaze have been in touch. Evidently, Dolomay’s been attacking *them*. He’s been keeping busy. Just away from us.”

“And these are the *other* aliens, right?”

“Right. Our galactic neighbors, kind of. They kept the Eldred away from us, way back when.”

“That’s right, you’ve mentioned them before. Who are... What are they like?” Wentworth asks.

“I still haven’t met them myself,” BC tells Wentworth. “According to the Project’s scientists, the Domo are like vampires and the Flaze are like your traditional UFO type aliens. Putting it in basic terms.”

“I see... Should we care that Dolomay’s hitting them?” Wentworth asks, arching an eyebrow.

“Maybe we should encourage Dolomay to go after them... keeps him away from us!”

“You’re assuming the Flaze and the Domo won’t hit back?”

“Even better,” Wentworth smiles a sly smile. “Let *them* take Dolomay out.”

“Their aim might not be that narrowly focused,” BC warns Wentworth. “Don’t assume that when they hit back they’ll only hit Dolomay.”

“What? All humans look alike?”

“Fraid so,” BC tells him. “Who knows? They are aliens, after all. There’s no telling how they think.”

The alarms begin ringing out across the command center. Wentworth’s crew scrambles to their posts.

“What’s going on?” Wentworth shouts out.

“Are they here?” BC asks.

“Another attack,” one of Wentworth’s techs tells them. “Down on Earth. They’re blitzing the Stinger shipyard!”

“Do we have any visual feeds?” Wentworth asks. Several feeds appear on wall screens around the room.

BC’s eyes are drawn from screen to screen. Dolomay’s two ships dart in and out of the picture. The ships are visibly altered, with added on armaments and engines.

A strategic graphic feed shows Dolomay’s two ships as bright red dots darting around the screen.

“Never seen ships *move* like that before,” one tech exclaims. “Crazy maneuverability!”

“Dolomay,” BC says to Wentworth, “souping up the ships with stolen equipment from The Flaze and The Domo. Oh shit!”

The screens with camera feeds all suddenly glow with an intense white light, and then blink out. The strategic feed blips off with them.

“What the fuck was that?” Wentworth asks in a low voice.

“Looks like a small nuke, sir,” a tech tells Wentworth. “A controlled burst. Never seen anything like it.”

“Shit,” BC says. He looks for a place to sit down and finds an empty chair in front of a screen showing a plan of the Stinger shipyard.

“Get me an overhead view on that right now!” Wentworth commands. BC sees a satellite view appear on his screen, zooming in and zipping across blurry land below as it repositions over the shipyard. He has to look away as a wave of nauseous vertigo comes over him. He looks back as the screen stops moving. Smoke and clouds fill the picture.

“Switching to resonant imaging,” a tech says.

The picture shifts from simple video to a graphic display as a topographic representation of the ground below appears. The crater below. There is no more shipyard.

*First time anyone’s used a nuke on Earth since Mecca was hit. Ruthless.*

BC realizes the room has been silent when Wentworth breaks the silence.

“Goddamn! The man plays fucking hardball!”

Wentworth shakes his head.

*Is that admiration in his voice?*

Wentworth looks over at BC.

“Guess we’ll be building our ships in the asteroids from now on, eh, Champion?”

“We should warn them out there that Dolomay’s back,” BC tells Wentworth.

“Do it,” Wentworth tells the man in front of him. “And let’s look alert, people, he could be coming here next.”

## Chapter Eight

For the next two months the resources of the UTZ and The Project are poured into two missions, one overt, one covert: vaccinations against the plague, and construction in the asteroids.

UTZ and Project doctors travel across the Earth, Moon and Mars, through all human settlements and outposts, administering the vaccine for the plague.

Clean up efforts at the demolished Stinger Shipyard on Earth are out in the open. Wentworth decided they should make it look like the UTZ was planning on building ships there again. Construction of the new base on Ceres and the building of the new Stinger Shipyard nearby are being kept off the public’s radar.

Dolomay hasn’t hit an Earth target since he nuked the old shipyard two months ago. Though he’s not around, his whereabouts can be guessed. Anita has conveyed to BC more complaints from The Domo and the Flaze of further attacks by Dolomay on their worlds, and they from their neighbors, as Dolomay’s raiders strike far and wide away from the Solar System.

Dolomay is evidently using his ancient navigational knowledge to pick other targets around the galactic “neighborhood”. He keeps his now reportedly three ships on the move. They strike together as BC predicted, and, as Wentworth had observed, it seems to be keeping them from attacking targets in the solar system.

Much like the UTZ Council, Dolomay doesn’t seem to know about the new construction in the asteroids. He has left the Ceres site and the new shipyard nearby alone. The Project’s original asteroid base is well defended and he hasn’t returned there, either.

Construction has been going at a frenzied pace at the both the shipyard and on Ceres’ new operations base.

BC travels on a Project transport to the Project's old asteroid base to check in with Anita. She's been overseeing the ongoing construction. He asked the ship's pilot to fly by both projects before heading in to the old Project base so he could see the progress for himself.

BC's ship buzzes past the Ceres site. Massive banks of construction lights illuminate the half built facility. The main dome rivals the size of the main dome on Lunar Prime, and like Lunar Prime, six tubular corridors radiate out from the dome. Two of the corridors simply end, awaiting future construction. The other four end in smaller domes, also interconnected by corridors, creating a partial outer ring. Out beyond that ring lies a ring of defensive posts, armed batteries already fully built and functional, bristling with defensive weapons.

After the Ceres flyby they cruise on past the new shipyard facilities. Thanks to Anita and her crew's efforts, they're already building ships, even as they build the shipyard around them. There are several ships scattered around the facilities in various stages of completion.

The facilities look incomplete and temporary. There's a slapped together quality to everything that reveals the haste of its construction. Then again, the place is less than two months old. Most of their efforts have gone into building new ships, not into fixing up the buildings around them.

Stinger ships constantly patrol around the base and the shipyard. Ships come off the assembly line and go right into service, soon as they can be crewed up.

BC's transport is full of novice pilots, all coming out to finish their training and get their ships. He leans back from the viewport and looks back at his fellow passengers, all crowded against the viewports looking out at ships they might soon be flying.

The passengers settle back into their seats as they pull away from the shipyard and head for the old Project asteroid base. The trip through the asteroids takes another two hours.

After bobbing and weaving through the rocks they finally touch down at the old base. Anita meets BC at the base's landing dock.

"BC! Good to see you!" She says with a smile, and she gives him a quick hug.

"Anita! How are you?" He says, hugging her back.

She pulls away, quickly looks around and then answers.

"Busy. Building a shipyard and building ships. That... and listening to aliens complain."

"At least they're only complaining," BC observes.

"So far. At least, I think The Flaze are complaining," she says, scrunching up her forehead in remembered frustration. "With them it's hard to tell."

She realizes something she meant to tell BC right away. "Dolomay's back! He just hit an Earth target. You were traveling so you probably didn't hear. The media are still calling him a rogue UIN unit," Anita tells him.

Her expression shifts. She picks back up on her past thought. "And besides the aliens complaining, I've got to listen to Dell and Krish harping on the fact they can't get their hands on Eldred technology. Thanks for planting *that* seed!"

"Well, that's one of the reasons I'm here. I still want to capture an Eldred ship so they can take it apart. You can bet Dolomay's been acquiring tech well beyond ours in his raids – that nuke he used on the shipyard was Flaze, by the way, use *that* as leverage if you can – and we *know* the Eldred have more advanced gear."

"You too, huh? You sound just like them!" she says, shaking her head. "Well, that's good. I thought you were coming here to check up on me. Make sure I wasn't fucking up your ships," Anita says with a little bit of an edge in her voice.

*So fucking defensive! Guy can't get a break!*

"Damn! I'm hurt," BC says with a touch of sarcasm to lighten the tone. He tries to reassure her. "I trust you to build the ships just fine. But I did want to see how things were going."

*And maybe I want to see you, too, ever think of that? Not that I'm still so sure of that now...*

"Sorry," she apologizes, "I'm just a little stressed."

"Sorry," BC says for no reason.

"The news media have been asking for you since Dolomay's new attack," Anita says, changing the subject. "You can have your own stress fest. They're asking why the UTZ isn't doing something to try to stop these UIN attacks, instead of hiding out like they are, holed up on Wentworth Station, guarded by what's left of the UTZ fleet."

"Great. There are only forty ships there."

"How many more ships do we have right now?" Anita asks him.

"Well, there are twenty on Mars. How many fully functional ships do you have here?"

"Fully functional? At this point, today? Fifteen."

"Great. Our fleet is seventy-five ships," BC says, depressing himself with the low number.

"We'll have five more ready by next week," Anita says in encouragement.

"On the line now?" he asks her.

"Yeah."

"Do we have crews to man them?"

"You rode in with them today."

"Those newbies? Jeesh. They hardly seem ready!"

"What are we supposed to do, BC? The Project's tapped out! We've pulled in all our pilots from Cat's Eye and the other outposts. We've lost a lot of seasoned UTZ pilots already. Wentworth tells me these guys are it."

"We're still training more," he tells her.

"I know. Just can't do it fast enough," she laments. She gets a distant look in her eyes as she receives a com message.

"Why him?" she asks, and listens. BC can't hear the other side of the conversation.

"Shit," she says as she focuses on BC again. "We've got a Flaze ship outside, asking for permission to dock. And there's a joint Flaze and Domo delegation on board asking to meet with *you*."

"Me?" BC asks. "Why me?"

"Yeah, BC, I asked them that, too. The Flaze say the Eldred have designated you *the* human representative."

"Great," BC sighs. "But how did they know I was here? I just got here? What, did they follow me in?"

"That I don't know. Lucky guess?" Anita suggests mockingly.

*How they know I was here, arriving here, now?*

"Give them permission to land, I guess. Have an honor guard meet them at their ship and escort them to the conference room near the landing area."

"This will be your first time, won't it?" Anita exclaims as the thought occurs to her.

"It will. I'm a virgin!" he jokes.

Anita darkens.

"Don't joke. I think you... well, I think you need to be very careful here, BC," she cautions.

"These are very dangerous aliens. You know about the Domo, we told you how vampiric they are. The Flaze are inscrutable. We still know so little about them..." she trails off, a little embarrassed by her show of concern.

"Come with me, then," BC asks her. "I need your help. Your knowledge." A thought occurs to him, stark and brilliant.

*I know exactly what to do!*

"And I've got an idea," he tells her.

"Now *that* sounds dangerous!" she says with a laugh.

"It may be. I want to get the Domo and the Flaze to reveal themselves to the public. We'll introduce them!"

"Are you insane?"

"Maybe. Let's open it all up! Blow it all wide open. Fuck the UTZ Council! Let's introduce the public to the Domo and the Flaze. Show them the Eldred. Tell the public about Dolomay being an alien. He already tried to tell the public about the aliens, even if people thought he was crazy... I'm sick of the

secrecy. I don't think it's doing us any good lying to the public about what's really going on out here!"

"What?" Anita can't believe it.

"Look," BC says, getting serious. "This is all going to blow people's minds at best – at *best!* At worst, they won't believe it. I'm thinking if we make it all common knowledge with two aliens standing there right next to us it might make us more believable. You did say the news media were clamoring to talk to me..."

Anita smiles. "You're crazy, but good-crazy. I like that! It just might work!"

BC sees the Domo and the Flaze in person for the first time when he enters the conference room.

The Domo look almost human, like fat bald men with oval, slightly pointed heads, although their mouths move the wrong way and look like they were put on wrong, sort of sideways. These two Domo each stand about five foot six, on the short side. They are rounded, rotund creatures. BC can see their pointed teeth gnash as they speak to each other, each sharp point moving independently in the vertical slash.

Where the Domo are curved, the Flaze are all angles. They stand taller, too. The two Flaze in the delegation stand well over six and a half feet tall, but walk stooped over. They are thin and bony, if they have bones under their taught, leather-like, flaky gray skin.

Bipedal, the Flaze could be called "humanoid", but they'd never be mistaken for human beings. Their heads are too long and large, for one thing. They have what appear to be two eyes, a nose, and a mouth beneath, but their "eyes" are large, multifaceted silver jewels, their "nose" just two thin vertical slits in the middle of their "face", and their "mouths" are horizontal slits rimmed by sharp spiky ridges instead of teeth.

BC stands with Anita, Krish and Dell beside him on the opposite end of the long oval conference room table from the aliens. The two Domo finish speaking to each other and turn to face them. BC looks across the table at the four aliens, taking it all in.

*Meeting the Eldred kind of prepared me for... woah, what's that? Kind of nausea, sort of a wave of exhaustion... is that the Domo? The 'vampiric qualities' Anita and the boys mentioned?*

One of the Flaze speaks first. Whispery, slithery sounds slip from the taller Flaze's spiky mouth. An apparent translator, a device on the Flaze's arm, begins speaking in English.

"You. The Camp-ee-ahn. Human. Leader."

BC waits for more, but there is silence. He decides they're waiting for an answer.

"I am Bernard Campion," he says.

The Flaze makes another series of whispery, slithering sounds. The translator kicks on after he finishes.

"We. The Flaze. These. The Domo. We come. SSSsss with you."

"Wait," BC says. "You come to 'what' with us?" BC can't understand the translator.

The two Flaze confer. The shorter Flaze speaks, and is translated.

"We. Negotiate. With you," the translator says.

One of the Domo takes this as his cue to speak.

"You are both a great danger and in great danger," the Domo says in English, his voice smooth and greasy with the hint of an old British accent. "As this situation is of our creation, we feel the need to once again involve ourselves in human affairs."

"Your creation?" BC goads them, curious to their response.

The Domo and the Flaze look at each other. The Flaze speak, whispery slithering sounds left untranslated this time. The Domo answer, briefly, in a sing-song voice that sounds a bit like a funeral chant. The Domo turn back to BC. The short one speaks again.

"We have been... *helping* you humans for some time now," the Domo explains to him.

"And helping yourselves to us, too," Krish says in a low voice. The Domo hear him and appear disturbed. Anita looks Krish down with a withering stare filled with daggers. The Domo, taken aback momentarily, then continue.

"Yes. Well. As it were," the Domo says, sounding like a fussy old British man. "We have

*protected* your planet from the Eldred for thousands of your years.”

The Flaze speaks, all slithering whispers. The translator then does its part: “Domo speak. Half true. Some fact. Domo way. Not protection. Hide you. Guarded you. Watch development. Hope. Gain advantage. Bring you in. Our allies. Break iron grip. Eldred. Failed.”

The Domo leader speaks again, after shooting a glance at the Flaze.

“Still. In hiding you, we were protecting you. We allowed your race to grow and develop. Had the Eldred found the human race any earlier, they would have wiped you out in one beat of your heart.”

The Flaze hisses and whispers, and is translated: “Familiar? Ancient Enemy?”

BC nods. “The Eldred told me about them. And they showed me what they looked like. They tell me we humans *are* the ‘Ancient Enemy’ reborn, or at least an offshoot of them.”

The Flaze hisses and whispers, and says through the translator, “Yesss. The Eldred. Created race. Ancient Enemy. Servant race. Million years ago. Ancient Enemy. Advanced. Brutal. Savage. Eldred Rise. Destroy Ancient Enemy. Scientists. Ancient Enemy. Gee-net-a-cists. Change Eldred. Altered. Overthrow Ancient Enemy. Final Destruction. Other Gee-net-a-cists send seeds out to stars. Bundles. Dee En Ay. Gee-net-ick material. Star seeds. Land. Planets. Restart race. Millions. Before End.”

The Domo picks up the thread of the story. “We watched as the Eldred tracked down these star seeds throughout the centuries. Wherever one was found, all life on the planet would be destroyed by the Eldred in their attempt to stop the return of the Ancient Enemy. The Eldred had already hit your Earth once. They didn’t think they needed to return.”

The Flaze hisses and whispers and is translated: “One Star Seed. Eluded. Eldred. We track. Seed lands. Here. Your planet. Earth. Not same. Ice. Seed spill. Dee En Ay. You develop.”

“We kept you safe, hidden away from the Eldred,” the Domo says. “Otherwise your planet would have suffered the same fate as so many others. So, you see, we feel somewhat responsible for all this.”

“I see,” BC says.

*Pretty much backs up what the Eldred told me.*

“The Eldred do not see it, but your race is different. From the Ancient Enemy,” the Domo says.

The Flaze hisses and whispers. The translator says: “Eldred. May. See it. You. Not destroyed.”

“How are we different?” BC asks.

“You...” the Domo starts, then stops. “Your race possesses another ‘dimension’, I guess I’d say. It is hard to translate what I mean.”

“The Eldred *did* mention something about our religions,” BC observes.

“Yes!” the Domo agrees enthusiastically. “That *is* an example of what we mean. Then the Eldred *do* see it!”

The Flaze interrupts with hisses and whispers, translated as: “Dolomay. Turns you. Humans turn. Be. Ancient Enemy.”

“Or at least he’s trying to. Do you know what’s going on,” the Domo says, “Out there?” he asks, making a sweeping gesture with his arm.

“I’ve been told Dolomay is now raiding your settlements,” BC responds.

“This is only half the truth,” The Domo tells him, echoing the Flaze’s earlier words.

The Flaze hisses and whispers and the translators speaks again.

“Dolomay. Stolen Ships. Modified. Improved. Ships land. Crews disembark. Wholesale slaughter. Kill all. Take all. And Worse.”

“Worse?” BC asks.

“Did you know *you* can rape the Eldred?” The Domo asks him.

“What?”

“The Ancient Enemy created the Eldred to serve them *in every way*,” The Domo clarifies.

“Oh.”

“Dolomay has led his crew in this activity. It, unfortunately, usually kills the Eldred involved, but seems to provide immense pleasure to the Ancient Enemy. Dolomay and his crew are doing this to every

Eldred they find. You See? Dolomay tries to turn humans back into the Ancient Enemy.”

“Wait,” BC puzzles. “If they kill everyone, how do you know all this?”

“Some have escaped to speak of the atrocities,” the Domo explains. “But only narrowly. They were left for dead, or otherwise managed to somehow be overlooked.”

The Flaze hisses and speaks again.

“Eldred grow insane. Anger,” the Flaze translator says.

“Tell me about it,” BC says in a low voice.

The Flaze begins a long hiss and raspy conversation. The translator starts.

“Will. Tell. Again.”

“No!” BC says quickly. “I’m sorry. That’s just an expression. You don’t need to...”

“Eldred. Angered. Violated,” The Flaze continues for a moment. Then the translator stops, and then says, “Understanding.”

“This is some of what we come to tell you,” The Domo says. “Unpleasant though these details may be.”

“More,” the Flaze hisses and is translated. “Eldred. Cannot stop. Dolomay.”

“Among the, uh, civilized races of the galaxy, it is usual for a race to police their own,” the Domo says. “It is, therefore, up to *you* to stop Dolomay. You must stop Dolomay. Or the Eldred will soon bring their planetary devastator to your system here. To remove the ‘taint’ of Dolomay. They will stop hunting him and turn their attention to your planets, and eliminate any base of support he might have.”

“Great,” BC sighs. “So you guys want to help us, right?” BC asks.

The Flaze again hisses and whispers and is translated, “*This* help. Information. No more.”

“What?” BC tries not to raise his voice. “This is it?”

“Our information is valuable to you, is it not?” the Domo asks.

“Look, I don’t need this *information*, I need ships!” BC loses it a little. “I need for my scientists to get their hands on Eldred technology – can you help with that? What about your technology? Let my scientists take a look at your tech.”

The Domo and the Flaze all look away from BC. Anita clears her throat.

“BC?” she says quietly.

“Yes, Anita?”

“The Domo and the Flaze *are* their tech with us, and we with them. It’s already happening.”

“Yes!” The Domo leader perks up. “Your Transpace drive is a marvel!”

The “expression” on the Domo’s “face” makes BC wince involuntarily, although he’s sure the bizarre gnashing of pointy “teeth” is supposed to be the approximation of a smile.

“Great,” BC says. “Just great.”

*So, we’ve gotten all we’re gonna get from these clowns, then? What is Dolomay getting his hands on, then? Stuff they’re not willing to share?*

The Flaze leader hisses and makes more slithering sounds. The translator speaks.

“Eldred. Possess. Possessive. Ancient Enemy. Technology. Use!”

*I’ve gotta get my hands on an Eldred ship!*

“The Eldred do not always appreciate the deadliness of the Ancient technology they employ,” The Domo says. “They merely use it.”

“There is still something you can help us with,” BC tells the aliens.

“There is?” The Domo questions cautiously as the Flaze hisses.

“What. Want?” the Flaze translator says.

“I want you two to join me and address the human media. Or all four of you, even better. Stand behind me and follow my cues. That’s all you’ll have to do. Will you at least consider that?”

The Domo and Flaze confer among themselves. Then the two of them who have not spoken turn and leave the room. The Flaze and Domo “leaders” remain.

“We two will join you for this ‘media appearance’,” the Domo tells BC. The Flaze hisses his answer.

“There. Be,” the translator speaks, “No. Speak. Awkward. Domo. Speak.”

The Domo nods.

*Well, at least it's something.*

"Great!" BC says, this time meaning it. "Krish? Dell? Can you set me up a news feed?"

"Sure," Krish says. "You mean from here?"

"Yeah."

"I'll take care of it!" Krish says. He leaves to make the arrangements.

The Flaze hisses, whispers and is translated. "What. Good? Display."

"It's only a part of my bigger plan," BC explains. "But in order for me to get those other parts of the plan in motion, I need the rest of the human race to know how real the whole situation is. I need them to see you. Both of you. So they know other races exist out there," he tries to explain.

"You see, right now, people think Dolomay is another human, a leader of the Universal Islamic Nation, the UIN, gone rogue. Thanks to my government, the UTZ council, even though the Eldred have attacked human settlements, most humans don't know they've been hit by aliens, only that they've been hit. Most humans don't know what the stakes *are* in this war, or even that aliens want to take us out," BC says.

"What of the Eldred's plague?" the Domo asks.

"We've cured the plague, or at least have a vaccine for it now. Even so, people don't know it came from the Eldred. There are rumors it came from aliens, but nobody seems to believe it," BC tells them. "That's why I want you to be there as we make *this* announcement. And after we're through here, the next step is capturing an Eldred ship. And then we can find out what makes it tic."

The Flaze and the Domo look at BC in silence.

*How do you read these guys? Is this surprise? Amusement? Anger?*

Krish comes back in and places a grey cube in the center of the table.

"That's it," he tells BC. "Whenever you're ready. They're waiting for you. Just speak, it's cued to your voice."

BC nods at Krish.

*Don't want to speak until I'm ready, then, do I?*

BC motions to the two aliens to join him on his side of the table. They move around the table and take up positions behind him.

*Woah, what's that smell?*

*Damn, the Domo smells like rotting garbage lying in the hot sun! The Flaze? Just kinda musty.*

*Well, here goes...*

"Hello. I'm Bernard Champion, chief CEO of the Universal Trade Zone CEO Council... and a few other things I'll explain in a minute. I'm talking to you today from a base out here in the asteroids, run by the Transpace Project of the UTZ, the company I'm the CEO for.

"Some of what I'm about to tell you, you may have already heard, in other news reports. But I hope you will listen when I tell you that the human race, the entire human race, stands on the brink of being wiped out by powerful forces from beyond our solar system.

"Please, hear me out. Behind me stand the representatives of two alien species, the Flaze," BC turns in the Flaze's direction, "and The Domo," he says, turning back to indicate the Domo.

"We are not alone in the universe. Besides the Flaze and the Domo, there is another race we call the Eldred. One of *their* enemies has seized a UIN ship. This enemy looks human, like us, and he has captured a human crew to serve him and fly his ship. You know him as the former head of the UIN, Ibn Al-Dolomé.

"His ships have been attacking us, on Earth, in orbit, on the Moon. We recently had a bit of time go by when his ships *didn't* attack us. He wasn't just lying low, I'm afraid. Instead, the ships were out attacking these aliens and others. These ships have continued their destruction among the worlds of the Flaze, the Domo, and the race called the Eldred.

"These emissaries of the Flaze and the Domo came here to see me today to tell me, to warn *us* the Eldred are planning to retaliate against us," BC says. "Against all of us. They don't see the difference

between the UIN and the UTZ. They just see a race collaborating with their enemies.

“The Eldred have already shown a willingness to take human life. They engineered the plague that nearly wiped us out. Now they are mounting a more physical threat.

“Our challenge is two-fold. We need to stop the ships of humans led by Dolomay, this enemy of the Eldred. We also need to stop the Eldred from exterminating us in the name of interstellar pest control.

“The Eldred recently attacked Mars. The reason for this is that the man who calls himself Ibn Al Dolomé, who recently rose to lead the UIN, is not a man at all!” BC pauses to let what he just said sink in.

“Dolomay is known by the Eldred as the Ancient Enemy. He is an alien, a member of an ancient race that once dominated the galaxy, and dominated the Eldred. He has taken control of the UIN ships and has been marauding through space with human crews under his control. He is causing immense pain and suffering, and his actions now threaten to bring retribution down upon us all.”

BC clears his throat.

“For some strange reason or reasons, I’ve come to be at the center of all this. As head of the UTZ Council, I expect to speak for, and work on behalf of, the UTZ. As the former Pope, I enjoy the support of M’Bekke, ah, Pope John Paul the Fourth, and the NcC.

“I also ask for support from those of you listening on Mars. When Dolomay departed from Mars, Al Solid granted me the leadership of Mars in order to stop the Eldred from continuing their vicious attack. Although I was declared leader of Mars, I do not claim to lead the UIN. Of course, as of right now, there really is no UIN.

“All of this has led the Eldred, and these other aliens you see here, to regard *me* as the person to talk to. I’ve been put in a position where I’m speaking for all of us. It’s not a burden I’d choose, but I’ll try to bear it best I can and not fu... mess up.

“None of you elected me. But I hope you’ll give me your support as we face this two-pronged challenge. I don’t mean to frighten you, but you need to know what the stakes are. We are now effectively at war on an interstellar level. I’ll be honest with you: we are in waaay over our heads, here, folks. But we do have allies,” BC pauses to nod at both the Flaze and the Domo. “And we do have a plan to fight both Dolomay and the Eldred.

“I can’t tell you what that plan is right now because the Eldred, and maybe even Dolomay, are listening in on what I’m telling you right now. I have to ask you to bear with me. Please. Offer any help you can. As human beings, we’re all in this together. In the eyes of our enemies there is no UTZ, there is no UIN. Only human beings. One race. We really are all in this together. We need to put aside our differences to stand together as the human race.

“Thank you.”

Krish moves over and snags the cube from the table top.

“Done!” he says as he pockets the device.

BC turns to the Flaze and the Domo.

“Thank you,” he says to them. “I know this isn’t what you came for, but I think it helped.”

The Flaze whispers and hisses and the translator says, “Admire. Spirit. Success. Yours. Hope. Stop. Dolomay.”

The Flaze turns and leaves the room.

“That was clever and well done, Champion,” The Domo tells BC. “We, too, hope you are successful.” The alien turns and follows the other one out.

BC is left standing with Anita, Krish and Dell. He lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“I guess *that* went as well as could be expected,” BC assesses. “What did I just say?”

“Well, let’s see,” Anita says. She holds up her hand to tick off her points finger by finger. “One: You declared yourself the leader of the human race. Two: You, um, promised to eliminate our enemies and save us all. Pretty much. That’s all.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought I heard myself saying. Just seemed like the right thing to do.”

“So,” Anita asks BC, a puzzled look on her face, “Do you really have a plan?”

“What do you think?” he asks her back.

“Don’t know. Thought you might be making this up as you went along.”

“Did you, now? Oh ye of little faith,” BC admonishes her. “Of course I have a plan. I just made one up.”

Anita shakes her head.

“I knew it,” she says. “So... What is your plan?”

“We need a UIN ship, first. Krish, Dell, I need you two to take a Transpace engine to Mars, find a UIN ship, install the drive and fly it back here.”

“Can I ask why?” Krish asks BC.

“You can ask,” BC responds without answering him. He stares at the smaller man. Krish stares back, then gives up and turns to go.

“Fine,” he says as he’s leaving. He looks over at Dell. “C’mon. Time to do the emperor’s bidding, you know!”

Dell nods to BC and then turns and follows Krish out the door.

“So.” Anita confronts BC. “What is your plan?”

“I want to make a decoy ship. Use it to lure the Eldred into a vulnerable position. Then we use the UIN’s old takeover technology to power down an Eldred ship so we can capture it!”

“The UIN’s old takeover tech? What, from the early years of the war? The tech that shut down the orbital stations? You think that’ll work on the Eldred?” She asks him.

“Not entirely sure,” BC admits, “But it should distract them, keep them busy and maybe drain the ship’s power. I’ve been on their ships. Strangely enough, their stuff isn’t *that* different from ours. At worst, the takeover tech won’t work. At best, we get control of one of their ships.”

“You are an optimist,” she says grimly, but then she smiles at him. “That surprises me.”

“Me? I’m just full of surprises!” BC jokes lamely.

*I might seem optimistic on the outside. Inside? Not so much. The human race is in real trouble if I’m humanity’s best hope for winning this...*

“Do you think your big-brain boys out here can adapt that UIN takeover tech to make it more likely to be compatible with Eldred systems?” he asks her.

“Maybe,” she says. “I’ll tell Krish and Dell to start working on that while they’re on their way back here from Mars. We’ll need to make sure they get a UIN ship with the system built into it.”

“Great!” BC says. “Next, we’re going to need a highly reflective asteroid with a hole in it. Reflective so it’s ablative, so the Eldred’s weapons won’t penetrate easily,” he explains. “It’s gotta be big enough for a ship to fit inside, big enough so we can make a ship-size hole in it. Tunnel into it... Any candidates come to mind?”

“Not right off,” Anita answers. “But that’s a little outside my area of expertise. I’ll check with our mining and prospecting guys, and let you know.”

“Good.”

Anita looks at him, another puzzled look crossing her face. She breaks eye contact and nearly runs out of the room.

“I’ve got to catch Krish and Dell and let them know about the takeover tech before they leave,” she calls over her shoulder. “Don’t want to be broadcasting that later,” she says, her voice trailing off.

*What was look?*

## Chapter Nine

BC’s plan comes together over the next few weeks. The Project finds an asteroid that fits the bill, about half an orbit away from the old Project base. The rock is large, reflective, and has a big tunnel already in place inside of it. They clear more space as needed. At BC’s instruction, Project technicians

mount twin lasers on each side of the tunnel entrance. They mount the UIN takeover tech's energy draining coil in the base of the tunnel, and the tech itself in the tunnel roof overhead.

Krish and Dell have been working on the UIN ship they brought back in a hidden part of the Project Base's landing bay, mounting the Transpace drive and turning it into a close duplicate of one of Dolomay's ships. The ship is now ready and waiting.

The Domo representative has been in contact with BC, keeping him informed of Dolomay's raids and whereabouts. Dolomay's ships and crews have continued to be active in Flaze and Domo space, and hitting targets on the edge of Eldred territory. BC asks the Domo to keep telling him where Dolomay is attacking, hoping to find the right moment to launch his decoy and his plan, to catch the Eldred's attention. The Eldred won't believe the decoy's really Dolomay if he's actually off hitting them somewhere else worlds away at the same time. Dolomay doesn't need to be back in the solar system, just away from Eldred space.

*Where are you, Dolomay?*

BC has spent nearly a month playing the waiting game. Playing hide and seek with Dolomay while watching over the preparations for his mousetrap. Supervision. He tells himself that's why he's staying out at the Project base. Certainly not just to hang out with Anita. Truth is he hardly sees her.

The Project base is large. BC occupies much of his time exploring. He tries not to get in Anita's way as she runs full speed through her days. Many days he doesn't see her at all, just hears from her over the com when she calls his quarters with news or a question.

*I think she keeps busy to keep avoiding me. Or maybe I'm just paranoid. Then again... What's not to be paranoid about? After all... They are out to get us! I wish Dolomay would get on with it!*

*The waiting game. I hate it! At least the Eldred haven't attacked us again. Yet. I know they're out there. Probably nearby. But we can't find them.*

*That's why we need one of their ships. Gotta figure out their shielding. Weapons. See what their drive system is like. Dell and Krish and the boys will have a field day! Once we get them a ship.*

"BC?" Anita calls him up out of his reverie over the com. "M'Bekke for you. Line one."

*M'Bekke? How long has it been?*

"M'Bekke!"

"BC!" he calls back, after the slight delay that accompanies Earth to Asteroid Base communications. "How are you?"

"As well as can be expected. As good as the Pope can be," M'Bekke says. "Things are pretty bad here, BC. Despite the vaccine, the plague is still claiming victims. I've reinstated the OPO to help me keep order, but UTZ people are abandoning their posts. Or dying. Then there was your 'announcement' last month. We saw rioting here after that."

"I'm sorry to hear all that, M'Bekke," BC tells him. "I'll be coming back Earth side once I finish a little project I'm working on out here."

*Can't say anything more on this channel. Hell, on channel! Don't wanna blow it now!*

"Right. A 'Project' project?"

BC just nods.

"I see, can't say what it is," M'Bekke says.

"I'm not even sure our old CCU's would be secure from *them*," BC admits. "Given our current circumstances and opposition."

M'Bekke gets it.

"I understand. Well. I hope to see you soon. I agreed to run the NcC, not the whole planet!" M'Bekke exclaims.

"And I didn't expect to be in charge of anything," BC fires back. "Never mind *Everything!*" He laughs an ironic laugh.

"Rising to the level of our incompetence, eh?" M'Bekke says. "Well, let me know what's happening. When you can."

“Will do. Good luck to all of us, huh?”

“Luck? What about the power of prayer, BC?”

“I’ll take whatever edge I can get,” BC jokes.

“M’Bekke out,” he says, signing off.

*People are still dying, M’Bekke says. But Wentworth seems convinced it’s cured, at least for now. So why are people still dying?*

“BC!” Anita calls over the com.

“What is it?”

“The Domo called while you were speaking with M’Bekke. It’s Dolomay. They’ve found him! His ships are heading back towards the Solar System!”

*Funny... that really shouldn’t be good news.*

*But it is!*

“Great! Let’s do it!” BC commands.

BC’s plan is put into action.

The decoy Dolomay ship is launched and travels over to lurk around the trap asteroid. The Project launches Stinger ships to go after the fake Dolomay UIN ship as it appears.

A small fleet of Eldred ships soon appear. Their sleek silver forms hang back up above the plane of the elliptic, avoiding asteroids.

*Right on cue. Although I didn’t expect to see so many Eldred ships! I just need one...*

BC boards a Stinger ship and heads out to be closer to the action, to see his trap at work and watch his plan take shape.

*Get to the asteroid, boys, make it fast...*

Eldred ships begin to drop and swarm around the decoy, but it manages to elude them and head towards the trap asteroid.

BC watches from the bridge as his ship pulls alongside the other Project ships, now disengaging from their “attacks” on the decoy as the Eldred ships approach.

*Well. Let’s see if this actually works...*

BC can’t really make out too much of the action from his vantage point.

“Can you give me some idea as to how it’s going?” BC asks the captain.

“Sure thing,” she says. “Hold on and I’ll get a viewscreen up for you.” She punches in some commands into the control panel in front of her.

A light blue, three dimensional panel appears in the air in front of BC, a holographic heads-up display. Asteroids and ships dot the screen, labeled and represented in varying colors: Eldred ships are blue, Project ships are green, asteroids are purple, and the decoy ship is bright red.

As BC watches, the red ship darts away from the blue ships and towards an asteroid of a different color – white. It has no label.

“Is the white rock the trap?” BC asks.

“Yeah. We don’t want to label it that, though. Probably shouldn’t even be a different color,” the captain tells him. She sounds a little put off.

*Sounds like someone was overruled on the tactical display decision... Hey, there it goes!*

The red ship has disappeared inside the white rock on the display.

“The decoy’s in the trap,” the captain informs him. “Let’s see if an Eldred ship takes the bait!”

Blue ships surround the white rock.

“Are they firing at it?” BC asks. “I can’t tell from this.”

“They’re blasting at the rock, but it’s doing what we’d hoped it would, reflecting and ablating the energy,” she tells him.

One of the blue ship dives in towards the rock.

*This is frustrating... can’t tell what’s really happening.*

“Aren’t there any cameras on the trap rock?” BC asks. “I’d like to see a visual feed, see what’s going on.”

“We’ve got cameras and other tactical equipment on there, but the plan is to keep the rock quiet

until we get an Eldred ship in there. Then they'll start broadcasting.”

She notices something out of the corner of her eye.

“Here we go! They're in. I'll switch to the video feeds.”

BC's blue screen blinks off, replaced by four camera views from inside and outside of the trap. There are bright flashes and two of the feeds go blank. The energy draining coil rises into the picture on one of the two remaining screens as the hull of the Eldred ship glides across the top of that screen. The other remaining feed shows the decoy ship, docked inside the trap rock alongside the small base built for this very purpose.

The energy draining coil glows blue as it generates its field. As BC watches, the coil contacts the hull of the Eldred ship above it. The camera pulls back as someone adjusts the zoom. BC sees the energy field grow to cover the Eldred ship, hopefully draining the energy from it.

