

OutReach *Investigations*

#1

Interstellar Intrigue

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Revised a little to reflect physics
of Ultra-Space Field Theory

Prologue

Space Station Dragon Star, a silver sphere with docking ports and sensory arrays, hung in the darkness of space.

Nine small satellites orbited the station. Each designed to cancel out electromagnetic waves emitted by the station, making it invisible to anyone or anything more than two kilometers away. The station was located in a small, dead star solar system, far from the normal trade routes and outside any League or Terran jurisdictions. It was not listed on any official maps and its survival depended on its privacy. The only way to find it was by knowing the single radio frequency emitted by the satellites, a homing beacon. The station's source of income was highly illegal scientific research.

Inside the station, near Docking Port 16, two human figures in dark blue security uniforms, complete with lowered helmet visors, moved quietly and quickly toward an air lock connecting with a small, red ship. The smaller of the two carried a bundle wrapped in soft, brown fabric. The other figure stopped, checked to see if they were being followed, and punched in the code to open the air lock. They moved quickly through the ship's entrance and to the pilot's and copilot's seats.

As they sat, the smaller one, placed the bundle gently on the floor between them, and ran her eyes over the console. Pressing two of the communications system's buttons, she connected with the station's intercom system.

"Hurry!" she said. "They've sounded a yellow alert on level 3. They must know we've escaped."

The small space ship disengaged its magnetic docking anchors and left the space station, moving immediately to maximum acceleration. It required five minutes of warm-up time before it could shift to faster-than-light speeds.

Within seconds, alarms went off in the station's two defense systems, which had been used in drills, but never in real combat. Lasers and force field shielding were in one section and missiles were in another. The two systems had been deliberately designed to be autonomous, with entirely different crews operating them. Both sections followed the instructions of a single tactical commander, who was currently racing toward his office and yelling into his wrist communicator, "Destroy that ship!"

Both sections obeyed his orders. Two missiles, one after the other, and a laser beam immediately followed the path of the ship.

They took evasive action. The ship swung to the left with the laser trailing behind it. In the process, the laser sliced into the lead missile. Shrapnel from the explosion detonated the second missile and gave them chance for escape.

With the laser beam following, they flew behind one of the cloaking satellites. The station vanished from their screens as they passed the satellite. The laser sheared the cloaking satellite in half, causing the station to suddenly reappear on their screens, and continued to follow them.

Inside the station, two more missiles were being prepared for launch. The tactical commander, now in his office and watching the developments on his holoscreen, roared his frustration, slamming his fist on the desk.

“Cease laser fire and shoot off two more missiles!” he bellowed.

The laser ceased and the ship’s pilot crossed his fingers, looking at the station through the rearview screen. He held his breath, anticipating. They had gotten this far on a fifty/fifty ratio of intelligence and luck, not having known about the laser defense system. The next few minutes would determine if their escape plan would work.

In the missile room the gunnery officer followed his orders. The first missile fired, but the second one seized and began its detonation sequence. A technician ran towards the missile, hoping there was still time. There wasn’t.

The missile had been sabotaged. It sat in its launching armature, one of twenty missiles lined up for rapid fire, machine gun style. The technician’s eyes widened and tracked down the row of deadly cylinders as he realized if this missile exploded it would set off the other nineteen. His second realization was he was too late to stop the detonation. Whoever had sabotaged the missile system knew the station’s crew had gotten into the sloppy habit of checking only the first three missiles during the daily reoccurring maintenance schedule.

Seconds later the space station exploded, a brilliant flash of red and yellow light against the background of black space and pinpoint stars.

Inside the small ship the bundle began to cry. The copilot pulled off her helmet, exposing the face of an attractive woman with curly, blonde hair. She lifted a dark-haired baby from the brown fabric and held it in her arms. The pilot glanced at the woman and child. The glance became a look. With a deliberate snap of his head, the pilot refocused on the rearview screen and the control panels. The single remaining missile was closing in fast.

The small red ship began moving in an ever-enlarging spiral as they had originally planned. The missile followed, gaining on them faster than they had expected. The small ship shifted course suddenly, heading back towards the debris of the station and passing through the empty center where the explosion had occurred.

Deep inside the missile, its magnetic brain became confused and distracted. One of its subprograms would not allow it to aim for the space station. Additional confusion was created by the lack of a cohesive space station form. The space station existed in a form the missile’s brain could not comprehend. Question marks appeared on its viewscreen and it overlaid an outline of the station where it should have been located. Rather than hitting the station, the subprogram initiated a self-destruct sequence.

The missile exploded.

