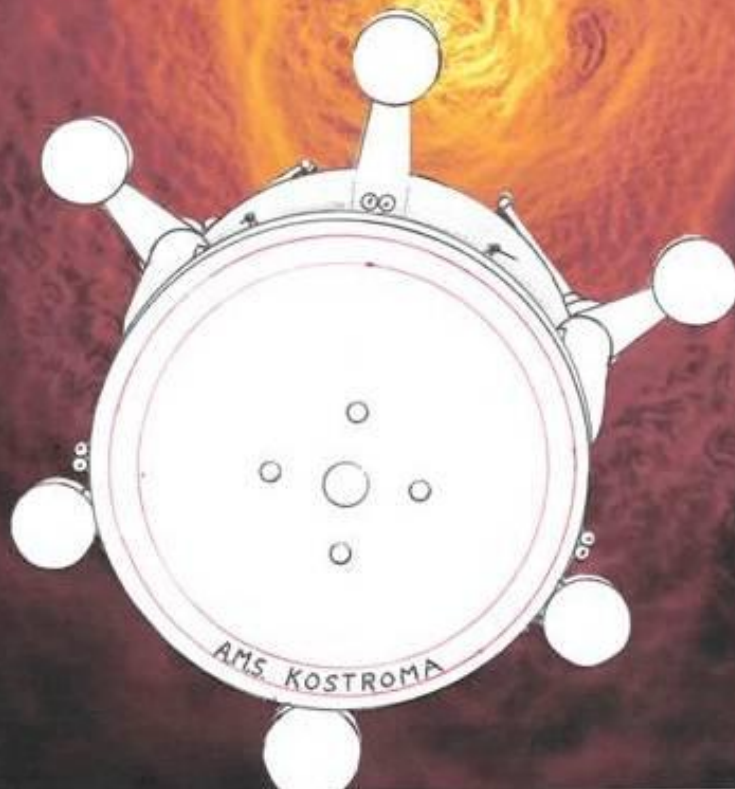


# LOST AMONG THE STARS

BY

MICHEL POULIN



# **LOST AMONG THE STARS**

A science-fiction novel

By

**Michel Poulin**

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## **WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS**

**THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.**

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

This novel is a sequel to THE ERIS PROTOCOL, which was itself a sequel to JOVIAN UPRISING – 2315, and continues the adventures in space of the giant cargo ship KOSTROMA and of its captain, Tina Forster.

### **Other novels by this author**

(Available for free at Free-Ebooks.net and at Goodreads.com, or can be requested directly to me via email to [natai@videotron.ca](mailto:natai@videotron.ca))

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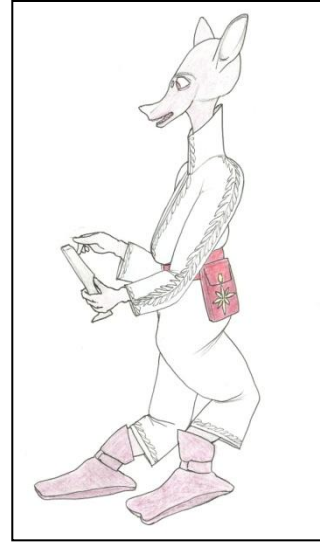
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A MARS ODYSSEY

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Northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada.



A Koorivar.

## **CHAPTER 1 – A STROKE OF GENIUS**

**08:41 (Vancouver Time)**

**Tuesday, November 18, 2319**

**University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver**

**Province of British Columbia, Canada**

**Northern Alliance, Earth**

The students and staff members of the University of British Columbia, or UBC, who were entering or exiting the building housing the university's sciences department all stopped in their tracks when a strange creature stepped out of an air car which had just landed in front of the building. Whispered remarks and exclamations went around as the being, who looked like a kangaroo with an elongated deer head, entered the faculty building. As for the air car, it took off soon afterwards and flew away.

"Was that a Koorivar?" asked a teenage female student to her friend, as the two girls watched the creature walk in.