“The Eldred ship is powering down!” a voice announces over the com. “The decoy crew is off their ship. Automated protocols are engaged. Stay clear, we're blowing the other side of the rock open.”

There's a flash on the feed that shows the decoy ship as they blast open the other side of the rock, the other end of the tunnel bored through the trap asteroid.

“We've got the Eldred ship! Let the decoy go!”

The now unmanned decoy ship decouples from the dock and flies out from the other side of the trap asteroid.

“Could you put up the other display?” BC asks the captain. The light blue tactical screen reappears. BC watches the red ship streak across the screen. A swarm of blue ships give chase, leaving the stranded ship behind in the Project's trap asteroid.

The decoy, the red ship, disappears off the edge of the screen.

“Can we follow the decoy?” BC asks, and the red ship is back on the screen as the display adjusts. But the blue ships soon reach it, and the red ship then disappears from the middle of the display.

“The decoy ship has been destroyed by the Eldred,” the captain confirms.

“Show me the feed with the captured Eldred ship,” BC asks. The feed reappears, the Eldred ship still bathed in the blue glow of the energy draining field. Small glowing dots, like fireflies, are appearing around the ship.

“What are those?” BC asks. “What's going on? What are they trying to do?”

“That's not them, it's us,” the captain says. “That's the UIN's takeover tech. We modified it some, loaded it into little 'bots shielded from the effects of the energy draining coil.”

The lights descend upon the Eldred ship as the 'bots affix themselves to the ship's hull.

“The takeover tech is attached and attempting to compromise the Eldred ship's systems,” the com says. “Prepare to deploy the simulated explosion.”

*Here comes my favorite part!*

“Show me the other feed. Please,” BC asks.

The video feed changes. BC watches as a round mass of metallic particles is propelled out of the newly blown open end of the trap asteroid. A flash blinds the camera and the screen glows white. As the camera adjusts, BC can see the debris field spreading out from the end of the trap asteroid. It's a carefully constructed debris field, made up of bits and pieces of salvaged Eldred ships.

*Not that they left us a lot to work with. We gathered all the bits we could from around Mars. Hopefully it will convince them the ship we just captured has blown up, and they'll leave it to us!*

*Let's see if they buy it...*

“Can I get the heads up display back?” he asks.

“Sure thing.”

BC watches the blue ships on the screen buzzing around the fake “wreckage” of the Eldred ship and the trap asteroid, and around the area where they destroyed the decoy ship.

One by one, the blue ships begin disappearing from the screen.

“Yes!” BC can't help but let out a yell as the last blue ship disappears. “Give me the asteroid cam feed again!”

“So demanding,” the captain says with a laugh, but she puts the interior feed back on for BC. On the screen, the blue-glowing Eldred ship sits with the energy draining coil attached to its lower hull.

*Doesn't look like they're going anywhere... And the others think they're dead!*

A hatch dilates open in the smooth side of the ship. The Eldred crew begins emerging, wearing atmosphere suits. They look around suspiciously, but seem dazed, confused. Some leave the ship and merely stand aside, almost catatonic. As BC watches in his monitor, Project scientists approach the Eldred crew. The Eldred put up no fight, and allow the scientists to lead them away, off camera, to a waiting Project ship.

*Well, well, well... we've got ourselves an Eldred ship!* BC and his ship return to the Project's main asteroid base. Krish and Dell are waiting for him in the landing bay as he leaves the ship.

*We did it! Now that we've actually managed to capture one of their ships, the boys here have gotta be salivating over the prospect of reverse engineering that Eldred tech!*

“Great job, BC!” Krish greets him, and slaps him on the back. The short scientist is grinning broadly. “Our cargo carrier is loading the captured ship on board right now, bringing it over here so we can get to work! We'll keep it in the hidey-hole we made for working on the decoy, it is perfect! We'll be dissecting her in no time!”

Dell nods down his approval, characteristically reserved, but even he can't help crack a little bit of a smile and add his approval.

“Well done, BC,” the tall English scientist says to him.

Dell then looks over to Krish. “We should go get ready for our delivery.”

“You make it sound as if we're waiting on take-out!” Krish says, and then laughs.

“Have fun, you guys. Hey! Where's Anita?” BC asks the two men.

“She's supervising the captured Eldred crew,” Dell tells him. “They're bringing them in now on the other side of the landing area,” he says, pointing past BC to a Stinger ship landing by the bay's distant other side. “We should go,” Dell says to Krish.

*Heh! Dell tries to hide it, but I think he's more excited than Krish is about taking that ship apart.*

“I don't want to keep you guys. Go ahead! But remember to be very careful, gentlemen,” BC says to them. “Watch out for booby traps, automatic self-destructs. The takeover tech has infiltrated the systems, but...”

Krish waves BC's warnings aside. “We know! We know all about these things. Don't you worry!”

“We'll take every precaution, I assure you,” Dell says with authority.

“You, I believe,” BC says, and laughs.

“That hurts!” Krish says, in mock pain. The two turn and leave, leaving BC standing alone next to his ship.

*Let's go meet the crew. See what they're like. What sort of fuzzy blue koala bears do we have here?*

BC strides across the vast landing area. Anita is trying to shepherd the twelve aliens across the landing bay as BC approaches. The aliens look lethargic and dull, and seem more inclined to wander aimlessly than follow Anita. Two Project security guards are futilely trying to help.

The “Leader of Responsibility” for the ship is obvious by decoration. He's also obviously not well at all. Instead of the Eldred's usual light blue coloring, the leader is turning gray.

“BC!” Anita greets him. “Am I glad you're here! Can you try talking to these Eldred? They don't seem to be listening to me!”

*What's wrong with them?*

The Eldred crew members show no sign of recognizing their surroundings. All of the crew members are losing color, fading to a dull gray.

“I'll try... Hello! I'm Bernard Campion.”

They remain silent, non-responsive. And gray.

BC walks alongside the alien. The Eldred “Leader of Responsibility” continues to ignore him.

“There’s no need to be so heroic,” BC tells the leader.

The Eldred leader pays no attention to BC. Instead, its eyes close. It collapses at BC’s feet.

*What the fuck?*

“Medic!” BC calls out.

Several come running, but stop in their tracks when they see the Eldred.

“Um,” the closest med tech says to BC, “we, um, we really don’t know what to do with one of these, sir.”

One of the others pushes past and kneels over the prone alien. He tries to find a sign of life, a pulse, anything. He stops and looks up at BC.

“I think he’s dead,” the med tech says.

*What?*

*Huh... looks like he is. Hard to tell.*

The Eldred does appear to be dead. Suddenly, the Eldred next to the leader’s body also collapses.

*Shit! Another one down!*

Then the other Eldred drop, one by one, like a cluster of fuzzy gray dominoes, apparently from highest rank to lowest. BC and the med techs check the bodies for any signs of life.

*All dead.*

BC straightens up from the last body.

The med techs line the alien corpses up in a row.

BC looks back over the row of dead Eldred lying on the ground and shakes his head.

*Why? What is this?*

*I’ve heard of some animals that die in captivity. Maybe they’re like that? Weird. It’s unusual. They wouldn’t even speak. Why is that?*

“BC?” Anita calls over to him. He straightens up, fights back an upwelling, emotional urge to let tears start flowing.

*Why is it hitting me like this? I don’t really know. Just hits me kind of... funny?*

“What is it, Anita?” he asks in a tired voice.

“What did we do wrong?” She asks him, obviously pained.

“I don’t know. Maybe they just can’t live in captivity.”

“They were acting so strangely. I’ve never seen them so oblivious.”

“It’s funny. I can see a battle in space, see one of their ships blow up and not feel much of anything. But to see them collapse and die right in front of you like that...” BC doesn’t know how to finish, what to say. He shakes his head again.

“I’m sorry, BC,” Anita says.

“Sorry? Why should you be sorry? It’s not your fault.” “I know, but I’m sorry this has put a damper on the victory, our capture of their ship,” she tells him. “I can see it on your face, in your eyes. This really is affecting you.”

“I’m fine,” BC says. “But thanks for reminding me we do have something to celebrate... How about we do dinner?”

She eyes him suspiciously, but then she actually smiles.

“You’re on. See you at eight?”

“Eight it is!” BC agrees. He leaves Anita in the landing bay and heads for the asteroid base’s control center to see what’s become of Dolomay’s actual forces.

*They were on their way into our neck of the woods... can’t allow our victory here to distract us from him. Wouldn’t be good to let him to surprise us.*

“Dolomay’s ships are gone,” a tech at the center informs him. “We tracked them as they came out of their Transpace jumps. They were hanging back. Seemed like they were watching us battle the Eldred. When the Eldred jumped away, they took off, too.”

“Well... keep your eyes open. We can’t be sure if they went after the Eldred, or if they’re just

trying to fake us out.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Keep me posted.”

*I wonder who Dolomay wants to attack more? Us? Or the Eldred?*

BC and Anita meet for dinner in Van Kilner’s old arboretum. Anita makes arrangements for food to be delivered from the Project’s kitchens. BC finds a table and chairs so they have places to sit and something to eat off.

BC and Anita sit across from each other at the table, looking at the steam rising from the food, looking around at the vegetation, but not really looking at each other. Anita breaks the silence.

“Well. Guess we should ladle this stuff out and eat, huh?”

“Guess so,” BC agrees. They spoon out portions onto their dishes and pass the food between them in awkward silence.

*Damn. I don’t know what to say.*

“Looks good,” BC sputters out lamely.

“Really? I guess it’s okay,” she says.

They eat quietly.

*This is so lame. Gotta say something...*

“We did pretty good today, getting that Eldred ship. Everybody did really well. We fooled the Eldred,” BC says with some pride. “And Dolomay stayed out of the way.”

*Trying to start a conversation over dinner...*

“We did *well*, we really did,” Anita agrees. “And Krish and Dell haven’t been heard from since they stashed that ship away for study this afternoon!”

“Are they okay?” BC asks with a hint of alarm in his voice.

“Oh. Yeah, they’re fine! It’s just an expression, BC, sorry.”

“Stop apologizing!” He laughs. “Forget about them for now. There’s more I want to talk to you about...” BC is cut off by the sound of the com cutting through.

“Mr. Champion? The UTZ Council is on the line, priority call. Sorry to interrupt you.”

“Put them through,” BC says with a sigh. “Champion here, go ahead.”

“Champion? It’s Wentworth. It’s bad, getting worse. We need you back on Earth.”

“Right. When?”

“Now would be good. There’s something wrong. The plague vaccine doesn’t seem to be working for everyone, not anymore. I’m calling an emergency meeting of the UTZ council!”

“You are?”

“Actually, no,” Wentworth corrects himself. “*You* ! How soon can you be back here?”

Anita is already boxing up their dinner and clearing the table.

“How soon is now?” BC asks rhetorically. Anita gives him a slightly disgusted look. “What?”

“Nothing!” she insists.

*Right. It’s never ‘nothing’! Even I know better than that!*

“Champion?” Wentworth asks over the com.

“I’m on my way, Champion out,” he says, ending the communication. He looks over at Anita.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She isn’t looking at him, avoids eye contact as she tells him, “You should get going. Here,” she says, finally looking his way as she hands him the box with the rest of the dinner they were sharing. “You can eat it on your way there. I... I’ve gotta get going too,” she tells him. She ducks out of the arboretum before BC can respond.

*Great.*

As BC heads back to Earth space, he gets in contact with the other surviving members of the UTZ Council, organizing a meeting on the Moon at Lunar Prime.

*Back to the moon, once again.*

“It’s the safest place for now,” BC tells each council member. Lunar Prime has thrived under the leadership of Governor Amanda Erskine.

*In a way, she’s fulfilling the promise of Meredith McEntyre that I cut short. She’s turned out to be a true leader. Keeps Lunar Prime thriving despite the plague and the war.*

*The Eldred may have started the plague by planting it on the delegates at my peace conference on Lunar Prime, but she’s kept it contained there. Under control.*

*Back to the moon.*

BC’s trip is short as he travels by Stinger ship, using the Transpace drive to quickly flash from the asteroids to Earth’s orbit. He’s soon back in the buildings and tunnels of Lunar Prime. He enjoys a walk under the city’s main dome through the atrium.

*MMMMm... I love the way it smells in here, like dirt and plants, the moisture in the air... look at those trees! They’ve really grown.*

*The Moon. Funny. Once again, it kind of feels like home.*

He heads for the Vatican Mission. Pope John Paul the Fourth, M’Bekke, makes sure there are rooms available there for BC whenever he needs them.

The actual UTZ Council meetings won’t start until tomorrow “morning” on Lunar Prime. BC has time to catch up on some sleep before the rest of the council arrives.

There is a call from Anita waiting for him as he gets up the next morning.

“BC! Krish and Dell surfaced just long enough to update me with some wild news. Call me when you can. Bye!”

After he refreshes himself and gets dressed, BC calls Anita back.

“BC! You’ll never guess what Krish and Dell found on the Eldred Ship!”

*No, I never will.*

“What?” he asks, playing nice.

“Project Technology!”

“What do you mean, ‘Project Technology’?”

“They were using our stuff!” she says, with a mix of curiosity and disappointment detectable in her voice.

“Maybe you should be flattered,” BC offers. “They’re adapting your technology.”

“They’re using our Transpace drive!” she exclaims.

“Well,” BC says, trying to bright side it, “You must have superior technology... in some cases.”

*This is not the news I hoped for. I want their superior tech. Don’t tell me they only more advanced than we are!*

“Great,” Anita says sarcastically, not appreciating his lightness. “It’s a weird thing, though. Aside from our drives, Krish and Dell tell me everything else on board, most of the other parts of the ship, seem to be thousands of years old! Just about everything’s old, and it’s all *verywell* maintained. Even our stuff is integrated seamlessly.”

“Just how old is their ship?”

“I’m beginning to wonder just how many times over the ship has been replaced piece by piece,” Anita ponders aloud. “This ship could be... well, ancient.”

“Tell me,” BC asks, “Will any of this make it any easier to reverse engineer their technology?”

“Maybe. Gotta hope so, huh?” she says with a hint of optimism.

“Well, I’ve gotta go meet with the council. Keep me informed, okay?”

“I will. Enjoy your meetings.”

“Right. Pretty unlikely. I’ll talk to you soon, Anita.”

“Take care, BC,” she says, and signs off.

The UTZ council meetings are actually mercifully brief. BC asks the council why there are still

people dying of the plague on Earth if Wentworth says he's got a cure. There is no answer.

BC shares his suspicions.

"I think the Eldred have let the plague continue to 'evolve' to its next stage, to take out another segment of the population unfortunate enough to share some randomly chosen genetic marker," he tells them. "It may be a result of our refusing to go along with their restrictions. The war is apparently over, but we haven't stayed within Jupiter's orbit, haven't withdrawn from our interstellar outposts. And Dolomay is ranging across the systems out there. They no doubt hold him against us."

The council agrees this could be happening, and votes to continue fighting the plague. UTZ and Project scientists will be sent back to their labs to see why their vaccine isn't working.

The shipyard in the asteroids is still off the books, so to speak, known to only BC and Wentworth among the council, so some of the councilors ask about rebuilding the old shipyard on Earth. Wentworth assures them this project is under way.

BC is quizzed on the Project, and answers as vaguely as possible. The UTZ Council is not what it was. No one challenges BC's vagaries. No one pushes to have him explain in more depth. No one brings up his press conference with the aliens again, either. Although he had broken every agreement of the previous council meetings, no one challenges BC now.

In his closing statements, BC reiterates his steady encouragement to the rest of the UTZ Council to recruit more potential pilots and troops to bolster the UTZ forces.

"What good will it do us to build ships if we don't have the men and women to fly them?" he asks the council. It's been two long days of meaningless meetings dealing with dull generalities that don't really seem to bear upon reality.

*Two days of this wasting my time. Well, we need the manpower. Maybe that will be the good that comes out of all of this.*

"And so, in closing, I ask again that you please try to motivate your constituents to join the UTZ forces and help fight for the very survival of our species! Thank you."

*Morons. God help us all.*

BC gets back to his rooms to find an urgent call waiting from Anita.

"BC! It's Dolomay! He's here... he attacking us at the old Project base!"

*And I'm wasting my time here.*

"You know what to do," he says to her. "Scramble all the stingers you can, keep him away from the ships on the line, and keep him from landing on the base. You know he's going to try to land and raid for supplies and any tech he can grab! Worse comes to worse, seal the place up, blast your way out and come back here. But try to keep him at bay with those stingers!"

"I know, they're scrambled," she says. "But BC, he's got more ships! There are five now!"

"Five? More ships, huh?"

"Guess he's been recruiting," Anita says. "I don't know, BC. All I know is that he's got five ships, maybe six, and they're here now!"

"If I leave here now, I don't know that I'll get there in time to do anything," BC tells her, thinking out loud.

"I don't think you..." Anita is cut off.

"Anita?" BC tries to reconnect. The signal returns.

"Sorry, BC, I gotta go. Dolomay's trying to land on the base! Man, you called that one," she concedes. "Guess we will need reinforcements! We're going to fight, hide out, or die trying here if we have to. Gotta run!"

"Good luck," he wishes her.

"Thanks, we need it. Good luck to all of us!" She signs off. BC relays her request for reinforcements to nearby UTZ forces who might have a chance of getting there in time to help them.

*It's all I can do. Wouldn't do any good to hop in a ship to try to ride to the rescue. Never get there in time, not the way Dolomay works.*

*Good luck, Anita!*

*What's that?*

“Bernard Champion?”

*Someone at the door?*

“BC?” A voice calls from the speaker in the wall. Someone is calling him from the other side of the door to his rooms.

“Who is it?”

“It’s the Governor, Amanda Erskine. May I come in?”

*Governor Erskine?*

“Sure, come in. Door open,” he says. Amanda Erskine stands in the doorway. With her straight, short hair and her pantsuit, she cuts a businesslike figure, although the conservative suit still manages to flatter her.

“Hello, Father Champion,” she greets him.

“Governor Erskine! What a pleasure,” BC says, gesturing for her to come in. “And please, you know, call me BC, everyone does.”

“Thank you, BC,” she says as she enters the room. She waits for the door to close behind her before she speaks again.

*A cautious woman.*

“I’m here because there’s been another attack on the Moon by UIN forces. Your UTZ people told me the UIN wasn’t a worry anymore!”

“They aren’t! It can’t be the UIN. When did this happen? I didn’t feel anything,” BC is confused.

“They didn’t hit Lunar Prime, that’s why you didn’t feel it. They attacked *your* Project base, on the other side of the Moon.”

“I didn’t hear anything about this,” BC admits. “Were there any survivors?” he asks, a little stunned.

“Don’t know,” she tells him. “The place was leveled.”

“So... wait, when did this happen?” he asks again, as he tries to sort out the news.

“About two hours ago. We’re just getting on site reports back now. Looks like they landed, looted, and then leveled the base, destroying whatever they left behind. We leave the place pretty much alone, so we didn’t know anything was happening until our motion detectors and seismic detectors started going crazy during what must have been their final bombardment. We sent some ships rushing over, but by the time they arrived the UIN ships were gone.”

She shakes her head and then looks BC in the eye.

“You told us the UIN was through attacking! I didn’t even think they were capable of an attack, after what the Eldred did to them.” There’s a puzzled look on her face.

“It’s not the UIN,” BC tries to explain. “It’s the guy I was talking about in my press conference with those aliens. Dolomay.”

“But we registered the presence of several ships! You said he just had two,” she insists.

“I’ve since been informed that he’s got more ships flying with him, at least five ships. He’s using them to attack The Project base right now.”

“Was everything you told the public in that press conference true?”

“It was. Simplified, but true. Those aliens that were with me, the Flaze and the Domo, kept our race’s development hidden from the Eldred. If the Eldred had found us early enough, they would have wiped us out!”

“I remember you told me something about all this, the Eldred and the plague,” she says. “If I understand you right, Dolomay is a member of the race known as the Ancient Enemy who has somehow come back to life and is now recruiting human beings as his followers?”

“Pretty much. Dolomay is ruthless! One reason the Eldred spared at least some of us is that we have empathy, love, religion, at least the capacity of living a little beyond ourselves. The old race didn’t have that capacity. Probably because they didn’t need to guess what other people were thinking,” BC tells her.

“What?”

“Dolomay and the Ancient Enemy look a lot like we do, but they’re different. They lack our

capacity to believe, and our capacity to love. They were a cold and competitive people, if Dolomay is any indication. But they were mentally more advanced than we are. They have the ability to read minds, at least surface thoughts, and to communicate directly, mind to mind.”

“That’s a little farfetched, isn’t it?”

“Granted. It is a little overwhelming,” BC admits. “But it gets crazier. The reason I know this is true... well, I’ve heard Dolomay in my mind. He’s spoken to me, mind-to-mind, and he’s tried to attack me with his mind.” Erskine just stares at BC. “I know, I know. It sounds insane,” he admits.

“Why you?” she asks BC. “Why should he talk to you, mind-to-mind?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” BC admits. “I think I might be more, I don’t know, I guess ‘*sensitive*’, to his mental powers. You see, a while back I was taken prisoner by a religious cult. They dosed me with some pretty heavy psychotropic drugs as they tried to brainwash me. I resisted and survived, but it’s as if part of my mind was rewired, and now I can ‘hear’ him in my mind.”

*I’m not telling her I thought I talked to God...*

“After being repeatedly dosed with their drugs I started getting monster headaches. After a while they began to clear, but as they went away I began to sense something, I began to feel another presence *out there*. And it turned out to be Dolomay. It’s almost as if I’m the only one tuned into the wavelengths he’s broadcasting on. I can sense him probing, casting out, and seeking for us, for our minds. And when I noticed him, he noticed me. I had to find a way to keep him out as he tried to take over my mind.”

“Are you sure you were successful?” she asks BC. “Maybe he’s using you, listening and watching us through you.”

*A smart cautious woman.*

“I’d like to think I was successful. I could feel his frustration at my blocking him. When he reaches out, my mind feels... *violated* by the oily touch of *his* mind, his thoughts. It’s kind of hard to put into words, but I know it when he’s there. I think.”

“It doesn’t hurt to be careful,” Erskine says. “So where did they dig up this Dolomay? How is he still around? Shouldn’t he be a million years dead and gone?”

“He should be. Evidently, he was placed in suspended animation as a punishment for his crimes by the Ancient Enemy a million years ago.”

“Oh great! You mean... this guy was a criminal *among* cutthroats? Even *they* thought he was bad?”

“Looks that way. The Eldred discovered that another alien race possessed a capsule with Dolomay inside. They brought Dolomay, inside his capsule, back to Eldray and kept him there, his continued existence a secret. When the Eldred brought *me* to Eldray, my proximity somehow triggered the capsule’s controls... and Dolomay thawed out.”

“I remember when you were steeling yourself to go visit them. You had no idea about this stuff with Dolomay then, did you?”

“I had never even heard of the Ancient Enemy.”

“How did the Eldred allow this to happen?”

“They didn’t put Dolomay in the suspended animation. They just *kept* him in it, without really understanding the technology of the Ancient Enemy that was keeping him under... and that, ultimately, woke him up.”

“This would almost be comical if he wasn’t so deadly,” she observes.

“I try to laugh at it so I don’t cry,” BC tells her. “As for Dolomay’s mind control, and whether he’s watching through me? I’d bet he’s pretty tied up using his abilities keeping his little fleet together right now. And why would he be trying to get to me and through my blocks I’ve put up against him, when all the rest of humanity, every other human mind, is open to him?”

“Great.”

“What?”

“Now we have to suspect everyone,” she points out.

“And I thought I was paranoid,” he says. “Well... it’s probably wise to be paranoid, at this point.”

An alarm begins to go off in BC's rooms, startling both Erskine and BC.  
"BC! It's Anita!" Her voice calls out from the com on emergency override.  
"Anita? Where are you?"  
"We're here! In orbit of the Moon, BC!"

## Chapter Eleven

"We bailed on the asteroid base, at least for now!" Anita explains to BC over the com. "I piled everyone I could into the biggest transport we had and we blasted our way out! I didn't want to go to... anywhere else, you know? So we came to the Moon. But we went to our old base... I don't know, BC. It's just gone – destroyed!"

BC and Erskine exchange a knowing glance.

"I just got that news from the governor here," BC tells her. "Dolomay attacked about two hours ago, raided and destroyed the place."

"Great. So where are we supposed to land?" Anita asks over the com.

"Have them land at Lunar Prime," Erskine says. "I'll clear it for you."

"Thank you, governor," Anita thanks her and signs off.

"Com?" Amanda Erskine calls out loud.

"Com," the system responds.

"Give me the port," Erskine says.

"Port Authority here. Oh, hello Governor Erskine!" the speakers ring out with the man's voice.

"Burt, we've got a ship here from the Project. Coming in. A big one. There may be others coming, too. Clear them, bring them in. Make sure to get their ships berthed properly, got that?" she commands.

"Got it," he says over the com. "Done and done, Madame Governor. Over and out."

"You heard the man," Erskine says to BC. "Done and done."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I figure it's the least I can do. You're telling me we've got a whole race of aliens that want us dead. Never mind an interstellar, telepathic sociopath. We humans need to stick together, huh?" She smiles, a serious grin. "So... when are you getting the UIN on our side?"

"Hah!" BC laughs an ironic laugh. "That is a good question. They're kind of on board already. Dolomay used the people of Mars as Ibn Al-Dolomé. I managed to get the Eldred to spare some of them and Mars itself, for the time being. The Eldred believe that I am in charge of Mars now, actually. Al Salid agreed to it."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Haven't you heard? Al Salid is dead," Erskine tells BC.

"What?"

"You hadn't heard the news. Well, it did just get reported."

"No, I hadn't heard," BC says.

*I just saw the guy!*

"He, uh, committed suicide," she tells him.

"Great," he sighs.

"There's a new Khalif, now. He's speaking as the new head of the UIN."

"When did this happen?"

"Today."

"Why wasn't I... never mind governor, not your fault. I'm just the head of the UTZ council... think I'd get the news..." BC shakes his head. "Our new Khalif needs to be careful. The Eldred only spared Mars because I vouched for the planet, and Al Salid backed me up. They might take the new Khalif's announcement a bad sign... if you see what I mean," BC tries to explain his thinking.

"I do," she says, conceding his point.

"I'm going to have to talk to him soon," BC says, but he's already thinking ahead.

*The Eldred won't be pleased. Gotta meet the Khalif. Let him know I'm not in way, but trying to stay in the way of the Eldred wiping out everyone on Mars!*

"Hey, thanks again for stopping by with the news about the Project base, governor," BC says. "And for being so accommodating with the ships that are arriving."

"You're welcome," she says, a disappointed look on her face. "Is that my cue to leave, then?"

BC is confused.

"Well, uh, I thought that was all you came here for. I'm sorry. Was there something else?" he apologizes.

"Actually, there was," she says. She looks him in the eye. "I was hoping we could talk about alliances. Thought we were heading in that direction," she says.

"Are you sure about that?" BC asks, half-joking. "The last governor of Lunar Prime who forged an alliance with my help ended up getting voted out of office!"

"Different people. Different times," she says matter-of-factly. Her eyebrows raise. "Can you speak for the UTZ council?"

"Maybe!" BC laughs. "Might as well. The council is pretty much useless. The meetings we've had..." he trails off. "They just haven't been that productive. Lots of talking, lots of ideas, very little action."

"Do you have control over the UTZ military?" she asks.

*Does anyone?*

*Wentworth does.*

"Personally?" he asks her. "Not exactly. Wentworth does. But he's been a solid ally since we agreed to work together, so the military shouldn't be a problem."

*Not sure where she's going with this...*

"Wentworth, huh?"

"Well, I've got control over the new Stinger ships the Project has been building. Most of them are operating under the Project at this point."

"That works," she says. "Should be good enough, anyway. Has to be..." she grows more serious, darker. "As scary as the thought might be, BC, only you, me, maybe Wentworth, a few others... we are all that's keeping everything from falling into chaos. We're holding some precarious strings, clutching some slippery last straws... pick your metaphor. We're just barely holding on," Erskine says with an edge in her voice.

"Down to us, huh? That is scary," BC admits.

"If not us, who?" she asks.

*I wish that was rhetorical...*

"I've never wanted to be anyone's last hope," BC mutters. "We need something better than the UTZ Council to face this," BC admits. "Stronger. More capable of action... Hell, able to do anything. We need a War Council."

*Where did that come from? Guess she's got me thinking...*

"A War Council?" she asks.

The door speaker pipes up.

"BC? It's Anita!"

"Come in! Door open," he says. He turns to Governor Erskine. "Here's another charter member of the War Council."

Anita walks into the room.

"Anita Capituna, meet Governor Amanda Erskine, Governor Erskine, this is Anita, my right hand at the Project."

"Hello Anita," Governor Erskine greets her. She eyes her warily. Erskine knows her from somewhere. She tries to place her as she shakes her hand. "Have we met before?"

"Hello, Governor, nice to meet you," Anita nods. "We may have met when I was working in

other capacities.”

“Anita was a spy,” BC explains to Erskine. “Masqueraded as LSC Nita Bendix. Remember? They thought she killed Governor McEntyre.”

Erskine eyes both of them coldly.

“Right. But she didn’t?”

“Nope,” BC confirms.

*Please don’t make me tell you I did!*

“I see,” Erskine says. She turns to Anita. “Has BC talked to you about his “war council” idea?”

“War council?” she asks.

“Nope,” BC says at the same time. “I only just thought of that,” he says.

“This IS war!” Anita says, her voice full of emotion. “Our ships are all safely down now, BC. We got everybody out of there. Krish and Dell escaped with... uh, everything they’ve been working on... in one of the Project’s heavy transports.”

*They escaped with the Eldred ship! Good job!*

“Good!” BC says. “Glad to hear they’re safe. Where are they?”

“Still on the transport with all the... tech they brought with them,” she says cautiously.

“She’s okay,” BC says to Anita, nodding at the governor. “She knows about everything.

Dolomay, the Eldred...”

“The ship?” Anita asks, arching an eyebrow.

“I think we *cantell* her,” BC says.

“I think you *better her*... and stop talking as if I wasn’t here!” Governor Erskine says.

“We captured an Eldred ship,” BC says to the governor. “Krish and Dell, two of the best Project scientists, are leading a team reverse-engineering the Eldred technology so we can use it to our advantage.”

“So what’s this ‘war council’?” Anita asks.

“I just thought of it,” BC admits. “After Governor Erskine and I got talking about the UTZ Council, and how ineffective they are. She was talking about alliances... and the thought of a war council occurred to me. Made up only of the people who are really responsible, capable of action and motivating the population. You,” he nods at Anita. “Me. The governor, here. Wentworth. Maybe M’Bekke, maybe Krish, Dell. Maybe even this new Khalif who’s risen up on Mars,” BC says.

“Do you think the Khalif will work with us?” Erskine asks.

“Why wouldn’t he?” BC wonders.

“Why would he?” she counters.

“A new Khalif?” Anita asks.

“There’s a new guy on Mars calling himself Khalif and Head of the UIN,” BC explains to Anita.

“He’s endangering their entire colony! What about Salid? The Eldred only spared them because you... Doesn’t he know?” Anita blurts out.

“Obviously not,” BC tells her.

“So... a war council?” the governor asks again.

“You suggested alliances... I’m merely trying to figure out the mechanics of that alliance,” BC explains.

“What happened to Al Salid?” Anita asks.

“Salid committed suicide,” Erskine informs her.

Anita nods. “Oh.”

“The man was worked over pretty badly by Dolomay,” BC speculates. “Al Salid was being manipulated and controlled by Dolomay for most of the last year or so. Must have been some pretty heavy duty mind control. Dolomay erased whole chunks of Salid’s memories. Maybe after Salid was freed of that...” BC shakes his head. “I don’t know... maybe he couldn’t live with all that he’d done as Dolomay’s pawn.”

Another alarm begins to sound.

“Now what?”

The com crackles to life.

“This is an emergency override,” the com announces. “Is the governor there?”

“I’m here,” Erskine tells the com.

“We’re getting requests for emergency assistance from Mars! They’re under attack!”

“By who?” BC and Erskine ask simultaneously.

“They say that it’s aliens... but in human ships!”

“Gotta be Dolomay. He’s on a roll,” BC figures out loud. “No time for any councils, looks like. Governor, why don’t you secure Lunar Prime? Get the Lunar Security Corps ready for an attack, just in case he comes here next. Anita?” She nods. BC continues. “Organize the Project personnel here that are non-combatants and find someplace safe where they can stay. And tell all combat personnel to scramble. Let’s try to hit Dolomay while he’s hitting them. I’m taking all the available Project fighting ships to Mars!”

BC heads for Mars with all the ships he can muster from the UTZ and Project fleets. BC’s cavalry is made up of thirty ships of varying sizes and capabilities, mostly Project ships. He looks at the reports from the planet as they make the Transpace jump to Mars. According to preliminary reports, Dolomay has five ships pounding ground targets on the surface.

The engagement is immediate and violent as soon as they reach Mars’ orbit. BC, watching the screens on the bridge of his ship, sees three of Dolomay’s craft break off to repel his cavalry’s arrival, firing up at his ships while rising up from the planet’s surface.

BOOM! BOOM!

BOOM-THANG!

BC can hear his ship both fire and take fire. The video and tactical feeds of the battle on the screens in front of him help him follow the action.

One of Dolomay’s dreadnoughts comes in close on the screen. BC watches as it’s ripped in two by a beam from another Project ship. Shrapnel and sparks ricochet off the viewscreen as the ship explodes. The screen darkens to protect their eyesight as the ship’s explosion glows intensely bright.

KANG! BOOM!

His ship is rocked sideways. BC holds on tight to avoid getting thrown from his chair.

“That ship tried to ram us!” the captain tells BC.

Their ship shakes. A low rumble echoes from the ship’s bulkheads.

“Enemy ship destroyed,” the captain says. “Almost too close, though. Fried some of our sensors. But our shields held pretty well.”

“What about the other ships? Have they broken off their surface attacks? Watch them! I’m betting they’ll come after us soon enough. Any idea what ship Dolomay’s on?”

As if in answer, a voice shouts in BC’s head.

*I KNOW YOU!*

BC “hears” Dolomay as if he was speaking in the room. BC tries to “shout” back.

*Get out!*

*OUT OF WHERE?*

*Out of my head! Out of my hair! Off of Mars... I can keep going...*

*JUST TRY AND KEEP ME OUT!*

*Okay...*

BC thinks of heavy doors closing in his mind, a trick that has worked in the past.

*Well?*

Nothing. His mind is “silent”. BC looks around the bridge, almost expecting Dolomay to pop out from behind a chair or out of a doorway. Silence.

*It worked! But where is he, really? “Felt” like he might still be down on the surface...*

“We think he’s on board one of the two ships still hitting surface targets,” the captain says. “Are you okay, BC?” he asks, sounding worried. “Your eyes just kind of rolled back in your head just then,” he tells BC.

“Fine. Dolomay’s down there. I can... feel him there.”

BANG-KOOM-THANG!

*That's another of their ships! They're done.*

BC looks up to see another of Dolomay's ships on the viewscreen, damaged and trailing a spray of sparks. The ship careens on an erratic course until it plows full on into Phobos, one of the moons of Mars.

"We've got UIN ships!" the captain cries.

"What? UIN ships?" BC has to ask.

"They've rallied some ships from down below... five or, maybe, six of them, taking off from what's left of their spaceport," the captain says.

BC watches six UIN fighter ships rush up off the surface to engage one of the two ships left. A bright flash erupts across the viewscreen.

"Oh my god - they're actually taking out one of the enemy ships! Surprised him, by the look of it," the captain says. "They got it!"

"One of Dolomay's?" BC asks.

"Yup! I mean, yes sir! Dolomay has only one ship left! And they're leaving!"

"They are?"

"Dolomay's last ship is firing up its Transpace engines!" the captain informs BC. Dolomay's ship blips off the viewscreen.

"We've got an incoming transmission," the captain says abruptly. "It's from the surface, I think. Maybe. Anyway... The 'Khalif' is on the line. He wishes to speak with you, BC," the captain says.

*Okay...*

"Put him on, please," BC says.

"Bernard Champion? I am the new Khalif, the leader of my people. And if the Eldred are listening in, as I would suppose they are, I would like to acknowledge you, Champion, as the ruler of Mars."

"Hello, Khalif. Well done. And I recognize you as the religious leader of your people just as you have recognized my control of Mars," BC says. "Just *in case* the Eldred are listening."

"I knew this Ibn Al-Dolomé, as he called himself. I did not like him," The Khalif says. "How is it that he is also your enemy?"

"Dolomay is a dangerous and powerful alien, Khalif. He possesses abilities beyond our own. Perhaps you've seen what I mean?" BC asks.

"Huh," the Khalif grunts in agreement, "perhaps I have seen... or felt, even... what you mean. I always felt... how should I put it? Unclean. I always felt unclean, somehow, after meeting with him. And he had some sort of... unnatural hold over Al Salid... which was evident."

"I'd like to fill you in on more you should know about Dolomay and the situation in general," BC tells him. "Will you join us in our war council? We're going to meet on the Moon, at Lunar Prime."

"Send me the coordinates and I will be there. Send them to my ship," the Khalif demands.