The pilot pulled off his visored helmet to show a light skinned face, with a thick, blond beard and short, blond hair. A few moments later he allowed his shoulders to sag, the adrenaline rush used up and exhaustion setting in. Now he could allow himself to relax. In spite of some unexpected surprises, their plan of leading the missiles back through the debris of the station had worked. They had escaped.

The woman held their black-haired, six month old son, Christopher, her arms wrapped around him protectively. Her green eyes sparkled, and she felt an overwhelming sense of relief. They were safe. Their son would have a normal life and so would they. She placed her hand on her husband's thigh.

"We made it," she said.

He looked at her and smiled.

Edward and Laura Black were both astonished they had escaped and survived. Now, they could return home to Mars and pick up their lives. It had been nearly fifteen months since their kidnapping, and Laura's forced pregnancy. Their escape had not been as much of a risk as complacency would have been. If they had not escaped, they would have faced a scheduled execution, and their son would have had to endure any number of experimental procedures as a human guinea pig.

Edward felt no guilt about blowing up the station. It had been a "them or us" situation and, like most husbands and fathers, he would do whatever it took to protect his family. He could rationalize away any guilt with the knowledge the people on that station would never again kidnap innocent people and force them into slavery as human experiments.

Edward and Laura wanted their black-haired, dark-eyed child to grow up a free man. They had risked their lives, and his, in a desperate and successful escape attempt. Edward set their course for Mars, brought up the force field, shifted to "fatal" speeds, and slumped back into his seat to relax and appreciate the moment.

The year was 2297.

Chapter 1

The year was 2327. Chris was running up the building's front steps three by three. The green Martian sky was overhead. He was wearing a dark suit with a brown pullover. Upon entering, he turned left and headed for the lecture auditorium. The sign at the auditorium door read 'The Early 21st Century; Historical Perspectives, by Joseph L. Martin.'

Christopher Black had grown into a tall, lean man, with dark, thick hair and light brown skin. He had high cheek bones and a straight nose, slightly rounded at the end. He looked to be of pure North American Indian ancestry. He moved with a fluidity suggesting years of martial arts and gymnastics training.

Chris was looking for his date. He could smell a trace of her perfume, a light lilac-rose combination. He scanned the auditorium looking for a small, light-skinned, brown-haired woman.

This lecture was her idea. She was a science historian, and looking forward to hearing this speaker for over a month. Though Chris had some interest in history, he had much more interest in spending time with his date, Melody.

He spotted Melody near the far right entrance. She was wearing a white, shimmering summer dress that showed off her legs. The couple she was speaking with were older, maybe one hundred and thirty. They were probably from one of Jupiter's moons, judging by their bright, spotted clothing.

"It's so good to see you, Professor Winslow," Melody said excitedly, giving the woman a hug.

"It's good to see you, too, Melody. This is my husband, Robert, and since you're not one of my students anymore why don't you call me Mary."

"Alright. It's nice to meet you, Robert. Did you two come all the way to Mars for this lecture?"

"No," Robert said. "We're here for two days and then heading on to Terra. Mary is going to be teaching at the University of Michigan for a semester and we're hoping to get involved in an archeological sea dig that is being planned."

"The one off the coast of Italy?" asked Melody.

"Yes," Mary answered. "But let's not talk shop. How are you dear? Any new romantic flings in your life?"

It was an intimate question Melody wasn't prepared for, but she liked the older woman, so she answered candidly. "Well, there is. He's supposed to meet me here, but he isn't always aware of the time, so I've gotten used to the idea he might be a little late," she answered with a slight blush.

"Is he an historian, too, dear?" Mary asked.

"No, actually he's a private investigator. A completely different career field."

"Oh, how intriguing. Does he have many adventures?"

“Well, yes, a few. I have to admit that is part of the attraction.”

The lights dimmed slightly. They each glanced at the ceiling realizing they should find their seats.

“Are you available for lunch tomorrow?” asked Mary.

“Yes, where would you like to meet?”

“We’re staying at the Atrium Inn. Call me tomorrow morning and we’ll schedule it,” Mary said hurriedly as her husband brought out their tickets and began looking around for their seats.

“Alright, I will,” Melody said moving toward her own seat. She had been surprised to bump into her old professor, and wondered if there was any way she could be involved in the dig.

As the lights began to dim, Chris had nearly reached the threesome, but now they were separating and moving toward their seats. He followed her quietly, staying out of her field of vision, and sliding into the empty seat next to her. Her look of surprise as he “suddenly appeared” prompted him to give her his usual dopey, lopsided grin.

“The next time I get you a seat, it’s going to be a lot harder for you to sneak into it,” she warned him with a smile, wagging her finger. “Where were you? You’re late!”

“I’m not late. They haven’t even started yet.”

“They’re starting late. If you had been here on time, I could have introduced you to Professor Winslow.”