"What else could it be, Jenny? They are the only extra-terrestrials we know of, thanks to the trip by the cargo ship KOSTROMA to the dwarf planet Eris, some two years ago."

“Oooh, I would love to be able to talk to one of them: there are so many fascinating rumors and stories about them.”

“And also some tragic ones: don’t forget that their world, Shouria, which we knew as Gliese 667Cc, was destroyed in a collision with a wandering brown dwarf<sup>1</sup> some 350 years ago. The 20,000 or so Koorivars who traveled all the way to our system and who now live in the northern part of Vancouver Island are the only known survivors of their race.”

“Still, they are fascinating creatures. I must say that, as different as they are from us, I find them...cute.”

Jenny’s friend smirked on hearing her last sentence.

“Is it the fact that they are said to be hermaphrodites, with a huge pecker on top of a vagina and breasts, that fascinates you?”

“So? A girl has the right to be curious.” replied Jenny, a defensive tone in her voice.

Inside the science department’s building, Senior Physicist Koomak, ignoring the stares and whispered remarks around him, briefly stopped what seems to be a staff member to ask him a question. His English could be said to be more than fair after a bit more than a year of studies and practice, while his voice was on a bit higher pitch than the human norm. Of course, being a scientific genius had helped him learn that alien language quite quickly.

“Excuse me, sir. Could you tell me where the auditorium is?”

“Uh, sure! It is on the next floor up, left of the main staircase. You came for the big international physics conference I suppose, mister...or miss?”

Koomak smiled at the man’s confusion, which was most understandable.

“I suppose that you could say that I am both, since we Koorivars are hermaphrodites. For simplicity’s sake, we have adopted male terms to designate ourselves to Humans. Thank you for your help.”

Koomak then walked to the main staircase in his strange gait, caused by his two ‘4’-like legs. Since he wore a set of clothes comprised of a long-sleeved blouse, a wide belt

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<sup>1</sup> Brown dwarf : A massive celestial body larger than the planet Jupiter but barely not massive enough to become a star. Some orbit known stars, while others wander through the Cosmos as solitary bodies.

with purple, trousers and soft boots, only his four-digit hands and his head, with its elongated and delicate snout and its pair of long vertical ears, were visible to onlookers. His clothes, made of a silky-like fabric, were of golden color with white and silver embroidering and were from Shouria, his unfortunate home of birth. Koomak actually jumped up from step to step, three steps at a time, like what a kangaroo would be expected to do, attracting yet more stares on his way. Of course, the fact that the gravity on Shouria had been 1.3 G, thirty percent higher than Earth's gravity, made his aging body look more energetic here than it really was. Once on the upper floor, he effectively saw a large sign standing on an easel, which advertised the international physics conference he had come to attend. Following the signs, he finally arrived at the doors of the big auditorium of the building, where an employee checked his name on his list of guests and attendees before letting him in.

Inside the auditorium, with its inclined floor going down towards a large stage, Koomak saw that over a hundred persons were already in, most of them discussing in small groups at the foot of the stage or along the successive landings along the three wide circulation alleys. Deciding to go mingle with other scientists, he went down one alley, soon stepping on the flat floor surface surrounding the foot of the stage. One man with gray hair hurried to him to shake his hand, a gesture Koomak had quickly learned after he had been awakened from his cryogenic sleep in the VEON SHOURIA, the ship that had brought him and his compatriots from Shouria.

"Doctor Koomak! It is a pleasure to see you here at this conference. I am Max Mandel, Head of the Physics Department at UBC and the organizer of this conference."

"It is a pleasure as well to meet you, Mister Mandel. Did you receive the private message I sent you back after receiving your invitation to this conference?"

From effusive, Mandel became at once most serious and he lowered his voice to answer Koomak.

"Yes I did, Doctor Koomak. As you wished so, the subject of anti-matter will not be discussed at this conference, in order to avoid any, uh, 'misunderstandings'. If anyone raises that subject, I will then intervene to deflect the conversation to other subjects."