"To your ship?" BC asks, surprised. "What... you're in one of the fighters?" BC scans the screens in front of him, looking for the UIN ships, wondering which one the new Khalif is on.

"Absolutely!" the Khalif responds. "How could I ask anyone else to do what I would not?"

"I like you already," BC tells the Khalif over the com.

"I will see you on the Moon, then," the Khalif says, and he signs off.

"Send him the coordinates," BC says. "And let's get ourselves coordinated and get back there, too."

## Chapter Twelve

BC and the remaining UTZ and Project ships return to the Moon. Governor Erskine meets BC at the Lunar Prime port.

“Was it Dolomay?” she asks.

“It was. We beat him up pretty good.”

“He’s on quite a rampage.”

“He should be done for now. We took out four of his ships.”

“Good news, I guess,” the governor says to BC. “Too bad you couldn’t go five for five.”

“We tried, believe me. We did manage to talk to Mars’ new Khalif. I invited him to meet with us in our war council.”

“That I knew,” she tells him. “The ‘Khalif of the Universal Islamic Nation’ just called ahead to arrange for lodgings during his upcoming visit. He’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Good!” BC says, smiling. “Can you set up a place we can meet?”

“Will do.”

“Could your people call M’Be... the Pope? Let him know we’re meeting?”

Erskine give BC a “don’t push it” look, but then says, “Sure, we’ll call him. Go ahead, get some rest.”

Governor Erskine leaves BC to find his way to his lodgings to rest his weary bones after a busy thirty-six hour day.

Her call is his wake up call the next morning.

“Did I wake you?” she asks.

“Don’t worry about it. What is it?”

“The Khalif has arrived. He’s ready and waiting to talk to you, BC.”

“Excellent!” BC responds. “Did you set us up a meeting room somewhere?” he asks Erskine.

“Just you and the Khalif?” she asks.

“I’d like to get the whole war council together, much as we can” he tells her. “Most of what I need to fill the Khalif in on you’ve all heard before, but I want him to feel like he’s a part of something bigger. Because this *is* bigger. He needs to know that it’s more than just him and me.”

“We’ll meet in the main hall, then,” she informs him. “In one hour?”

“Sounds good.”

BC, the Khalif, Governor Erskine, Anita Capituna, Krish and Dell convene their conference in the main hall of Lunar Prime, scene of many past conferences and failed attempts at reconciling the disparate members of the human race.

*Of course, I played a part in helping those proceedings fail, at least once. Makes me wonder where we’d all be if I’d never assassinated Meredith McEntyre...*

BC smiles at the Khalif across the table from him as he reflects upon his own guilt in delaying the peace process.

“So...” the Khalif begins. “This Dolomé... he is not human, you say?”

“Dolomay is an alien, no matter what he looks like,” BC tells the Khalif. “No matter what he said while he was among your people. Dolomay has no concept of brotherhood, camaraderie, religion...” BC searches for the right words. “He looks like us, but he is truly alien. Without empathy. His people were sociopathic. No capacity to love, no ability to see the greater good, the larger whole... no insight beyond the obvious.”

“Huh,” the Khalif responds, taking it all in. “Then... how does he get people to follow him? I have seen it firsthand... people follow him like slaves!”

*Let’s see if the Khalif is open minded enough to take this in...* “Dolomay uses his *mind* to warp their wills. I would guess that’s why he made you feel ‘unclean’, Khalif. That is what I meant by powers and abilities beyond our own. He’s a very powerful telepath. He can twist the minds of men so they follow him, so they love his violence without limits. He takes men back to their animal selves, encourages that animal abandon. He makes them love *him*... though he has no love for them.” BC laughs an ironic laugh.

“He would kill any of his followers in an instant, or allow them to be sacrificed if it was to his gain, or guaranteed his own safety or satisfaction. Yet they still follow him... A brutal bunch of animal humanity.”

The Khalif steeples his hands in front of his face as he listens and thinks.

“No capacity for love,” he repeats after a time. “This makes him very dangerous, does it not?”

“Yes, it does,” BC agrees. “He doesn’t seem to feel any connection to his fellow beings.”

*This young Khalif is a little bit sharper than Al Salid...*

“Dolomay is an interstellar sociopath, as so many of his kind supposedly were,” BC tells him.

“His kind?” the Khalif asks.

BC tells the Khalif of the Ancient Enemy. He fills the UIN leader in on all the knowledge BC has of the Eldred, the Flaze and Domo, and the Ancient Enemy.

The Khalif closes his eyes and shakes his head as BC finishes. “How do we fight one so ruthless?” the Khalif asks, wondering aloud.

“Is that just a rhetorical question?” BC asks him with a challenge in his voice.

The Khalif is taken aback at first, but then he smiles.

“So... the question does not need to be rhetorical?” he asks with deep interest.

“I don’t think it does,” BC says. “We can stop him and his followers... if we work together. If we are willing to bring ourselves together as a united force.”

M’Bekke, having been summoned up from Earth by BC, enters the conference room.

“M’Bekke!” BC begins as he stands to greet the new arrival. He corrects himself. “Your holiness. John Paul the Fourth. Welcome. Your timing is impeccable!”

“Why, thank you, BC,” M’Bekke answers as he shakes BC’s extended hand. “I cannot stay long, but they told me you said this was important, so here I am.” M’Bekke looks around the table, a brief expression of surprise crossing his face when he reaches the Khalif.

“M’Bek... John Paul, sorry... may I present the new religious leader of the UIN, his holiness the Khalif?” BC introduces the two men. “John Paul, tell me, can the New catholic Church coexist peacefully with Islam?” BC asks.

“I believe we can,” M’Bekke says cautiously.

“Can Islam coexist peacefully with the New catholic Church?” BC asks the Khalif.

Again, the Khalif steeples his fingers in front of his face as he loses himself in thought. He doesn’t immediately answer. M’Bekke sits down at the table.

“Khalif?” BC prods him.

“The Prophet spoke of the other people of ‘the Book’,” the Khalif says, “speaking of both Christians and Jews. It is sometimes... ‘forgotten’... that the Prophet spoke of the other people of the Book as worthy of our love and respect,” he says slowly, deliberately, carefully weighing his words before he speaks. “I do not believe that our differences are as great as we would make them.” The Khalif brings his hands down from his face, laying them palms down on the table. “It is a lesson learned at a very high price,” he says somberly. “And yet, until the other aliens arrived, until your recent ‘press conference’, you told the people on Earth that Dolomé is UIN... why? This makes your people hate my people!”

“Well,” BC begins, thinking frantically on his feet as he tries to answer the Khalif diplomatically, “He *was* UIN. We didn’t tell our people anything. We have not labeled him UIN...”

“Your media does,” the Khalif corrects him.

“Indeed, they do,” BC admits, “But not because we tell them to. They report what they see. We haven’t tried to make him out to be UIN. He *was* UIN. I’m not sure that they believe *us* when we tell them that Dolomay is an alien, the ‘Ancient Enemy’ returned. But I have tried to make that clear, even during the press conference with the Domo and the Flaze you mentioned earlier. Did you not hear?”

“Yes, although some news reports continue to label him UIN,” the Khalif contends again.

“Your working with us will stop that,” Anita interjects. The Khalif looks at her strangely, but he nods.

“No matter, now. We can no longer afford to be enemies. We no longer have that luxury,” the Khalif agrees.

“You’re right. We don’t have the luxury of fighting amongst ourselves,” BC says. “Not anymore. Because not only do we face Dolomay, we also face the Eldred. They’ve been responsible for the

plague, and more attacks.”

The Khalif waves away the mention of the Eldred. “Of course, we know of the Eldred. The Kaliknaga, Ibn Al-Dolomé called them. They have attacked Mars repeatedly.”

“You can thank Dolomay for that,” BC says. “But just as *hetries* to keep humanity divided, we can try to help to unite humanity. Bring us all together, no matter what we look like or what we believe.”

“You are an optimist, Bernard Campion,” the Khalif says to him.

“I’m a realist,” BC disagrees. “The only *realistic* hope we have of defeating our enemies lies in a united human race.”

BC has a brainstorm. Another crazy idea occurs to him.

*Well, this should make M’Bekke’s trip up here worthwhile.*

“I want to propose something radical,” he tells the two holy men.

M’Bekke has been listening and taking it all in. He looks intently at BC. The Khalif glances from BC to the Pope and then back to BC.

“BC? I know you too well,” M’Bekke, Pope John Paul the Fourth, says with some humor.

“What are you thinking? How ‘united’ do you think humanity need be? What is it that you have in mind?”

*M’Bekke can tell I’m looking for more. Well, here goes nothing...*

“Yes,” the Khalif says. “What is the question you are *not* yet asking?”

“Well,” BC starts. But he pauses before he continues, unsure of how to say what he wants to say, and unsure of the receptiveness of his audience. “What I’m about to propose is so radical that you two may shoot me down immediately.”

“Go on,” M’Bekke encourages him.

“Yes, please, go on,” the Khalif agrees.

“Could we... can we possibly... unify our religions? Unite Christianity and Islam?”

M’Bekke and the Khalif are struck dumb by BC’s bold idea. Both stare back at BC in silence.

“I did not see that coming,” Krish chimes in.

“What? What are you thinking, BC? Did you call me up here under false pretenses?” M’Bekke challenges him.

“This is not what I expected either,” The Khalif says as he shakes his head.

“I know, it just occurred to me, but hear me out,” BC tells them. “We, all of us here, are the leaders of our people... as scary as that prospect might be.”

“Yes, it is scary that we are being led by a madman!” M’Bekke says in disbelief.

“Our numbers have dwindled since the plague, and the attacks on Mars,” BC says. “Shouldn’t it be easier to find some common ground?”

“When the number of followers drops in any religion, the remaining believers tend to grow more extreme, not more open,” the Khalif observes. “I do not think your logic holds,” he tells BC.

“But... can’t we start with the fact that you believe in the same God? You do, don’t you? I mean ‘Allah’, ‘Yahweh’, ‘Jehovah’; it’s the same God under different names, isn’t it?” BC asks them.

Neither M’Bekke, nor the Khalif answers BC. Each shifts uneasily in his seat, hoping the other comments first. BC decides to plow ahead on this sudden brainstorm.

“Why can’t we put it out there?” he asks. “Allah is the Christian God, is Yahweh, is the Jewish God, and Vice Versa; Jesus and Mohammed were both gifted teachers of God...” BC leaves the thought hanging open.

“Perhaps something along these lines could be done. But we should not go *too* !” the Khalif cautions.

“I don’t know,” M’Bekke says cautiously, acting every inch as Pope John Paul the Fourth.

“Islam does not recognize the Trinity. Jesus is no part of Allah, but he is a third of *our* God.”

“Ah,” the Khalif says. He leans back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of his face, but his sneer is still evident. “There it is. The simple arrogance of the Christians.

*What made me think this was going to work? How far are they willing to go?*

“Gentlemen!” BC interrupts before M’Bekke can answer. “Could I back this up? Please? There’s got to be some common ground here. Has to be. Khalif, if Mohammed taught respect for the

people of 'The Book', then isn't Allah Yahweh?"

"Some teachers say yes, some no. Others are unsure."

"And M'Bekke, Yahweh is the God of Jesus Christ, isn't he?"

"Huh, why, of course he is, BC!" M'Bekke answers. He again grows cautious. "Why do you ask?"

"The Jews who believe in Yahweh do not believe that Jesus is a part of him, one-third of God, either. Do they?"

"No, of course not."

"And you have no quarrel with the Jews, correct? Their God is your God?"

"Yes," M'Bekke nods. "I see your point. But that does not mean this will be an easy thing. The NcC itself is still very young. People don't like their religion to keep changing on them. Makes them very grumpy."

"Quite a concession," the Khalif comments. "Much nicer than the Evangelicals who used to accuse us of worshipping 'Jubal, the Moon God'."

"See?" BC says hopefully, "We're getting somewhere!"

"Mm-hmm," M'Bekke agrees tentatively.

"But where are we going?" the Khalif challenges BC.

"How about this?" BC continues. "We put out a new holy book, a joint religious book made up of parts of the Bible, the Koran, and other writings..."

"No way! You *are* crazy." M'Bekke protests immediately.

"Out of the question!" the Khalif says simultaneously.

"Wait!" BC stops them, "Hear me out! This isn't a book to *replace* anyone's holy book! What I'm proposing is a book in addition to those you already hold sacred. A book we can give to alien races when they ask us, 'What do you humans believe?' A book welcome in every church, synagogue, temple, mosque, approved by every faith as an expression of what we, as humans, believe."

"That's still a very tall order," M'Bekke tells him. "What would you put in it?"

"Yes, what 'parts' of the Koran would you include?" the Khalif asks pointedly.

BC smiles. "I have no idea."

"What?"

"Huh?"

"I'm certainly not qualified to decide!" BC says, and he laughs. "Let your theologians duke it out! Give them something to keep them busy. Get them talking to each other, instead of labeling each other monsters."

The two men shake their heads.

"Maybe it can't be done," BC admits. "But we should at least set the process in motion... as a grand gesture of reconciliation!"

The Khalif and M'Bekke stare at BC in disbelief.

"You are truly insane, BC," M'Bekke says.

"I don't know," the Khalif says, still thinking about BC's proposal.

"Why not try to create a new world for humankind?" BC asks them. "This could be a path to peaceful coexistence."

"But..." the Khalif begins to speak, but stops himself.

"I really don't think we can do this, BC," M'Bekke says. "In all seriousness."

"M'Bekke, even if we can't, we still have to try, don't we? Khalif?"

"Yes?"

"Are you willing to try?"

He pauses a moment, and then speaks.

"I am."

*Really?!*

"Great! So, then, M'Bekke, Pope John Paul... why not? Let's at least give it a try."

"I'll... we'll see. I'll see if I can set the wheels in motion," M'Bekke answers.

“Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but I’ll take it,” BC says. “It’s better than a ‘no!’ ... can I make an announcement? Some kind of public statement?”

“Well, I don’t know about tha...” M’Bekke begins protesting.

“Yes,” the Khalif says.

“Great! I’ll take that as two yeses!” BC says.

“I didn’t...” M’Bekke starts, but then stops. He gives in. “Okay. Go ahead. Make your statement. I’ll make sure we send representatives, theologians, whatever, to whatever discussions you call for.”

“Thank you, M’Bekke. This is a groundbreaking moment, gentlemen!”

“Indeed,” the Khalif says. He rises to his feet and extends his hand to shake BC’s.

BC shakes the Khalif’s hand. He looks over at M’Bekke hopefully. M’Bekke glares back briefly, but then smiles and stands, extending his hand to BC. BC then steps back, giving the other two men the opportunity to shake each other’s hands.

After the briefest hesitation, and a glance at the rest of the war council looking on in anticipation, the Khalif of the UIN and Pope John Paul the Fourth of the NcC shake hands.

“Hold on a second,” BC asks the two. “Krish? Can you make sure we get footage of this?”

The scientist pulls out a recording cube and places it on the tabletop.

“Okay... cameras are recording... Now!”

“Smile, gentlemen, smile!” BC says past a grin of his own. He stands behind and between the two others, one hand on the shoulder of each man over their shaking hands.

*Never underestimate the power of a good photo op!*

“That’s enough, Krish.”

“They’re off!” the scientist says cheerfully.

BC turns to the Pope.

“M’Bekke, now we’ll discuss some matters of state. I promise, I did call you up here as a member of our war council.”

“Thank you, BC”

“Let’s talk about Mars.”

The Khalif turns to BC. “What are these matters of state we need to discuss?” He doesn’t let BC answer, but instead continues on, “As I stated before: I recognize you as the civil authority in charge of Mars, and you recognize me as the spiritual leader of the Universal Islamic Nation, our UIN. We are in agreement, are we not?”

“We are in agreement. Are you willing to sign documents to that effect?” BC asks him. “Let’s put it in writing, put it out there, show everyone humanity is united – why not?” He tries persuading the Khalif.

“Fine. Draw them up and I will read them, and sign them as warranted.”

“Great!” BC is elated. But doubt creeps quickly back in and he grows more cautious. “Why are you being so agreeable?” he asks the Khalif.

“What choice do I have? We have few ships left thanks to the attacks by the Eldred and Dolomay, and few people left thanks to the plague. The few meager supplies we receive come from you and the UTZ. I can offer my people religious instruction and hope through the Prophet, from Allah, may he always be praised. But I cannot pretend we can fight you any longer. We’ve gained nothing by fighting! And so, we follow your... er, leadership,” he says, looking down at the table top. He looks back up, looks BC in the eye. “But we will not change who we are! Islam will not change for you, Bernard Campion. We will cooperate, but we will not compromise who we are inside. Know this, even as we cooperate on your new book.”

“I don’t ask you to change who you are inside,” BC insists. “I don’t question your spiritual leadership, Khalif. That’s between you and the people of your faith. The book I propose will be what you will it to be, not what I want. It may not even come into being if we can’t all agree on what’s in it... but we’ll see, huh? It’s an exercise in trying to get along, in tolerance. Instead of intolerance,” BC smirks. “Get it? In tolerance... Intolerance?”

“Ugh, I can’t believe you’re cracking a joke,” Anita groans. Krish snickers. Dell remains silent, as does Governor Erskine. M’Bekke tries to hide a grin.

“Just trying to lighten the mood a little,” BC says defensively, looking around the table.

The Khalif is actually smiling.

“No, that is fine. I like good wordplay,” the Khalif says. His smile grows almost mischievous. “And even bad wordplay like *that* makes me smile.”

BC grins.

*He has a sense of humor! There is hope...*

“I’ll take what I can get,” BC says, meaning it on many levels.

“Indeed,” the Khalif answers, his smile replaced by a knowing look as he ponders the many meanings. “All is submission to the will of Allah,” he says after a pause. “You seem to have his favor, at the moment.”

“You think so?” BC asks. “I hope so!”

“I pray it is so,” the Khalif says. “Otherwise, all is lost. Allah be praised.”

“Indeed. Allah be praised,” BC agrees.

The Khalif raises an eyebrow, but nods in appreciation of BC’s declaration. Then he leans in towards BC and speaks conspiratorially, almost whispering, “I hope you can do this. I hope we can all pull together and win. But I have serious doubts. And these aliens are all ruthless. Do you really think we can beat them?”

“I’ll level with you. I don’t know,” BC answers in a slightly louder voice. “But we’re working on it. The Project scientists,” he gestures over at Anita, Krish and Dell, “have been dissecting a captured Eldred ship. We’re learning more about them every day. We’ve found that they may be technically more advanced than us in some ways, but they have no imagination. That gives us an edge! The Eldred, like Dolomay, don’t have religion. They don’t seem to know love! I think these things give us power, as long as we use them for our own good, to unite us, instead of to divide us. We have the power of love. We have the power of Allah. And we have the gift of imagination we can draw from. These give me hope!”

“I hope you are right,” the Khalif says, nodding, “though I sense you are indulging in hyperbole.”

“What is truth?” BC asks.

“Pontius Pilate?” the Khalif responds. “I’m not sure he’s a good model for you to be quoting.” He laughs.

“You know Christian Scripture?” BC asks, surprised.

“Don’t look so surprised! I am a student of many religions,” the Khalif informs him.

BC smiles.

“What?” the Khalif asks.

“What could be better than a student of many religions, helping to shape a book reflecting all of them?” BC asks rhetorically. “Perhaps you are the perfect person... the right person, in the right place and at the right time!”

“That is funny,” the Khalif says, rising from the table. “I was hoping the same was true of you,” he says to BC.

BC stands up as he sees the Khalif is preparing to leave.

“Khalif, when can we sign the documents?”

“Prepare them, and then contact me. We should sign them on Mars, I should think.”

“I think you’re right,” BC agrees. “So... I’ll see you there soon?”

“Soon. Bring your cameras. I’m sure you’ll want ‘footage’ for the news,” the Khalif says with a minor hint of disdain in his voice. “Until then, good day,” he nods a brief bow, turns and leaves.

BC sits back down and smiles.

“That went better than I could have hoped,” he says to those still at the table, Erskine, Anita, M’Bekke, Krish and Dell.

M’Bekke stands up to leave.

“I must attend to matters back on Earth, back at Vatican City,” he tells them. “And soon, I’ll have a whole new batch of problems to attend to, thanks to your crazy ideas, BC! A new holy book...”

this will not go over well.” He smiles at BC despite his words. “I thank you all. I’m sure we’ll meet again soon, and you can all call me at the Vatican any time. Thank you,” he says. He gives BC a small nod, turns, and leaves the meeting room.

BC looks back from the door.

“The new Khalif seems almost reasonable,” Anita says with a hint of surprise in her voice.

“I thought he would be the tough one! I was surprised M’Bekke was so... resistant,” BC admits. “The Curia must be getting to him!”

Erskine gets up from the table.

“This has all been fascinating. Can’t wait to see if this goes anywhere. What mankind hasn’t been able to do for 1500 or so years, you think you’ve pulled off in a matter of hours? We’ll see. But I’ve got a Moon to run. So, if you’ll excuse me?”

“Certainly, governor,” BC tells her. “Thank you for attending.”

“Keep me in the loop, huh?” she asks.

“Of course,” BC assures her. He watches her leave.

*Hmmm... what about the Moon? Independent. Like Erskine. Should probably stay that way. Allied, but independent. Erskine is stable, wants the best for her people. We can probably count on her.*

*Our love and our imagination. Our greatest weapons? So, then... are we doomed or what?*

“Were you just staring at her ass?” Anita asks BC.

*Jeesh! Speaking of imagination...*

“What? What kind of question was that? I was thinking about her, I mean, the Moon, you know, as an ally!”

“While you were staring at her ass,” Krish interjects unhelpfully.

“I was staring off into space!” BC protests.

“Yeah, the space where her ass was,” Anita says. Suddenly, she snorts, and breaks out laughing. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to, you know, ‘lighten the mood a little’?”

“Joking? What? Now you’re mocking me? This council has really degenerated here. I get no respect!” BC protests.

“I suggest you adjourn the meeting while you still cling to even a thread of respect,” Dell offers.

“Meeting adjourned!” BC says, louder than he needs to.

“Well done,” Dell says dryly, the hint of a smirk on his long face.

“Enough meetings,” Krish exclaims. “Let’s get back to ripping that ship apart!”

Krish and Dell take off to get back to work on the Eldred ship. BC and Anita are left alone in the cavernous conference hall.

“I wasn’t looking at her ass,” BC insists, again.

“What? Do you think I’m jealous or something?” Anita says. BC hears a little nervous tremble in her voice.

“Maybe? I don’t know,” he shakes his head.

“Don’t flatter yourself!” she says with a smirk.

BC walks around the table to stand next to Anita.

“What?” she says, playing ignorant.

“Just thinking about our greatest weapons,” he tells her. “Imagination and lo...”

“Shhh...” she says, closing the distance between them and holding a finger up to his lips. She looks around, then back at BC. She lets her finger drop as she leans in to kiss him. “Don’t say the ‘L’ word just now,” she says as BC kisses her back.

*Okay... I won’t say it. But what else should I call it?*

They lose themselves for a few minutes, but finally separate. BC looks at Anita, smiling.

“What?” She says.

“Nothing,” BC answers. “I just can’t stop smiling. Perma-grin. Hey, you’re smiling, too.”

“I am?” she asks, and she tries to stop. She can’t. She tries to look serious but a grin cracks out across her face.

“Why not allow ourselves a little happiness?” BC asks her. “We don’t have to be serious all the time.”

“I feel like I do,” Anita says. “I’ve always been... I was always the serious little girl.”

She looks down at the floor. This time her smile does drop. BC reaches over to gently lift her face up.

“Hey,” he says to her softly. “There will be plenty of time to be serious later.” He leans in and they kiss again.

“Come back to my rooms?” he asks her when they break apart again.

“Yeah,” she says quietly. She grabs hold of his hand and squeezes it tight. They walk out of the hall and back to BC’s rooms, together.

## Chapter Thirteen

The com alarm goes off and wakes BC up from a sound sleep. He wakes up alone. Anita left yesterday. She headed out to the asteroids, back to oversee the Project operations out there.

*Glad she was able to spend the time here that she did. She can only do so much from the Moon. Still, the weeks just flew right by.*

The original Project asteroid base was trashed pretty badly by Dolomay in his raid two months ago, but the shipyard and the base on Ceres are up and running. Anita had to get back out there to keep the operation humming along.

He misses her sleeping beside him.

BC and Anita spent most of their off hours together during the last two months, as the Project regrouped on the Moon. It was nice to have Anita around for the holidays. She and BC managed to both work and play together, without it getting awkward.

It’s been a good couple of months. Now the Project scientists have headed back out to the asteroids, this time to Ceres. They went public with Ceres Station, now officially known as the new base of The Project.

BC smiles as he gets ready to face the day, thinking about Anita as he gets refreshed and dressed.

*So far, so good. We keep it all business all day, let ourselves go after hours. We have fun. Sometimes I’m surprised at her stamina. Man, it’s like she’s still trying to kill me... by wearing me out! It’s probably just this initial rush, the first blush, whatever you call it.*

*Just don’t call it ‘love’ around Anita! I think she planned for the Project to leave just before Valentines Day on purpose...*

*She doesn’t like the word, but I do think I love that woman.*

*Love and imagination, our best weapons against Dolomay and the Eldred.*

Dolomay has disappeared for the time being. He took a beating, losing all but one ship. BC and his allies assume he’s gone to ground, found a base to hide in to lick his wounds and regroup. He’s been quiet. He hasn’t returned to the Project asteroid base. There’s no telling where he is. The Domo and The Flaze have not been complaining, so he hasn’t been hitting their bases.

The Eldred have kept their presence known, but haven’t attacked again. They have scout ships which appear near Mars every day but don’t engage other ships.

The Eldred are also keeping a menacing fleet presence near the Project base at Cat’s Eye. Several Project ships have had Eldred “escorts” as they traveled to the outer bases, Crankshaft, Rigel Four and Dimwit included.

*We never agreed to remain inside of the orbit Jupiter, did we? Even the UTZ Council was smarter than that. Ah, the UTZ Council...*

The UTZ Council hasn’t been meeting. BC’s war council has met more often. The war council

meets in person. No one attends over the com, for risk of eavesdropping.

Wentworth finally joined. The Khalif comes when he can, as does M'Bekke. Governor Erskine attends often. The Project crew did... until they all left yesterday

*Maybe we need a new meeting place.*

*There's the com again.*

The com alarm is going off.

"Yeah?" BC answers.

"Campion? Erskine here. We've got company."

*Oh shit! Here we go!*

"The Eldred? Are they attacking? Here?"

"No. Oh, no! Not the Eldred! Don't worry, it's not an attack!" she tries to calm him down when she realizes she's alarmed him.

BC's heart slows down after racing and skipping a beat.

"Who, then? What company?"

"The Domo and the Flaze have both sent representatives here, to the Moon. They're asking to set up missions here to open trade with us, and to offer their aid. Or so they say."

*Interesting... Surprising... wonder what brings this on? Seems too brave for them.*

*Only one explanation.*

*They've gotta be spies.*

"I see."

"And they're asking to see you, Campion."

"Okay. I'll be right... Where are you?"

"We can meet in my offices," she says. "We'll need security. The alien... the Domo and the Flaze were very public in their appearance here."

"Really? Well," BC pauses, thinking. "Maybe this is a good sign?"

"Maybe," Erskine agrees. "We'll see."

*Maybe we can use them to advantage.*

"You know, so long as they don't do anything threatening, they could be a sign of hope for people," BC suggests.

"How so?" Erskine asks.

"Well, it reinforces the idea that there are aliens out there that *aren't* trying to kill us. Aliens that want to set up embassies and be our allies," BC says. "Makes it seem that somehow the entire universe isn't entirely against us, out to get us! After that press conference a couple months back, people know they exist. But if they're here every day, it makes it all more real, makes what I said ring true."

"I see. So, see you here soon?" Erskine asks.

"Yeah... I'm actually supposed to be heading out for Mars right away, but I'll be there."

The Domo and The Flaze Representatives are waiting in Erskine's office when BC arrives.

The Flaze have greatly improved their translation units, and speak in simple but complete sentences.

"Hello, Bernard Campion," the Flaze representative's translation unit says nearly simultaneously with its hissing and whispering in its own tongue.

"Hello, Flaze representative, Domo representative."

"Hello, Bernard Campion," the Domo says.

"I must say it is a surprise to see you here on Lunar Prime," BC tells the two aliens, "When I last spoke with representatives of your races, they seemed certain we were doomed to be wiped out by the Eldred. It seems unusual to set up trade agreements with a doomed race," BC observes.

"You humans do not all share the same ideas," the Domo representative counters. "The same is true for our races. Among the Domo, and, yes, even among the Flaze, there are those of us who believe otherwise and are willing to take the risk."

"We do not see it as a risk. And we are requesting separate facilities," the Flaze says. "The Eldred will know we are a Flaze outpost. They will spare our mission if they attack." The alien pauses,

turns to address Governor Erskine. “Forgive me if I assume too much too soon. This would be what we would request for our Flaze mission here.”

“I see,” Erskine responds. “That makes sense. I can understand that. And will the Domo want to build their own separate mission as well?” she asks the other alien.

“Why...” the Domo pauses, considering its response, “why yes, we would. We Domo sometimes make other races... uncomfortable.”

*That’s a big admission! I can feel the drain just being in the same room. Good idea keeping the Domo apart. Have to tell Erskine to watch for any strange disappearances and deaths.*

The aliens and Erskine work out the basics of their requests. BC helps iron out a couple of small details, but he’s really not a necessary participant once the initial hurdles are jumped.

The Domo still makes everyone else uneasy and vaguely tired and drained. But the aliens’ requests are reasonable, and strikingly similar to the requests the Vatican once made prior to setting up the Vatican Mission at Lunar Prime.

Erskine agrees to let the aliens set up missions, autonomous zones they will construct themselves, in a secure section of Lunar Prime currently devoid of development. The government of Lunar Prime agrees to maintain an airlock and security on the Lunar Prime side of the lock.

BC leaves the meeting in Governor Erskine’s hands, and leaves one meeting for another.

This one requires some traveling. BC hops a Stinger ship for the trip. He’s due on Mars for the official signing ceremony with the Khalif, as planet Mars agrees to official UTZ jurisdiction, while the UIN still remains an independent religious organization.

BC also wants to ask him how “the book” is coming along.

It took a lot longer than BC would have liked to iron out all the details of the Mars agreement. The Khalif, while “agreeable”, nevertheless proved to be quite stubborn when it came down to the fine details. But they’re done now, and he’s ready to sign, so BC is off to Mars.

His visit is treated with pomp and ceremony. The Khalif has arranged an elaborate welcoming for BC. He gives BC his official greeting, but is soon at a distance as musicians perform and dervishes whirl.

*I’d like to pull the Khalif aside and ask him about the Book. Both he and M’Bekke have been dodging my questions on it lately.*

*This is a nicer welcome than the sight of those Eldred Scout Ships we spied when we reached Mars’ orbit. Always hovering nearby, reminding us of their continuing presence. What do they wait for? Dolomay?*

The Khalif’s men escort BC to a suite for his overnight stay. He’ll sleep first, and then attend the signing ceremony tomorrow morning. BC will leave soon after it’s over. Having come out as far as Mars, BC is using his trip as an excuse to continue on out to Ceres to see Anita.

The next morning, the Khalif convenes most of the UIN’s surviving population in a new domed auditorium for the signing ceremony. He has understandably abandoned the Terraforming of Mars in order to concentrate on reconstruction and rebuilding after the Eldred attacks and the raid by Dolomay. BC finds himself walking through acres of freshly built housing and other facilities, through shiny new corridors still sealed and sand free, as he makes his way to the auditorium.

Again, the Khalif has arranged for music and dance to accompany the signing. BC tolerates the ceremony. He can feel the lurking Eldred Scout ships in the neighborhood, but the aliens do nothing more than make their presence felt.

As he endures the signing ceremony, BC has his ship return to orbit. The captain is under orders to call BC if the Eldred make any furtive moves.

BC finds himself continually frustrated in his attempts to draw the Khalif to the side. The ceremony has them seated apart. They’re only in speaking distance as they sign the treaty.

“Khalif, if I may...” BC begins. The Khalif cuts him off.

“It is a great day, is it not, BC? All of us united!”

*Is that sarcasm I’m hearing? I’m not sure the Khalif is really sure about all this.*

“We should talk...”

“Later. For now, we put on our show, eh?”

They sign the treaty and return to their seats until the ceremony ends.

*Guess we’ll speak at the reception after the ceremony.*

BC can’t seem to find the Khalif in the crowd at the reception. He spots him across the room several times, but never seems to find him there when he approaches. BC feels like the Khalif is avoiding him.

*He knows I want to talk about the Book....*

BC wants to talk with the Khalif about any progress on “the book of unity” as they’ve called it, but the Khalif seems to find ways of eluding any chance for BC to speak with him one-on-one. BC eventually gives up, frustrated that there is no time for those discussions amid the politics.

BC’s Stinger Ship lands a few minutes after the reception begins. The pilot calls BC on the com and lets him know they’re ready to go whenever BC is. After a few more futile attempts to corner the Khalif in conversation about the book, BC finally gives up completely and heads back to his ship.

*Hope Anita is in a friendlier and more welcoming mood than the Khalif was.*

BC hops out to Ceres to see Anita. Unfortunately, he can’t stay long. He has to head back to Earth orbit first thing tomorrow morning for a long delayed but now scheduled meeting with the UTZ Council and Wentworth on Wentworth Station. BC has also been trying to set up a time to meet with M’Bekke, but to no avail. Meeting after meeting.

BC makes it out to Ceres and manages to stay the night with Anita, but the visit is too short. He has to run the next morning to get back to Wentworth Station for the UTZ Council meeting. Anita’s not happy as she sees him off.

BC apologizes, tries to tell Anita he’ll be back soon. His head is spinning from the constant motion. He barely has time to think as he travels back to Earth orbit.

*Wish Dolomay or the Eldred would attack so I wouldn’t have to go to another meeting!*

*Well, no... not really.*

BC shifts in his seat on the stinger ship shuttling him in to Wentworth Station.

“Com?” he calls out.

“Com on.”

“Take a memo,” BC says. “Please ask Pope John Paul the Fourth if he can meet with me soon. I’ll be visiting Vatican City after the UTZ Council meetings are over and would be honored if he would grant me the pleasure of his company. I want to talk to him about his negotiations with the Khalif. We can meet whenever it’s convenient for him. I want to know what’s happening on that book,” BC says to the com. “Send that to M’Bekke.”

*If I show up on his doorstep, maybe I can make M’Bekke talk to me about the unity book!*

BC meets with Wentworth and the UTZ Council at Wentworth Station. It’s sad to see how decimated the council ranks have become, although Wentworth does bear some good news: the UTZ scientists seem to have adapted the vaccine against the plague to counter the new strain. BC and the rest of the council take the vaccine at the meeting, and health officials are dispatched on the council’s orders to inoculate everyone left on Earth, in orbit, on Mars and on the Project bases.

BC floats a new idea he’s been tossing around. He’s discussed changing the UTZ currency to “Alliance Dollars” to remove the stigma UIN members and independent stations seem to have over using the UTZ currency. The idea is met with some resistance, and the meeting degenerates into a case of information overload as the surviving CEOs on the council spend their time telling BC why his ideas are wrong.

The rest of the UTZ Council meetings then become a blur of accounting sheets and facts and figures that BC tries to follow but fails. He tunes the council out and looks forward to his next stop, Vatican City.

BC and M'Bekke finally meet on Leap Day, February 29th, in M'Bekke's offices in Vatican City. BC can tell by the expression on the Pope's face as he meets M'Bekke that whatever news there is, it isn't good news.

"We can't do it," M'Bekke says as they settle into chairs in M'Bekke's offices.

"What do you mean? You can't do what?"

"We cannot reconcile these two very different religions, BC, not even for a book – there's no way! My people have been sitting at the table with the people sent by the Khalif. We've gone over the Koran and the Bible, but there's no common ground! They say the Koran has to be in Arabic, its original tongue. How do you compromise on that? And they look down on our many translations!"

"So, they won't budge on that?" BC asks.

"No. Not at all. Even the more liberal among them hold to that as an essential element of their faith."

"How about we print it side by side, Arabic and whatever language the book is in?"

"In columns? I don't know if that will work for them..."

"What about page by page?" BC asks. He grabs a book off of a nearby shelf. "I used to have an old book of poetry by a German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. The English translation was on the even numbered pages, the original German version on the odd numbered pages."

"No way," M'Bekke says. "You read Rilke?"

"Nice," BC says.

"That might work, but you know what they'll say? 'Not good enough!'" he says in a mock Arabian accent. "You know they won't allow the Arabic on the 'odd' pages," he notes. "They'll have to be on the right."

"But don't you see, M'Bekke? If you can get them arguing about which *side* the translation goes on, you're already on the road to victory!"

"Do you really think so?" M'Bekke challenges him.

"Sure!" BC says with enthusiasm. "Then you can start arguing over what goes in."

"They want the whole Koran in the book!" M'Bekke says in exasperation.

"Put it all in, then," BC says matter-of-factly, a little impatient. "And put the Arabic on the right. Do we need alternate translations for the Bible section, too?"

"Well... no," M'Bekke answers.