“Are you giving me grief?” Chris asked with mock seriousness.

“Me, give you grief? Never!” she said, rolling her eyes.

The speaker came out onto the stage and began his lecture. As he spoke, it quickly became clear to Chris he was a very good speaker and gifted with a large dose of stage presence. His voice rose and fell with a rhythmic quality which both hypnotized and stimulated.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. When thinking about the consensus reality of twenty-first century humans, please consider the different belief structures existing at the time.” He paused dramatically, catching his breath.

“Faster-than-light travel, or fatal travel, as modern slang has abbreviated it, was completely unknown and considered impossible by many of their leading physicists. Field theory technology was in its infancy, generally limited electricity and holographic projections. Physicists preferred to work with particle theory, a simplistic mathematical system. The speed of light was not considered a variable, but a speed limit which could not be exceeded.

“Antigravity thrust drives, force fields, and even something as simple as artificial gravity wells did not yet exist. There was no clear understanding of how gravity and magnetism worked. Space travel during those times was not only a difficult process, but it could lead to illness and death if you stayed in space too long. Radiation poisoning, muscle and tissue atrophy due to weightlessness, and sheer boredom from being confined in a small space ship or station for months or even years, were trials the

pioneers of space travel faced.”

As he spoke, pictures from the past appeared on a gigantic screen behind him. The first was of an astronaut floating in space, wearing an archaic space suit. The pictures changed every few minutes to emphasize a point the speaker was making.

“One of my favorite myths of the twentieth century was their belief in a theory called the ‘Big Bang’, which was popular until about 2015. The Big Bang theory proposed the universe was created from a tiny speck perhaps the size of a proton. This proton sized mass exploded creating all matter and energy in the universe we see today.

“The original basis for this theory was the observation light shifted to the red as they travelled from other galaxies to Terra. It was theorized the redshift was caused by the galaxies moving away from each other in the same way sound waves shift from a high pitch to a low pitch, as the source of the sound, or the listener, moves away. Light waves were thought to behave in much the same way as sound waves. And since space was thought to be empty and provided no interference with the light waves, it was the only theory that seemed to make sense. The question became: ‘Why were the stars moving away from each other, some at seemingly incredible speeds?’

“One popular answer, was an explosion propelling all of the galaxies away from a central point. The Big Bang theory. It was thought eventually gravity would either pull the universe back into a proton sized mass or else the universe would continue to expand, losing heat as it did so. Both scenarios spelled the end of all life. I won’t pretend to know the impact this theory had on individual perspectives, but I imagine it must have been at least a little depressing.

“Now, I should point out not all Terran cultures of the early 21st century embraced the Big Bang model. Many had religious beliefs passed down from one generation to another, and the Soviet Union, an experiment in communism, did not officially embrace the Big Bang theory. The leading country of the time, the United States of America, did, however, actively promote it, by teaching it in their schools as a fact, rather than theory.

“I find it fascinating this theory was promoted as fact by North American scientists, when there was no way to prove the validity of it thru direct observation. And it was a strongly held belief by many of their leading cosmologists. Information and observations creating doubts were scoffed at and ignored.

“The Wolf Effect, named after Emil Wolf, was developed during this time period, but was never seriously considered an alternative explanation for the redshift of light. The Wolf effect was, of course, proven to be correct after the first “fatal” expeditions to other galaxies. From our perspective with 20/20 hindsight, it seems the discovery space was not empty should have alluded to the possibility there might be other reasons for the redshift of starlight. I suspect the change to particle research and away from field and wave theory research blinded scientists of the time to other possibilities.

“21st century Leaders of physics appear to have developed an almost religious faith in the Big Bang theory. A faith keeping them from open minded objectivity. Continually finding stars and galaxies older than the proposed age of the universe, and observing galaxies on a collision course with each other, should have stirred doubts

about the theory. Only after discovering that galaxies orbit around galactic cores, which current theory suggests are over a hundred billion years old, did the Big Bang theory begin to falter. It should be noted Terra still prefers the photon model of light.

“Before we pat ourselves on the back for our current state of enlightenment, we should consider our descendants may very well wonder about some of the current beliefs and perspectives.

“I’ve given you a sense of their technical expertise and how they viewed their physical world. Now I’ll move on to an overview of the three dominant cultures of the time. And as I’m describing them, imagine how these cultures must have conflicted with each other when doing business or interacting in other ways.

“The United States was the primary world power, with Canada as their cultural ally. We’ll call them the ‘North American Culture’. As a culture, their primary ideals seemed to be a combination of honesty and efficient use of resources, while maintaining a strong sense of individual freedom and identity. Not always met, to be certain, but strived for.