"Thank you, Mister Mandel. It is very much appreciated." replied Koomak, reassured. The whole subject of the Koorivar anti-matter technology, once known by Humans to exist, had proven very contentious indeed. While most scientists and



industrialists had seen it as a way to tremendously improve the space-traveling capabilities and profitability of human spaceships, others, particularly ambitious or vindictive politicians and military leaders, had seen it as a way to create hugely powerful weapons which would eclipse even thermonuclear weapons in terms of destructive power. Tina Forster, the captain of the KOSTROMA, had understood the dangers of seeing that anti-matter technology falling into the wrong hands and had counseled at once the captain of the VEON SHOURIA to destroy his anti-matter drive and erase all files pertaining to it while they were still on Eris, a decision Koomak had found most wise when he had heard about it. However, the poor Tina Forster had then faced a fierce barrage of accusations and criticism from enraged scientists and politicians around the Solar System. That dispute had even cost a life and had caused a failed attempt by the power-hungry head of an industrial group to have the chief engineer of the VEON SHOURIA kidnapped, in order to extract from him the secrets of the anti-matter drive. With that point now settled, Koomak braced himself and faced the first of a small crowd of physicists eagerly waiting to discuss with him. Thankfully, nobody was rude or inconsiderate enough to ask him about anti-matter technology, with most asking questions about the internal workings of red dwarf stars, the subject Koomak was due to present during the conference.

After about ten minutes discussing with a number of physicists at the foot of the stage, Max Mandel went to the lectern set in one corner of the stage and announced the opening of the conference, asking the attendees to go take their seats. As a matter of courtesy, as the lone alien scientist present, Koomak was given a front-row seat next to the stage, where he activated his portable translator unit. He may have been fairly fluent in English by now, but the terms used by advanced physicists often were by no means common words, with an average Human who would watch the conference probably unable to comprehend half of what was said. In that, his translator unit quickly proved most useful, allowing Koomak to fully enjoy the scientific dissertations which followed.

Koomak had time to present his subject matter, answering many questions about it afterwards, then returned to his seat to listen to the next presenter, whose subject was about black holes, worm holes and the deformations they created in the fabric of Space. One sentence that presenter said suddenly made Koomak stiffen and pay even more attention, as an avalanche of ideas cascaded around his mind. When that presentation

was over, with a lunch break announced, Koomak feverishly reviewed the audio recording of the parts which had stimulated his attention. He then realized that he was definitely on something that could bring huge consequences, for both him, the Koorivars and the Humans.

### **18:35 (Vancouver Time)**

#### **Central computer compartment**

#### **Koorivar starship VEON SHOURIA**

#### **Landing pad of Koorivar colony, northern tip of Vancouver Island**

A soft, friendly voice greeted Koomak as soon as he stepped inside the heavily shielded and protected central computer compartment of the VEON SHOURIA.

“Good evening, Doctor Koomak. What may I do for you today?”

“First off, could you put this compartment in total privacy mode, Shanya. What I want to discuss with you is extremely sensitive.”

“Of course, Doctor Koomak!” replied the highly advanced artificial intelligence computer of the Koorivar starship. “Privacy mode now established.”

“Excellent! I heard something today at the international physics conference in Vancouver which triggered an idea in my head. I have reviewed that idea and would now like to pass it to you for analysis, so that you could check if it is both realistic and feasible by checking its parameters and running a simulation on it. I am now going to introduce into one of your data receptors a data chip containing the guiding lines of my idea.”

Introducing the small rectangular chip into one of Shanya’s data receptor slots, Koomak then waited patiently as the computer downloaded the content of the chip and started analyzing it. Shanya took two minutes before speaking, a very long time for such a powerful computer.

“Analysis and simulation program completed successfully, Doctor Koomak. I am happy to tell you that your idea is eminently feasible. In fact, the simulation ran more smoothly than I had expected, so I took the liberty after that to draw the complete schematics of a prototype system that I would like to call the ‘Koomak Drive’. I am now downloading those schematics onto your data chip as I speak.”