"Good! Why does this seem so obvious to me?"

"You're not an unreasonable diehard, BC. We're dealing with dogmatists on both sides. And we have to, because if they're not behind this, nothing will happen. Nothing will really change."

"And how many on our side want to include the entire Bible?"

"Well, there are a few. Most of them. All of them, actually," he mumbles.

"Great," BC says sarcastically, throwing his arms up in exasperation. "So our old guard is just as bad as theirs!"

"Sometimes worse. We have a fundamentalist among our negotiators. He's NcC, but still fundy. And he gets the others rallying around him!"

"I knew I should have declared fundamentalism a heresy while I was Pope!" BC sighs.

"Wish it was so easy. The NcC is a tolerant church, BC," M'Bekke mock lectures him. "The fundies are still not sure they should be part of a church led by an openly gay pope, BC, so I try not to provoke them."

"That's an issue?"

"It is with them."

"Should have excommunicated them," BC says. "I should have, I mean."

"So," M'Bekke says. "What would *you* include in, or exclude from, the book of unity, from the Bible? You do know the book I mean, right? Ever read it?"

"M'Bekke! I was the Pope!" BC protests.

"Right. I've known 'religious' leaders with only a passing knowledge of the Bible," M'Bekke

says.

“Point taken.”

“Well?” M’Bekke presses.

“Well what?” BC asks.

“What parts of the Bible should be included?”

“You really want to know?”

“Have you ever really thought about this, BC?”

“I have. But you won’t like it.”

“Probably not,” M’Bekke concedes. “But go ahead.”

“Well, for starters? I’m not really sure we need the Old Testament...”

*Let’s see what he thinks of that!*

“BC! I thought you wanted this book to reflect the Jews, too?”

“Okay. Maybe we keep Genesis and Exodus. Maybe just Genesis.”

“You can’t leave out Moses! You’ve got to have Exodus,” M’Bekke says.

“Okay, then. Those two. Some of the psalms, the ones that aren’t too tribal and bloodthirsty. Job is good, we can keep the Book of Job in there.”

“Joshua? Judges?”

“Nah,” BC says, dismissing them. “Bloody tribal warfare dressed up as God’s will. Bad behavior sanctioned by a bloody tribal god. Don’t need all the rules in Leviticus either.”

“There I won’t argue,” M’Bekke says. “Chronicles? Kings?”

“No and no.”

“Proverbs? Song of Songs?”

“Some of the Proverbs,” BC says, thinking out loud. “Don’t think we need Song of Songs. It’s like ancient porno.”

“BC!” M’Bekke exclaims. “It’s a good thing you didn’t let people know you felt this way while you were Pope!”

“I wasn’t a very Pope-y Pope,” BC says.

“That is true,” M’Bekke agrees. “Ecclesiastes?”

“What? ‘Vanity, vanity, all is vanity’? That guy?”

“That’s the one.”

“I kind of like that one,” BC admits.

“What about the Prophets?”

“Jeremiah’s okay. You know the fundies will demand that we include Daniel, but I don’t see it. None of the later prophets or history books, really, either.”

“No Ezra?”

“Nah.”

“None of the Old Testament Apocrypha?”

“They’re not even really part of the Old Testament, anyway! Leave ‘em out!”

“Man, BC, you’re a ruthless editor! I almost hate to ask about the New Testament.”

“You really want to know? The New Testament? Well, I guess the gospels are okay. But add Thomas’s, too.”

“Uh oh, here we go,” M’Bekke says.

“Drop Revelation entirely. No reason for it.”

“But...”

“Wasn’t written by John the Apostle. It’s really about Nero and the Roman Empire. Doesn’t even mention the Anti-Christ. Just doesn’t belong in the Bible, or the book of unity.”

“That’ll go over big with the fundies.”

“They agreed to the consolidation in the NcC didn’t they?”

“They did, but we have gradings, degrees, and they liked that, having the ability to be a part of things and yet still maintain their own way of celebrating their beliefs.”

“Even when those beliefs create us versus them mentalities? Why keep books in the Bible that

breed hatred?” BC asks.

“Are you on our side,” M’Bekke asks, “or the Muslims?”

BC frowns and doesn’t answer.

“Sorry,” M’Bekke says. “You’ve actually been very helpful. Some of your suggestions have merit. I think the idea of Arabic on one page, English on the other, will work with them.” M’Bekke changes the subject. “Will you be staying in Vatican City for any services?” he asks BC.

“Hold on,” he says, and checks his calendar. “I will! I’ll have to leave after the early mass tomorrow. I promised the brain trust out in the asteroids that I’d be there soon. They’re promising a grand unveiling of some new systems!”

“Reverse engineered from the Eldred technology?”

“Yeah, they made some breakthroughs recently. I haven’t been able to see much. They’ve been quietly holed up with the ship, figuring it all out and coming up with only God knows what.”

“Well, at least the Eldred have given us some breathing room. And Dolomay has been quiet, too,” M’Bekke says.

“They’ve both been *too* quiet, you know? The Eldred are out there, but they don’t talk to us now. There have been rumors from the Domo and the Flaze that Dolomay is again attacking isolated outposts, but nothing solid. They could be old reports resurfacing. It’s hard to know what’s going on. The Eldred could be massing forces from across the stars. We have no idea how far their dominion reaches! Part of me dreads the thought that they’re gathering ships for a comprehensive final assault on humanity.

“We don’t know where Dolomay is nursing his wounds, but we know that he’ll be back when he’s back up to fighting strength.”

“We know there’s more coming, but we don’t know when. What was that thing, you know, when you’ve got that sword hanging over your head?” BC asks him.

“Damocles,” M’Bekke tells him. “The Sword of Damocles. Waiting for it to fall, huh?”

“Pretty much,” BC admits. “But the Project gives me hope. If we can counter the Eldred’s current weaponry, we’re on our way to beating them.”

M’Bekke looks at him quizzically.

“The Eldred are a static, unimaginative race,” BC explains. “If we can block their current technology, they’ll be hard pressed to come up with new ways of attacking us.”

“I hope you’re right,” M’Bekke says.

“Me too,” BC admits.

BC and M’Bekke end their meeting, and BC retires to quarters provided for him in the Vatican. His com is flashing, full of queued up messages. Anita called with an update. Wentworth wants a word. There’s also a draft report on Independent Orbital Platforms.

BC decides to read the report first. He had UTZ operatives assess the status of the orbital stations that hadn’t joined the UTZ alliance. He wanted to see if any other stations might become allies, or offer assistance.

*I think we need a new name for our alliance. ‘UTZ’ doesn’t fit anymore. When we ask these old independents to join with us, what do we tell them they’re joining?*

*How many stations are still operating?*

Some stations are dead, wiped out by the plague or simply abandoned as crews became scarce. Others are run by rugged individualists who just want to be left alone. Three once-thriving stations were wiped out in raids by Dolomay in the last year.

This leaves a short list of indy stations. All of them are dependent on UTZ currency and trade, but none want to be “beholden” to the UTZ. BC has been developing a plan to bring them into the fold, beginning by changing the name of the currency. The status report gets him thinking.

“Com!” BC calls out. A unit appears on the desktop. “Get me the Khalif, please,” BC says. In a minute or so the Khalif is on the line.

“Greetings and respect, my friend,” the Khalif says.

“Greetings and salutations,” BC responds.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company,” the Khalif asks.

“I noticed when I was with you on Mars two weeks ago that you didn’t seem to want to talk about the book of unity,” BC gets right to the point. “Thought maybe we hit a breakdown in the negotiations. I’ve just met with M... the Pope... I’ve suggested some ways to accommodate your needs for the book of unity.”

“Really?” the Khalif says with the hint of surprise.

“Really. Could your people accept the Koran included both in Arabic and in a second language?” BC asks.

“So it would be in there in the proper tongue and also in translation?” BC nods. “That might work,” the Khalif says. “It might.”

“Thank you,” BC says. “I also wanted to talk more about our currency ideas. I think I’m going to consolidate the UTZ and UIN currencies as Alliance Dollars.”

“If you change the name of the currency... will you then go ahead with a further name change? Will you change the name of the UTZ, too?” the Khalif asks him cautiously.

“Doesn’t really seem to fit anymore, does it?” BC asks him.

“No. But I do not think it would surprise anyone that I do not like the name!” The Khalif laughs a quick laugh.

“Do you dare, though? What will you call it? ‘the Alliance’?”

“The Alliance? Huh, I don’t know? I don’t know if the UTZ council is ready for a new name! So, no, not yet! But we have to call the combined currency something. Alliance Dollars has a good ring to it. I think it will get any hold outs to sign on with us, once they see we aren’t forcing them to become UTZ.”

“I see. Well, do as you must. On these political issues I find I usually agree with you! You have been incredibly honest with me, with us, so far,” the Khalif says. So, no new name for anything yet?”

“Not yet, Khalif. You’re the only one I’ve even discussed this with so far. Nope, no new name. And no book of unity.”

“Well, I am sorry about the book. But that you would discuss the idea of the ‘Alliance’ with me, for that I am honored.”

“You don’t have an ego-stake invested in the old names. It’s refreshing. There are many in the UTZ and the UIN who do.”

“‘Ego-Stake’?” The Khalif notes the term. “I like that. And you, Champion, have very little ego staked, do you?”

“I do... or, I don’t, I guess,” BC says. “I just want to see us survive,” he says.

“Yes,” the Khalif says. “I have recognized this about you. You really are trying to keep us all alive – how ironic is that for a former assassin?”

“Old news,” BC says. “Even then, I was only trying to do what was right.”

“It is funny how that changes, is it not?” the Khalif observes.

“Sure,” BC says cautiously. “But I think it all has to do with who we call ‘us’ and who we call ‘them’, doesn’t it?”

“Go on,” the Khalif encourages.

“Well, I now define ‘us’ as the human race,” BC says. “It’s a... broader definition than I used to have.”

“True, but accurate. So... who becomes your ‘them’?” the Khalif asks him.

“The Eldred. Dolomay. Whoever threatens us, I guess.”

“That makes a certain amount of sense. You know, though, eventually even those ‘them’ could, and should one day, become ‘us’,” the Khalif muses.

“That’s pretty progressive of you, Khalif. Seeing as how they’ve been trying to wipe you out.”

“Thank you. This is a new time for Islam. We are trying to figure out just what submission to the will of Allah really means,” the Khalif says.

“You’re... would it be wrong for me to suggest you’re kind of enlightened, Khalif?”

The Khalif begins laughing. “Wrong? I guess we shall find out!”

“So, then... you’re okay if I change the name... starting with the currency?”

“I am. Go ahead,” the Khalif says.

“Thank you, Khalif,” BC says.

“What... the Solar Alliance?” the Khalif asks.

“Something like that,” BC admits. “It shouldn’t be named for any one planet or people,” he explains.

“Name it for the sun. That makes sense.”

“Thanks,” BC says.

“I must admit, you are still not what I expected.”

“No? Is that good?”

“It has been great!” the Khalif assures him. “You are a continuing revelation to me! You do Allah’s work without knowing it. You are like a demon, unknowingly moving as Allah wills.”

“So that’s how you see me, huh? A force for Allah whether I like it or not?”

“Pretty much. You do not stand in God’s way. That’s about as good as we can hope for from a Christian! You do not subordinate yourself to the will of Allah, but you do not actively thwart his will either.”

“Thanks, I think,” BC replies. “Do you suppose the human race is actually worth saving?”

The Khalif begins laughing out loud.

“What?” BC asks.

“Again you ask the inconvenient question. Even in the midst of doing all you can to save us all, you aren’t afraid to ask the hard questions.”

“Don’t you ever question yourself?” BC asks him.

“I question whether or not my ego gets in the way of my submission to Allah,” the Khalif explains. “My questions are... well... deep. I’d like to,” again, the Khalif laughs. “Have you ever read Rumi?”

“Rumi? No, I have no idea...”

“He was a whirling dervish, a charismatic follower of Islam and of Allah.” The Khalif pauses to smile. “We would all be better off knowing more Rumi. He was a great poet, you see? He writes of knocking on the door to madness, only to have it open to find he was on the other side!”

“Has the door opened?” BC asks.

“I believe it has,” the Khalif says. “But it remains to be seen which side of the door we end up on, does it not?”

“Indeed,” BC agrees. “Thank you, Khalif. Campion out.”

BC signs off, shuts off the com.

*The Solar Alliance. Huh. Well. At least the Khalif is on board. The rest of the UTZ council will need convincing. And Wentworth... Wentworth! He wanted me to talk to him.*

BC gets Wentworth on the com.

“Campion! I was beginning to wonder if you’d gotten lost in the labyrinthine corridors of the Vatican!” Wentworth jokes.

“Wentworth,” BC greets him.

“Campion, I’ve been receiving some complaints from independent stations. Do you have people out harassing the indy stations?”

“Harassing?” BC asks. “No, not harassing. Surveying, asking some questions so they could put a report together for me. I’m working on getting the indies to join us,” he explains. “It’s tied into changing the name of our currency. I wanted to see where they were at. I didn’t want to surprise them.”

“The *name* of the currency? Those ‘Alliance dollars’ you’ve mentioned? Would you combine the UIN and UTZ currencies, too?” Wentworth asks.

“Yes, I would. A unified currency.”

“Replacing both currencies... and their governments, too, perhaps?”

“Not replacing their governments, just asking for their help and support,” BC argues.

“Don’t play games with me, Campion! I’ve been at this way too long!”

“Ultimately? You’re right. We need unity, Richard. We need an alliance, don’t we? A single entity pooling and controlling our resources, helping us present a unified front against the Eldred and Dolomay.”

“And that’s you? I never figured you for a power hungry dictator, Champion. I guess I’ve underestimated you!” Wentworth says, scorn dripping from his words.

“That’s not what I mean. And I know you know better,” BC admonishes him. “Look, Wentworth, right now everything is in pieces. Some here, some there, some somewhere else. We need to face them as one. We’re stronger together than apart against these enemies. It’s just common sense.”

“Come on, Champion! If there was such a thing as ‘common’ sense, everyone would have it!”

“Touché, Wentworth,” BC says. “But I do hope I can count on your support for the Solar Alliance.”

“The *Solar Alliance*?” Wentworth says. “Solar Alliance, eh? That’s the name? Best you could come up with?” He rolls the idea around in his head. “Sounds like science fiction to me, Champion.”

“Wentworth, we’re dealing with aliens who want us dead! This *is* science fiction.”

“Touché right back at you, then, Champion,” Wentworth says. “Are you going to abolish my UTZ Council?”

“Nah,” BC answers. “But we do need a better system of representation. The UTZ Council can become more like a... well, a cabinet, I guess, to a prime minister who leads a house of commons, that sort of thing.”

“You’re a regular political scientist, aren’t you?” Wentworth says, his tone dripping sarcasm. “Can’t we be a House of Lords?” he jokes.

“Not enough of you,” BC explains.

“Your system sounds vaguely British.”

“My ‘system’ is just good ideas right now,” BC points out. “And I’m open to suggestions.”

“When were you going to address this with the council, Champion?”

“I brought up the currency idea once already and got shot down,” BC notes. “I’m going to try again at our next UTZ council meeting. But I was planning on calling *you* tonight all along. Wentworth. You and I really *are* the UTZ Council. You know it! So if you and I agree to the Solar Alliance... that’s it, really, isn’t it? After the ‘council’ agrees, we set up a representative democracy. Put a structure in place, with representatives voted on by the people. We’d only run things while we set up the government. Then we step aside,” BC explains to Wentworth. “I hope it will give people something to fight for. I don’t want to be a dictator.”

“You think that will work? You’re an optimist!”

“Hell, Wentworth, I’m just making this up as I go along,” BC admits and sighs.

“Do you really believe Dolomay and the Eldred will continue to give you the peace and quiet you need for your experiment in governance?” Wentworth challenges him.

“They could hit us at any time,” BC says. He pauses for effect, looks around as if waiting for an attack to start. It stays quiet. “Nothing? Good! Not yet, then. So... I keep trying. And if you’re really as smart as you think you are, Wentworth, you know that the real reason for an alliance is to finally, once and for all, unite the UTZ, the UIN, and the Project fleets and militaries.”

“Yes, I was getting to that,” Wentworth says.

“I’m heading out to the Project,” BC tells him. “They’re promising to show me breakthroughs they’ve made in reverse engineering the Eldred technology. We need to be unified so we can apply the new tech to *all* of our ships, across the board, with no questions or confusion.”

“You’re making a lot of sense. When do you want to meet with the UTZ Council again, then?”

“Some time after the weekend,” BC tells him. “Maybe Monday, the 7th?”

“Good enough,” Wentworth says. “What should I tell them until then?”

“Whatever you want to.”

“And the indy stations?”

“Join us and get the new currency. Or stay indy and hold on to worthless currency.”

“Harsh! Not trying diplomacy?” Wentworth questions.

“Diplomacy is done. Join us or die,” BC says with mock harshness. But he means it.

“How progressive,” Wentworth says.

“Well,” BC muses, “That should be incentive enough.”

“Be careful not to reach for too much, BC.”

BC can’t help himself. He starts laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Wentworth asks.

“You!” BC manages to get out past his laughing. “You’re funny! The man who’s made his fortune reaching for too much telling *me* not to reach for too much! That’s rich!”

“Careful Champion, you might hurt my feelings,” Wentworth mock protests.

“Yeah, right! You have feelings!” BC says. “Goodnight, Wentworth.”

“Goodnight, Champion.”

BC stays at the Vatican through M’Bekke’s first official papal liturgy the next day. He catches a Stinger out to Ceres after the ceremony. His mind races through his mental to-do book.

*The Muslim and Christian negotiators have agreed to reconvene on March 8th. Alliance Dollars should go into effect April 1st. Meeting with the UTZ Council sometime after the weekend. See if we can make that happen.*

*Dolomay is rampaging on out there, somewhere. The Eldred continue to hang out there, too, a threat waiting in the wings for the right excuse to attack us again.*

*At least we have the Domo and the Flaze representatives on the Moon, entertaining the media and showing the general public that not all aliens want to kill us... least not directly.*

*The Domo still freak me out!*

*Well, look at that!*

BC smiles. They’re approaching the Ceres base, and as he looks out the ship’s viewport, BC sees The Project has several new ships lined up, lining his arrival route, all glimmering with new tech adapted from the captured Eldred ship.

*It’s a start! Hope the news is that they can reproduce the new tech on a larger scale. I feel like the next attack is coming any minute now... a gut feeling. I may just be paranoid.*

BC’s ship lands at the new base on Ceres. Krish and Dell lead the welcoming committee waiting for BC alongside his ship in the landing bay as he disembarks.

“BC! Did you see them?” Krish asks, before anyone has a chance to say hello.

“I did! They look nice,” BC tells him.

“Nice?” Krish responds, a little exasperation in his voice.

“He could only *see* them,” Dell points out. “How much can you appreciate from mere appearances?”

“Krish, Dell, it’s great to *see* you two!” BC says. “Those ships out there did look good. I hope that’s just the beginning...”

“We’ve made some amazing breakthroughs!” Krish insists. “We’re throwing a party in honor of our achievements! You’re in plenty of time to join in the festivities.”

“I believe you will be very pleased,” Dell tells BC. “We’ve come quite far in applying the tech we’ve uncovered. Making sure we can use it easily, plugging it into our current systems.”

“Can you? Have you made it that easy already?” BC asks them. “Plug-inable?”

Dell hesitates before he answers.

“Well, yes. To some degree,” he says.

“What Dell isn’t saying,” Krish says, “is that once we cracked the language and the codes, it became remarkably easy to figure out. It really wasn’t that hard!”

“The ‘cracking’ as Krish describes it was somewhat difficult,” Dell says. “But the application, once the tech was deciphered, almost took care of itself, really.”

“Really?” BC asks, surprised. “How’s that?”

“The Eldred seem to follow the same sort of thought processes we do,” Krish tells him. “Does that make sense to you?”

“I think it does,” BC grants him. “Bottom line, what do you have for us?”

“Dell?” Krish says, deferring to the older, taller scientist.

“Thank you,” Dell says. “We now have shields that match their shields, based on our adapted tech. We have what we’re calling ‘blasters’. We started with their beam weaponry and converted it to turn the media it passes through into a building kinetic mass, creating a beam weapon that not only melts and burns but also delivers a kinetic wallop.”

“I think I’ve felt *that* wallop before,” BC comments.

“Not actually likely,” Dell corrects him, “Or you would be dead. And our adapted beams?” Dell cracks a small grin. “Even deadlier.”

“Nice,” BC compliments the man. “So now we can withstand their attacks and hit them back even harder than they hit us?”

“Pretty much,” Krish confirms. “*Slightly* harder.”

“We’ve also developed new navigational equipment,” Dell continues. “We have a new array of sensors and survey tools. We are, however, still working on the majority of the data storage. The language barrier is still posing a problem in these areas, and there seems to be additional encryption on the non-technical stored data. It’s hard to tell for certain.”

“We guess that there are navigational charts, histories, survey data,” Krish adds, “we just haven’t cracked those codes yet.”

“Treasure yet to discover,” BC notes.

“Their drives are not as impressive as their armaments,” Dell says with a small measure of disappointment. “There are even some aspects of their drive systems where we have developed superior technology. Our Transpace Drive beats their faster-than-light drives,” he says with some pride. “We’ve found some tweaks we can make to our drives, small refinements, based on what we’ve learned.”

“Great,” BC says.

There’s an awkwardly long moment of silence.

“That’s, um... that’s kinda it,” Krish says a little sheepishly.

“That’s fine, it’s good,” BC reassures them. “It’s enough. Now, again, I gotta ask, can we reproduce these improvements on a massive scale? How fast can we retrofit our ships?”

“Which ones?” Krish asks.

“All of them!” BC tells them. “Project ships, UTZ, UIN, all of them.”

Krish and Dell look at each other, both a little surprised.

“All of them?” Krish asks meekly.

BC nods. “And we need to crank out more new ships equipped with the latest tech we have, fast as we can.”

“Ambitious!” Anita cracks, appearing out of nowhere to startle the other three.

“Necessary,” BC replies, finishing the thought. He jokes with Anita. “Did you sneak up on us?”

“I’m just naturally stealthy,” she says, amusement in her voice.

“Do you want us to retrofit ships here?” Dell asks BC. “We’ve built the facilities that allowed us to fix those ships you saw outside. We’re small, but...”

“Better idea,” BC says. “Let’s take back the asteroid base, locate our retrofitting operations there. That leaves the shipyards open to crank out new ships.”

BC is thinking on the fly.

“Send those ships I saw out there back to Mars and Earth right now. Have them replace ships there, take their place as those ships come here, so that we don’t lose any numbers back there. Then we’ll repeat that process, upgrading our ships in shifts,” BC explains. “How many ships are ready to go right now?” he asks.

“Seven,” Dell tells him.

BC thinks out loud, “Let’s see... Send three to Mars, four to Earth. Split the crews when they get there with the ones from the ships they replace. Leave a training crew and half of the original ship’s crew on board our Project ship, Bring the other half of the crew back here with their ship, and we’ll train them here as their ship is retrofitted.”

“Done,” Dell assures him. He turns and leaves to put the plan in motion. Krish turns and leaves

with Dell. He shoots a hurt and angry look back at BC before they leave the room.

*What was that for? Was I too harsh? Damn.*

“How long until the party?” BC asks Anita.

“About twelve hours,” she says. “If your *majesty* is sure he can allow such celebrations...” she says with heavy sarcasm.

“What’s that for?”

“You came on kind of authoritative, kind of abrupt.”

“I did not! How long were you listening?” BC protests. “I just gave them instructions on what to do next.”

“You didn’t praise their efforts,” she tells him.

“What? I said ‘great’, ‘good job’; that’s praise, isn’t it?”

“You didn’t say ‘great job’, you just said ‘good’,” she corrects him.

“Jesus!” BC sighs, exasperated. “Look, I’ll propose a toast to them at the party, okay? We can certainly take a few hours off to celebrate.”

“Thank you,” Anita says, the sarcastic edge still in her voice, “your *majesty*!” She mockingly bows and leaves BC standing alone in the landing bay.

*I never know how to take her... was she serious?*

BC just shakes his head.

He finds out where he’s staying. He heads to his room to take a nap before the party starts. A com tone wakes him up.

“BC? Almost party time!” Anita says over the com. “I thought you’d want an hour or so to get ready.”

“Very thoughtful. Thank you, Anita.”

“You... you’re welcome,” she says, and then signs off.

*There’s still something... some tension there. Why is she so mad at me?*

*Like I can puzzle that out!*

*Can’t worry about it too much.*

*Let’s party... Watch the Eldred or Dolomay attack at the stroke of midnight. While we’re toasting ourselves!*

They celebrate in style, turning the landing bay into a dance hall, a party zone with colored lights and music. BC does indeed toast the scientists for their efforts, their labor and hard work.

The Project pilots and training crews skip the party, acting on BC’s orders, heading immediately back to Earth and Mars.

After the party, BC and Anita spend the night together. The next morning, Anita sees him off as BC hops a ship back to Lunar Prime, leaving the Project scientists to get back to their work. As BC’s ship leaves Ceres, the first wave of UIN and UTZ ships arrives for retrofitting.

*We’ve got some breathing room. We’ve got to do all we can as fast as we can. Dolomay or the Eldred could be back at any time. Our forces are smaller, but if we can keep it together... maybe we can survive. Maybe we can even win this fight. I hope we’re stronger for all our trials. Not kind, not pretty, but resilient and strong.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Reports have Dolomay out far from the Solar System, hitting some of the fringe worlds of The Flaze. The Eldred continue to hang back, observing, silent. Taking advantage of the relative calm, BC meets with the UTZ Council to push for his currency name change. After some initial friction, they agree to call them “Alliance Dollars.” BC goes further. He proposes the new government. The UTZ Council, goaded by Wentworth, reluctantly agrees to the new representative body. BC is able to make the Solar

Alliance official.

They set a date for a parliamentary election in three months: June 4th, 2112. Representatives will be elected from Earth, Earth Orbit, The Moon, Mars and the Project bases, creating a government body that will then elect a Prime Representative. The Prime Representative will then organize the rest of the government out of the other representatives. The UTZ Council will remain in an advisory position to whoever becomes Prime Representative.

BC decides to run as a representative for Vatican City. Richard Wentworth runs as one of the orbital representatives. Anita Capituna runs to be one of the representatives for the Project bases, all the while espousing her hatred for politics. Strong candidates arise on Earth and Mars as well. The Khalif does not engage in politics, preferring to remain the religious leader to his people.

Three months of campaigning pass by quickly. Fortunately, their breathing room continues, as the Eldred remain aloof and Dolomay is reported to be ranging far beyond the reaches of Flaze space, into distant systems populated by alien races not yet known to humanity.

The unified military is christened the Solar Alliance Interplanetary Force: SAIF. "Keeping the Solar System SAIF!" Four divisions cover Earth and Earth Orbit, the Moon and the asteroid base, Ceres and the shipyard. The Project continues to retrofit the SAIF ships on the old asteroid base while the shipyard cranks out more Stinger Ships. Ceres has become the central point for travel to the Project Outposts in Deep Space.

The SAIF's fourth division, based on the Project base at Ceres, functions as an elite force. They're equipped with the cutting edge tech the Project develops as soon as it's tested and deemed operational. They train among the asteroids. Among the rank and file of the SAIF, the fourth becomes known as *the* division to serve in. Based in the asteroids they're kept from the public eye and hopefully from the eyes of Dolomay and the Eldred as well.

On Election Day, BC is chosen to sit on the new Solar Alliance parliament. Anita Capituna is elected representative and governor of the Project holdings in the asteroids, even though the general public is still only dimly aware of the bases' existence. The formation of the Solar Alliance creates a growing awareness in the public of just how far the Project has taken humanity into the stars.

In the absence of any real competition, BC is raised to Prime Representative during the first session of the Solar Alliance House of Representatives. BC names Anita the Project Director and CEO. Under her leadership the Project's assembly plants have been cranking out Transpace warships as fast as they can, applying the technical advances reverse-engineered from the Eldred ship.

Things have been going well through the spring and early summer, but BC still looks over his shoulder, constantly waiting for Dolomay or the Eldred to strike their next blow. BC's July begins with meetings, appointments requested by the representatives of the Flaze and the Domo. Together.

*Funny. The Eldred once told us never to trust the Flaze and the Domo when they work together... Hmmm.*

Two Domo dressed in sparkling purple robes roll into BC's new Prime Representative's office on Lunar Prime. Two spindly-limbed Flaze follow them in, awkwardly angling their way sideways through the doorway and into their seats at BC's conference table.

One of the Domo speaks first.

"Congratulations, Prime Representative Champion," the alien greets BC, "on your electionssss."

"Thank you," BC says. The Flaze merely nod at BC. "What can I do for you?"

"I believe it is more a case of what we can do for you!" the Domo says.

"Oh really," BC responds cautiously.

*Can't dismiss them outright.*

"Really," the other Domo says. "We want to help. Serve as go-betweens. Between you humans and the Eldred."

"I see... Have you spoken with the Eldred lately?" BC asks. "Because, you see... and this is the thing," BC involuntarily raises his voice a little, "they've been attacking US!"

"Yes, we know," the first Domo says. "And this is unfortunate. But you *are* attacking them. In their eyes."

"In the eyes of the Eldred," the other Domo continues the thought, "Dolomay and his humans are the same as the rest of you. And *they* are attacking everybody."

The Flaze hisses and wheezes and the wrist worn translator says, "Dolomay and his men attack *us* even now."

Not really having a response, BC just stares back at the four aliens, not saying a word.

"We believe we can help both sides," the first Domo says, "and ourselves."

"Of course," BC acknowledges.

"It makes sense to us to make you this offer," the Domo says with a nod.

BC feels tired. Drained.

*Damn Domo! What's their game? Just being near them makes me drowsy!*

"Tell you what," BC says, "Detail for me in a report how you propose to get the Eldred to stop attacking us, and what you want from the Solar Alliance in return."

"A report?" the Domo asks.

"Put it in writing," BC tells the alien. "I have to go now. Other meetings, other things to attend to," he tells them.

"What could be more important than the very survival of your race?" the first Domo asks BC.

"Nothing, I assure you. But I can't waste my time either."

"You think we are wasting your time?"

"I think there's *something* you want from me. But I don't think the Eldred will listen to you. I know we all want to stop Dolomay. But I don't think you can help us do *that* either."

"We need to prove our worth to you, then," the Domo says. "We once were a value to those of you in your 'Project'. Could we not be a valuable ally once again?"

The Flaze hisses and clicks, "Allies," the translator says.

"Dolomay once again has a small fleet of ships, and an apparent planetary base," the Domo says. "Perhaps this information is useful to you?"

*It is. Damn. Didn't know Dolomay had built back up again. Not great news... But it is 'useful', I guess.*

"What do you know?" BC asks them.

"We know where his planetary base is," the Domo tells BC. "We also know that the Eldred have not been merely observing you. The Eldred are preparing... *something*. A new weapon, a new plague, it is unclear. But they have gone into a defensive mode," the Domo says. "Now might be a good time to talk to them."

"Now? How is this a 'good time'?" BC asks the alien incredulously.

"*They* are not attacking. *We* can speak with them on *your* behalf. It is, therefore, a *good* time," the Domo assures BC.

The Flaze hisses, clicks and wheezes, and the translator speaks: "We are being attacked by Dolomay. We need your help. You know Dolomay and how he thinks. His people are your people. Help us stop him. This helps you as well."

*Funny that the Flaze, although using a translator, speak clearest to what they want. They're willing to admit what's in it for them.*

"So," BC says, "Our friends the Flaze are looking for our help?"

The Flaze, through the translator, says, "Yes."

"We all help each other," the Domo insists. "We speak to the Eldred for you – you benefit!"

"So you say," BC says in tepid agreement.

The Domo continues, "If your forces were to engage Dolomay's forces... that would draw him away from the Flaze - the Flaze benefit."

BC grows tired, more drained. He stifles a yawn.

"So how, then, do the Domo benefit?" BC asks.

"We benefit in closer relations with humans and better relations with the Eldred. And we have agreements between ourselves and the Flaze. We benefit from these as well."

*I bet you do...*

“I see.”

*Damn, its draining just to sit here and listen to this thing!*

“We tell you where Dolomay and his base are, you deal with him, the Domo says. “We tell the Eldred what you are doing, and then negotiate with them on your behalf.”

“So what are the Flaze doing?” BC asks.

The lead Flaze hisses. “In part,” the translator says, “We keep the other races at bay.”

“Other races?” BC wonders.

The Flaze hisses, wheezes, clicks and is translated, “The Snakt. The Devrizium. Others. There are many other races out there, Bernard Campion. Dolomay has been striking them as well. And with the Eldred so distracted by you and Dolomay, many sense opportunity as well.”

“Their first ‘opportunity’ in hundreds of thousands of years,” the Domo adds. “The Flaze could be quite busy.”

The Flaze rises up as it speaks again through its translator, “We know how to fight these aliens!”

BC closes his eyes. He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to fight the exhaustion now threatening to overwhelm him.

“Look,” he says to the aliens, “let me think on this generous offer. Can we reconvene tomorrow?”

“Certainly,” the Domo says.

“Thank you,” BC says. He smiles and excuses himself. He ducks out of the room as quickly as he can.

*Damn! I’ve never experienced the ‘Domo Drain’ quite that severely before. It must come on stronger when they want something from you. I need some sleep, now.*

BC retires to his rooms to rest after his encounter. Sleep quickly overtakes him. He finds himself again at the center of a still gray sea, at the center of the silent ocean. The walls fall away and he’s surrounded by gray.

*THERE IS... WHERE IS... THERE YOU ARE! THERE!*

BC feels a hammer come down on his head.

*Defend!*

*YOU RESIST, INFANT?!*

*Defend!*

*YOU CANNOT!*

*I can! DEFEND!*

Silence.

*I can!*

*Lord, please let me sleep in peace!*

Silence continues. Having shut out his adversary, BC finally rests and gets some peaceful sleep.

He greets the Domo and Flaze representatives refreshed the next morning. His mind buzzes with a new set of questions to ask them.

“Before we go any further,” BC begins, “I’ve got a few questions for you. I’d like to ask you more about the ‘Ancient Enemy’.”

“We will tell you anything we can,” the first Domo says cautiously.

“What sort of psionic abilities, telepathic abilities, did the Ancient Enemy possess?” BC asks them.

“What do you mean?” the Domo asks, in either real or feigned ignorance.

“Maybe that isn’t translating so well,” BC offers.

The Flaze hisses out an answer, translated, “We know what you meant.”

“Thank you,” BC says, turning to directly address the suddenly helpful alien. “Could you elaborate?”

The Flaze begins a long hiss, then clicks, wheezes and hisses again. The translator kicks in midway through.

“The Ancient Enemy could invade your mind as well as your planet,” the translator says, “turn

other beings into their mental slaves. At least, the strongest among them could.”

“Ah!” The Domo figures out what BC is asking. “The *canark*, yes, the mind attack! We did not understand before. There were those among the Ancient Enemy who could bend others’ wills to their own.”

“Was Dolomay one of the strong ones?” BC asks.

“We have no idea,” the Domo admits. “We had not heard any reference to him specifically. We have only stories and legends of that distant past. None of those really tell us individual’s names. But they do tell of the *canark*.”

“The Canark, BC says, “Mind attack. Canark attack.”

“Excuse me?” the Domo says.

“Never mind.”

The Domo looks scared.

“What?” BC asks. “What did I say?”

“The ‘never mind’ is a complete state of no-mind the end result of the worst *canark*, erasure... a walking death!”

“Sorry,” BC apologizes. “It’s just a human expression, like, ‘don’t worry about it.’ I didn’t mean to scare you!”

The two Domo settle down.

*Spooked them!*

The Flaze pipes up again. The translator speaks.

“The Eldred also possessed this ability, though to a far more limited degree. They were much weaker.”

“Do they still?” BC asks.

“We would think so,” The Flaze says, translated.

*No kidding! I wonder if the Eldest of the Eldred read my mind during our visit on Eldray? Could I be hearing one of the Eldred in my head? to be Dolomay?*

*I don’t think so...*

“Well, thank you for this information,” BC says. “It’s quite important to us. I’ll take this as a gesture of friendship and goodwill between our races.”

“Does this mean you are taking us up on our offer of diplomacy?” the first Domo asks.

“Can’t hurt,” BC admits. “Go ahead. See if the Eldred are willing to refrain from trying to wipe out the human race.”

“Er, well, yes. We will go and see if we can open a dialogue,” the Domo says.

The Flaze hisses something. The translator says, “We will open Flaze territory to you. Provide you with star charts. A moment.”

The Flaze pauses.

“They have been sent to your network,” the Flaze informs him.

“Just like that, huh?” BC is impressed.

The Domo shifts nervously, but then steadies. “And now, we have sent the location of Dolomay’s base to your net,” the Domo tells him. The Domo then gets up from the table. “That is all for now.” They leave the room followed out by the Flaze. The lead Flaze pauses before leaving the room.

“Thhhhhank you,” the Flaze manages to hiss out without the translator.

After starting a second in surprise, BC nods at the alien. “Thank *you*,” he says, and he gives the Flaze a slight bow. The alien turns and leaves the room.