“The ‘Asian Culture’ included Japan, China, and Korea. The strongest ideal influencing their behavior was the concept of harmony, essentially, to avoid creating emotional stresses, and to know your place, or status, in society. To be a hard worker was also an important ideal. Again, not always achieved, but strived for. Although each country spoke its own language, they shared the common written language of Chinese, which acted as a unifying influence.

“The Soviet Union was also a world power, and as mentioned before, was an experiment in communism. Sharing the wealth seemed to be the primary goal in the ‘Soviet Culture’. I hesitate to use the word ideal, because I do not believe this philosophy was embraced by the general population. The Soviet Culture was one of chaos and disorganization. Domination and lack of individual responsibility, though not ideals, were behavior patterns in the Soviet Culture. Patterns leading to its dismantling in the 1980’s. After this, various member countries of the Soviet Union began to embrace North America’s cultural ideals.

“The Soviet Union had created a massive welfare state philosophy, from which its people did not fully recover until approximately 2080.

“For those of you unfamiliar with the concept of a welfare culture, a simple definition would be a culture where individuals expect to be given to them the essentials of life. Work and social responsibilities do not earn the essentials, and are philosophically separated. In a welfare state the government provides the basics for survival and concepts such as quality and personal worth fade away.

“The concept of synergy played an increasingly important role in all three cultures, starting with Canada. Synergy, as an anthropological concept, originated in the 1940’s. An anthropologist named Ruth Benedict compared what she considered to be three unhealthy primitive cultures with three healthy primitive cultures. She developed the concept of ‘synergy’ as a description of broad cultural behaviors. By her definition, it meant behaviors that, when combined, produced effects greater than the sum of the

actions. A culture in which individuals shared their resources, communicated honestly, and took care of its children in a collective and loving way would produce many positive results, both materially and psychologically. The amount of energy required to produce these results were minimal.

“Compare this with the much larger amounts of energy used in a culture where individuals hoarded their material resources, saw lying as a necessity for accomplishing their goals, and attempted to weaken or eliminate their neighbors and the children of their neighbors.

“A synergistic culture supported long term thinking patterns and non-synergistic cultures supported short term thinking patterns.

“The concept of synergy had a gradual, but expanding impact over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Beginning in the North American culture, then expanding into the Soviet culture, and finally moving into the Asian culture. Synergy, as a cultural concept, also laid the groundwork for our current Martian culture.

“We’ll focus primarily on the North American Culture partly because they kept more accurate records and also because most of our own belief structures have evolved from...”

Standing outside the door of Chris’ apartment with Melody, he asked, “What is the Wolf effect?”

“If I remember correctly, the basic idea is that if you have light waves of different frequencies entering a plasma or gas cloud in space, the interference causes a frequency shift towards the red end of the spectrum. The thermal fields of the atoms absorb some of the light’s energy and some of it gets scattered. Most of it passes thru at a lower frequency.

“Oh,” Chris responded. “Well, photons don’t apply in the process. I wonder why Terra still uses them as a model?”

“Politics in the physics community,” Melody answered as the two entered his apartment, one of three New Haven Towers. As always, he admired the view from his apartment. It was on the fifth floor and overlooked New Haven and the Martian landscape. He had been on the waiting list for six years to get an apartment above the third floor, and it was well worth the wait. The view from his apartment was spectacular.

A red message light was blinking on the comm system as they entered. They were both still buzzing conversationally about the lecture, which had provided all kinds of insights into the mindset of early 21st century humans, as well as a few about modern humans. Chris was torn between answering a possible business prospect and focusing all of his attention on Melody. Curiosity and his sense of business responsibility won.

“Excuse me for a few minutes,” he said.

Melody gave him a dirty look and picked up a magazine comm-link lying on the coffee table. She began scanning for the latest fashion articles. Chris hoped she would avoid the styles coming out of the Jupiter colonies.

The viewscreen brought up the face of an attractive blonde-haired woman in her

early fifties. It was Valery Firsov, Security Director of Intergalactic Mining Enterprises. He had contracted with them before and knew she had been pleased with his work. One of Chris' business goals was to create a strong base of repeat customers. He was very pleased she had called.

The message started to play. "Hello, Chris. This is Valery Firsov of Intergalactic Mining. I have a job for you, if you're interested. We have received word through the grapevine a mole is in our mining base on Corbin III. It is our understanding the mole is planning to steal a large quantity of corbinite. We would like to have you go undercover and investigate the situation. We're prepared to pay you 40,000 credits if you find the mole within a two week period. If you are unable to find the mole, we'll pay you 3,000. Give me a call back and let me know what you think."

Chris enjoyed being a private investigator. It was a field he seemed especially well suited for. Psychological counseling he had received in his youth had sparked a keen interest in the workings of the human mind. In school he'd taken a number of psychology classes. He also had a gift for observation and accurately "reading" events based on minutiae. Chris was a natural for detective work.

