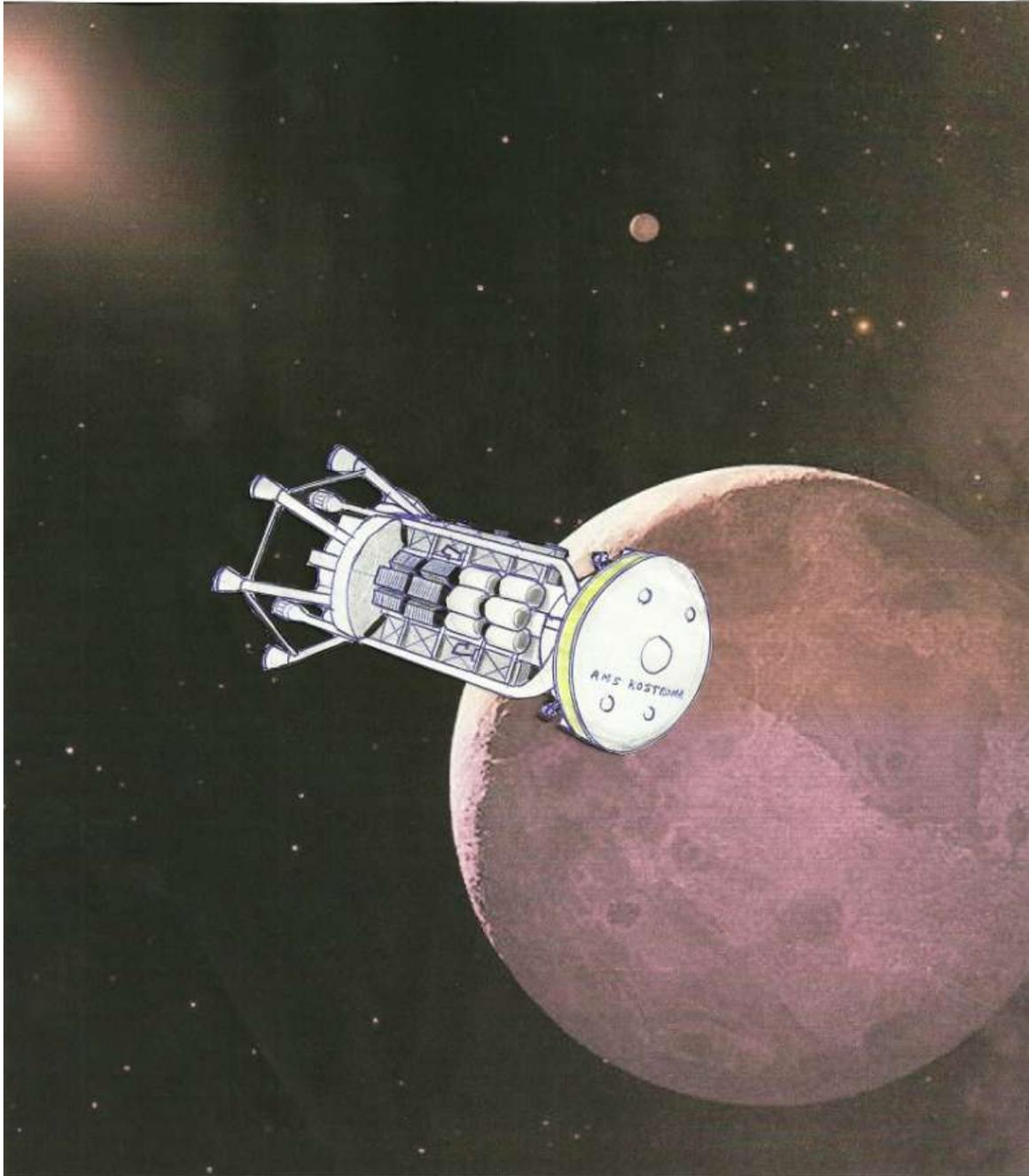


# THE ERIS PROTOCOL

By Michel Poulin



# **THE ERIS PROTOCOL**

**SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL**

**By Michel Poulin**

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## **WARNING TO READERS**

**THIS NOVEL CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF SCENES OF VIOLENCE, SEXUALITY AND CRUDE LANGUAGE AND IS NOT MEANT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN. THIS IS ALSO A WORK OF PURE FICTION AND ANY APPARENT SIMILARITIES WITH PERSONS OR EVENTS OF THE PRESENT ARE FORTUITOUS.**

### **FOREWORD**

THIS NOVEL IS A SEQUEL TO THE NOVEL 'JOVIAN UPRISING – 2315'. THE AUTHOR, WHEN WRITING THIS NOVEL IN 2014, USED THE KNOWN INFORMATION AVAILABLE THEN ON THE MAKEUP OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM. HOWEVER, THE RAPID RATE OF ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES MAY MAKE SOME DATA ON PLANETS, MOONS AND ASTEROIDS AS USED IN THIS NOVEL LOOK OUTDATED. FOR THIS, THE AUTHOR ASKS FOR THE INDULGENCE OF THE READERS.