*Well, that’s something. Allies? I don’t think so. I just don’t trust them.*

BC returns to his office out the viewport, out over the empty gray surface of the Moon.

*Can we take either the Flaze or the Domo at their word? What is the word of an alien worth? Guess we’ll find out.*

Using the new information, BC orders a SAIF squadron to the supposed location of Dolomay’s base. They arrive to find the base abandoned. Dolomay and his ships are long gone. But it’s clear they were there. Evidence of their occupation and their atrocities remains.

Other evidence is discovered as well. Dolomay has been reported to have a woman at his side, a female consort. BC has heard the reports. But upon sifting through the ruins of the abandoned base, BC is confronted by printed proof. Worse still, BC recognizes the woman.

Fiza.

*He's gotta have her under his control! There's no other way she would've... well, she might. But the last time I saw her she wasn't exactly cozying up to him and his folks.*

*Poor Fiza!*

*She looks like she's doing okay.*

BC is looking at a posed print of Fiza and Dolomay. His blonde hair is growing back in, the dark ends giving him a strange look. His arm is around her. She grins a nervous smile, but her arm is around Dolomay.

*Huh... she kinda looks happy. I guess.*

BC doesn't know what to feel. He feels hurt seeing Fiza with Dolomay, but also afraid for her. And he can't help thinking of Anita.

*Fiza is playing a dangerous game, but probably because she has to. Fiza. Anita. Jeesh. Maybe if I was the last man on Earth, or the Moon. Or Mars. Prime Representative. Pope. CEO of the Project. Titles. What are they? What are they worth? What am I worth?*

*I don't know anymore. No matter what I do, what level I reach... it still doesn't seem like it's enough. I still feel hollow. If God is Love – where do I find that love? Even when I was Pope, I couldn't answer that. I don't know if I've ever actually loved anyone! Does that make me evil? Sociopathic? I did used to kill people for a living. That's not really all that social, is it? Well adapted?*

*What is love? What is truth? Quid est veritas?*

*Makes me think I need to check in on M'Bekke on 'the book'.*

*We keep arguing and killing over how it is we're supposed to love each other. How fucked up is that? Too many people who don't even know how to love are telling other people how they should love!*

*And the killing continues.*

BC finds a good night's sleep no longer comes easily as the summer stretches on. He values his sleep when it does come... although he is wary of Dolomay's attacks.

Late one August night he once again finds himself standing on the still, calm ocean, as the walls fall away. The world turns gray. He stands alone on a sunless sea.

*This is getting old.*

*IS IT?*

*Out out out out out*

*WAIT!*

*What?*

*WHY DO YOU TRY TO BLOCK ME?*

*Wait a minute... who are you?*

*WE'VE ALREADY GONE THROUGH THIS, HAVEN'T WE?*

*You're not Dolomay? This feels... different.*

*NO.*

*Are you trying to tell me you're God? Jesus?*

*ALWAYS THE SAME QUESTIONS – AND SO, THE SAME ANSWERS: YES. AND NO.*

*Do you speak like this to Dolomay?*

*DOLOMAY? NO. HE IS LOST.*

*But he speaks as you do, like this, in dreams, mind to mind.*

*AH, BUT 'THIS' IS BUT YOUR LIMITED MIND'S WAY OF INTERPRETING MY CONTACT WITH YOU. YOUR MIND INTERPRETS DOLOMAY'S CONTACT IN A SIMILAR FASHION, BUT IT IS ONLY SIMILAR BECAUSE YOUR MIND MAKES IT SO.*

*YOU ARE DIFFERENT AS WELL. YOU ARE NOT AS I AM, BUT YOU ARE NOT LIKE*

*DOLOMAY AND HIS KIND, THE ONES THEY CALL THE ANCIENT ENEMY, EITHER.*

*Me?*

*ALL OF YOU. HUMANITY.*

BC sees a vision of a huge crowd stretching off as far as his eyes can see. All the people still alive, all of humanity, he somehow knows.

*I HAVE A GIFT TO GIVE TO YOU. CLEAR YOUR MIND AND BE STILL.*

BC attempts to comply. A feeling of warmth without heat washes over him, welcoming him, loving him, accepting him unconditionally. And something then ‘clicks’ in BC’s mind.

The gray sea and sky surrounding him begins to shimmer and glow, luminescent, increasingly white, until it is nearly blinding him with its burning, phosphorescent glow. The light’s intensity peaks and begins to fade, and as the light fades BC’s feelings of warmth and love fall away and fade as well.

*What just happened?*

*I HAVE GIVEN YOU A GIFT. BUT IT COMES AT A GREAT PRICE.*

*Why do you sound so faint?*

*I HAVE GIVEN YOU ABILITIES AND DEFENSES YOU WILL NEED TO FACE DOLOMAY. BUT BECAUSE OF THIS, YOU AND I WILL SOON NO LONGER BE ABLE TO BE IN CONTACT WITH EACH OTHER. THIS IS THE PRICE.*

*YOU HAVE SEEN AND TOUCHED WHAT OTHERS HAVE NOT. YOU KNOW HOW HUMANITY CAN EVOLVE – ALL CAN SHARE IN THIS AWARENESS AS YOU HAVE. BUT THEY WILL NEED YOUR HELP TO GET THERE.*

*You’re fading away!*

*YOU’RE SHUTTING ME OUT. IT’S OKAY, IT IS PART OF MY GIFT. YOU WILL BE ABLE TO KEEP DOLOMAY OUT EASILY, NOW. YOUR MIND HAS BEEN ALTERED, OPENED ORIGINALLY BY THE DRUGS AND YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE LIGHT AND HIS CULT – OPENED AND VULNERABLE. YOU NOW HAVE THE MEANS TO PROTECT YOURSELF. BUT THE COST, FOR NOW, IS THAT YOU’LL NO LONGER HEAR MY SONG...*

The voice is gone.

*Hello?*

The ocean and sky around him fade from gray to black, and BC drifts through a cloudy dreamland of closing doors.

BC wakes up, but stays in bed. He tries the mental exercise he’s been trying to use against Dolomay, the closing doors in his head.

*Close the doors!*

BC can almost physically feel his mind shut itself up, inner doors slamming closed.

*That does feel different... more potent?*

He drifts back off to sleep and dreams of being on board the bridge of some strange ship. He’s yelling at someone.

*Why am I yelling?*

He shoots the man.

*Why? Why did I shoot him? Waitasec... Is that Fiza?*

A woman that looks like Fiza leads a Domo in front of him. BC hands the Domo a squishy, sealed bag of... something. The Domo looks excited, and speaks.

*The Domo obviously values it... ew... could it be blood?*

BC realizes he’s not alone. He feels Dolomay near! He visualizes the closing doors!

*SLAM!*

The dream ends with a snap! BC sits upright in bed at the jolt, expecting a headache.

*Damn! Was that real?*

He rocks his head back and forth, loosening the tension in his neck muscles. He massages his temples, but he seems to be spared a headache, for now. He gets out of bed and begins his morning routine.

After breakfast, BC walks through the atrium, under the main dome of Lunar Prime, on his way

to the Prime Rep's office. As he looks at other people, a strange feeling clouds his thoughts. He's struck by how ordinary life is still functioning all around them.

*It all looks so ordinary, like nothing has changed. But everything has changed! Or has it? It's just me. Nothing has really changed.*

BC feels like a spectator sitting back and observing from somewhere inside his own head as he goes through his day. He goes through all the proper motions. He analyzes production reports on the Project bases from Anita, covering ship production and retrofits. He reads through a report about, ultimately, nothing, from the Domo, on their unproductive discussions with the Eldred. There is a request from the Khalif for supplies and for the general needs of Mars as they rebuild.

He signs off on almost everything, moves the files out of his office and on into the growing bureaucracy of the Solar Alliance, all save for Anita's report. He calls her himself.

"Hey Anita, just read your report."

"Yeah?"

"Things are looking good, huh?" BC asks her. "Looks like you've worked the kinks out of the assembly process after incorporating the Eldred tech."

"Uh-huh. Things are humming right along BC," she says.

*She sounds distracted.*

"What's up?" BC asks her.

"What do you mean?" Anita answers, sounding defensive.

"Sounds like you have something on your mind," BC prods her.

"Well," she begins, but she stops.

"What?" BC asks after her pause.

"I hate to say it... But it's too quiet."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, all summer... I just... I hate waiting for the other shoe to drop!" she says.

"I know. I'm trying to find that shoe."

"What?"

"We're rotating a new SAIF Stinger squadron out to Cat's Eye to scout Dolomay's last known location in Flaze space. If you're looking for some excitement, I could put you in charge of the wing," BC offers.

"No thanks!" Anita demurs. "You trying to get me killed, BC?"

"Just offering."

She laughs.

"Actually, I've got my hands full here on Ceres. You know, BC, you haven't really been back to the new base since it's become fully functional, lived in. You should stop out for a visit!"

"What? On an inspection tour, or something?"

"As the Prime Representative visiting one of the territories of the Solar Alliance?" she suggests.

"Alright, maybe I'll come out," BC says. A thought occurs to him. "Aw, you miss me, don't you?"

Anita actually blushes, but she regains her composure quickly.

"Maybe I do," she says. "Let me know what you decide to do." She cuts off the com.

*Strange woman. Not that I'm sane...*

*The ice queen melts! Is this a good thing?*

*Whoah... My heart's racing a little!*

*And then I think of Fiza. Inevitably. She's with Dolomay, looking awfully cozy with him.*

*How much of that is his doing?*

A communiqué arrives from the Flaze, drawing BC's attention. They ask about the disposition of the human fleet, the additional SAIF ships BC will be sending into Flaze territory. BC gets his secretary on the com to respond for him.

"Tell the Flaze the, um, 'fleet' will be there within a matter of days. But be sure to let the Flaze know the new ships are just replacing the ones we sent out last month. See if they understand 'rotation',

huh? And set up a visit out to the Ceres base for me. I want to go inspect the place, tour the new facilities, get to know that part of the Solar Alliance a little better.”

“And maybe tour Ms. Capituna’s facilities as well, sir?” his secretary Lisa cracks, before she clicks off.

*That woman knows way too much! Makes her an excellent secretary.*

BC calls up the plans for Ceres Central. The newest asteroid base draws attention away from the shipyard, and the original base, now their new retrofitting facilities. Ceres is distant enough to keep prying eyes away from the other bases.

*Representative Juarez of Ceres has been directing the trade discussions with the Flaze and the Domo as head of the commerce committee. She has a knack for dealing with them... maybe I’ll pull her in on the diplomatic side, too.*

*Although... She’s not making friends with the remaining UTZ Councilors. They don’t like her no nonsense style. I told her to ignore them, don’t care what they say. And tell them to complain to ME. It’s a new day. A new world. Worlds, plural! And as we set up our central trading hub with these new cultures and planets, the old rules no longer apply.*

*Juarez knows. She gets it.*

*I should visit with her while I’m out there, too. Boost the morale of the commerce negotiators. Maybe.*

BC’s secretary Lisa books the trip with flourishes – BC will ride from Lunar Prime to Ceres on the new Transpace passenger liner, accompanied by a small contingent of SAIF Stinger Ships as a security escort.

Anita has arranged a state dinner for BC on Friday night. She confirms the details on a com call with BC. She throws him a bit of a curve ball when she adds, “And then on Saturday I want you to meet with me and the governors of the colonies.”

“What? What governors of what colonies?” BC asks her.

“Crankshaft, Cat’s Eye, Dimwit and Rigel Four.”

“What? We’re calling them ‘colonies’ now?”

“What should we call them?” she asks BC.

“I don’t know. I’ve always just thought of them as kind of... branch offices of The Project, I guess, under your jurisdiction, now.”

“That’s not how they see it. They were hit by the plague. They’ve sent ships to help fight, they make some of the parts we use on the new ships. They feel they’re much more than ‘branch offices of the Project’, now.”

“Representative Juarez has agreed to meet with the colonial governors, too, to help map out trade routes. There’s already been a healthy amount of human/alien commerce going on out on the four worlds.”

“Okay. I’ll do that, then. I’ll meet with these ‘governors’... Were they actually elected?” BC asks her.

Anita sighs. “Yes,” she says, a bit exasperated. “There are about three hundred people on Rigel Four. They elected Fari Anslan to represent them. The two-hundred or so left on Cat’s Eye voted Amara Schwartz into office. The two-hundred and fifty residents of Crankshaft decided Ken Grissom would lead them. And the two-hundred on Dimwit elected Su Chin to lead.”

“If they’re going to be part of the Solar Alliance, we’ve gotta change the name of ‘Dimwit’!” BC cracks.

“Actually, Su Chin already has a proposal. They want to officially name it ‘Depot’. It’s kind of what they call it already out there,” Anita tells him.

“Just tell her to go ahead and do that. Let’s make it official,” BC says. “‘Depot’ it is!”

“Just like that?” she asks, and looks at him with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Just like that,” BC says. He smiles at Anita. “So, do we still need to meet?”

“BC,” she says, managing to turn his name into an admonishment. She rolls her eyes but then cracks a smile. “That’s just the tip of the iceberg, as the old saying goes,” she tells him. “Yes. We still

need to meet.”

“Fine. Saturday afternoon, then. I’m all yours,” he says to her.

“Are you making any public appearances? Giving any speeches? Anything like that, while you’re here?” she asks.

“Do I have to?” BC asks.

“It *would* be a good idea,” she tells him.

“Listen. I...” BC begins to protest. Anita glares at him. “Fine! Okay. I’ll give a speech of some kind to start the meeting, let the press cover it. How’s that?”

“Good!” Anita says. “And that leaves Saturday night... open.” She looks at BC expectantly.

“Good,” BC agrees.

There’s an awkward silence.

*What does she want me to say? It’s been a while. I never know how to read her.*

*What am I supposed to do?*

Anita clears her throat.

“Do, um, do you, uh, want to have a non-state dinner on Saturday night?” BC tries.

She smiles.

*Yes! Right answer!*

“Good idea,” she says, patronizing him only slightly.

“Gee, thanks,” he says sarcastically.

“See you Friday,” she says, signing off.

*Saved by the com...*

## Chapter Sixteen

Ceres Central is the Solar Alliance’s first official new facility. Built on the dwarf planet Ceres in the asteroids, Ceres Central is a hybrid base built for research, trade and commerce, with a large military component also included. Once a secret project, Ceres Central is now public knowledge, and open to the general public. The base is beginning to see some commercial traffic.

The threats posed by Dolomay and the Eldred have hung heavy over the construction of the base. A division of SAIF Stinger Ships is based at Ceres Central, squadrons kept on constant alert, and the station itself is heavily armed. Each of the six radial corridors that come off the central dome is protected by an anti-ship battery armed with dual energy cannons and defensive measures powered by adapted tech stolen from the Eldred. The batteries are set in place just beyond the end of each corridor, effectively circling the dome with a ring of weaponry.

Although granted mission bases on Lunar Prime, civilian Flaze and Domo seem to be gravitating towards Ceres Central. BC spots several Flaze and Domo commercial ships as his liner lowers into a berth at the Ceres Central port.

*The place looks sturdy, solid... hope it’s a good place for meetings.*

*Still can’t... can’t believe I’m in charge! But who else was stepping up to do it? I want the war to end so I can quit! I’ve tried to make up for my past mistakes. Tried to draw the Muslims and Christians together. Better to have them arguing over a book than shooting at each other and blowing each other up!*

*Damn... flying always gives me too much time to think.*

Anita Capituna and a small group of high-ranking Ceres Central personnel are waiting to greet BC as he gets off the ship.

“Prime Representative Champion,” Anita says with a curt nod, greeting BC with an outstretched hand. She seems cold, aloof.

*All Business... okay.*

BC shakes her hand. "Governor Capituna," he responds. She introduces her head of security, her lieutenant governor, and two other bureaucrats from the Project with her.

An older woman and a younger Latino woman approach as BC finishes with introductions.

"Representative Juarez," BC says, greeting his Representative for Commerce.

"Prime Representative," the Latino woman, Commerce Rep Juarez answers. "I'd like to introduce you to the governor of the Cat's Eye colony, Amara Schwartz."

"Prime Representative Campion, a pleasure," the older woman says, shaking his hand. "I'm looking forward to our meeting tomorrow," she tells him.

"As am I," BC replies.

"Could you and I meet sooner than that, on another issue?" Schwartz asks him.

"I'm not sure I..." BC looks around for Lisa, his secretary, but she's nowhere around. "My schedule is kinda booked."

*What does she want?*

"Well," she starts, but she pauses. She starts again, "This really isn't the right time or place but," she steels herself and then says, a little louder, "I want to register a complaint!"

*This should be good... it's good to be the king?*

"Oh," BC says. "I'm sorry. What is it?"

"You, the UTZ and The Project, moved a squadron of Stinger Ships and men to Cat's Eye a month ago. And you never even bothered to warn us!" she says, upset.

*I did. And no, we didn't. Cat's Eye is next to the Eldred, close to the Flaze. The SAIF squadron used Cat's Eye as a staging area as they went after Dolomay. She has a point.*

"You should have been warned," BC admits to her. "But communication isn't what it should be yet in our new alliance. I am sorry. We were trying to keep the operations secret... But you should have been informed, included among those who 'needed to know'."

"Everyone is scared, Prime Representative Campion. We didn't think the plague could touch us. It did. We know Dolomay's out there. And he's damn close to Cat's Eye, too. Where do you think Dolomay will attack first if a human strike force engages him in Flaze or Eldred space? It will either be us or Rigel Four, I guarantee you that! Tell me, Prime Representative, did you give any thought at all to us? The couple hundred souls who live and work on Cat's Eye for you?"

"We're doing all we can to ensure everyone's survival," BC says, but the words ring hollowly in his own ears.

*I'm sure she can hear that emptiness, too.*

She looks like she wants to say something, but keeps her mouth shut. She looks BC in the eye. She breaks eye contact and turns away abruptly. She walks off, leaves BC standing in the port.

*Did she just snub me? Guess I deserved that. I didn't give any thought to Cat's Eye when I sent the SAIF out there. They won't be there long. No mystery why those ships are out there. But no real sign of Dolomay, either... not yet. Not where we can reach him!*

BC meets with the colonial representatives the next day, the 'governors' of Cat's Eye, Crankshaft, Rigel Four and 'Depot', the name change now official. Amara Schwartz is cordial and diplomatic. And she does not register a formal complaint.

The press is allowed to cover the beginning of the meeting. BC intends to make it quick. He and the governors smile as they sit and nod at each other, letting the media cameramen get their footage. BC then begins with an opening statement for the media.

"We all appreciate the pioneering spirit of the colonies, humanity's outposts among the stars," BC says, trying to sound more impressive than he feels. "We are lucky to have Ceres Central as our hub to humanity's outer reaches. We could agree to meet here at Ceres Central every three months, more often if necessary, to check in with each other and cover any problems and concerns the governors have," he suggests.

"I like that idea," Fari Anslan of Rigel Four says. The other governors nod their agreement.

"We agree! Well, looks like we're off to a great start," BC says for the press' benefit. "I want to thank the media. The rest of the meeting will be private, for now. Thank you!"

They switch off the media feed.

"I hope you all meant that. I did. Every three months, at the least."

"Glad you weren't just acting for the cameras," Amara Schwartz comments.

"I know we have a limited agenda today. But next time? I want to talk about repopulation.

We've got empty space, lots of room. Since the plague," Fari Anslan says.

"I'm afraid there is a lot of room everywhere," Anita responds, speaking up.

"Governor Capituna is right, I'm afraid," BC acknowledges.

*No lack of room anywhere.*

"Have you given any thought to abolishing private property?" Governor Ken Grissom of Crankshaft asks. When everyone else simply stares at him, Grissom gets defensive. "What? We've talked about it on Crank."

"I'm not looking to do anything radical," BC tells them. "We've got a couple of dangerous enemies out there," he says. "They're just waiting to hit us again. We don't know where, when, or even how. So... that's gotta be our pressing concern. Social engineering, political experiments... we don't have the luxury of time to mess around with these things. They'll have to wait until this present danger is over and done with."

*I think we've pressed our luck with the political experiments and social engineering we've already been working on! We're lucky the Eldred are holding back. Lucky Dolomay is out there, not here. But neither situation will last. When will the bough break?*

"Worry about the pressing threat? That seems wise to me," Su Chien, the governor of Depot says. "First things first."

"Is there anything else that needs our immediate attention?" BC asks.

"Not really," Amara Schwartz says. The other governors agree.

"Well, I'm glad we could do this, meet like this," BC says. "Just trying to protect *ourendangered* species. Thanks again for meeting with me today."

"Thanks!"

"Thank you."

The delegates say their thanks and farewells and depart, leaving BC and Anita alone in the conference room.

"Well, that went well," BC says.

"You think so?" Anita asks.

"You don't" BC asks her.

"You haven't given them any thought at all, have you?" she asks, "not until just now, right? Have you?"

"Is it that obvious?" BC asks her.

"Well," Anita ponders, "I could see it. But I know you better than they do."

"And I already told you, I thought they were Project branches, not colonies. So you *know* I wasn't paying attention to them!"

"Touché," Anita admits. "So, yeah, then, I guess it went okay."

Another uneasy silence erupts between them.

"So, uh," BC says, "You, uh, still want to do dinner tonight?" he asks Anita.

"Of course!" she says with an uneasy laugh. "Um, what? See you in about an hour?"

"About an hour? Sure. Yeah, right," BC answers awkwardly. "I'll uh... I'll see you then." He almost stammers.

"See you then," she says.

Neither of them move.

"Well. Uh..." BC starts.

"I should..." Anita begins at the same time.

Both stop.

"I'm, uh... I'm gonna go," BC says. He ducks quickly out of the conference room. Thoughts race through his head as he walks back to his rooms.

*Great. I'm the ruler of the free world and I still can't deal well with women! Or maybe it's just Anita?*

BC manages to find his way back to his rooms.

*Everything is so new here. Maybe that makes it the right place for new beginnings.*

BC refreshes and readies himself for dinner. He meets Anita on schedule and they head together to one of the only restaurants open on Ceres Central. Restaurants seem to be the last commercial businesses to take off on any colony, not really viable until most of the grunt work is done. Most early colonists stick to the commissary for a cheap but healthy diet.

BC and Anita find they have the restaurant, an Italian place called "Giovanni's", just about all to themselves. The restaurant is decorated like an old Italian grotto, a little touch of old Earth on its newest colony on Ceres.

*We try to take Earth with us, wherever we go.*

BC and Anita make small talk until the food arrives, comparing notes on supplies, personnel, ships. Neither says much as they eat.

"How's your spaghetti?" Anita asks BC midway through their meal.

"Good, good... It's good," BC answers, trying not to talk with his mouth full of food. "Your lasagna?"

"Good," she replies, nodding. "It's good, too. Wanna try some?"

"No thanks," BC begs off. "I'm already almost full on this spaghetti. They serve a pretty healthy portion here, huh?"

"Yeah," Anita agrees. "Good size."

The conversation sputters out as they return to eating. They continue to eat in silence.

*You know, I kind of like the quiet...*

"You know, BC... I sort of like this quiet," Anita says, breaking the silence.

*Weird!*

"I was just thinking the same thing!" BC says. "I was worried that I wasn't, I don't know, coming up with, you know, something witty. Or anything, really. I'm not, like, a stellar conversationalist."

"I asked *you* how your spaghetti was," Anita says with a hint of self deprecation.

"Dessert?" the waiter says, suddenly appearing tableside.

"Just a coffee," BC orders.

"Another water," Anita tells the server. She turns back to BC. "We talk all the time, BC. Sometimes it's nice just to, um, not talk, you know?"

They do talk a little over coffee and water.

"It does feel good to relax a little," BC muses. "Even though I know they're out there, hanging over us, biding their time, the Eldred, Dolomay..."

*And Fiza... And 'fuck you!' brain for going, now!*

"I know what you mean, it's nice to relax, but you can't get too comfortable," Anita agrees with BC. "But somehow... I've got a good feeling, for some reason. I'm not usually superstitious, but I feel like they aren't going to bother us tonight."

"Oh really," BC teases. "What? Did you strike up some sort of side deal with them or something?"

"If only!" She laughs. "Nah. It's just a feeling."

The waiter brings the check over. Anita demands that they split the bill. BC starts to protest, and then decides he knows better than to argue with her.

More awkwardness ensues when it's time to go.

"So, um, what are you, uh, doing tonight?" BC asks Anita as they both stand up from the table.

"What do you mean?" she asks him.

*Oh, come on! That's not fair!*

"Do you wanna go get a drink or something somewhere?" he manages.

"Sure," she agrees. She smiles a brief, crooked smile at BC. "I know a place we can go."

The bars were Ceres Central's first commercial establishments, thrown together just after the

commissary was up and running in the colony's earliest days. Workers building the new frontier let off steam in their off hours, drinking and enjoying the entertainment in the bars.

BC and Anita find a place playfully called "Roids." The bar is crowded with Ceres Central colonists. Anita has to put on her best "Governor Capituna" smile and nod as she passes by her constituents on their way through the crowd to an open booth. BC gets off easy. No one seems to notice him.

*Pay no attention to the Prime Representative, please!*

*That booth emptied pretty quick for us. For her! Well, governor, rank does have its privileges, doesn't it?*

Once they're seated, the crowd leaves them alone. BC and Anita have a couple of drinks and talk about nothing for about an hour, and then decide to call it a night. They settle their tab and get ready to go.

"Walk you back to your rooms?" BC offers.

"Sure," Anita says with a little smile.

They walk together to her rooms and stop outside her door. A passing tech stops, startled.

"Hello, Governor! Hello, Prime Representative," she says nervously. She ducks her head and trundles off down the corridor.

*For some reason I feel awkward...*

Anita and BC watch her go. Anita turns to BC.

"Hurry up and come in," she chides BC playfully. They step inside her rooms. When the door closes behind them, Anita steps up to BC, puts her arms up around his shoulders, and looks him in the eye.

"You know, BC. There are times I like being a public figure. I like being in a position where I can help people, do good. All that. But I like to step out of view, too. Get out of the public eye. Don't you?"

"Um, yeah," BC manages. She wrinkles her forehead.

*Oh, that was smooth.*

She plants a kiss on him anyway. He draws her in and they connect with some kind of electricity once again charging the air between them. BC feels supercharged. Anita leans into him, on him.

They draw apart after a few minutes.

"Wow," BC says, "You know, I..."

Anita shushes him with a finger to his lips.

"No more talking," she says. She takes him by the hand and leads him to the bedroom, pulls him over to her next to her bed. They kiss again, and it slowly transforms into carnal lovemaking.

Later, BC watches Anita sleep.

*A Latino angel.*

BC thinks about the first time he saw her – after knocking her out with a hatch cover in a supply room on Lunar Prime, ages ago.

*Even when she was trying to kill me! There was something about her...*

## Chapter Seventeen

BC drifts off into the most peaceful, undisturbed sleep he's had in years. No headaches, no voices, no visions, no interruptions. The same can't be said for breakfast.

Anita and BC decide to eat breakfast in bed. The com begins ringing early.

"I've got to take this," Anita says.

"Go ahead."

She takes two more calls as they try to eat breakfast. When the com rings a third time, BC rolls his eyes. Then Anita hands the earpiece over to him.

"It's for you," she says, a little puzzled.

BC puts on the earpiece, hearing one side of a conversation in progress on the other end. An administrative tech is speaking to someone nearby.

"...told you he was there! If I was him, I'd a..."

BC cuts him off.

"Campion here. What's up?"

"Oh! Ahem, uh, hello, sir. The Domo representative has asked to see you immediately. He – is it a he, though? I don't know, I just meant, well – 'it'? That doesn't sound right either. The Domo says it's urgent, sir, Prime Representative, sir, very important."

"Where?" BC asks. "Is he here? On Ceres Central?"

"He is, sir. He'd like to meet with you as soon as possible this morning," the tech says.

"Tell him I'll meet with him in... an hour and a half," BC tells the tech.

"Oh... um, I don't think he's gonna like that, sir," the tech says, sounding nervous. "He's standing here waiting, next room over. And he kind of freaks me out, sir."

"Bear with him, but don't get too close," BC warns the tech. "Okay? You know what I mean?"

"I do, sir. I sent one woman home already, when she began to feel 'drained'."

"Be careful," BC cautions again. "And tell him I'll be there as soon as I can, in about half an hour."

"Yes sir."

BC pulls the earpiece off.

*What now? What do the Domo want?*

About thirty minutes later, BC meets the Domo representative in a conference room. Anita joins him, all business.

*No PDA – Public Displays of Affection – we agreed on that before. Business on the outside, fun on the inside. Now it's time for serious business.*

"Good Morning, Prime Representative Campion," the Domo says across the table. "Good Morning to you as well, Governor Capituna."

"Good Morning," BC and Anita respond, nearly in unison. She gives him a quick glance.

*Too cute. No PDA!*

"We must speak of urgent information," the Domo tells them.

*The tech was right. The Domo almost seems impatient!*

"Speak, then," BC encourages the alien.

"We have, as you know, recently started endeavoring to speak with the Eldred on your behalf."

"The results have been pretty minimal so far, though, haven't they?" BC asks.

"Indeed they have," the Domo admits, "for the Eldred have seemed unwilling to engage in any form of communication whatsoever."

"Indeed," BC agrees, echoing the alien.

*We haven't heard diddly from them either...*

"Now," the Domo continues, "Although the Eldred have not been forthcoming and have not given us any official indication of their disposition, we have received news of the Eldred from some of our unofficial sources among them." The Domo pauses. "This news is not good, I'm afraid, Prime Representative, Governor."

"No?" BC asks. "What's the bad news?"

"The Eldred are planning an all-out assault on your original asteroid base, your colonies, and your shipyards. We did not hear of any plans to attack here at Ceres Central, but it could also be a target," the Domo warns. "The Eldred want to curtail your ability to move between the stars. They aim to keep you contained within Mars orbit by destroying the asteroid base, the shipyards, and the colonies."

"Mars orbit? What happened to Jupiter? Suddenly they want to knock us back inside the asteroids? When is this supposed to happen? When?" BC presses. "When are they attacking?"

"We don't know when," the Domo admits. "But it will be soon. They are moving many forces into this area, gathering many thousands of ships up above off of the elliptic."

*Many thousands? Great. But this is what we knew was coming, on some level, didn't we? At least suspected it could happen. We've been waiting for this, for the other shoe to drop.*

"Thank you for this information, representative," BC says to the Domo.

"You are welcome. We Domo believe this completes our deal in this regard. Good Day," the alien says, dismissing himself. He leaves the table and quickly exits the conference room.

*What? The deal is over? I wonder if the Flaze think the deal is over, too?*

*We've gotta pull our people back from the colonies. Shit. We'll be easy targets if we're all spread out. Gotta gather ourselves together. Circle our cosmic wagons.*

*And you know Dolomay will jump in at some point. He could adopt one of the colonies as his base, with us pulled back. Shit.*

*It's like chess. Like fucking chess! Move a piece here, another one moves there, three moves later you realize it was the wrong move, and you lose the game. I hate fucking chess! I'm not into playing games with people's lives, either.*

*Move out of the colonies, and Dolomay moves in. Pull our SAIF ships back, and he'll attack. And when will the Eldred come thundering down on us? Maybe we can leave some people on each colony, small defensive forces to protect our interests. Volunteer squads. They'd have to be. Could be suicide.*

Anita sighs, and BC snaps out of his thoughts.

"What are we going to do, BC?" she asks rhetorically.

"We're going to fight them, Anita," BC answers anyway. "We're going to kick their asses. And they will NOT destroy our bases – I won't let that happen!" he insists.

"Good words, BC. Good words. But can you back them up?"

"I can, with your help," he tells her.

She looks him in the eye. Her eyes bore into his. BC feels her measuring him.

*I wonder if I measure up... and under what standard am I being measured?*

Anita seems to make up her mind. She takes a deep breath.

"Great," she says. Her forehead scrunches up as she thinks on her feet. "I think I need to relocate to the Project Base."

"Okay," BC says. "Put someone else in charge here first," he tells her. "I'll go with you when you head over there."

"You will?" she asks, surprised. "I thought you'd be heading back to Lunar Prime."

"I should be where I'm needed. If they're going to be attacking the Project base, I should be there leading our defense."

"Since when?" she gives him an angry, puzzled look. "I don't think your government, your bureaucracy," she spits out the word with contempt, "will support your decision. They won't want you on the front line. And I'm not sure you should be there either."

"But you should be?"

"It's *my* job," she says, glaring at him. "Your concern is sweet, but misplaced!"

*I Can Handle IT!*

BC can hear her unspoken words in his head loud and clear.

*That's not why I'm going!*

"I'm not trying to insult you," he tells her. "Look, Anita..."

*Why am I going?*

"Even the last twenty four hours notwithstanding, I think we make a pretty good team," BC suggests. "If we're fighting for our lives, and you know we are, I'd really like to have you by my side, next to me in the fight."

Anita is still a little flush with anger, but BC thinks he maybe sees a blush rising up in her cheeks behind her ire.

"I didn't realize you were such a dumb romantic, BC," Anita chides him. She leans over and kisses him on the cheek. "You're sweet. Who knew such a mean, vicious killing machine like you could have such a way with words?"

“Is that a compliment?” BC asks her.

“Nah. I wasn’t finished. The way you have with those words? It’s a way of torturing and maiming them,” she volleys back. Then she smiles. “I do know what you mean, believe it or not. I can’t believe it... And it is sweet, even if you’re not exactly thinking straight.”

*Aw shucks?*

“But don’t talk like this is our last stand, it’s bad luck.”

“We should move,” BC says. “If the Domo are running scared, the Eldred could be right behind them. They could attack at any second.”

“A romantic *andan* optimist,” she laughs.

“I’m a realist,” he answers defensively. He turns to a com unit and calls an assistant.

“Yes, sir?”

“Situation red, repeating, situation red,” BC says. “All Solar Alliance forces on red alert. I want gold squadron to relocate from Mars to the old Project asteroid base immediately. Green squadron, you’re reassigned from Lunar Prime to the asteroid base, effective immediately.”

*Thinking on the fly here... who do we have where... where will we need them?*

“Tell the forces now billeted on Cat’s Eye to secure the colony and prepare for an assault,” BC says, “from Dolomay, the Eldred, or... hell, even the Flaze might decide to kick us when we’re down, who knows? Now that the Domo have decided that they’re done with their side of the bargain.” BC looks over at Anita, who is scrutinizing him as he gives his commands. “And please remind the commander of the SAIF ships at Cat’s Eye that he still answers to Governor Schwartz, okay. Make sure the governor is informed on everything that’s going on this time, too, for chrissakes.”

“BC?” Anita tries to get his attention.

“Have green and gold squadrons coordinate with the asteroid base defense’s SAIF detachment. Black and white squadrons are posted there now. Black leader is the acting commander, report to him.”

“BC?” Anita tries again. BC breaks off from the com and looks over at her.

“I’m sorry,” he says, realizing he’s been steamrolling along ignoring her. “I was on a roll,” he says, trying to explain.

“No, you were,” she says, reassuring him. “But...”

“What? But what?”

“The more I think about it... as I listened to you sending more ships... well, here’s the thing,” she says. She shakes her head. “I can’t believe I’m saying this... I don’t think the asteroid base is really defensible against the Eldred. I don’t think, realistically, that we can hold the Project base,” she says quickly, as if she couldn’t say it at all unless she got it all out at once. “The shipyards we can defend. But the asteroid base? It’s too large and sprawling, too riddled with passages... just too vulnerable. We saw that when Dolomay attacked us there.”

“You don’t think we can keep them at bay from there?” he asks her for confirmation. “We’ve done it before.”

“Not if they’re gathering the numbers the Domo say they are. Makes what we faced before look like just a handful of ships. This time...” She stops, thinking. “This time there will be thousands, BC. Maybe hundreds of thousands.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“Give them the base,” she says. BC looks back at her, silent, surprised by her words.

*Wow! Didn’t expect that from her!*

“Give them the base?”

“Yeah. Send the SAIF squadrons to the shipyards. Keep a token force at the base. Defend, but be ready to cut and run. Maybe plant some explosives? Take some of them out?” she explains. Her brow furrows as she thinks. “We’ll need to get everyone off of the base. Starting now!” she realizes.

“Oh?” BC asks.

“Well,” she looks away, “That’s what I would do.”

“Since we’re being honest here... Do you think we can hold the shipyards?” he asks.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Really? So, you’re an optimist, then?” BC says sarcastically.

“I’m a realist,” Anita insists, echoing BC’s earlier comment.

*Let’s see...*

BC does some quick thinking. He puts a call in to Commander Dragama from the SAIF Black Squadron.

“Dragama here,” the commander answers.

“Dragama, this is Bernard Campion,” BC says, identifying himself.

“Well hello, Prime Representative. To what do I owe the honor?”

“Commander, I have a technical question for you. Is there any chance you could fire the new laser defenses we’ve installed on the asteroid base remotely, from your ship?”

“Hmm. Let’s see, I think we can in case of emergency... hold on, sir.”

“Sure.”

BC and Anita look at each other as they wait for Dragama to come back on the com.

“What are you thinking?” she asks him. Before he can answer, Dragama returns.