Koomak had to sit down at one of the chairs facing the computer work station, his head suddenly spinning under the impact of the powerful emotions now washing over his brain.

“You are sure that my idea will work, Shanya?”

“Completely positive, Doctor Koomak. In truth, your idea is a genuine stroke of genius: despite being a simple one, it was by no means an obvious one. May I in turn make a few suggestions to you about it, Doctor?”

“Please, go on, Shanya.” said Koomak, his attention focused to its maximum.



A space shipyard. Design from the FANDOM site.

## **CHAPTER 2 – SPACE REFIT**

**13:57 (Greenwich Universal Time)**

**Thursday, January 8, 2320**

**Command bridge of the armed merchant ship A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**On approach to the Avalon Space Yards**

**Low Earth orbit**

The tall brunette in her early thirties smiled on seeing the face of a mature man appear on one of the small viewing screens attached to the armrests of her command chair.

“Hello Gustav! I am back from my second trip to Eris and am ready for the refit we discussed a few months ago and that is to be financed by the Spacers League. I also have a few million credits that are burning my fingertips and that I am eager to spend at your shipyard on a few personal projects I have in mind.”

“Aaah, the kind of customer I like!” replied with a smile Gustav Shomberg, the owner of the Avalon Space Yards and one of the most prominent spaceship designers in

the Solar System. "So, how are the scientists in the Eris Station doing, apart from wallowing in Eris diamonds?"

"Studying and observing, as you would expect from true scientists. They are also quite busy studying each other, considering the fact that seven babies have been born at the station in the past year and a half, with more on the way. By the way, I also kept busy with Michel Koniev, what with those long space trips, and we now have a three month-old boy named Misha. You will be free to cuddle him once you come aboard."

"Oh! Congratulations! I am sure that he will make an excellent ship captain one day. About your refit, I received three weeks ago from the Spacers League the weapons systems, ordnance and materiel meant to be fitted to the KOSTROMA. From formidable, your KOSTROMA will soon become a truly mighty opponent in a space battle."

"Well, I sincerely hope that I will never need to use those weapons, ever: I hate war, even if I proved to be good at it while fighting the Terran Federation four years ago. The personal improvements I have in mind are definitely on the more pacifist side."

"I am eager to hear about them, Tina. I suppose that your crew will go for a long and well-deserved vacation period on Earth while we will work on your ship."

"You supposed right, Gustav. I may have forests, giant aquariums and farms aboard the KOSTROMA, but I still don't have a seaside beach or a mountain range."

"Can't have it all, I guess." said Shomberg while shrugging and smiling. Well, I will now leave you in peace, so that you can dock your ship inside my Dry Dock Number One. See you later!"

The video link was then cut, leaving Tina Forster free to concentrate back on guiding her 1,700 meter-long ultra-heavy cargo ship towards the waiting main dry dock of the Avalon Space Yards. At an empty mass of 2,510,000 metric tons, the KOSTROMA would definitely inflict some major damage to the space yard if not handled properly and with due caution. Thankfully, her cargo holds were presently empty, while her deuterium-tritium fuel tanks were only a quarter full, the result of the long, year-long return trip to Eris, so her ship's gravity sails, which worked in a fairly similar way to anti-gravity fields, proved more than sufficient to propel the KOSTROMA with agility and precision. Another twenty minutes and the giant cargo ship moored itself inside the largest of the yards' dry docks. The access doors of the dry dock then closed and compressed air started filling the vast volume of space inside.

“Mooring clamps engaged and secured! Communication tunnels extending into position!” announced First Pilot Frida Skarsgard, a 31 year-old woman with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes who was also a close friend of Tina.

“Shut down all engines! Secure from flying stations!” said Tina in turn before looking at her First Navigator, Dana ‘DD’ Durning, who was also her unofficial First Officer. While Dana said that ‘DD’ were simply the first letters of her name, sneaky tongues (male ones mostly) said that it alluded to the size of her chest. Whatever the meaning of ‘DD’ was, the 36 year-old still had most men salivating at her sight.