Thank god for career testing! he thought.

He had very little competition as a private investigator. There were five on Terra and he was the only one on Mars. Unfortunately, there was also very little demand on Mars, so most of his work came from Terra. Computers could investigate the majority of situations quite efficiently. Occasionally, though, a human was needed to gather information and make intuitional connections computers simply could not. This was where Chris came in.

Chris paused for a moment to analyze the situation. He needed the work and the credits. But the payment arrangements were not his standard operating procedure. He normally worked for 500 credits a day, and was not thrilled with the idea of having his customers dictate his fees. It made for a bad precedent. Still, he thought, I would like to have Intergalactic Mining as a repeat customer, and I could use the credits. On the other hand, do I want them as a customer if their going to underpay me.... I'll bet they're not convinced their info is a hundred percent reliable and that's why they want to set it up this way. Time for a little direct communication.

"Computer, what time is it on Terra, Pennsylvania, Scranton City."

"Terran time, Scranton City is 3:34:20 PM," the computer responded.

"Place call to Valery Firsov, Security Director, Intergalactic Mining Enterprises. Chris stood as he waited for the call to go through. (After sitting at the lecture for an hour and a half, and another fifteen minutes in the cab home, he had no desire to sit down again for this comm call.) Melody decided this would be a good time to use the bathroom. Chris noted she took the magazine comm-link with her. He hoped she wouldn't leave it in there.

"Hello, Chris. Is this something you can fit into your schedule?"

Chris turned to find Valery's face on the vidscreen. "Scheduling isn't a problem Valery, but the payment arrangements are a concern. Normally, I charge 500 credits a

day. The idea of going to Corbin III for two weeks, with another couple of days thrown in for travel time, and only coming back with 3000 credits isn't all that appealing."

"It's 3000 credits if you don't find the mole. It's 40,000 if you do."

"How reliable is your information?" Chris asked bluntly.

Valery practically squirmed in her seat. "It's not as reliable as we would like. If it were, we would probably know who the mole is."

His hunch was right. They were working with weak information and hoping he would absorb some of the loss, if it turned out they were wrong. "I'd be happy to take the assignment, Valery, but I'm afraid I have to insist on my standard fee of 500 credits a day."

Valery looked as if she were going to cry. "Chris, this is the offer the board has approved. I don't have the authority to change it."

"I'm sorry, Valery. But I can't afford to get burned if it turns out there's no mole. As I said, I'm be happy to take the assignment, but only at 500 hundred credits a day."

Valery's face was shifting to an expression of anger and there was a hard edge to her voice. "Very well, I'll see what I can arrange. I'll call you back in a few minutes."

The screen went blank.

This is somebody's idea of money management, he thought, perhaps hers. Large corporations are always trying to find a way to save a credit. They'll happily pay 40,000 credits to catch a thief, but don't want to waste more than 3000 for a wild goose chase. Why can't they just play it straight? The odd thing is she didn't expect me to question it. When I did, she had gotten flustered which is unusual behavior for her. Stress-related behavior.

A few moments later Valery rang him back. She had recovered and was once again all smiles and friendliness.

"I have approval to pay you 500 credits a day. Can you leave tomorrow?"

"Yes. That's not a problem" Chris answered, wondering what kind of problems this might create.

"Good. Too bad there aren't more of you. Well, maybe someday. I'll have your tickets and an info package waiting for you at the ship tomorrow morning at 11 AM your time. Good hunting. Out."

Chris was relieved the negotiations were over. He didn't enjoy having to defend himself in this way. He knew he charged a fair price and provided an honest, competent service.

That whole conversation had an odd quality to it, Chris thought. The way they're rushing me out of here means they're concerned about it happening soon. I'll have to be careful about the way I do business with Valery. I don't completely trust her. And what was that crack about there not being more of me? An odd smile had crossed her face when she said it. Is it possible she knows something about my origins?

Chris noticed the bathroom door was open and the light was out. Melody must have moved to the bedroom. It was time to refocus his attention on the present. He quickly called Chester and left a message saying he would be stopping by in the

morning. He then put the issue of tomorrow's new case in an imaginary box, and put the box in storage for the night. The bedroom was lit with candles. Melody had been busy while he was on the phone. The candles provided a warm, soft light, and gave the room a scent of vanilla. She did know how to create a romantic atmosphere.

"I have to leave tomorrow on an assignment," he said as Melody, who was already nude underneath a sheer nightgown, began taking off his clothes. "Intergalactic Mining has a situation they want me to check out."

"Oh. How long will you be gone?" she asked nibbling on his ear lobe.