“Yes sir, we can. Even easier than I thought. Their systems can be tied into ours in an instant, it’s built in for triangulation fire. We can assume control of the base defenses from any of our command vehicles.”

“Wha...” Anita begins, but she stops as BC raises a finger, asking her silently to hold her thought.

“Excellent, Dragama, that’s good news. Thank you, commander,” BC says, signing off. He turns to Anita.

“Let’s get everybody off the Project Base, bring them back here to Ceres Central. Leave the base empty, surrounded by a carefully selected super squadron of ships led by Dragama’s forces, so the Eldred think we’re still there.

“When the Eldred arrive, we’ll fire back at them using the base’s lasers as well as ships’ lasers, so it will look like the base is fighting back. We’ll be trying to take out as many of the Eldred as we can, don’t get me wrong, it’ll be a real battle. And we’ll also try to observe them, assess the strength, the size of the Eldred force, see what we’re up against.

“In the meantime, while we keep them busy at the base, we shut down the shipyards and mobilize every ship we can afford to defend the facilities themselves. Shut down the beginning of the lines now, Anita, have them focus on finishing up the ships already in production. Get the brain boys out of there, too.”

BC is thinking on his feet.

“We should get all our scientists back to Mars, the Moon or Earth,” he says, thinking out loud. “Damn,” he swears, stopping.

“What?” Anita asks. “What is it?”

“If the Eldred are striking with such huge numbers...” he shakes his head.

“What?” Anita asks again.

BC calls up the com.

“Get me the colonial governors,” he says.

“BC, what are you doing?” Anita presses.

“We can’t defend them. We’ve got to evacuate the colonies. I’m sorry, Anita. If the Eldred are going to hit us the way the Domo say they are, we can’t have our forces spread out all over the place. I’d like to, but we can’t defend the colonies from Dolomay and the Eldred *and* secure our defenses here, too.”

“They’re not going to like this,” she comments. She shakes her head.

“I know. I don’t expect them to like it. But,” he grabs her lightly by the shoulder so she’ll look directly at him, “you’re giving up the Project Base. Because you know we can’t defend it! For the same reason – the *very same reason!* – we have to evacuate the colonies.”

“They’re still not going to like it,” she repeats. “The colonists are all rugged individualists, very defensive...”

“We’re connecting with the governors now, Prime Rep,” the com cuts her off as it sputters back to life.

“You know it makes sense,” BC says to Anita before he answers the com. She smiles.

“I know,” she says. She frowns. “But I also know them. You’re asking them to abandon their homes. They’re going to resist.” She shakes her head and tells him again, “They’re not going to like it!”

And they don’t like it. They all take the news badly, and BC comes away from the five-way conversation feeling bruised and verbally battered. He also comes away with a nasty headache.

*Nowhere near as bad as those old headaches I was getting. Those seem to be gone. No Dolomay lately either... no attacks, anyway. Maybe I shut him out.*

*Now... if only I could figure out how to strike back at him, attack Dolomay with my mind. Wouldn’t be something!*

*He’s too powerful. I feel like I’m lucky just to keep him at bay. But a guy can dream, can’t he?*

BC and Anita manage to find more quality time together that night. BC drifts off afterwards into an uneasy sleep, anticipating attacks even as he tries to relax and rest.

He doesn’t feel Dolomay in *hismind*. Instead, he feels as if he’s in Dolomay’s mind! BC dreams of being on the bridge of Dolomay’s ship – once again looking out through Dolomay’s eyes!

Dolomay is laughing at a Domo sniveling at his feet.

“Get up!” Dolomay shouts at the pathetic creature.

“Yes, Dolomay,” the Domo mumbles out of its sideways mouth as it struggles to its feet.

“I have decided to pay you for your information,” Dolomay says to the Domo, “but I have come to believe your terms are far from equitable.”

“You wish to renegotiate?”

“I *wish* nothing! I will give you ten of these pale echoes, these *humans*, to do with as you will. *Not* the one hundred for which you have asked. And *you* will give me your information. Or you will die. You and your entire crew of overgrown leeches will be exterminated, your ships flown straight into the nearest sun!” Dolomay growls. He grins a sharp toothed grin down at the Domo. “Your choice.”

“I can’t... I’m not auth...” the alien stammers in protest. Dolomay continues to grin down at the Domo in silence, waiting. If Domo could sweat, this one would be dripping wet.

“A moment?” the Domo asks of Dolomay.

“A moment? Ten minutes, no more!” he tells the alien. The Domo bows and scrapes and leaves the room, presumably to speak with its superiors. Dolomay lets his grin fade. He turns to the “pale echo” who has been amusing him lately.

*THE LOVELY FIZA. A FINE BITCH OF HER SPECIES, WEAK AS THEY ARE. PERHAPS EVEN WORTHY OF A BOND, BACK IN MY DAY. SHE TELLS ME THEY HAVE SIMILAR BONDS AMONG THE PALE ECHOES.*

*HER MIND IS SO SMALL. ASLEEP. CLOSED. NOT SO EASILY LEAD AS AL-SALID. THOUGH I BEND HER TO MY WILL, SHE SEEMS AFFECTIONATE ENOUGH. THIS CONCEPT OF “LOVE” SHE SPEAKS OF, THAT I’VE SEEN IN HER MIND... SO FOREIGN, SO ALIEN.*

*THOUGH THESE HUMANS BE OUR OFFSPRING, THEY ARE VERY DIFFERENT. THIS LOVE, THEIR “BELIEFS” AND “RELIGIONS,” THESE THINGS THEY HAVE INVENTED...*

*WHAT ARE THEY IN THE END BUT MORE EXCUSES FOR THE EXERCISE OF WILL, CONTROL AND POWER?*

*BUT THEY ARE SO REAL TO THEM! I’VE SEEN IT IN THEIR MINDS! SEEN HOW THEY HOLD THESE SIMPLE CONCEPTS TO BE TRUTH. HOW THEY GIVE THESE IDEAS THEIR REALITY!*

Fiza looks up at Dolomay and smiles.

*I MUST ADMIT, HER APPETITES ARE MUCH LIKE THOSE OF THE WOMEN I FAVORED IN THE LONG AGO.*

Dolomay reaches down to stroke Fiza's cheek, much as one might caress a favorite pet. Fiza plays along and purrs her approval of his touch. She pulls one of Dolomay's fingers into her mouth and sucks on it briefly before Dolomay pulls it away.

*YES! STRONG APPETITES, INDEED.*

The reentrance of the Domo distracts Dolomay away from Fiza.

"Do you have an answer for me? Do I get my information or do you die?" Dolomay asks the alien matter-of-factly. "Have you had your warriors calculate the likelihood of your escape should you assassinate me? Or try to resist? What say you?"

"We agree to your new conditions," the Domo says to Dolomay.

"Excellent!" Dolomay exclaims. He motions to one of his lieutenants. "Have ten prisoners chosen at random and delivered to the Domo ship immediately," Dolomay orders. The lieutenant nods, and leaves the room to carry out Dolomay's demands.

The Domo brightens and straightens up.

"You see?" Dolomay says to the Domo, "I can be quite reasonable."

"As can we," the Domo insists. "We gladly provide information when compensated adequately."

"Well then," Dolomay says to the alien, "go on!"

"The Eldred plan on attacking the humans in the very near future," the Domo says with import and weight.

Dolomay laughs him off. "That's it?" He turns to another lieutenant, "Go stop the prisoner transfer!" The man runs to follow Dolomay's orders.

"News fucking flash!" Fiza comments.

"Indeed, this is not information, this is old news," Dolomay says in disappointment to the Domo. "Now you're going to die!"

"No! No, wait," the Domo begs for its life. "We understand this! But there are more details that you do not know! The Eldred believe the humans need to be 'contained'. With this in mind, they will be striking the human's asteroid base and shipyards sometime in the next month."

"Not their colonies?" Dolomay asks, noticing the omission.

"Evidently not," the Domo says. "They seem to believe striking the asteroid base and shipyards will cut off the colonies. They seem to believe the colonies will wither and die cut off from Earth by the base's and shipyards' destruction."

"Right," Dolomay says, pondering the Domo's words. "They *seem* believe this. They would *seem* to be wrong," he laughs, "of course! But I can see why they would believe that, seems plausible they would. That reminds me," Dolomay breaks off to call over to an underling. "We need to put another raiding party together. Get a crew together. I want to hit the hydro gardens again on Crankshaft – restock the larder!" The underling leaves and Dolomay turns back to the Domo. "What about their new base, on Ceres?"

"The Eldred will advance on Ceres after they hit the asteroid base and shipyards," the Domo says.

"Oh, will they?" Dolomay asks, amused. He almost snickers. "I think they underestimate the tenacity of the pale echoes," Dolomay muses. "They'll give them a good fight! The *Servants*," Dolomays sneers, using the ancient name of the Eldred from when they served his race, "don't realize, can't really comprehend how much like their masters these 'humans' really are! The Servants may win – they have stolen our old technology and now call it their own. They have powerful weapons at their disposal, after all."

"And they plan on striking in unprecedented numbers!" the Domo adds. "A force the size of which the universe has not seen in a million years!"

"I remember fleets in numbers that would dwarf any the Eldred may be able to muster," Dolomay scoffs. "Still, I'm sure they can amass ships enough to stagger the humans. They plan on attacking en masse, do they?"

The Domo nods.

"Interesting. The Servants seem to be gambling! They'll beat the humans, of course, but they will

pay a very high price.” Dolomay’s grin returns, spreading wide across his face. He looks around the room at his followers. “When they pay that price, *we* will then exact an even higher price from *them*! We’ll wait until the humans have been defeated. They will not go easily, no matter what the Eldred think. There will be great damage on both sides. But ultimately the humans will lose. And then we will strike what is left of the Eldred! We’ll wipe them out, and then take over what is left of the human race! Earth will become the home of my new Empire!”

“You talk pretty big,” Fiza cracks. “What if ‘the humans’ don’t lose?”

Dolomay laughs out loud.

“You still overestimate your little species, you pale echoes of my great people, don’t you my pet?” he patronizes her.

“I hate it when you call me that!” Fiza pouts back up at him.

“You all make lovely pets, so obedient, so easily trained,” Dolomay purrs at her, “aren’t you, my pet? Don’t fret, pet!”

*YOU WILL LOVE ME! YOU DO LOVE ME!*

He reaches over to stroke her cheek and her eyes go blank. She looks confused, and then leans in to accept Dolomay’s caress.

“There, now, pet, isn’t that better?” he asks. She smiles a confused smile at Dolomay.

“Sure, D,” she says. Dolomay smiles and turns back to the Domo.

“When will they strike?”

“As I’ve said, we do not know for sure. Within the month, certainly. The Ser – the Eldred already gather their forces in preparation for their assault.”

“I see,” Dolomay say, thinking. “Well thank you, Domo.”

“So you will have your men deliver on your bargain now?” The Domo asks him. “You will have them continue the prisoner transfer?”

Dolomay nods at the alien. Dolomay beckons, and one of his lieutenants saunters over. The Domo looks on expectantly. “I want you to take care of the Domo ship,” Dolomay says to the underling. “Destroy the ship now.”

“Yessir!” the underling acknowledges, spins and turns to execute Dolomay’s orders.

“But you promised to...” the Domo begins to protest.

Dolomay pulls a beam gun from his side and fires point blank at the Domo. He lifts the beam as he fires, slicing upwards through the alien. Smoking jagged halves collapse to the floor at Dolomay’s feet.

“Fly their ship into the sun,” Dolomay commands. He smiles over at Fiza. “A promise is a promise, after all.”

*Fiza!*

“Who said that?” Dolomay says, confused.

“No one said anything, boss,” one of Dolomay’s men says to him.

Dolomay seems confused. A strange thought occurs to him.

*I AM NOT ALONE AM I? AM I! IS SOMEONE THERE? WHO IS THERE? WHO IS IN MY HEAD!*

*GET OUT!*

BC feels himself snap back into his bed as if he’s suddenly fallen from a great height. He tries to breathe, but he struggles, the wind knocked out of him. Finally a sharp pain in his chest accompanies a gasp that begins to refill his lungs. His heart is pounding, matching another pounding he can hear – someone banging on the door to his room?

No. Banging on the doors in his head!

*Dolomay!*

BC envisions the doors in his mind.

*They’re vibrating! But holding...*

*He didn’t seem to know it was me.*

*Was that for real?*

Anita stirs in bed next to him.

“Y’okay?” she mumbles sleepily.

“Fine,” he tells her. “Just had a fucked up dream. Either that, or a vision into the mind of Dolomay.”

“I heard you shout that woman’s name again,” Anita says, waking up more. “I’m really starting to not like this ‘Fiza’ person...”

“She’s a UTZ agent,” BC sort of tells her the truth. “But she’s been kidnapped and warped to the will of Dolomay. He calls her his ‘pet’. He’d like to make us all his pets.”

“Meow,” she says, turning back over. “Tell me more in the morning.”

“Dolomay wants to swoop in after the Eldred hit us,” BC says. “Wipe them out and take us over.”

“Else is new?” Anita half asks as she drifts off.

*I don’t think I can sleep now! Was that real?*

BC drifts off into an uneasy half-sleep, tumbling over the surface of slumber, never quite relaxing, his sleep disturbed by thoughts of tactics, ship counts and other battle plans. He finally gets up out of bed.

*Can’t really wake up when you haven’t been asleep.*

The “dream” remains fresh in his mind. In the clear light of day BC is even more convinced that his glimpse inside Dolomay’s head was real.

*I was inside his mind – felt his thoughts, vile as they are. To him we are just pets, pale echoes, insects. He knows he couldn’t take us, our Solar Alliance, and certainly not the Eldred, not straight up in a fight... But he figures he can mop of us up after we spend ourselves on our throw down. Too bad he didn’t think of his base’s location while I was in his head! And poor Fiza... there was some of the old Fiza there, but he’s controlling her pretty tightly. On a short leash? She seems to have been tamed. What do they call it, that syndrome where captives begin identifying with their captors? Patricia Hearst syndrome? Something like that. Saw it in a movie once.*

“A lot on your mind?” Anita asks, startling him.

“I didn’t hear you get up,” BC tells her.

“Yeah, I’ve just sort of been laying here half asleep, knowing I have to get up soon. Just kind of waiting for the alarm to go off. I always wake up just before the alarm goes off.”

“You’re a freak!” BC kids her. “Why do you need an alarm clock, then? Why not just get up at the right time?”

“If I don’t set the alarm, I don’t wake up.”

“But you always wake up before the alarm. The alarm never wakes you up!”

“I wouldn’t say never...” she says.

“Aha!” BC says, in mock prosecutorial glee as he pretends to catch Anita in his cross examination. He crosses over to the bed, bounces down and begins to tickle her. “Oh, the governor of Ceres Central is ticklish! She is!”

Anita is giggling and trying to twist out of BC’s reach.

“Stop! Ah, ha, uh, cut it! Ooh, oh, hey ha, ha,” Anita gets out between gasps and giggles. BC stops to kiss her, ending his tickle torture. They crawl back under the covers and make love... until the alarm finally *does* go off, at the most inopportune time.

“Let it... Unh, let it ring,” Anita gasps.

The alarm goes off for another few minutes before they finally disentangle. BC smashes the snooze alarm down to shut it off. Still giggling a little, Anita pulls him into the refresher with her and they “shower” together like a couple of teenagers. But after a few minutes of forgotten responsibilities, they leave the refresher and dress to meet the day as the Prime Representative of the Solar Alliance and the Governor of Ceres Central. They kiss briefly once again before they leave her quarters to face the day.

“I’ve gotta run...” Anita apologizes before taking off.

“I know,” BC says, “I’m going to grab some breakfast and get cracking. Wanna join me?”

“Sure.”

## Chapter Eighteen

BC begins issuing orders over breakfast. He's got one of the SAIF generals on the com.

"I want a command and control ship here, near Ceres Central," BC says, "but out next to a Transpace jump point so we can move fast if we need to," he tells the general. "I'll need direct and complete access to Dragama and his ships at the asteroid base... and a link up with the shipyard, too." BC turns to Anita. "I'm going to need you to coordinate the evacuations. We need to be careful... I don't think we want it to *look* like we're evacuating, if at all possible. We don't want people to panic, and we don't want to let on to the Eldred or Dolomay that we know anything."

BC rubs his head, an anxious headache threatening just behind his eyes.

"Prime Rep Champion?" a tech calls over to BC.

BC looks up.

"Yeah?"

"We've got Commander Dragama on the line for you."

Dragama checks in with BC. His "super squadron" of five of their best ships and crews stands at ready at the asteroid base.

"We're set here, Prime Rep. We've got our ships arrayed around the base," Dragama says. "We have reserves hiding out on more distant rocks. The asteroid defenses are linked in to our ships. You know, sir, with only five ships on defense, the base's laser defenses should be able to fire more rapidly than they could in a more typical defensive situation. With so few friendlies in the 'sky' we can blanket larger swaths with cover fire."

"Great!" BC says. "Thanks, Dragama."

"Dragama out."

"Anita, what's happening with the scientists?"

"I've got Krish and Dell coordinating their resettlement on Lunar Prime. They've been working all night. Most of our 'brain trust' is already safely back inside Mars' orbit at this point."

"I'm not really sure that's any safer, to be honest," BC says. "At least they know I'm thinkin' of them," he says, smiling.

Anita frowns at BC's attempt at dark humor.

"I'm sure they'll be touched at your concern," she cracks.

"I'm trying not to take myself too seriously," he says, trying to explain.

"These are serious times," Anita observes.

Commander Aziz checks in from the shipyards, now in lockdown mode.

"Just five ships left on the assembly line, Prime Representative," Aziz says. "We've been shutting the line down and securing it behind 'em, step by step." The commander of Black Squadron has four squadrons under him at this point, guarding the shipyards, Black, White, Green and Gold Squadrons are now all answering to Aziz. BC has also sent extra ships Aziz's way. The shipyard defense forces have been bolstered by the new Stingers coming off the shipyard's assembly line.

"What do you want to call the new squadron?" Aziz asks.

"What?" BC asks, momentarily confused.

"All the extra ships... there are enough for another squadron," Aziz explains. "What would you have me designate it?"

"Huh... uh, how about Silver?" BC offers. "Silver Squadron?"

"Silver it is, sir," Aziz confirms. "Out for now, Prime Representative."

"BC?" Anita asks, getting his attention.

"What?"

"Krish is on the com for you, says it's important. He says he's afraid this might get lost in the shuffle"

“This?” BC asks. “This what? What does he want?”

“I don’t know,” Anita says. “He didn’t tell me.”

BC sighs.

“Okay, put him on.”

“BC!” Krish greets him.

“Hello, Krish. How’s the ‘resettlement’ going?”

“It’s annoying,” Krish admits. “Scientists are big and horrible babies when you disturb their nests. Lots of complaints! Fussy, fussy, fussy! But that’s not why I’m calling.”

“No?”

“No. I’ve got something for you, maybe a new, um, weapon. I think.”

“You think?”

*I’ll take it... we need any advantage we can get!*

“What is it, Krish?” BC asks.

“I’ve been calling it a ‘transpace nullifier’. Dell likes to call it a ‘transpace dampener’. His name seems to be winning.”

*I don’t care what you call it! What the fuck is it and why should I care now?*

“What is it? A Transpace whatzy?”

“A Transpace damp... I mean, nullifier,” Krish says enthusiastically. “We reverse engineered it from the Eldred’s shield technology!”

“Can you explain it to me in layman’s terms?” BC asks.

“Let’s see,” Krish says, and he pauses, mulling it over. “Well, the Eldred’s shields work because they nullify, or dampen, the energy directed at them. Makes sense, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well,” Krish continues, “that’s a kind of passive application of the technology. It waits to be engaged to work, if you see what I mean.”

“Go on.”

“Well, I began to wonder if the tech could be used more actively. Instead of waiting to get hit, could we project the dampening effect back at the energy beam or whatever’s source?”

“Could you?” BC asks.

“No,” Krish says, disappointed. “An active application like that grew significantly weaker as it radiated from the point of its generation.”

“Wait a minute,” BC stops him. “What?”

“The ‘signal’ didn’t carry far enough to be effective,” Krish clarifies.

“Gotcha.”

“But!” Krish says with a bit of a flourish, “Here’s the good part! Although the projected dampening field was too weak to stop direct beam energy weapons, it turns out it does dampen another field, a weaker energy, more diffuse field we all know and love: the Transpace field! And the dampening effect could work over longer distances.”

“You can dampen the Transpace field?” BC checks him.

“Yeah!” Krish says.

“I didn’t know there was a ‘field’ involved,” BC says.

“Oh,” Krish says. “Let me back up. The Transpace drive creates a field around the ship that allows it to, um... well, work. With the active application of the adapted tech we could dampen, or nullify that field, and then the ship wouldn’t be able to, er, ‘jump’... the Transpace drive can’t work without the field. We can take the field away.”

“What’s the range? How far away can the field effectively dampen?” BC asks Krish.

“It has an effective field of about ten kilometers.”

“10K? In every direction?”

“More 5K in every direction, making a circle around 10K across,” Krish explains.

“Can the device be triggered remotely?” BC asks, thinking. “Doesn’t seem like you can use it on a ship... I mean, wouldn’t it stop *you* from jumping, too?”

“Yeah, that’s something we’ve been working on. But I suppose you could set it up, rig it so it could pulse off remotely,” Krish says, thinking out loud.

“Well, it’s not much of a weapon otherwise, is it?” BC asks him. “Not if *ourship* is effected when we trigger it!”

“Oh,” Krish says, “yeah, I see your point. Maybe it has to be a remotely triggered device.”

“That would be great,” BC says, trying to sound encouraging. “And in the meantime, send your working model out here, pronto,” BC orders.

“What?” Krish asks, surprised.

“Pronto?” Anita asks BC, giving him a look.

“I thought ‘pronto’ sounded good,” BC admits, aside.

“So, you want this one?” Krish asks. “It isn’t remotely triggered. Not yet.”

“Yeah, I want it now. Anything they don’t know we have, I want. It’s an advantage. Why don’t you come out here with it and rig up a remote trigger for it on the way?”

“Okay. I’ll get it out to you today. You really want this on your ship?”

“Hell, I want one on *everyship*,” BC tells him.

“Oh,” Krish says.

There’s silence as the statement sinks in.

“I’ve got a lot of work to do, then,” Krish finally says, breaking the silence.

“I guess you do,” BC agrees.

“Okay, then. Well. Thank you, um, BC, for letting me say my piece,” Krish says.

“Thank *you*, Krish. This is big! Nicely done,” BC congratulates the scientist.

“Thanks, BC!” Krish says, brightening. “I’ll get the testing unit out to you ASAP!” He signs off the com.

*Huh... maybe this is something we can use. Float it into the middle of their fleet... Stop the Eldred from jumping and blow them up!*

“Command and control ship ready and waiting, Prime Representative,” a SAIF officer reports to BC after he strides up to the breakfast table. “C and C is parked in proximity, in near orbit of Ceres Central.”

BC looks around the breakfast table, out at the milling crowd of people eating, drinking and starting their day. Anita notices him gazing at their surroundings, knows he’s ready to head to his ship.

“I’m beginning to know that look,” she tells him. “You’re mentally taking it all in before you go, aren’t you?”

BC almost blushes, mildly embarrassed.

*Funny... she can already see through me!*

“Guess so,” he says.

“Go ahead,” Anita says. “Your ship’s waiting for you, Prime Representative,” she says playfully.

“You want to join me on the C and C ship?” he asks her.

“I do,” she says, “but I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

“My place is here. Ceres is *mycommand*.”

“I see,” BC says, in mock hurt.

“BC! Come on! I’d have stayed on the asteroid base if I thought that made sense.”

He keeps playing hurt.

“That’s okay. I see.”

“You know I’m right.”

He smiles at her.

“I know. But I don’t have to like it!”

She smiles, and then leans over and kisses him on the cheek. She leans back.

“I’ve got to get to my command center,” she says. She gets up from the table.

“I’m sure we’ll be talking soon,” she tells BC.

“Let’s hope it’s just routine reports and pleasantries,” BC says.

“Pleasantries, huh?” Anita cracks. “That’s what you call them?” She smiles again.

“Sure,” he says.

*What else do I say? How do you respond? Never mind...*

Anita turns and heads away across the cafeteria and off toward her command center.

*Guess I’ll head for my ship. Hope they don’t attack while I’m shuttling across. I wonder how long we do have? How much time until the Eldred attack? The Domo said within the month... are they right?*

## Chapter Nineteen

“Now it’s a waiting game,” BC says to the captain of the command and control ship as the two sit on the quiet bridge. BC’s settled into a deck chair on the bridge of the ship. His after breakfast shuttle ride up from Ceres Central was short and uneventful. It’s still quiet, with no sign of the gathering storm, no sign of massing Eldred forces the Domo claim are readying for attack.

“Yessir,” Mark Chang the young captain says, agreeing with BC because he has to. “Who are we waiting for first, sir?” he asks BC.

“Nothing’s etched in stone, captain, but we think we’ll see the Eldred first, based on our intel from the Domo,” BC says. “I think that’s right, too, based on... other information,” BC says mysteriously, not wanting to discuss his dreams with the captain. “My other information also says Dolomay will wait to strike until after the Eldred have defeated us.”

*“After we’re defeated, sir?”*

“That’s *their* plan,” BC clarifies for Captain Chang. “Dolomay hates the Eldred. It’s an old grudge between them,” BC explains. “So he wants to wipe out as many of them as he can. He thinks the Eldred will be easy to mop up after they’ve tangled with, and defeated us. He’s sure the Eldred will defeat us.”

“Nice to know he’s rooting for us,” Chang wryly observes. He changes back to an official monotone and tells BC, “Prime Representative Campion, you have a high level communiqué coming in. It’s Governor Amara Schwartz of Cat’s Eye.”

“Thank you, Chang.” BC picks up an earpiece for a private call. “Put her through to me.”

Chang nods.

“Governor Schwartz!” BC says in greeting. “What can I do for you?”

“We’ve decided to stay,” Schwartz says outright, matter-of-factly.

“What?” is all BC gets out.

“We’re staying here. On Cat’s Eye. Most of us.”

“I can’t give you any protection,” BC tries to explain. Schwartz cuts him off.

“I know! I know,” she says, “and we’re not asking you to. The SAIF ships have already left here, Prime Representative. But we’re not following them. This is our home, Representative Campion. We want to stick it out here.”

*What can I do? What can I say about that? “Don’t!”?*

“Well, governor... I don’t know what to tell you,” BC says honestly. “I can wish you luck. Give you all my best, for all that’s worth. But we need all the Solar Alliance forces back here to guard the home world from this next, vast assault from the Eldred.”

“I know. We all know that here, Campion,” she tells him. “We know you’re doing what you think you have to do. Truth be told, most of me knows you’re right. But my heart is here, in this place. Our hearts are here. So we’ll take our chances. We’re staying.”

“I’m not arguing with you,” BC tells her. “We don’t have the luxury of time for arguments anymore. I don’t have the resources nor the will to come get you all by force or persuasion. So I wish

you luck, Governor Schwartz. S'all I got. I'm sorry.

"Who knows," he says. "If they wipe all of us here out in their next assault, you folks might be the few remaining humans left alive in the galaxy, the last of the human race," BC says morosely.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that!" Schwartz exclaims.

"Hope for the best but expect the worst?" BC offers.

"That's an old one."

"Still true, though," BC says. "Good luck, Amara."

"Thank you, BC," she says, and then signs off.

BC sighs.

"Any more governors on the com, Chang?" BC half jokes.

*Wonder if I'm going to have a full scale rebellion on my hands?*

"Actually, sir, there is one waiting."

*Great.*

"Governor Capituna is holding for you," Chang informs him.

*Well, that's a different story!*

"Anita! What's up?" BC greets her as he fires up the com.

"Just checking in, BC. Did Amara Schwartz just call you?"

"She did. You talked to her already?"

"Yeah, she called me before she called you. They really feel tied to the place."

"Yeah, I got that," BC says, a little frustrated.

"On a more positive note, Ken Grissom and his people just checked in here at Ceres Central, so you don't have to worry about Rigel Four doing the same thing."

"What about the other two?" BC asks her. "Do you think they'll want to stay out there?"

"I think they'll be coming back here, BC," Anita says, speculating, trying to reassure him. "There may be some stragglers that stay behind, but nothing like Cat's Eye. They're a little more... um, passionate. I guess."

"I see. Have they always been that way out at Cat's Eye?"

"Pretty much," she tells him. "You've never been there. It's beautiful! The Cat's Eye nebula lights the nights there an emerald green, paints the daylight sky aquamarine. It's inspiring. Makes you fall in love with the place, even though it isn't Earth. It has its own beauty."

"Very poetic," BC observes. "I can tell it's touched you."

"Funny. It's where we first met the Eldred," she tells BC. "We had no idea what we were in for." She changes the subject. "How are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm good, I guess," BC tells her. "As good as can be expected. Got a lot of nervous energy... I hate the waiting!"

"Me too," Anita says. "Hate waiting."

"But waiting is all we can do now," BC answers.

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Anita counters.

Waiting.

One day.

Two days.

BC is having trouble sleeping on his command ship. There have been no more "dreams" of Dolomay, but little real sleep, either. And no true dreams of any kind at all.

Three days.

Krish arrives at Ceres Central with the "Transpace Nullifier" and then heads out to the Project Base to teach Dragama how to use it. BC sends a couple other packages out to the base with Krish, too.

Four days.

"It's on board the base now, and Krish tells me the remote trigger will work, so I guess we've got a new weapon. The other 'packages' are mounted in place, too. We're sending Krish back to Ceres Central this afternoon. Other than that, it's more of the same."

"Thanks for checking in, Dragama. Keep running the drills," BC orders, and signs off the com.

Everything seems quiet at the asteroid base.

*If only the Domo could have given us a better idea of when the Eldred will strike. They just didn't know. I'm sure if they did... well, even if they didn't tell us, I bet they would've sold the information to Dolomay, or tried to, anyway. He's out there. He's waiting, too. We're all playing the waiting game.*

Five days.

Six days.

BC continues trying in vain to get a good night's sleep. Nervous energy keeps him wound too tightly to truly relax, so he never falls into a really satisfying slumber.

*Impossible to sleep...*

BAMP!

In between days six and seven, in the middle of the night, all the lights in his room and on the ship come on at once, shattering the dark and scattering BC's thoughts.

BAMP!

*That's the alarm! This is it!*

BAMP!

BC jumps up out of bed. He heads for his clothes and shouts out for the com.

"This is Bernard Campion – give me a situation report!"

"Representative Campion, it's the Eldred, sir, they're finally attacking. But sir... I've never seen so many ships together at one time! Far as the eye can see, sir!"

"Keep it together, Chang. We getting any intel from Ceres on how many are out there?"

"Negative, sir. They say they're still counting!"

*Well, that can't be good. Expected, sure, but still...*

"Five hundred Eldred targets," a voice from Ceres Central cuts in. "That's here, our location. The asteroid base reports approximately twenty-five hundred hostiles surrounding their position. We also have a report of about a thousand ships now surrounding the shipyards."

"Any other ships sighted? Other presumptive targets?" BC asks.

"Several seemingly random Eldred patrols have been encountered throughout Earth and Mars orbits in the last fifteen minutes, comprised of four or five ships apiece. There's no indication of how many of these patrols may be out there."

"Great."

*Over four thousand ships!? And this is just their first wave! Holy shit.*

"Any shots fired yet?" BC asks.

"Not yet, sir," Ceres Central reports. "They're just... waiting."

"Good. Thank you, Ceres Central. Chang?"

"Yessir?"

"I'll be on the bridge in just a minute or two. Let me know if anything changes!"

"Will do, sir."

BC gets dressed. He checks the clock as he leaves for the bridge. Three-fifteen in the morning, August 31st!

*As good a time as any to invade, I guess! And within the month, like the Domo said. Right on time? Who can sleep, anyway?*

BC walks onto the bridge.

"Looks like the moment we've all been waiting for has finally arrived!" BC says to Chang.

"Yessir," Chang acknowledges BC's comment. The young captain is staring wide-eyed out the viewscreens around the bridge at all the distant Eldred ships arrayed before them. "So many ships!"

"Don't let them get to you, Chang!" BC says, trying to encourage the man. "They're here in these numbers because they know we're tougher than they are, better equipped now, too! The only way they can face us is with what they hope is overwhelming force. Our goal is to show them their hope is wrong!"

"Get me Dragama on the com, Chang."

There's a brief pause.

“Dragama here,” the com says

“I hear our company has finally arrived,” BC says.

“We’ve had a few guests show up for our surprise party here,” Dragama says. “Guess we’re pretty popular!”

“Is the gift from Krish still safe?”

“It is. All set to play its part in the grand finale. Hold on a second... I’m sending you secure codes on an encoded subcarrier. That way you can set off the dampener should anything go wrong on our end. Not that I plan on being prematurely removed from the game... just best to be prepared, and careful, is all.”

“I would expect no less, Dragama,” BC says, complimenting the man. “Beam Cannons all charged and ready?”

“Absolutely. As if you need to ask. Sir,” Dragama chides BC. “Now you’re just making small talk.”

“Maybe I am, at that,” BC admits.

“When the action begins, you’ll be the first to know,” Dragama assures him, “After us, I mean! Ha! Dragama out!”

“Get me the shipyards, please, Chang.”

“Yessir.”

“Aziz here, Prime Representative. So are the Eldred.”

“That’s why I’m calling, Aziz,” BC tells the man.

“We are fully mobilized. We count around a thousand Eldred ships here.”

“That checks with what I’ve heard,” BC says. “Keep your eyes on them. Let us know when they start to move in. Counter any hostile move with deadly force. Don’t hold anything back! We’re counting on you to keep those shipyards safe and in one piece, Aziz. Good luck.”

“Thank you, sir. Aziz out.”

“All our ships here have checked in, sir,” Chang informs BC. “All twenty-five of them.”

*Twenty-five against five hundred? Gotta love those odds...*

“Another report for you, sir.”

BC hears about more Eldred ships. They’re now dropping into close Earth and Mars orbit, and are closing in on the Moon, too.

*Small numbers... but we only have token forces back there ourselves! Enough to defend for a short time. Maybe.*

*They aren’t moving. What are they waiting for?*

An hour goes by. No shots are fired in any location. SAIF ships continue defensive fly-bys of their bases.

The Eldred then request a conversation... With Bernard Campion. And so BC finds himself face to face via viewscreen with the Eldest of the Eldred.

“Ah, BC! It is good to see you again, although I wish it were under more pleasant circumstances,” the Eldest of the Eldred says, greeting BC.

“Really? You’ve created these unpleasant circumstances yourselves. I believe if you truly *wished* the circumstances to be different, they would be,” BC points out.

“I wish that were true, Campion,” the Eldest of the Eldred says sadly. “We gave you the option of resolving this peacefully. I am here to do so once again. All you need do is renounce interstellar flight and confine your activities to this system, inside the orbit of Mars, and venture not beyond the asteroids and gas giants.”

“Inside the orbit of Mars? You said Jupiter!”

“That was before. Now, we require more. Dismantle your Transpace Drive manufacturing facilities. Give up your distant colonies and call your human race home. Cede to us the base below, on this rock you call Ceres. Abandon the ship building factories out here. You will give us control of the Domo base you have been occupying here as well as control of the former Domo colonies of Kran-Ka-Sha-Fette and Deem-Waht. You will also, of course, abandon your colonies on the fourth

world of the star you call Rigel and the one you call 'Cat's Eye'," the Eldest of the Eldred tells BC.

"Should you require assistance, we would be happy and willing to assist you in the transport of your race and your equipment from these outlying worlds back to Mars and Earth, back to your true homes. We have many ships available. As you can see."

"I can see," BC agrees. "Indeed, you have brought quite a few ships with you today, haven't you, Eldest of the Eldred?"

"Yes."

"Such a show! Such a brazen show of force, in such numbers, Eldest of the Eldred, is really only one thing: a threat! It is an act of open warfare!"

"There need not be violence between our races," the Eldred says.

"No? I'd call killing billions with your plague pretty damn violent. And what do you call your sudden need for an overwhelming show of force, huh?" BC cracks.

"Cooperation is not anticipated nor expected," the Eldest of the Eldred says to BC. "We take precautions."

"Do you now? We've got a lot of people out in these places you want us to abandon! People who call those places their homes!"

"Not according to the latest report we have. As of right now, only one of those colonies is currently occupied, Bernard Campion. Your own ships have brought most of your colonists home already. Cat's Eye offers us token resistance, but we should have that under control soon. The other three are already abandoned."

"Hold on."

BC breaks off from the main com to ask Chang a question.

"Any new reports from Cat's Eye?"

"They're in the shelters there, sir, ignoring the Eldred's demands that they leave the planet."

"Any shots fired yet?"

"No sir. Just words exchanged, so far."

"Good." BC turns the main com back on.

"I called my people back from those worlds for their own safety," BC tells the Eldest of the Eldred, "after hearing that you were coming after us, planning to attack us with great force. Those on Cat's Eye would not leave when I asked. I doubt you will have any better luck persuading them."