“Dana, you have the bridge. I am going to meet Mister Shomberg.”

“Understood!”

Getting up from her command chair, Tina then walked down the steps linking her platform level with the next lower one, where the access rotunda to the elevators was. At this level in the ship, just under the massive, 700 meter-diameter bow shield of the giant cargo ship, only two personnel lift cabins and two medium cargo lifts reached all the way up to the bridge complex and were reserved for the exclusive use of the crew. The other elevators contained inside the central longitudinal spine tube of the KOSTROMA stopped short of it on Deck 23, which was the highest level passengers could normally get to, unless invited up by Tina. Calling up one of the lift cabins and then riding it down to the ship’s Main Promenade Deck, on Level 9, Tina left the cabin there and started walking down one of the four radial hallways linking the deck’s central rotunda with the peripheral ring which constituted the Main Promenade proper. Passing in succession in front of the entrances of the ‘Maharaja’ Indian restaurant, the ship’s commercial daycare center, the ship’s barber shop and hair salon and the children’s playground, she arrived after some sixty meters at the junction of the hallway and of the Main Promenade. Small trees and rows of decorative bushes planted on both sides of the ten meter-wide ring promenade added a soft natural touch to what was in essence a commercial shopping venue used by crewmembers, members of their families, passengers and visitors alike. The shops, boutiques and clubs of the Main Promenade were in fact one of the main reasons why the KOSTROMA was such a popular mixed cargo and passenger ship in the Solar System. For the men and women working hard in often isolated mining operations and smaller human outposts around the Solar System, the passage of the KOSTROMA represented a rare and much appreciated occasion to entertain themselves, shop for things that were not available locally, enjoy exotic food

and generally change their minds from work. On such stops at isolated facilities and outposts, another particularity of the KOSTROMA made it even more popular, this time with the managers and logistics officers of those facilities and outposts: the extensive agro-food production facilities on which Tina had worked for years now to develop aboard her cargo ship. With a length overall of 1,740 meters and a total of 128 full decks, many of which were sub-divided into more decks, Tina had plenty of internal space available to devote to hydroponic gardens, animal farms and fish ponds, and this without hurting her cargo-carrying capacity, which presently stood at a whopping maximum of twenty million metric tons, most of it transported in space cargo pods attached to its external flanks. That initiative, apart from helping to fulfill Tina's dream of transforming her ship into what she called 'a village in space', had proved as well to be very lucrative commercially. One reason for that was that the KOSTROMA was now self-sufficient in terms of food production, with Tina not needing anymore to buy foodstuff at often inflated prices from Earth suppliers or from Spacers' moon farms. Another reason was the fact that some of the crops and foodstuff produced aboard the KOSTROMA were highly-sought of products, like spices, coffee, tea and chocolate, which Tina was then too happy to sell to other Spacers at prices markedly lower than those asked for by Earth's exporters.

Tina smiled to herself on seeing that the reception counter of the East Outer Access Gallery, which was now some fifteen meters ahead of her, was already processing visitors from the Avalon Space Yards, many of them being obviously spouses or children of the workers of the giant orbital facility. Despite being stationed in Earth orbit, a trip to Earth's surface was still fairly costly for the average worker, who normally saved his or her money for vacation trips rather than for shopping trips. There was also the fact that the KOSTROMA and Tina enjoyed a special relationship with the Avalon Space Yards, which had effected its first major refit and had also secretly helped arm it in prevision for the war that had opposed in 2315 the now defunct Earth Federation and the Spacers League, a war in which Tina and her cargo ship had played a crucial role. Her smile widened as she watched a group of excited children dragging their parents towards the nearby children's playground of the Main Promenade, which covered over 500 square meters and had a free height of ten meters, allowing it to house some fairly elaborate play modules. Other children also assaulted the adjacent 'Enceladus Swirl' ice cream parlor and candy shop, which served fresh ice cream and

chocolate produced aboard the KOSTROMA. The parents of those last children actually put up little resistance, as fresh dairy products were some of the most sought of (and expensive) items off Earth's surface, due to high transportation costs and the difficulty of keeping those products fresh during the long delivery trips across the Solar System, which could take up to four weeks aboard older cargo ships.