"Should only be about three weeks," he replied kissing her shoulder and moving them toward the bed.

"Mmmm. Well, don't plan on getting much sleep tonight."

They kissed passionately for several minutes. Chris lightly dragged his fingernails up the back of Melody's thighs continuing their ascent until his fingers reached the nape of her neck. Starting just behind her jaw line, he licked and nibbled his way around her ear.

Both were accomplished lovers and firmly believed in the Martian credo, 'An orgasm a day keeps the doctor away.' Martian culture had a very liberal philosophy regarding sex and lovemaking. Sex was regarded as a necessary release for maintaining good health.

Chris had experienced lovers since his sixteenth birthday and had even taken an extracurricular class titled 'Lovemaking 103' when he was twenty, which he had thoroughly enjoyed, in part due to the enthusiasm of his female classmates.

With the influence of sexually transmitted diseases no longer a threat, and the extension of life to approximately one hundred and eighty years, the culture of Mars had adapted. Young people started experimenting with sex at around age sixteen and continued into their late twenties. Individuals in their thirties were generally more focused on developing their careers than in finding marriage partners, though short-term monogamous relationships were common. Marriage normally happened at around age fifty and consisted of a fifteen year contract for purposes of having children. As individuals reached the age of one hundred, it was not unusual for them to have two or three lovers, often in a communal-style setting. These relationships usually lasted for the rest of their lives.

At fifty, most people were considered to be young adults, both physically and experientially. Signs of aging didn't generally start to appear until a person was around a hundred years old. Strength, vitality, and good health were maintained throughout a person's life, due to a variety of medical and biofeedback developments.

Human evolution had moved from a genetic function of adaptation and survival of the fittest, to a conscious selection of desired genetic traits, and an education including subjects such as yoga and alien trigonometry. An expanded lifespan had not been the result of natural evolution, but of a greater understanding of human genetics and biological aging mechanisms. Yoga training began at age twelve, as part of a basic Martian education. By the age of twenty, Martian youths had learned to control most of

their autonomic functions through a combination of yoga techniques and biofeedback training.

As the two of them shifted positions he could feel her breasts pressing against his chest and the heat from her loins pressing against his thigh. Her breathing was starting to speed up and so was his. Chris had learned matching his partner's breathing rate created a more intimate, trusting atmosphere, as well as adding to his own physical excitement.

She moaned as he kissed her neck. She lifted herself to give him a passionate kiss, and his hands moved down her back.

They continued to cuddle and stroke each other. Sensing the time was right, Chris rolled Melody over on her back. He thrilled at the sensation of first entry, as he always did. They were not a monogamous couple, but they enjoyed and cared for each other and both were open enough to be intimate without fear.

A few hours later they lay in each other's arms exhausted. They cuddled, relaxed and whispering to each other.

"Where will you be for three weeks, mister private investigator?"

"Corbin III, one of Intergalactic's mining colonies."

"Will it be dangerous?"

"Shouldn't be too bad. I'm going undercover to try and sniff out someone of low moral character who wants to steal some corbinite. All I should have to do is point my finger, provide the appropriate evidence, and let Intergalactic handle it from there," Chris said sleepily. He hesitated on going into the conversation with Valery Firsov.

He knew Melody enjoyed hearing about details and a small battle between "communication laziness" and "sharing info" took place in his mind.

"With that incredibly sensitive nose of yours, you shouldn't have any problems sniffing someone out," she said playfully, as she rubbed his stomach.

"I'm probably oversimplifying it. They're not even sure a theft is being planned. The original offer included a clause saying I would get paid less if I was unable to find the mole. I had to renegotiate to get paid a daily rate, regardless of whether or not they were sending me on a wild goose chase."

"I can't believe they tried to rip you off. They had better be paying you a fair amount!"

"They are," Chris assured her. "I have to get together with Chester tomorrow morning before I leave. I'm fading fast, Sweetie. Good night," he said kissing her on the forehead.

Melody lay with her head resting on his chest. She felt content and loved. She was intrigued with Chris. He wasn't your typical Martian male. He wasn't an engineer, or a physicist, or a language specialist. He was an adventurer. He wanted to go out and explore the universe. Yes, he was intriguing, and a little odd.

Chapter 2

A reddish, squirrel-like creature was moving across the desert sand. Waves of heat radiating from the blue sand distorted its outline. One of its six legs, center-right, was wounded and oozing a purplish-colored blood. It looked around for predators and shade. If it could find shelter from the blue double suns, it would survive.

If a predator didn't get it first. At that moment it was attacked.