"You seem to make the mistake of thinking we are giving you a choice. Your only choice lies between deciding to do these things voluntarily or being forced to comply and cooperate with us. We are here to restore the status quo of the universe, nothing less, Bernard Campion. You have disturbed the balance and disrupted the status quo."

The Eldest of the Eldred shakes his head, a nearly human-looking gesture. "This is not, directly, your race's fault. That fault belongs to the Domo and the Flaze, who kept your race's development hidden from us. But you must pay the price, and return to the inner worlds of your star system, or we will eliminate your race. You are the offspring of the Ancient Enemy, a remnant of that vile species that ruthlessly dominated us all so long ago. It is only thanks to our benevolent nature that you have not already been exterminated."

"Yeah, thanks a lot," BC says. "And about that... what about Dolomay? You know, the actual representative, the last living actual *member* of that race, your 'Ancient Enemy', who you conveniently managed to let escape? Why is it you turn your firepower here, on us, instead of using your resources to go after him? Why are you using all these ships to try to impress us instead of using the numbers so obviously at your disposal to go after the actual Ancient Enemy, huh?"

The Eldest of the Eldred does not answer BC's questions. BC challenges the alien further.

"Why aren't you going after Dolomay?"

"We cannot find him," The Eldred finally answers. "We do not know where he is," the alien admits.

"So you figured you'd pick on us instead, then, is that it?" BC asks defiantly. "Pick on the smaller, softer, easier enemy, instead of the real Ancient Enemy? How fucking brave!"

“What? What was the word before ‘brave’, it didn’t quite translate,” the Eldest of the Eldred asks.

“*Fucking*,” BC says with vigorous emphasis. “Used as a modifier. To denote my scorn and disgust with your cowardly behavior,” BC explains through nearly clenched teeth. “That’s about the definition of it, I guess. It’s a handy word, works well in another phrase I’m rather fond of, too.”

“What are you saying? What do you mean by that?”

“Let me make myself perfectly clear. Fuck. You.” BC turns off the com.

*Not exactly diplomatic...*

“Mister Chang? If any of their ships fire, engage. Any of their ships approach another click, engage. We detect them applying any firing solutions, engage.”

“Got it.”

“Dragama? Aziz?” BC calls out, activating the com.

The two acknowledge the signal.

“Any suspicious action by the Eldred will be considered a hostile action from this point forward. Any scans or firing solutions, any suspicious movement, engage.”

“We’ve got movement here, Prime Rep,” Dragama says. “The Eldred are moving more ships in toward the base.”

“Well, Dragama, guess that means that you get to start this thing. Start the defensive firing solutions. And good luck!”

“No such thing as luck, just proper planning,” Dragama says.

“And energy beam cannons,” BC adds.

“Yeah, those don’t hurt,” Dragama admits. “Gotta go! We’re engaging!”

*The Domo said the Eldred would start at the asteroid base...*

“Make us proud, Dragama! And get out of there in time, you hear me?”

“Loud and clear! We’ll look good doing it, too. Dragama out.”

“Open channel,” BC calls to get a fleet-wide signal. “This is Prime Representative Bernard Champion. The Eldred have begun attacking our distant asteroid base. The war has begun. We are firing back. We must be ready, as their other ships may begin to attack at any moment. Be watchful, be ready, and show these alien attackers what it means to be human!

“Our weapons are superior!” BC says, trying to inspire them. “As we head into battle, it’s no longer a secret... I can tell you now that we’ve cracked their shield technology. Our beam cannons can now slice through their shields like a knife through butter, and our shields are now stronger than theirs, able to deflect their beam weapons! They cannot strike us with full force!”

“Sir?” Chang gets BC’s attention when he pauses.

“Yes, Chang?”

“The Eldred have returned fire at the asteroid base. Dragama’s forces are fully engaged,” the captain informs him.

“Aziz, open fire! Chang, tell our twenty five to open fire!”

“Now?” Chang asks, hesitating. “They haven’t fired on us yet.”

“They will! They’ve engaged at the other base, they’ll soon engage here!” BC explains. “Fire, Chang!” he commands. “Their overwhelming numbers are instigation enough! Surprise is all we have!”

“All ships firing now, Prime Rep!” Chang says.

BC swears he can feel his hairs stand on end, feel the air charge with electricity as the powerful energy beam cannons power up and pulse out bright bursts of destructive plasma energy. The hum of the guns echoes through the ship, vibrating BC down to his molecules. BC calls up a viewscreen on the bridge to watch the battle outside.

*Sitting in here, you can forget we’re moving!*

BC watches the stars sweep by as his ship twists and maneuvers. Chang guides the ship as they dodge pulses from the Eldred ships’ energy weapons’ return fire. BC watches the chaos on his monitor, trying to follow the action of the battle but it barely makes sense, ships careening every which way, flashes of blinding light from pulsing weapons and exploding ships. He feels dizzy as his brain attempts to

keep up with the motion he can't actually feel.

BC pinches the bridge of his nose trying to quell the vertigo and avoid a headache.

"Give me a look at Dragama's ship's tactical screen!" BC orders the monitor. He wants to see how the battle is proceeding at the asteroid base. The outside view disappears from his viewscreen, replaced by a calmer, yet no less complex, tactical display from Dragama's flagship.

"I want audio, too," BC commands.

"Should I get Dragama on the line for you?" Chang asks.

"No! No, don't disturb him now," BC warns off Chang. "You should be paying attention, too!" he admonishes him. "Just let me hear what they're saying."

"...coming around. SAIF Four, you're straying, watch for friendly fire!"

"Roger that, SAIF One. We just took another hit, unfriendly."

"Damage, four?"

"Negative, one. Nothing significant. I'm gonna kiss me a scientist when this is all done. Nice toys they've made us!"

"Girl scientist or boy scientist?"

"I don't care, SAIF Three! I'll kiss 'em all! These shields, the new beam cannons, I love 'em!"

"Watch it, three, you've got butter coming up on your left flank!"

"Roger that, two. I see 'em."

"Where's five?"

"Got no sign of SAIF Five, one."

"I think she might have bought it on a rock, right after we lead that first wave through the base's kill zone. Saw a flash, anyway."

"Roger that, three."

BC tries to picture the scene in his mind, going over the battle plans. The SAIF ships start from a tight orbit around the asteroid base, and then work their way outward in concentric orbits creating globes of engagement around the base, all the while firing the base-bound energy beam cannons, creating kill zones.

Dragama's ships aren't concentrating on taking out Eldred targets so much as they're harrying and herding the Eldred ships into the corridors of energy fire being carved out by the asteroid base's artillery. A separate fire control team on the flagship mans the remote fired cannons.

The Transpace Nullifier is installed on the asteroid base. When Dragama's ships get out beyond the five kilometers the field can cover, they'll try to force as many of the Eldred ships inside the nullifier field's range as they can, and then trigger the nullifier.

With the Eldred unable to use their Transpace drives, Dragama will execute the final part of the plan. Just before the SAIF ships jump away, they'll trigger the five second countdown for the packages BC sent over with Krish and the nullifier, two large scale thermonuclear weapons now hidden on the asteroid base. The resulting explosion should destroy the rest of the Eldred ships within the nullifier's field around the base.

"This is SAIF Four, we're outside. We'll keep chasing them in."

*There's one of our ships out of the nullifier's range, ready to jump to safety. Four... probably three more to go... if SAIF Five is gone.*

"Roger that, SAIF Four. Hold beyond the perimeter and continue harrying the Eldred from there," Dragama orders.

"SAIF Three in the safe zone!"

"Roger, SAIF Three, hold and harry! Wing up with SAIF Four! Keep slicing and dicing... get as many of them inside as you can!"

"Will do, One."

"Prime Representative?" Chang interrupts BC's listening.

"What is it, Chang?"

"Some of the ships here are leaving."

*What?*

“Ships? Leaving?”

“Some of the Eldred ships, sir. They just blinked away into Transpace.”

*I bet I know where they're going...*

“Get me Dragama,” BC orders Chang.

“You're already patched in, sir,” Chang points out.

“Sorry, Chang,” BC apologizes. “Dragama?”

“Dragama here, PR.”

“PR?” BC wonders aloud. “Oh, Prime Representative, I get it. The only initials I usually go by are ‘BC’!”

“PR BC, then, whatever. Busy here,” Dragama says.

“May be getting busier. Some of the Eldred ships have left here, blinked into Transpace minutes ago. I'm betting they're on the way there to see you.”

“Sounds like a safe bet,” Dragama agrees. “We'll keep our eyes open. But there are so many anyway... ain't really gonna notice, you know?”

“Understood,” BC acknowledges.

“We've got more sheep on the way, SAIF squadrons,” Dragama announces to his ships, trying to make it sound as if there are more there than his elite squad. “Let's be aware. Keep your eyes open. More herding for us, wolfhounds!”

“Wolfhounds, sir?”

“Heh,” Dragama laughs, “Thought it sounded good, SAIF Two, didn't you? Eyes open, people!”

“Three. New company coming in,” SAIF Three reports. “Moving to engage.”

“Roger Three. Four, move and support Three.”

BC watches his feed of Dragama's strategy screen as he listens to the ship-to-ship banter. A new wash of small blue blips is suddenly picked up by the scanners feeding the strategy screen: New Eldred ships arriving. Some of the new Eldred ships arriving break off to engage SAIF Three and Four, but most of the new group head in straight for the asteroid base itself.

“Let 'em through to try to attack. The base's energy beam defenses are still at eighty percent! Let the Eldred past to get ground up in that... but don't let them back out!”

“Roger,” SAIF Four responds.

“Trying!” SAIF Three checks in. “Roger, that.”

“Gotcha. SAIF Two out.”

BC imagines the SAIF ships firing into the oncoming Eldred as he notes their positions on the strategy screen. SAIF Three and Four continue moving through the “safe” zone beyond the reach of the Transpace Nullifier firing at both new arrivals and earlier stragglers. The Nullifier's effective zone is marked with a thin red line that circles the asteroid base. SAIF One and Two are both still close in to the base, and well inside the field dampening reach of the Nullifier. Too close yet to effectively trigger the device and get away.

*Come on, one and two, let's get going!*

BC watches blue blips disappear from the screen as they close in to the base. The Eldred are wiped out in waves by the base's energy beam fire, directed by the fire control onboard SAIF One. BC asks the strategy screen to zoom out for a look at the bigger picture. Some groups of Eldred, tiny swarms of blue blips, are hanging back.

*Reinforcements, maybe? Reserves? More cannon fodder? What are they waiting for? Well, they're on Dragama's display, so he knows about 'em. No need to bug the man now!*

*Let's see... anyone else we know lurking on the sidelines?*

BC scans the edges of the display for any sign of Dolomay and his ships.

*Nothing yet. Hope he holds to his plan. Oh, no!*

SAIF Two just blipped off the screen.

“We just lost Two,” Dragama says sadly. “Time to get One out beyond the dampener limit! Let's go, now! Oh shit...” There is a zap of interference on the com.

“SAIF One, you want backup?”

“Negative, Three, stay back there,” Dragama orders. The com sounds a little distorted. “Stay up, stay out, stay back.”

“We’ve got a visual on you, your ship is damaged...”

“Stay back beyond the zone, that’s an order, Three. You too, Takachi, keep Four back, too. Have your fire team take control of the base’s energy fire, SAIF Four. You’ve got the emergency protocols Takachi, use them!”

“Roger that, Dragama. Will do.”

“Good. Just need one more thing... good, here they come. There were some Eldred hanging back, but they’re on their way in towards the base, now... keep firing, SAIF Four! Keep the base firing! As soon as they start to get into range... Good! I’ve just triggered the Transpace Nullifier!” Dragama announces.

SAIF One is well inside the dampening field’s reach, Dragama’s ship’s own Transpace Drive is rendered as worthless as the drives of the Eldred ships surrounding his ship and the asteroid base.

“What about you?” Takachi protests from SAIF Four.

“Never mind us,” Dragama says. “We’re going to take care of this. After you two are gone. I’m going to draw the Eldred in towards the base. Now, go! That’s an order! Head to the shipyards, both of you! Go! Now!”

“Three. More sheep arriving out here.”

“Roger that, Three. Send them our way!” Dragama says. “Drive them in here as you go!”

Chang interrupts with a report.

“Earth and Mars report their Eldred ships are leaving,” Chang tells BC.

“Leaving?” BC asks. Chang nods. “Great... send a squad from Earth out to the asteroid base to aid Dragama’s squad.

“Dragama!”

“Who’s that? Busy here!”

“Dragama, this is the Prime Representative... get out of there! No need for dumb heroics! Get your ship out of there!”

“Sorry, PR. This ship’s not going anywhere,” Dragama says, “whether we’d like to or not. We’re hit, shields are failing, we’ve expelled the last of our defenses. All we’re good for now is... bait! I’m going to land on the base, draw them in, or die trying. Get them to bring as many ships as they can in close before we let the main charge go off.”

“SAIF One, this is SAIF Three,” the captain of SAIF Three interrupts. “We’ve got a lot more company all of a sudden!”

The feed for the strategy screen blinks off momentarily. When it returns, BC notices his feed is no longer coming from Dragama’s ship, but from SAIF Four.

*Dragama’s feed must have grown too weak.*

“SAIF Three and Four, this is command,” BC says over the com. “The sheep are drawing in their forces from throughout the system. That’s your new company. Let them in past you best you can, herd and harry them like wolfhounds, like Dragama says. Get ‘em in past our invisible fence, but be sure you stay outside it yourselves! I want you ready to jump into Transpace at my signal, soon as that thing goes!”

“Gotcha, command,” SAIF Three answers.

“We’ve got more hounds on the way, coming to help you out,” BC tells them.

“Too late to help Dragama,” SAIF Four says bitterly.

BC sees SAIF One blip off the screen next to the base.

*Did he do it? Did he land? Crazy bastard!*

“SAIF Three? Four? Report!” BC orders.

“SAIF One just crashed into the asteroid base as they attempted a landing. Sir.”

*Damn.*

“Keep the base’s energy beams firing, SAIF Four. We want them to move in towards the base, but don’t let them land! SAIF Three, open the emergency protocols for triggering the main defensive

operation now.”

“Roger. Opening emergency protocols now,” SAIF Three reports. “Welcoming new company, too... good company this time. Glad to see you guys!”

*Our reinforcements have arrived!*

“SAIF Squadron designation ‘Gold’ one through five on site and entering the arena,” Gold Squadron leader announces.

“Gold Squadron leader, this is Prime Representative Campion on Command,” BC calls over the com to get the woman’s attention. “Objective remains ‘herding’ the ‘sheep’ inside our ‘invisible fence’ for the next five minutes.”

“Five whole minutes, huh? No time for talking, then. Gold One out.”

“SAIF Four, maintain the base’s beam fire, keep them busy!”

*With Dragama gone, they might need the encouragement. Or maybe I’m trying too hard...*

“Gold squadron, keep your ships outside of the limit!” BC orders when he sees the new gold blips drawing in too close to the asteroid base and the dampening field. “Chase the sheep in, but don’t follow them!”

“Gold Two. Command, aren’t they going to wonder why we’re breaking off?”

“Make it look good, Two! Dodge some rocks!” Gold One answers.

“Emergency protocols are in place, Command,” SAIF Three calls out. “We’re at full power! The nullifier is at full strength. The warheads are fully armed and ready!”

“We’re at go then, all ships break and go into Transpace on my mark. SAIF Three, trigger the detonator on my mark. Okay, Mark!”

BC watches most of Gold Squadron blip off the screen as he waits for the explosion.

There is no explosion.

BC looks across the strategy screen. SAIF Three and Four and Gold One are still there, waiting. Hoping to document the mission’s success, they instead face disappointment at its apparent failure.

“SAIF Three, what happened?”

“Nothing happened! The remote trigger is somehow damaged!”

“SAIF Four, attempt detonation!” BC orders.

“I’ve been trying, command, seemed like the thing to do,” SAIF Four responds. “No response. We’re continuing the energy beam fire from the base for now.”

“Yes! Excellent! Good thinking, SAIF Four!”

As BC watches, the blip for SAIF Three darts across the screen followed by Gold One, both ships diving in towards the asteroid base through a swarming sea of blue blips, the Eldred ships.

“SAIF Three! Gold One? What are you doing? Get out of there!” BC commands.

“Negative, command. We’re going to fix this thing and save the mission. Got to be done. Feel like I owe Dragama that, can’t let him die in vain, right?”

“Gold One providing cover for SAIF Three,” she responds. “Gold One out.”

“You won’t be able to get out of there!” BC warns them, helpless to stop them.

“Prime Representative?” Chang interrupts.

“What?” BC snaps. “Sorry, Chang. What is it?”

“The Eldred have now completely left Mars, Earth and Lunar space and orbits. They seem to be concentrating their forces, gathering them near and around the asteroid base, but also close enough to our shipyards as to be a threat to them as well.

“And the shipyards report the Eldred there have begun attacking, targeting the assembly line. We’re holding them at bay for now, but they have requested reinforcements.”

*As the Domo indicated they would. Pretty solid info, as it turns out. I know more than they know that I know... Makes my head hurt!*

*Do we dare to move forces away from Earth and Mars? This could be a feint...*

“Send one squadron of Stingers from Mars and one from Lunar Prime out to bolster our forces at the shipyard,” BC orders, deciding to shift a few of the SAIF Stinger Ships. Have the remaining squadrons on Earth, in orbit, on the Moon and on Mars stand at ready. The Eldred may try to pull

something after they think they've focused our attention elsewhere. Let's not let them get us while we're distracted."

"Got it."

"Gold One?" BC calls over the com. He watches the blips for Gold One and SAIF Three on his strategy screen as they approach the asteroid base.

"Gold One. Busy, sir!" comes the quick call back over the com.

"Understood. Can you give me a quick sitrep?"

"SAIF Three is setting down inside the base! Both ships have taken heavy fire, our shields are low, sir! Thick in here, sir! Busy! Gold one out in the briarpatch!" the com cuts off.

"Briarpatch?" BC asks, but no one responds at first. Chang finally chimes in.

"It's an old expression, like 'hornet's nest'. Briars were prickly things. Stuck in a patch of those, you'd get stuck by the briars, pricked all over. Pretty much impossible to get out of..." Chang trails off.

BC watches as SAIF Three's blip 'hovers' over the base and Gold One's blip flies by. The blue blips surround them, forming a growing, three-dimensional, cloudy mass of light blue blips around the asteroid base on the strategy screen.

"Like a swarm of angry blue bees," BC observes under his breath.

"And we're swatting them pretty good," Chang interjects.

"We're doing okay," BC grants.

"Okay?" Chang says, in disbelief. "With all due respect, Mister Prime Representative, they outnumber us like, five hundred to one or something like that? And *we've* got the upper hand!"

"Hey chatterboxes!" Gold One's voice comes bursting out of the com. "You wanna debate theory, turn your com off! We're hip deep in practical applications right now out here, trying to concentrate!"

"Sorry, Gold One," BC apologizes. "Chang?"

"Sorry," Chang says. "I thought I was muting our channel as we spoke. My mistake. We're, uh, we're quiet, now."

"Good!"

"SAIF Three. We're down! Deboarding now to see a man about a remote trigger. Will maintain com through suit unit."

"Roger," BC replies. He looks at the swarming globe of blue dots concentrating in front of him like bees around a hive, the hive a red smudge representing the asteroid base at the center. SAIF Three is on top of the red smudge. Gold One's golden blip bobs and weaves its way around the red smudge, blue blips blinking out of its path as it moves. A funnel shaped group of blue blips follow it, trying to catch up and engage Gold One. Further back from the ships, an equidistant, thin red-lined circle surrounds the red smudge, the limit of the Transpace Nullifier's dampening field.

SAIF Four is represented by a green blip that continues flying a jagged, evasive course around the edges of the red line on the screen, just beyond the dampening field. A small group of blue blips continue to pursue and fire upon SAIF Four.

A group of blue blips near the red smudge disappear.

*Good to see the energy beams are still firing. At least their remote control was working!*

"SAIF Three. Bad news here, I'm afraid. This remote unit is shot. The warheads are fine, they're armed, ready... but the remote trigger looks like it melted down or something."

"Is there a backup?" BC asks.

"Not that I can see, command. I might be able to rig something up... but I don't think we have the time!"

"What are you saying, SAIF Three?!"

"Gold One, get out of here, now!" SAIF Three shouts over the com. "Tell my mom I love her, okay? Tell her to be pro..."

The com cuts off. The red smudge on the screen disappears. The blue blips around the area where the red smudge was begin to disappear as well, blinking out in concentric circles, in disappearing ripples. The strategy screen begins to fill in the empty center with a glowing yellow globe.

The ripple approaches Gold One.

“Hey, that nullifier thing actually works,” Gold One calls in over the com. Then Gold One disappears as the expanding circles overtake the golden blip.

Blue blips begin disappearing from the space beyond the red circle, but the Eldred ships inside the dampening field zone, the blue blips inside the red circle, simply sit still, stuck in place by the effects of the Transpace Nullifier. As the explosive wave overtakes them their blips are wiped off the screen in front of BC.

“It’s working!” Chang says excitedly. “We’re winning!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Chang,” BC cautions him.

“But we just took out about two thousand of their ships!” he argues.

“And we’ve got thousands more to face. And we don’t have another strategic base we can afford to blow up like that, either. Never mind the brave men and women who sacrificed... well, everything,” BC says somberly.

“SAIF Four. Not much more we can do here now. We’re coming back to Ceres Central. SAIF Four out.”

The green blip representing SAIF Four on the strategy screen finally disappears in a safe blink into Transpace, and the strategy screen folds up into a small glowing dot in front of BC.

“We’re a long way from done,” BC lectures Chang. “Keep alert! The wolves will be showing up soon!”

“The wolves? Who, Dolomay?”

“Who else? Keep your eyes open, Chang.”

“Yes sir.”

## Chapter Twenty

BC paces the bridge of his command and control ship. He tried to sleep but only caught a quick catnap. He can’t really rest when he knows there are battles still raging between his people and the Eldred.

*We still have plenty of ships on reserve, a mix of fixed up old UTZ models and newer Stinger Ships. At least a couple more Transpace Nullifiers will be ready soon, according to Krish. And we wipe out a whole bunch of them just now. Maybe we are winning?*

“Chang, what’s happening with the shipyards right now? Get me a SitRep on all of our engagement arenas!” BC orders.

A new strategy screen appears in front of BC. Swarms of light blue blips buzz around the edges of the screen. As BC watches, smaller groups break off from the swarms and fly in to attack the shipyards. Red, green, gold and silver blips intercept and blue blips disappear.

“We’ve jumped our remaining ships from the asteroid base engagement out of harm’s way,” Chang reports. “Gold Two, Three, Four, and Five and SAIF Four made it out. We lost Gold One, and SAIF One, Two, Three and Five. We’re waiting for an updated assessment of battlefield results, but initial estimates of enemy losses number near twenty-five hundred,” Chang tells BC, raising an eyebrow.

“Good start,” BC says sharply.

“We’re still engaging the enemy at the shipyards. Judging by commanders’ battlefield reports, improvements to our shield technology and to our energy beam weaponry appear to have given our ships a distinct advantage against the Eldred ships. We’ve been able to repel their attacks and inflict heavy casualties.”

“Good.”

“There’s another thing the commanders are reporting, sir. Our pilots report that the Eldred lack, um, ‘imagination’ in their battle strategies, for lack of a better word. For a supposedly advanced race,

their battle tactics are *not* that advanced, and often two-dimensional instead of three, makes them predictable, not advanced at all.”

“How many of theirs have we destroyed at the shipyards?” BC asks.

“At least a thousand,” Chang tells him. “Again, these are preliminary battle numbers, which tend to be inflated,” he cautions.

*All thanks to the technological ‘improvements’ we’ve reverse engineered from that ship of theirs. If we hadn’t stolen that ship, this all would have been over really quickly!*

“Any sign of Dolomay? Any unidentified ships in the area?”

“Negative.”

“I want you to send a patrol squad back to the area around the asteroid base to keep a watch over the place, keep a look out for him. Harass any surviving Eldred ships you might find there. Keep the battle on!”

“Roger,” Chang acknowledges. “Sir? You’ve got an incoming call from Ceres Central. It’s Governor Capituna.”

“Thanks!” BC says to Chang. “Anita!”

“Hi BC. Are we winning? It’s been pretty quiet here. The Eldred didn’t stay long.”

“No, they didn’t. They threw a lot at the asteroid base. And then they threw even more at it.”

“Is it gone?” she asks, sounding like she really doesn’t want to hear the answer.

“It’s gone,” BC tells her. “So are five of our ships and their crews. But the strategy worked. We took out a couple thousand of their ships, and they could hardly touch us! “Now they’re concentrating on the shipyards, but they’re not getting anywhere, we keep knocking them down when they attack. They don’t change their tactics much. We’re kind of mopping up there, I think.”

“Gold Two from the shipyards on the line for you, Prime Rep,” Chang interrupts.

“Well, Anita, I’ve got to go for now. Please excuse me. I’ll call you back soon.”

“Okay, BC. Let me know what I can do to help.”

“Will do. Thank you, Anita,” BC says, smiling.

“Sure thing, BC,” Anita says with a smile of her own. “Ceres Central out.”

“Okay, go Gold Two,” BC continues.

“We’re still encountering significant numbers of Eldred ships,” the pilot reports. “They’re throwing themselves at us! It’s like they’re methodically trying to wear us down. That’s a guess, of course. They don’t seem to vary their attack. It’s the same every time... they don’t adapt! It’s just wave after wave of their ships coming down to blast at the shipyards’ assembly line. We’re kinda mowing them down, sir!”

“Keep up, um... keep up the good work?” BC says uncertainly, unsuccessfully trying to keep the irony out of his voice.

*We may see Dolomay sooner rather than later, if this keeps up. If he doesn’t show soon, there may not be anything left of the Eldred! Well, best not to get ahead of ourselves, huh, BC? If we don’t leave him anything to shoot at, he may not show...*

“You know what, Gold? Don’t let them hit any targets... but be sure you leave some of their ships intact and functioning, okay? Disengage from direct attacks and retreat to defensive perimeter positions.”

“Retreat, sir? Gold two requests confirmation.”

“You heard me, Gold Two! Don’t let them hit the line, hold perimeter positions, but do not directly engage.”

“Okay, sir,” Gold Two says. BC can hear the hesitation in the pilot’s voice.

“It’s okay, Gold Two. I need you to trust me on this. It’s part of a bigger plan,” BC explains, feeling compelled to bolster the pilot’s reserve. “With that in mind? Keep your eyes open for Dolomay and his ships.”

*Get it?*

“Gotcha!” the pilot confirms. “Gold Two out!”

BC feels an ache begin to build behind his temples.

*A headache?*

“Prime Representative?” Gold Two comes back on the line. “There’s something he…”

The com signal cuts off abruptly.

BC looks up at the strategy screen display. Gold Two’s blip is gone. A strange, dark blue smudge glows where the blip had been.

“Chang? What’s this blue smudge here where Gold Two was?”

“Not sure, sir. We’re having trouble getting a fix on it, that’s why it’s not clearly resolved. We can tell there’s something there, bending waves, messing with the gravity… but no fix.”

*It’s him. Gotta be. Dolomay! How many ships does he have now?*

“Are we seeing any other anomalies like this nearby?” BC asks Chang.

“We’re tracking about six of them.”

“Com on,” BC says, turning on the fleetwide communicator. “Those ‘smudges’ on the strategic display are Dolomay’s ships,” BC informs Chang and the SAIF ships listening in. “Steer clear of them! They’re not showing themselves yet. Dolomay wants the Eldred more than he wants us. He’s been adapting tech, too, after looting worlds across the galaxy. His ships are bound to possess capabilities that either match or go beyond our own. He’s no doubt adapted alien weaponry we can’t yet imagine. We have to be ready to defend against it all the same! His ships are obviously employing some shield technology that we don’t have, and can’t yet see through. That’s why we can’t get a fix on them,” BC explains to the fleet.

“So, we should just shoot the smudges!” a pilot pipes up.

“Not yet!” BC cautions. “Don’t let them know we can see them at all just yet. Just steer clear. If they follow you, lead them towards Eldred forces. Let them get close to the Eldred. I believe Dolomay’s hatred of the Eldred will lead him to engage them as soon as they are close enough to attack. We need to watch that attack, see what Dolomay does, how his ships fight. Watch for any weaknesses. The Eldred have been an easy foe to fight, and predictable. I expect Dolomay’s forces won’t be so easy to fight, and certainly won’t be so predictable. Let him wear himself down a little against the Eldred, although… if we’ve been able to mow them down, I’m sure his forces will be able to do so as well,” BC speculates out loud.

“For now, lay low. Watch out for Dolomay’s ships and continue minimal engagement with the Eldred attack force. Let Dolomay think we’re nearly wiped out. I don’t want him to know what our strength level really is.”

As BC watches on the strategy screen, the SAIF forces hang back. The blue smudges representing Dolomay’s ships begin moving toward the Eldred reserve fleet, spreading out apart from each other and subtly penetrating the spaces between the thousands of light blue blips hanging en masse on the edges of the conflict. The blue smudges move deep into the midst of the Eldred undetected.

Suddenly, in a coordinated effort, the six ships begin spinning, each ship firing in all directions, three hundred and sixty five degrees, each ship a bristling pin cushion of energy beams, a deadly blossom of fierce firepower.

The Eldred ships surrounding them are ripped into shreds, their blue blips blinking out in concentric waves of death rippling out from Dolomay’s ships. Each ship is surrounded by a globe of fiery debris as they continuously fire into the surrounding Eldred, but they’re far enough apart from each other to prevent friendly fire.

Dolomay’s ships massacre hundreds of Eldred vessels in the first minute of their orgy of destruction. The SAIF forces nearby merely hang back and watch, avoiding shrapnel and stray fire.

BC calls up a visual feed from one of the SAIF ships near Dolomay’s attack. Brightly erupting flashes of light dim the stars around them in the near distance, each evidence of an exploding Eldred ship. BC can barely make out a pulsing ball of light off in the distance, Dolomay’s nearby ship. The flashing explosions threaten to blind BC, and he switches back to the tactical display.

On the strategy screen Dolomay’s ships continue to deal death by the hundreds as they advance through the Eldred fleet. Suddenly, one of the blue smudges stops spinning and darts out from the midst of the carnage of the conflict and heads off on its own.

*There you are!*

*I bet my life Dolomay's on board that ship!*

"Send a squadron after that ship!" BC commands over the com. He turns to his pilot. "Chang?!"

"Yessir!"

"How fast can we get to the battle?"

"You want to take the command and control ship into the battle, sir?"

"Close to it, anyway, Chang. This isn't a debate! How long will it take?"

"I think we can be there in five minutes, if we go Transpace. It's a short jump, but a little dangerous. I can do it, though, sir, or I wouldn't try it."

"Do it," BC says. He winces as pain begins throbbing behind his temples again, threatening to become a headache. He tries to fight it, but seems to be losing.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"Headache," BC spits out the word. "Go!"

Chang, chastised, turns and focuses on flying the ship. As he works, BC shifts his screen to show the ship's exterior view. As he watches, they pull away from Ceres Central and suddenly shift into Transpace. BC's headache eases as they jump.

They reappear right above the shipyard's main installation, near some SAIF ships patrolling the facility. Suddenly, BC's headache slams back on both sides with more power than before. He brings his hands up to press in the sides of his skull, as if to keep it from splitting.

*Goddamn! It's him! Somehow, Dolomay is doing this to me, I just... feel it. I know it, somehow! He can't quite get into my head, but he can do this!*

"Chang, get us near that smudge that's on its own... where is it now?"

"It's moved away from the Eldred to a vantage point near our raw material mining facilities,"

Chang says.

"Head for that ship, but don't get too close," BC manages to spit out past his pain. He grimaces.

"Are you okay, sir? Your nose... you're bleeding, sir!"

*So I am. So I am... bastard!*

"Chang, I'm going to try to get control of this attack. This is a mental attack by Dolomay. I'll explain later. But give me fifteen minutes here to compose myself and maybe counter attack. I'm gonna close my eyes and see what I can do. Don't disturb me for about fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Yes, sir. What about after that?"

"Wake me up, shake me, whatever you have to do," BC instructs, "if I don't wake up on my own."

## Chapter Twenty-One

BC closes his eyes and begins to think of the doors he's built inside of his mind. He sees them pulsing, bulging outward as a pounding continues on the other side.

*Dolomay!*

*I hear you knocking... you ain't getting in!*

He thinks of the doors growing heavy, heavier, heavier... he sees the doors settle back solid into place. The pounding subsides.

BC feels his headache ease.

*Ha! Just needed some bigger doors... Now, let's see...*

BC lets himself relax and the world fades to grey. The walls fall away and he floats in the middle of the still, calm silent sea.

He "sees" a cloud of golden particles dancing in the air around a glowing red orb hanging over the water nearby. He reaches out and touches the cloud.

And suddenly he knows he is once again seeing out through another's eyes. The eyes of death. The eyes of Dolomay.

Dolomay is sitting in his plush pilot's chair on the bridge of his ship, giving orders to his gunmen.

"Hit their engines again! He's on that ship, I can feel it!" Dolomay says, or thinks out loud, BC can't really tell the difference.

Something on a screen in front of him catches Dolomay's eye. "There! Target their engines! Hit them again! Don't destroy the ship! I want him brought here, in front of me, so I can kill him myself!"

*Who... me? Does he know I'm here?*

BC feels a jolt of panic, nearly gives himself away. He calms himself quickly, tries to stay "quiet".

*Gotta be careful... I'm a guest in the mind of a madman!*

*IS THIS A HEADACHE?*

Dolomay wonders. He rubs his brow.

*WHAT IS THIS? SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT!*

The ship rocks sideways.

"What was that!" Dolomay asks angrily.

"Just docking with the ship, D," the first mate tells him. "Little rough, I know, sorry Big D."

"Just get him up here!" Dolomay shouts. He checks the sword in its sheath hanging from his belt.

A human artifact, he likes the brute effectiveness of the heavy, sharpened blade.

*I RELISH THE THOUGHT OF USING THIS ANCIENT HUMAN WEAPON TO TAKE OFF THE HEAD OF THE ELDEST OF THE ELDRED!*

"We have him, sir," a voice calls over the communicator. "The little fuzzy-wuzzy is on his way to you now."

"The 'Eldrest' of the Eldred is it?" Dolomay says as the defiant Servant, the fuzzy blue koala bear, is brought to stand in front of him. "Most arrogant of the arrogant, more like," Dolomay sneers. "Do you know me, Servant?"

The Eldrest of the Eldred looks at Dolomay blankly and remains mute.

*It is the Eldrest of the Eldred! He must have been on one of the ships!*

Dolomay summons the Voice of Command.

*"SPEAK!"*

The Eldrest of the Eldred twitches as if he can't help himself, and speaks.

"You are the last of your kind, the last living member of the race now called the Ancient Enemy. You are Dolomay."

"I am Dolomay. But look around you! I'm not the last! Look at all my children!" Dolomay says, looking around at the crew gathered on the bridge.

*Fiza! Asleep at the foot of Dolomay's "throne". Nice plush pilot's chair.*

The stir of recognition nearly alerts Dolomay to BC's presence.

*FIZA?*

*WHAT?*

*ARE YOU THERE AGAIN, DIM ONE?*

*HIDING INSIDE MY HEAD?*

*NO MATTER.*

*OBSERVE ALL YOU LIKE.*

"These 'children' are not like you," the Eldrest of the Eldred tells Dolomay. "You are the last."

"You do not believe that. Or you would not be here, wiping them out."

"We do this because they *could* like you. If you were to lead them, it becomes even more likely that they *would* become like you, as some of these have. However... I can sense your touch heavy on many of these, Dolomay. They would not serve you willingly, would they?"

"No matter. They serve all the same. They are easily bent to my will. They now serve me... as you once did. As is your PURPOSE! Your DESIGN!" Dolomay yells down at the Eldrest of the Eldred. "Eldrest?" Dolomay laughs. "Old servants, perhaps. Only 'Eldrest' because you've been around so long!"

"You will die here today, Dolomay," The Eldrest of the Eldred says defiantly. "We will kill you."

Or they will. But you *will* die.”

“Idle threats,” Dolomay dismisses the Eldred’s words.

“Promises.”

“Is this to be our final battle, then?” Dolomay asks him. “This is what it comes down to? We will die out in this remote backwater place? Far removed in space and time from my people’s once great empire? Die out here and it all ends in obscurity, is that it? And what am I to you now? Your great shame incarnate?!” Dolomay is nearly raving.

“You brought your forces here for victory, nothing less, correct? Certainly. You attack these ‘children’, these pale echoes, mere shadows of what we were. But they are not your enemy! They are at best weak imitations! Those who serve me can only *wish* to be like we super men of old!”

**BEFORE I KILL HIM, I WILL DESTROY HIS WORLD!**

“When I awoke, I wondered why any of *you* were still around, Servant!”

“You wondered? All races have prospered without the Ancient Enemy to keep us scared and pinned down on our planets!” the Eldest of the Eldred argues.

“You don’t get it, do you?” Dolomay says, shaking his head and smiling a deadly smile. “Your race has forgotten its humble origins. You are *Servants*! You were created and bred to serve *us*! You were also created with a built in obsolescence, built to be dependent upon us for your continued existence. Without us around, the Servants should have slowly dwindled and died out thousands of years ago! Why do you suppose you’re still around?”