Tina was passing by the reception counter and through the large airlock situated at the junction with the access gallery when her wrist videophone buzzed, making her stop and raise her forearm. Seeing that it was Spirit, the artificial intelligence computer of her ship, calling her, she opened the line and spoke in her videophone.

"Yes, Spirit?"

"I am sorry to bother you, Tina, but I just got a message from Shanya, my friend on the VEON SHOURIA: a team of Koorivars just departed Vancouver Island in one of their shuttle craft and is on its way to here. They wish to speak to you in private about a most important and sensitive subject."

Two things immediately made Tina freeze for a moment. First, Shanya was the AI computer of the Koorivar ship VEON SHOURIA, which had been saved by the KOSTROMA on Eris. The notion of two super computers calling each other a 'friend' was enough to make most people pause. Second, a 'most important and sensitive subject', when it related to the Koorivars, could only concern one thing: their anti-matter drive.

"Uh, I was on my way to go see Gustav Shomberg, to discuss our refit with him. When is the Koorivar shuttle scheduled to arrive at the Avalon Space Yards?"

"It should dock with the station in about 43 minutes."

"Then, once they are on the KOSTROMA, have them wait for me in my suite on Level 24. I will join them there after speaking with Shomberg."

"Understood!"

Her mind now busy speculating about what the Koorivars wanted to tell her, Tina closed the link and resumed her walking. Once out of the 320 meter-long telescopic access gallery, Tina found that Shomberg had sent a driver with an anti-gravity scooter to wait for her at the reception airlock of the station. Thanking the driver, she took place in one of the passenger seats of the scooter and let the man drive her down the long passageways of the installation. Four minutes later, the scooter was letting her step off in front of Shomberg's private office, situated in the design department of the space



yards. Shomberg's personal secretary, a stunningly beautiful Asian young woman, greeted Tina with a respectful bow.

"Welcome to Mister Shomberg's offices, Fleet Captain Foster. Mister Shomberg is waiting for you in his office. If you will please follow me."

A bit amused at being greeted by her rank as a reservist in the small Spacers League's navy, Tina returned the woman's bow, then followed her into a large but not extravagant work office where a joyful disorder of piles of documents and dozens of miniature ship models greeted her. Despite being a true technological genius, Gustav Shomberg was a bit old-fashioned in his work habits and manners and liked to use paper documents whenever he could. Shomberg, a tall and beefy man of pure Nordic type with platinum blond hair and pale blue eyes, greeted Tina with a rather unceremonious hug and kisses on both cheeks.

"Tina, it is truly nice to see you again."

"And it is also nice for me to see you, my friend. So, you wanted to discuss with me the refit work on my ship?"

"Of course! The Spacers League is after all ready to spend some 278 million credits on that refit, so we might as well make sure that it is done right. I already received from the League all the materiel and systems for that refit, so we will be ready to start as soon as we agree on how to make it. You did say on your last call that you wanted to spend some of your own millions on personal work to be done on your ship. What did you have in mind exactly?"

"You remember my complaint about not having a seaside beach? Well, I want one! I would like you to use the free overhead space available over the northern and eastern quadrants of the forest ecosystems occupying my ship's bow section to build a false beach with a false lake of sweet water at least twenty meters wide, on Level 24. I would also like to add some extra agricultural surfaces over the rest of those two quadrants, in order to boost my cereals production. Right now, my wheat production levels are barely enough to fill my minimum needs and I still have to buy wheat grain from time to time."

"I see! With the trees in your Boreal Forest and Temperate Broadleaf Forest not growing higher than about seventy meters, we have a good twenty meters or more of free height to play with in order to build those new deck surfaces. Supporting those new decks above your forests will not be a problem: I will simply suspend them from your bow shield structure above them."

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