A spider, half a meter in diameter, leapt onto the sand squirrel's back. The spider was coated in a permanent layer of light blue sand, providing it with perfect camouflage. Its two front legs had evolved a mechanism for spraying powerful digestive acids, which it used to spray in the face of its prey. It held on tight as the sand squirrel bucked in pain and terror. Finally the spider's meal shuddered one last time and died, its head a sticky goo of partially digested protein.

The spider moved off its prey and circled around to the head. Suddenly, a narrow red laser beam sliced the spider in half. Its digestive fluids spilled over the sand and foamed on contact. A moment later, another laser beam sliced off the mass of protein goo and acid that had been the sand squirrel's head. A gloved hand grabbed it by the tail and carried it away, purple blood dripping to the sand.

Two heavy feminine hands held a bone stripped of flesh, then casually tossed it into a small pile of bones. The owner of the hands was an average looking woman with a stocky build and long, black hair. She was clean and neat in appearance and had soft white skin unused to the harsh sunlight on this planet. Sitting in a camouflage tent as she waited, she amused herself by thinking of what she would be able to buy and where she would travel to when this job was done. A two year vacation sounded awfully good.

Her thoughts drifted to what she had done the night before. The screams of dying women and men, the snapping sound of bones breaking. They, too, had paid the price of her upcoming wealth. Pangs of guilt began to surface.

Her thoughts shifted. Those people mean nothing to me. Human life means nothing to me. I hate them for being the small, pathetic people they were. They had to be eliminated. It was the only way to steal the corbinite. Their deaths were nothing more than their own bad luck. The thoughts were foreign to her, and though they were helpful as rationalizations to explain away any responsibility, they were not her own and felt uncomfortable.

As she pulled herself back from the ego and anger in those thoughts, she heard a low mechanical humming noise in the background and knew her ride had arrived. Stepping through the tent flap, she raised her hand to her brow in an effort to block the bright blue light from the double suns. The interstellar pickup she spotted matched the description she had been given. She began tearing off the camouflage from the truck she had stolen to haul the pressurized containers of corbinite.

The pickup landed and its driver got out. Loading hatches and large armatures unfolded in the background as he walked toward the campsite.

“Hello, Martha,” he said as he approached the woman. “How did it go?”

Martha didn’t respond to his greeting, continuing to remove the camouflage.

Frank was a small, emaciated man, whose dry, blotchy, slightly greenish skin suggested an addiction to paintel, an hallucinogenic narcotic. He was nervous and tense, and wishing he had some paintel to calm himself down with. He was also aware his boss would have him killed if he was caught using paintel while on an assignment. His beady eyes darted back and forth nervously.

Frank thought about his craving for paintel, as he often did. Only when it was flowing through his system did he feel truly alive. Life without paintel was empty and without pleasure. When he was high on paintel he confined himself to what he called his “pleasure room.” It was a safe place.

The walls of his pleasure room could be programmed to create any environment he desired, ranging from a desert island, with lazy lapping waves against the shore, to the inside of the great Caprian cathedral, Esosan, with its awe inspiring walls, ceilings, and art. If it were possible, he would have spent the rest of his life in his room, high on paintel. His only regret was the paintel was destroying his liver and his kidneys.

Paintel was a powerful drug. Regular use of it, two or three times a week, would kill a human being within a year. The doctor was going to regenerate his liver and kidneys for him as partial payment for his help in delivering the corbinite. Frank didn’t really trust the doctor.

“Hello, Frank. You’re late,” Martha finally replied, turning to face him.

“Yeah,” he said with feigned casualness and began climbing into the truck to position it correctly for the armatures to transfer the corbinite aboard. “They surprised me with two new security satellites. I had to take them out before they began firing at me.”

It was Martha’s turn for surprise. In her accounting position she should have seen vouchers for two new satellites. This is not a good time for questions and conversation, she thought. “Let’s start loading up.”

As they loaded, Frank wondered about Martha. She didn’t look like the kind of person who would be involved in this sort of operation. Yet, every once in a while her face and body posture would shift, and she would suddenly take on the characteristics of someone cold and hard. Initially he had thought of having sex with her on the trip back, perhaps forcing her if necessary, but as he watched her during the loading procedure, he had changed his mind.

She frightened him. She was much too strong for her stocky little frame and during those shifts of hers, she looked completely evil. Better just to leave her alone, accomplish the mission, and get his payment.

The two moved quickly and efficiently, as experienced cargo haulers would. Frank actually was experienced with cargo transfers. Martha’s experience came from transferred memories. Within half an hour, the three tons of corbinite were transferred

from the truck to the shuttle pickup. Martha decided to leave the tent and any remaining equipment in an effort to get back on schedule.

The last of the corbinite was loaded and the armatures folded back into the pickup.