“You *need* me, you old fool!” Dolomay shouts at the Eldest of the Eldred. “If I hadn’t been around for all these years in stasis, you would’ve died out! Without *me*, *you* don’t even exist! I keep you alive! You never figured that out, did you? I am the REASON you EVEN EXIST!”

“Now who is the arrogant one?” the Eldest of the Eldred observes wryly.

“Arrogant?” Dolomay laughs. “Kill me, and your race’s reason for being will be gone. It’s biological. Your race is hardwired to mine! If I hadn’t been out there in suspended animation all these years, there would have been no Eldred!”

The Eldest of the Eldred stares mutely back at Dolomay.

“Without me, there *is* no you,” Dolomay says smiling an evil grin. “You’re seeing it now, aren’t you? You know it’s true!”

“You are the reason that we are alive? Is this what you are trying to say?” the Eldest of the Eldred says in disgust.

“It does not exactly thrill me, either,” Dolomay says. “I am doing what I can about it.”

As he finishes speaking, Dolomay springs up out of his chair, drawing the sword from its sheath as he flows up out of his seat, bringing it up as he rises and then down and across as he nears the Eldest of the Eldred, taking his head clean off with his one sweeping swing.

*Woah!*

BC can’t help but react.

**YOU IN HERE!**

BC feels Dolomay’s awareness on him like a hot blast of sunlight. He sees Fiza through Dolomay’s eyes. She’s waking up, standing up at the same time.

“Ew...” she says, looking past Dolomay at the head and body on the floor. She looks back at Dolomay as BC looks through Dolomay’s eyes into Fiza’s... and suddenly he’s looking *out* of her eyes and into Dolomay’s dead eyes.

*I’m in Fiza’s mind!?*

*bc? that you?*

*It feels wrong... HE’S in here, too!*

BC feels Dolomay’s presence like greasy, slippery tentacles grasping at him and Fiza. He concentrates and dries the tentacles down to gnarly black branches that he then snaps, breaking Dolomay’s grasp.

Fiza and Dolomay have been staring eye to eye this whole time. Now Dolomay’s brow furrows, as he tries to figure out what just happened. He doesn’t break his gaze. BC tries to block him out.

*How are you, Fiza?*

*bc! he's been controlling me! this... this isn't me!*

*I know. It's okay. I'm here now. Are you okay?*

*no, i'm anything but okay, bc! he's been inside me, bc, completely violated me, mind and body!*

BC feels the greasy tentacles reaching out again as they continue their stare down. He closes the doors on their wriggling forms and the ends shrivel down to nothing.

*keep him out of me, bc!*

*I will try, Fiza.*

"Fiza?" Dolomay finally says aloud. "It's strange. I cannot feel you."

"Strange," she says quietly. Finally, Dolomay breaks his gaze and shifts his attention.

"Clean this up!" Dolomay orders the first mate, pointing at the corpse of the Eldest of the Eldred with the tip of his sword.

*keep him out of me, bc!*

*I'm trying!*

*i see a gun i can reach... keep him out for me, bc! let me do this!*

Fiza casually saunters over to the "throne" and plops back down on her cushion at its feet, easing a handgun off the throne and down beneath her as she lays down.

*he didn't see me.*

Dolomay walks back over to his chair and sits down next to Fiza.

*keep him out of me, bc!*

Dolomay leans over Fiza.

"Why can't I feel you, Fiza?" he asks.

"Feel this," she says, and she brings the handgun up into Dolomay's face at point blank range.

She pulls the trigger.

**BANG!**

BC feels her adrenaline rush, her fear, her sense of freedom, her elation. He sees through Fiza's eyes one last time, sees the hole in Dolomay's forehead just above his two now truly dead eyes, sees the bits of brain and the blood splashed across the wall behind him, sees the rest of the crew on the bridge now dazed, out of it and confused.

Dolomay had gathered the strands of their minds together into his own. With his death, each strand has snapped back, stunning them. This boomerang effect has left the bridge crew incapacitated.

BC snaps back! No easy awakening through the still calm silent sea this time, BC is jolted awake and alert on the bridge of the command and control ship.

"Minute to spare," Chang says as BC opens his eyes and stands up.

"Huh?" BC feels a little dazed himself.

"You were under for fourteen minutes."

"Oh. Uh-huh. What's happening?" BC asks.

*Dolomay's dead! Fiza just killed him!*

"That stray smudge merged with, must have boarded a blue blip, blew it up afterwards. Huh, now that's strange. Something's happening with that ship... we're starting to get a fix on it. The Eldred must be, too, they're starting to surround it."

"Strategy screen," BC calls the tactical display up. Dolomay's ship shifts from smudge to a small blue blip as BC finds it on the display. A small dark blue blip surrounded by a sea of light blue blips as the Eldred close in.

"Their shields are down," Chang reports.

"Get me an open channel!" BC commands.

"Go ahead."

"Dolomay is dead! This is Bernard Champion! You do not need to fire on that ship! Dolomay is dead! Dolomay's dead," BC tells everyone listening.

"How do you know?" an Eldred voice ask.

“Yeah, how do you know?” Chang echoes the alien.

“I’ve seen it. We have a way of seeing into their ships. I saw it happen over there, on their ship,” BC explains. He tries to convince them. “Please, do not fire! Dolomay is dead, I saw Fi...”

BC stops. The massed Eldred ships have simultaneously opened fire on Dolomay’s ship.

“Visual!” BC commands. A viewscreen pops up just in time for BC to see the steady focused fire of the Eldred ships have its desired effect. Dolomay’s ship explodes in a billowing, cloudy surge of red, orange and blue.

*Fiza!*

“The Eldred are firing! I guess that means this fight isn’t over,” BC says, sadness and anger coloring his tone. “Fire at will! I repeat, fire at will. All Eldred ships are targets, all of Dolomay’s remaining ships are also now viable targets! Fire at will! I repeat – fire at will!”

BC calls for the tactical display.

“Strategy screen.”

BC stares as SAIF ships take out more of the light blue blips. Dolomay’s ships drop their shields as SAIF ships approach, turning into solid dark blue blips on the screen.

“Dolomay’s remaining ships are surrendering,” Chang reports to BC.

“Arrest the crews. They’ll have to stand trial for their crimes. They’ll have to learn how to be human again.”

*It won’t be easy figuring out how much was them and how much was the touch of Dolomay.*

*How much did the devil make them do it? How much did they dance with the devil of their own free will?*

“Confiscate the ships. If we can spare the pilots, fly Dolomay’s ships back to the shipyards. We’ll see if we can use them against the Eldred.”

“Sir? The Eldred are no longer putting up much of a fight. We’re getting reports that indicate many of their ships are now fighting with shields completely lowered.”

“Put me on the fleet com, Chang.”

“You’re on.”

“All ships, new orders. Dolomay’s ships have surrendered. Their ships and crews are being taken care of as I speak. The Eldred seem to be standing down as well. Your new orders are to only fire when fired upon. I repeat, we will now only return fire. Only fire when fired upon. Keep your shields up, but do not fire unless provoked. Command out.”

“BC?” Anita is on the com. “What’s happening over there? Did you have to go over?”

“Dolomay is dead, Anita!” BC tells her. “And the Eldred seem to be backing down and losing their will to fight. That may be because Dolomay killed the Eldest of the Eldred. Before Fiza shot him.”

“Fiza? Fiza shot Dolomay? Dead?” Anita asks, incredulous.

“Dead! Right in the middle of the forehead.”

“Great,” Anita jokes, “so now Fiza’s a hero?”

“Fiza’s dead, Anita,” BC says solemnly to throw it back in her face as he gets a little mad at Anita’s flippancy. “The Eldred destroyed the ship, even after I told them Dolomay had already been killed. They blew her up.”

“I’m... I’m sorry BC. I know she was an old ‘friend’ of yours.”

“Thank you, Anita.”

*Now I feel guilty for getting mad, dammit!*

“Well, it’s good news about Dolomay. And the Eldred too, huh, maybe?” Anita says.

“We’ll see.”

“Keep me informed, BC,” she asks him.

“I will,” he says, ending the call.

“The Eldred are retreating, sir!” Chang informs him.

“Follow them! Lock onto their Transpace signals and follow them back to their bases. Let’s make sure they aren’t going to come roaring right back at us!”

Tracking systems developed by the Project allow the Solar Alliance Interplanetary Forces to track the Eldred back to their nearest military base.

The first report comes back in about twenty minutes.

“They’ve definitely got reserves! There are a couple more *thousandships* here!”

“Take them out,” BC orders. “As many as you can!”

Two SAIF squadrons of six ships apiece swoop in to attack the Eldred advance base.

Surprisingly, the Eldred fleet offers only token resistance. They put up little fight as the SAIF ships streak through strafing their base and sweeping through their fleet.

BC watches relayed information on his strategy screen, watching the SAIF ship’s blips mow through the light blue blips representing the Eldred ships.

*What’s happened to the Eldred? Is what Dolomay told the Eldest of the Eldred true? Were they somehow biologically attuned to him? Did that make them aggressive? And now that he’s gone...*

*Could be true, I guess. Something about them has definitely changed. They lost the Eldest. That could be it.*

*Before, they were attacking us as if we would become the Ancient Enemy. Now they’re holding back. Hardly defending themselves!*

*Did Dolomay represent the potential for us to become what he was? To become the Ancient Enemy? Now that he’s gone... maybe that potential is gone, too.*

The SAIF ships are able to do massive damage without losing a ship out of the dozen. The base is wiped out with little resistance. A few remaining Eldred ships retreat again.

“The Eldred base has been neutralized,” Chang tells BC.

“Good. We haven’t found any other staging areas, any other Eldred bases?”

“Not so far, sir. All the ships we followed retreated to the same base.”

BC orders one of the squadrons to follow the current retreat and trace those ships back to whatever deeper base they are fleeing. He tells the other squadron to hold the ruins of the base they’ve just taken out and eliminate any stragglers. He sees no reason to risk reprisals or any changes of alien “heart” from the Eldred.

*If they even have hearts...*

*Damn. I feel bad for some reason. Guilty.*

*Why should I feel guilty about wiping them out? They were trying to wipe us out, after all. Keep wiping them out, even when they stop fighting back? Have they really stopped?*

*They seem to have, for now.*

*We don’t know that they’ll stay “dormant”.*

“SAIF squadron Blue reporting contact with retreating Eldred fleet,” Chang reports. “They’re reporting no resistance, Prime Representative, sir.”

“Tell them to open fire,” BC orders. “Sweep the fleet. If they get into any trouble, fall back, don’t risk getting hit. Tell the ships to watch each other. I don’t want to lose anyone to friendly fire!”

“Yessir,” Chang says sharply.

*Sounds like Chang might not agree with my methods. So be it. Some will always argue with what has to be done. I can only hope it’s the right decision. Seems right to me. We do what we have to do.*

“Blue squadron reports little resistance, but again massive retreating by the Eldred from the field of battle.”

“Find out where they’re going. Watch a few ships, see if they’ll change it up and try fleeing to multiple targets. It’s not likely given their track record, but we’ll see.”

“Yessir.”

Blue squadron harries the Eldred back two more Transpace jumps before finally losing them. BC doesn’t want to risk losing blue squadron, so he orders them back to help the other SAIF group finish mopping up around the first base the Eldred jumped to.

Dolomay’s five remaining ships are all flown in to the shipyards. Their surviving crews are put on

ships heading back to Earth so they can face justice at home.

With the fight winding down, BC asks Chang to take the command and control ship back to Ceres Central.

"Looks like we might have won this one," BC observes. "At least for now."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

BC meets Anita for dinner back on Ceres Central a week after the battle with the Eldred and Dolomay, when things finally calm down long enough for each of them to take a break. BC has traveled throughout the solar system during the week, even back and forth to Cat's Eye, as the new Solar Alliance takes stock of itself after the battles.

BC doesn't say much through the meal.

"You're preoccupied by something, aren't you?" Anita presses him, finally, over dessert.

"Am I? Do I seem distant? I'm sorry," he apologizes.

"Yeah you do. S'okay." She laughs. "We did just fight a war."

BC sighs.

"Come on. Give it up," she says, trying to coax him into talking about it.

"I'm... conflicted, I guess," he says, "of two minds. Divided between wondering if we did the right thing by following the Eldred back to their bases and wiping out their fleet..."

He trails off.

"And?" she prods.

"...and wondering if we somehow blew the chance to find our way back to Eldray. Strike back in a more meaningful way."

Anita shakes her head.

"And here I thought you were worrying over wiping out the Eldred ships because you thought we were being too brutal. Instead, you're worried you've missed our chance to find their presumably civilian homeworld, to hit their civilian population? Jeesh, BC, you're more brutal than I thought!"

"There are military targets and ships on and around Eldray. I'm not looking for the wholesale slaughter of Eldred 'civilians' as you're calling them," he tries to defend himself.

"Of course not," she answers him with a light touch of sarcasm in her voice. "There's nothing remotely like revenge on your mind right now, is there? Justice and Defense only, right? Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord!" she jokes.

"Getting biblical on me?" BC asks.

"What?"

"Never mind. Nothing. But, if god works through man, then why *couldn't* we be the instruments of His Divine Vengeance?"

She stares across the table at him. BC feels as if she's x-raying his head to see if he means all the shit he's spouting.

"Spoken like a true Assassin for the Vatican," she says, finally, chiding him but breaking the silence. "Isn't that a little Old Testament for you, BC?"

"Old testament. Old job. Old me, really," BC insists. "It's only been a couple of years, but it feels like that was a lifetime ago. I've gone from wanting to kill you to falling in love with you!"

*What the fuck did I just say?!*

Anita seems to be having trouble breathing.

"What did you just say?" she manages, past her shock.

"Did I just say that out loud?" BC asks her. Anita nods. "I guess it's true. I think I *am* in love with you, Anita."

"That's not *exactly* what you said the first time," she says, calling him out. "There was no 'think'

in there before,” she points out.

“I’m sorry,” BC apologizes. “Look, I shouldn’t have said anything. I didn’t mean to, it just came out...”

BC’s protests are abruptly cut off as Anita leans across the table and kisses him hard. She finally pulls back.

“Don’t be afraid to say it, BC!” she says, looking him eye to eye, in close. “You’re not scaring me away.”

*That’s it, too, isn’t it? Fear! I’m afraid to love for fear it will run away. Afraid to love because I’m afraid to lose it. How fucked up is that?*

“I’m sorry,” he says.

*Maybe I’ve been the one afraid of it all this time...*

“Stop apologizing!” she says louder. She leans in to kiss him again. Suddenly, BC realizes his arm is soaking wet. He can’t help himself, and starts to laugh, breaking up their kiss.

“What?” Anita says. “This had better be good! You better not be laughing at me! You’re not laughing at the way I kiss, are you?”

“No! My arm, look,” he says, holding up his dripping sleeve. “You spilled my wine, that’s all.”

“Too bad.”

“I wasn’t laughing at you, Anita. If anything, I’d laugh at myself for letting what I said earlier slip out!”

“You can’t take it back now, you know,” Anita tells him.

“I can’t believe I said that.”

“Said what?” she says coyly, innocently.

“You want me to say it again?”

“If you dare. If you can. Can you?”

BC looks her in the eye.

“I love you, Anita. I think I did the moment I first laid eyes on you, as corny as that sounds.”

“What, back when you knocked me out with that hatch cover on Lunar Prime?”

“Yeah, you remember, just before you tried to kill me for the first time,” BC says sarcastically. “I remember thinking you looked like an angel... didn’t know you were the Angel of Death!” He jokes.

“What a way to start a relationship, huh?” she says, and laughs.

“But, seriously, I do remember thinking way back then that you looked like a sleeping Latino angel,” BC says, softening his tone as he smiles.

Anita stops laughing. She smiles a kind of crooked smile as she looks back at BC.

“I love you too, BC.”

“So. You can say it too, huh?” he jokes softly.

“Guess I can.”

“Well, then, right back at ya!”

Anita frowns and pulls back.

“*That was not romantic at all. Way to kill a moment, BC. ‘Right back at ya?’ What was that?*”

“Sorry.”

“I thought I asked you to stop apologizing!” she says in mock anger. She laughs again, and then leans over to kiss him again.

“Ahem.”

A man clears his throat next to them. The waiter. He’s looking askance at the mess on the table top, the spilled wine dripping off and onto the floor. BC and Anita grin up at him sheepishly.

“Sorry,” they manage to say in unison. Anita reaches over to cuff BC on the shoulder.

“Hey!” he protests.

“Add any extra costs to my bill,” Anita tells the waiter.

“You’re getting this one?” BC asks.

“My treat.”

“Thanks!”

“Thanks for admitting how you feel. I know that wasn’t easy for you.”

“It wasn’t. I’m sorr...” he stops himself. “It had to come out when I wasn’t thinking about it, I guess. I didn’t think I was ready.”

“What, to say it?” Anita asks.

“To accept it. You know...” BC struggles to find words. “I’m flawed, Anita. I don’t wanna lie to you. I’ve been a horrible person. I’ve killed people. I did it for ‘God’, supposedly. But I did it mostly just to save my own skin. I’m a bad man... I’m just not good enough or, I don’t know, it’s... I’m not ready, or somehow, I don’t know, fixed enough, somehow, to be worth loving... god, that sounds pathetic!”

“No it doesn’t,” she says. “Confused, sure, but normal enough. But if you wait until you’re perfect before allowing yourself to love and be loved, you’re going to be waiting your life away. You’ll be waiting forever. Nobody’s perfect, BC. We’re all flawed in different ways. That’s a part of love, though, forgiving those flaws, or seeing past them. It’s part of it, BC. You love *me*, and you know how flawed I am.”

“Nobody’s perfect, I know...”

“But what? You’re still expecting yourself to be perfect?! You’re not perfect! So deal with it. You’re never going to be perfect. Never!” she raises her voice slightly as she makes her point. Then she quiets down a little. “It’s okay to try to be perfect; I guess that’s natural enough. But it’s a process. Life is a process. It’s not over until, well, you know, when you die, you know? You’re never done, not so long as you’re breathing! If you don’t think you’ll be ready until you’re ‘done’, you may never be ready. Not until you’re dead.”

“You know, I *know* that,” BC says, “but knowing it and feeling it are different. They’re different things.”

“Are you feeling this?” she asks, point blank.

“That tickles,” he jokes. Anita frowns.

“I’m serious. Do you really feel ‘this’, between us?”

“I do. I think I’ve finally let myself love someone, love you.” He looks Anita square in the eyes. “I love you.”

*And I mean that.*

*I think.*

“I love you too, BC,” she says, and she kisses him.

They leave the restaurant and head off together to Anita’s quarters to spend the night.

BC awakes to a new day the next morning.

*Funny how love can change your whole attitude!*

He looks over at Anita, still sleeping. He lies back down and assesses the larger situation, the so-called ‘big picture’.

*The Eldred are dead and dying. At least all the ones we’ve encountered are. We don’t know where Eldray is, so we can’t check out their homeworld. Or maybe just one of their homeworlds. But the Eldred seem to be dying off.*

*Dolomay must have been telling the truth. Without his continued presence, the fight has left their race. More than that, their very will to live seems to have died with their Ancient Enemy.*

Anita stirs next to him. He sits up in bed.

“Mornin’,” she mumbles out sleepily.

“Good morning,” BC replies. “Sleep well?”

“Uh-huh,” she says, and then yawns.

“I was thinking...”

“Uh-oh,” she interrupts. BC glares at her in mock anger. “Sorry,” she lies. “Go on.” She sits up and waits for him to stop glaring. His fake glare melts into a grin.

“Can you help me convene a meeting of the heads of the human colonies here at Ceres Central?” he asks her.

“Wait a second,” she says. “That’s what you were thinking about?”

“It was... I’m sorry, is that bad?”

“Well,” she says, looking down. She looks back up at him. “Let’s make a deal from here on out. We don’t talk work – no politics, no nothing – here in the bedroom. Okay?”

*She’s really serious! I feel like I just crossed a boundary or something...*

“Okay,” BC agrees.

*That will be tough... I don’t have any control over what I think about or when. Just have to keep my mouth shut!*

“I think we should at least try to keep our personal lives and our business lives separate,” Anita explains. “They will inevitably bleed into each other. That’s going to happen. But we can at least try to keep the bedroom as our sanctuary from the outside world, don’t you think?”

“You’ve got a good point there,” BC admits. “I hadn’t thought about that, but you’re right. We need a place to get away from the madness!”

“Good,” she says, smiling at him. “I’m glad you agree.”

“But... before we start that... do you think you could set up a meeting? Sometime in the next week?”

Anita whips her pillow around and into his face! BC throws his arms up to defend as she pummels him repeatedly. BC picks up his pillow to battle back. They both begin laughing. Soon all thoughts of the meeting are forgotten, as the two of them entangle and delay getting out of bed for another hour.

Anita does set up the meeting for the middle of next week. BC will meet with the leaders at Ceres Central on Tuesday, the 13th of September.

The governors of Crankshaft, Depot, Cat’s Eye and Rigel Four all attend. The Ayatollah comes from Mars. Amanda Erskine attends for the Moon, Wentworth comes for the UTZ Council, and M’Bekke, as Pope, represents the NcC. BC, as Prime Representative, represents the Solar Alliance government.

When they are made aware of the meeting, the Domo and the Flaze also request permission to send observers, as they actively seek peace and alliances.

Most of the meeting covers government forms and functions. Democracy. BC’s a fan. With the threat of war declining, he wants to insure they act quickly to return power to the people. BC wants to get back to having each governor popularly elected, balanced by the representatives recently elected to the Alliance’s House of Representatives, and an appointed judiciary. The meeting attendees begin to take on the government-building with vigor, and over the next two days the simple meeting turns into a full-blown constitutional conference.

BC ponders the enormity of the conference as he walks to a smaller meeting he’s scheduled for Thursday morning.

*This has turned into more than just a meeting! I suppose we’re making history. I just want to keep it simple. Simple rules, simple structures, simple laws. The rule of law, not of man.*

*This should be interesting...*

BC enters a simply appointed conference room. Two other figures wait at the table: the Ayatolla and M’Bekke.

“So... how goes the book?” BC asks the two men.

M’Bekke and the Ayatollah look at each other, and then back at BC. Neither says a word.

“Going that well, huh?” BC prods them. The Ayatollah looks off into the distance. M’Bekke looks down at the floor.

“There is no book yet, is there?” he says, confronting them with what he’s pretty sure is the truth.

“We can’t...” M’Bekke starts.

“It’s not...” The Ayatollah says at the same time.

Both stop. They look back and forth at each other and BC.

“I’m afraid it is impossible, Champion,” the Ayatollah says.

“We have tried, BC,” M’Bekke assure him. “But it is not possible. It’s not...”

“It is just not right, I’m afraid,” the Ayatollah finishes.

BC just shakes his head.

*What can I say? One crazy dream down. Maybe I was reaching too high?*

“There are too many sacrifices required, too many compromises. There would no longer be the proper forms and phrasings of the Prophet,” the Ayatollah insists. “We considered many permutations, but all compromises were, ultimately, sacrifices too great to make.”

“Perhaps,” M’Bekke says softly, “you will have to be content with merely restoring peace between the faiths.”

The Ayatollah chuckles.

“Yes! You have stopped many folks from killing each other. Some would be satisfied with that,” he tells BC.

“Why stop at Mars?” BC wonders out loud, chuckling to himself.

“What about Mars?” The Ayatollah asks.

“Just something someone from the Project asked me once,” BC half explains. “Has to do with going beyond expectations. Not stopping with what is expected or asked for.”

“You haven’t stopped at Mars, BC,” M’Bekke says, a little puzzled. “You’ve united us all from, what now, six different planets, a moon and an asteroid? Some would be satisfied with that.”

“Some would,” BC agrees, “some who didn’t have as much to make up for, maybe,” he says, knowing M’Bekke knows what he means and pretty sure the Ayatollah does, too.

“You did as you were ordered to do,” M’Bekke says to him. “What you were forced to do. I know.”

“Just following orders?” Seems to me that’s the lamest defense in the book,” BC says.

“Indeed,” the Ayatollah agrees.

“I’m not defending myself or what I did, or making excuses,” BC says.

“No, no excuses,” M’Bekke says, with a touch of sarcasm, “you’re just trying to unite two historically opposed religions, that’s all,” he points out.

“Aim high,” BC jokes.

M’Bekke and the Ayatollah exchange a look.

“We... have agreed. On something,” the Ayatollah informs him.

“Oh, really? Do tell,” BC says, encouraged.

“We have agreed to each acknowledge the divine inspiration behind each other’s book, and to accord each other’s book an honored place in our respective houses of worship.”

*Well, that’s something!*

“I guess that’s a start,” BC says.

“It’s more than before,” M’Bekke offers.

“It is the best we can do, now,” the Ayatollah tells BC.

“I guess it is,” BC admits. He starts to get up, unofficially declaring the meeting over. But then another thought occurs to him. He settles back down. “Tell me, gentlemen – where do aliens fit in your religion’s view of the cosmos?”

“Well,” M’Bekke says, but he stops, at a loss.

“Interesting,” the Ayatollah. “We have not had much time to consider them, what with working on this project of yours, BC.”

“We have not spent a lot of time considering the aliens ourselves, either,” M’Bekke admits. “We did only find out about them officially a short time ago. Theology moves rather slowly, I’m afraid. Some theologians and religious ethicists have pondered alien life in ‘what if?’ sort of terms and scenarios, but we do not have a standing policy or philosophy in place on extraterrestrials. No set dogma, at any rate.”

“I guess there’s work to do, then, huh?” BC says.

The other two nod a little.

“Maybe. Maybe not, BC,” M’Bekke says. “Wouldn’t it be wisest to assume that we are all God’s creatures?”

The Ayatollah brightens.

“Indeed! My friend M’Bekke speaks with great wisdom,” he says, nodding. “They, too, can serve Allah, may his name be forever praised!”

BC nods.

“Sounds like you’re off on the right foot,” BC says. This time, he does stand up. “And on that note, I’m off. I want to take a break before the next big group meeting.”

BC leaves the two holy men. He hopes to get a nap in before the final scheduled meeting later in the afternoon.

By the time the attendees travel home on Friday, the Solar Alliance has been given true structure and form. The conference is productive. The leaders set up the structure of their colonies’ future governments, agreeing that those structures should be ratified by the governing bodies in each colony, themselves to be elected by popular vote in the next thirty days. The Solar Alliance is solidified.

With the meetings adjourned and judged a success, BC contemplates taking a vacation.

*These wheels need to turn for the next thirty days... so I have thirty days. Might as well enjoy them. I trust the people I have in place – they’ll get this done. They don’t need me hovering over them. The less I do, the better. I don’t want to seem to be meddling in local politics. I want real democracy to work. Let the process work.*

*So, then – where can I go on my vacation?*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

BC decides to vacation at each colony, to spend a little time at all of humanity’s homes over the course of the month, so the Prime Representative doesn’t seem to be playing favorites. Anita puts the itinerary together for him, a skill she still has a knack for. But she won’t be able to join him on his excursion, as she points out she has political processes and elections to oversee on Ceres Central.

BC finds himself on a shuttle to Earth, alone, as he begins his vacation. He’s traveling with light security, two plainclothes SAIF officers. His first destination: Boston. BC is visiting the parish where he was first a “priest” in the New catholic Church.

He’s trying to avoid crowds, but somehow word of his itinerary has leaked out. There are people milling about outside the church when BC arrives. He waves to them as he gets out of his transport, but then he makes a beeline for the church’s front doors.

St. Gabriel’s Church was built sometime back in the nineteen hundreds. It’s a grand old white wooden building with two square towers. The building’s two longer sides are lined with rows of stained glass windows depicting the passion of Christ.

As BC climbs the white marble steps he thinks back ten years to when the NcC began and he was transferred here.

*I knew I was in over my head at that point. I’d never set foot inside a real church before this place!*

BC opens the heavy wooden main doors at the front of the church and disappears into the darkness inside. He has his security detail wait outside as he tours the old white clapboard church. He wants to take it all in by himself, alone.

They only agreed to wait when the local priest told them he could lock the doors behind BC, so he couldn’t be disturbed. As BC enters the church foyer he hears a slam and some clicking. The doors are closed and locked behind him.

BC’s eyes adjust as he walks through the foyer, through another set of heavy wooden double doors, and into the main hall of the church.

He walks up the aisle toward the altar.

BC is looking up at Jesus on the cross, at the crucifix suspended over the altar, when he hears the church’s doors open behind him.

*Huh... thought they were going to keep those locked. I told them I didn’t want to be disturbed...*

BC turns to see a woman and a small child standing in the dim light of the foyer, in front of the church doors. The two begin to walk forward. They pass through the stained-glass colored sunlight streaming in through the windows of the church as they walk up the aisle towards BC.

*There's something familiar about her...*

"I thought I'd find you here," she says to BC as she approaches. She clutches her coat closed in front of her with one hand while the small boy holds on to the other.

"Me?" he asks.

"Hello BC," the woman says, drawing closer. She stands beside him with the small two or three year old boy at her side. "The priest was kind enough to let us in when I told him we were family," she says.

BC stares into her big brown eyes, trying to remember who she is.

"You don't even remember who I am, do you?" she says, seeing right through BC.

"I'm afraid I don't. You look familiar..."

"We were once close," she says. She looks down at the boy. "Quite close."

*Uh-oh...*

She shakes her head.

"This won't do at all," she says to herself more than BC. "I was your alibi," she says to BC. She looks at the boy. "His name is Alibi," she says, with an air of some sort of satisfaction. The boy has his mother's big brown eyes. He looks up at BC, but stays quiet.

*Alibi? Oh My God! Kim's daughter! Ruth?*

"Ruth!"

*Kim said she was dead!*

"You remember!" she exclaims, and a weird smile creeps across her face.

"I thought you were dead! Your father told me you had died!" BC remembers that Kim himself is dead, now. "I'm sorry about your father," he tells her.

She frowns, and then looks down at the ground at her feet.

"You should be sorry," she says. She looks back up at BC. "You have lots and lots to be 'sorry' for, BC!" she tells him, practically spitting out the word "sorry".

"You ruined my father... my family! My faith! My home, my world... my life! You bastard!" She stares eye to eye at him as she finishes. The boy at her side begins fidgeting, whimpering softly.

BC sees frenetic energy dancing in her eyes as she lectures him. There is a weird edge to her voice, a strange chaotic craziness.

*I don't think she's all there anymore! She seems off...*

"I... what can I say, Ruth?" BC tries to sound calm and reassuring.

*She's lost it... she's not right! How do I call security without freaking her out?*

"Nothing," she answers him. She looks down again. One of her hands still holds the hand of the boy, the other is inside of her coat.

*I thought she was holding it closed...*

"What about the boy?" BC has to ask.

She looks up at BC, and then down at the boy. She bends down to talk to the boy face to face.

"Al? This man is your Daddy. Alibi, meet your father. This is Bernard Campion," she says, and she and the boy both look up at BC. She straightens up.

*Is she sick? Holding her stomach?*

"Are you okay?" BC asks her. She ignores his question and begins to lecture him again.

"You've done a lot of bad things, BC," Ruth tells him. "And I'm not talking now about what you did to me and my family and Fortune Station. I'm talking," she looks down, and then back up at him, "about the things my father told me about you. He told me all about you, BC. All the killing, the horrible things you'd done." She shakes her head. "And now I see you all over the news. They're all saying such great things, such nice things about you, but none of it is true! Leader of the free world! And I've seen you with that woman..." she trails off and looks back down at the floor. She glances at the boy and then looks back at BC. "Rumors say you two are getting married, is that right?" she asks in an accusatory

tone.

“Well, I don’t know about that, we haven’t even talked about it,” BC says defensively.

“You’re a bad man, BC!” she says angrily. She glares at him as she raises her voice. “*You* don’t... Good things should not happen to you! You don’t deserve any of it!” Her eyes burn into his.

“I’ve tried to make up for the bad,” BC tells her. “I’ve tried to do good things! I’ve saved the human race! That’s gotta count for something,” he insists.

“You were lucky,” she reasons, “lucky to be in the right place at the right time. You were lucky, not repentant. Have you repented? Really? I don’t think so! You haven’t atoned for your sins!” Ruth says, a quavering edge to her voice, a hint of panicky excitement.

“Are you judging me, then?” BC asks her defensively. “Maybe I’ve made up for what I’ve done. I did it all in the name of God, anyway!”

“You don’t believe that! Do you?” Ruth challenges him. “You never did, did you? Neither do I! You did it because it was *fun!* You didn’t really *believe* in what you were doing!”

*How true is that? It is sorta true, on some level, to some degree, isn’t it?*

*Where is my security?*

“I was an instrument of God,” BC tells her, but his words ring hollow in his own ears.

“You were judge, jury and executioner,” Ruth tells him. She fixes her eyes on BC’s. “And so am I.”

She breaks her gaze. Ruth looks down at the boy.

“This is your son,” she says, lifting her hand holding the boy’s. Her other hand comes out of her jacket holding a .38 pistol. “And this is a gun.” She pulls the trigger.

BANG!

There is a stunned silence. Ruth has just shot BC in the stomach.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

BC is on his back, on the floor of the church, and his stomach is on fire.

*She shot me!*

The boy is crying loudly, his shrieking and sobbing filling the air like a human alarm siren. BC hears the gun hit the ground beside him, hears shouting in the distance – but everything is echoing.

*She shot me in the gut... that’s not good!*

He blinks. He sees Ruth standing next to the crying boy. She stares off blankly into space, arms hanging limply at her sides.

The world begins to move in slow motion. BC watches his security officers rush up behind Ruth. One grabs her in a secure hold, pinning her arms and rushing her off. The other one leans over BC, kneels beside him.

“Priiiiiime Rep-re-sen-ta-tive!”

He’s yelling, but to BC it sounds distorted and slowed down. BC tries to listen to him.

“Is that me?” BC wonders out loud. He feels like sleeping. His stomach really hurts. On fire.

*Why can’t I move?*

“Stay with me, Prime Representative!” the man yells.

But BC sees the walls fall away and finds himself in a gray place, floating on a still calm silent sea.

He’s floating away. Floating up, away from his body. Floating across the still calm sea. Floating. Away.

The voice of love speaks.

*YOU JUST NEVER KNOW, DO YOU?*

*I can hear you again? Jesus? Or... since that name’s been abused... is it... Ted?*

*HA! YOU REMEMBER! STILL HAVE YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR, DO YOU? THAT’S GOOD! NAMES ARE NOT IMPORTANT.*

*I knew you weren’t Dolomay. He’s dead.*

*YES. HE IS. AND HE IS NOT ME.*

*BUT NOW, YOU ARE.*

*Wait... I am? I'm you? You mean this is it?*  
*THIS IS IT.*  
*ARE YOU WITH ME?*  
*Yeah...*  
*I'm with you.*

## Epilogue

*From the First Address to the Solar Alliance Congress by Prime Representative Anita Capituna.  
This was her first public appearance after her election in November of 2112.*

“...I cannot finish today without mentioning the man who isn't here with us today, a man I grew to love, despite his many faults, Bernard Campion. Leader. Pope. Assassin. Scoundrel. And a man with a very big heart.

“None of us would even be here today without him, even though he would never have chosen to lead us. There's a Shakespeare quote from “Twelfth Night” about those who have greatness thrust upon them: “...be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” Actually, in the context of the play itself, it's not a very flattering quote really, when you analyze its origins. But BC wouldn't want us flattering him anyway. He would have admitted himself that any greatness of his was certainly thrust upon him.

“I have to tell you all... I didn't want to be the one up here today. I never thought I'd have to be. I was sure that when we reached this point that it would be him up here in front of you, addressing you on a day like this. He earned the right to be up here. He tried to make up for his past... thanks to the media's digging in the last few weeks since his death, we're all well aware of Bernard Campion's digressions. We all know what his faults were.

“But he rallied us, all humanity, to face the Eldred, even after they had tried to wipe us out with their disease. Even as they assaulted us head on. He made sure we stood up to them. And he made sure we won.

“Humanity survived. And now we reach for the stars, united by our humanity. Bernard Campion had a lot to do with getting us here with his vision for the Solar Alliance. I am proud to be a part of carrying out that vision, or carrying on where he left off, a vision that is helping to carry us into the stars.

“We are joining the greater interstellar community of races that travel among the stars not as a reborn version of the Ancient Enemy but as a friend, an ally, a trading partner, a force for good among the alien races who now seek to find their way among the stars without the ‘guidance’ of the Eldred.

“Truly, we should mourn the demise of the Eldred. But how much? Their's was a race whose time had come and gone. They held the interstellar community in a kind of stasis for a million years, much as they held on to Dolomay. Perhaps it was their time to move on.

“But I don't want to dwell on the past. We have too much to do. Too much of the future to build to keep looking back. I wish BC was here to help us build that future. Because it is thanks to him that we even have a future to build.

“I have heard the voices of those who would write him off, who say his past just caught up with him, that he died as he lived. I can only hope for their own sakes that their pasts never catch up with them!

“For my part, I will treasure the good that BC did as I try to do my part to help lead us into the future he envisioned. I thank you all for your faith in me to carry us forward.”