Frank sealed the pickup's hatches and gave the navigational computer its instructions. The antigrav boosters lifted the pickup, and the thrusters quickly pushed it into the upper atmosphere. As they were about to leave the planet's mesosphere another satellite appeared, causing alarms to sound.

"Damn," said Frank. "We'll have to try to outrun it."

"Can we activate the force field?"

"We're still within the planet's primary gravmagnetic field. We'd short out the system," Frank answered. "See if you can get a bead on it with a missile. I'll take evasive maneuvers."

Martha worked swiftly at the control panels. "Got it."

She saw a flash of light from Frank's direction, just as she launched the missile. Looking over, Martha saw Frank twitching and shaking. There was a hole where his left eye used to be. You could see right through it to the wall beyond. The satellite had gotten off a laser shot before Martha had fired the missile. It had gone right through Frank's head cauterizing the tissue and blood flow as it went.

The explosion on the viewscreen, of what had been the satellite, distracted her momentarily. She recovered her focus and pushed Frank out of his seat, taking over the controls. As they left the planet's primary gravmagnetic field she brought the force field on line and accelerated, shifting to fatal speeds.

The pickup traveled without problems for almost ten minutes at standard fatal speed and then gave a lurch and dropped to less than two hundred kilometers an hour.

The laser must have done some serious damage, Martha thought. I'm a couple of light years away from Corbin III. Safe for the moment.

She looked at Frank. He had stopped twitching and she assumed he was dead. An odd desire to giggle came over her, so strong a desire she gave in to it.

Let's make some soup, a foreign thought suggested.

"No!" she told herself firmly and, using the pickup's computer, began to investigate the damage.

The satellite had fired multiple laser shots simultaneously. The ship hull's various breaches had sealed with a thin membrane, designed for emergencies like this. Nanites were making permanent hull repairs. Diagnostic sensors showed damage to one of the plasma feeds for the antigrav thrusters. The ship's computer had automatically reduced its speed as soon as it had sensed problems.

With the exceptions of Frank and the damage to the antigrav feeds, she had been quite lucky and sustained minimal damage.

Why didn't I know about those new satellites? she wondered.

Because they knew about you. You've been betrayed, the foreign thought pattern cautioned her.

Martha shook her head trying to clear it of the thoughts not her own. She had been

warned that the more she used the memories that had been transferred into her brain, the more likely personality bleed over would take place. She had also been cautioned stressful situations would make the memories more intense and increase the bleed over.

Staring at the viewscreen, Martha thought about what had been done to her. The steps taken to ensure she could steal three tons of corbinite. The cells of her muscles had been permanently altered giving her the strength of two men and increasing her reaction time by 50 percent. Medications had made her bone structure denser. Her body felt quite different, as did her mind, exaggerating the concern she had lost her identity. Not exactly what she had in mind at the beginning of her vacation three months ago.

On the first day of her two week vacation from Intergalactic Mining, she had met an attractive man and had enthusiastically allowed him to seduce her. She remembered how he had told her of a place more beautiful and romantic than anything she had ever experienced and convinced her to go with him to “paradise”, as he referred to it.

Martha was sunning herself by the pool at the Harrison Hotel which was located inside the Devoe Satellite orbiting Earth. She was looking forward to the view seen at night. She had been told by the desk clerk both the Earth and a full moon would be in the satellites night sky at the time and she didn't want to miss it.

A tall, muscular man had settled into the recliner next hers and she gave him a quick once over from behind her sunglasses. He's quite a hunk, she thought as she felt a warmth in her loins. He may not have any interest in me, but I can dream.

Martha was startled when he spoke to her.

“Have you been at the hotel long?” he asked.

“No, I just arrived this morning.”

“Really. So did I. I've been looking forward to this vacation for a long time. The night view is supposed to be spectacular.”

He spoke with an accent Martha couldn't place, but found very attractive. “Yes,” she said. “Tonight, both the Earth and the full moon are supposed to be in the sky. At about 11:00 PM. I'm on vacation, too. I'm going to be here for the next ten days.”

“Really! What a coincidence. I'm here for ten days also. My name is Richard,” he introduced himself, looking into her eyes.

“My name is Martha.”

There was silence for a few moments. Martha was nervous. She wasn't experienced at picking up men and she certainly didn't want to start off her vacation with a rejection. But she knew if she didn't try she would never get laid.

And then he spoke. “Forgive me for being so forward, but if you're available, would you like to have dinner with me this evening?”

Martha paused, and found herself about to say ‘no’ out of fear and shyness. “Yes, I'd enjoy having dinner with you,” she finally answered.

They talked all afternoon. He listened to her and asked questions about her work and her friends. Richard told her about himself. He was an engineer returning to Earth, after having been on Pluto for the last six months. He told her he didn't want to talk

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