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## **CHAPTER 1 – A VILLAGE IN SPACE**

**14:57 (Universal Time)**

**Thursday, June 7, 2317**

**Bridge of the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Low Mars orbit**

**Solar System**

Tina Forster watched quietly the image of Mars' surface on the giant viewing screens of her ship's bridge as the A.M.S. KOSTROMA flew in low orbit around the red planet. Barely eighteen months ago she had led her giant cargo ship, hastily converted for war, in a series of space battles against Terran forces which had seized Mars after it had rebelled against the heavy rule of the Terran Federation. Those battles had proven to be nearly one-sided massacres, with the powerful laser battery and thick anti-radiation bow shield of the KOSTROMA proving too much for the much smaller, relatively lightly armed ships of the Terran Customs Navy. A total of 36 Terran cruisers, frigates and troopships had been destroyed by the KOSTROMA in three separate battles around Mars, with over 32,000 Terran crewmembers and embarked Internal Security Forces troopers killed in the process. In return for such an overwhelming victory, the KOSTROMA, masterfully led in battle by Tina, had suffered only minor damage to its thick, 700 meter-diameter bow shield, and no casualties. The only two casualties suffered by the crew of the cargo ship had come later, during the ground fighting to retake Mars' capital, Ares City, from occupying ISF troops. Tina and her cargo ship, now rated as an armed merchant ship, had destroyed more Terran ships around the Jovian moon of Callisto while fighting to defend the newly formed Spacers League against a Terran task force. Tina, who hated war but had been forced by Terran excesses to fight for the Spacers League, had taken no joy in all that killing. Her worst time in the war had however come as victory was already nearly assured, when an ISF secret facility near the city of Lagos, in Nigeria, had to be destroyed by an orbital strike. That facility had been producing a deadly chemical agent meant to exterminate Spacers in their space cities, so there had been no choice but to destroy it. However, the underground production center had necessitated the use of a devastating kinetic energy weapon, in

essence a rocket-propelled asteroid. The strike from the space battle station MJOLNIR had utterly destroyed the facility, but it had also destroyed the nearby city of Lagos, killing over 26 million persons in the process. That mass killing had impacted heavily on Tina's psyche and she had needed weeks to go over her guilt and subsequent depression. She was now over her mental distress but she fervently hoped that she would never have to kill again.

"Tina, the shuttle with the Martian delegation is approaching. It will enter our main hangar in about six minutes. It will be in Craft Hangar Number 3."

The warning from Patricia O'Neil, the redhead beauty presently manning the bridge sensors station, took Tina out of her thoughts and made her nod her head.

"Very well! I will go down now to the Hangar Deck. Tell Natalia, Piotr and Winnie to join me there."

"Will do!"

Turning around, Tina walked to the bank of elevator shafts situated under the upper central platform of the multi-layered bridge complex, itself situated in the center of a huge sphere whose internal surface was covered by a 3D holographic display screen. Calling up one of the cabins, she had only to wait a few seconds before the doors of the shaft opened and she could step inside a cabin. She next pressed the button for Level 7, the Hangar Deck, situated sixteen levels and 117 meters below. As far down as that would sound to a visitor, this was however a short trip compared to one down the full length of the KOSTROMA, which measured 1,750 meters from its bow to the undersurface of the giant landing legs of the cargo ship. Tina was rightly proud of her ship, which was presently the sixth largest spaceship in existence and also the fastest cargo ship in the Solar System, with a maximum cargo capacity of twenty million metric tons, most of it inside detachable cargo modules hooked to its flanks.

Tina walked out of the cabin as soon as it stopped on Level 7 and, crossing the rotunda surrounding the central spine shaft of the ship, went through a crew locker room and a craft maintenance workshop before arriving at the airlock door of the Craft Hangar Number 3. She met only two crewmembers on her way from the bridge, but saw over twenty work robots of various types, including cleaning robots, on that same trip. Despite its gargantuan size, the KOSTROMA had a crew of only 280 men and women, but also had an army of over 1,800 robots of various designs that took care of the

routine maintenance and cleaning tasks, plus 400 robots specialized in firefighting and emergency repairs. All those robots could in turn receive directives or pertinent data from the ship's master computer, 'Spirit', a super computer possessing a high degree of artificial intelligence. If things went really bad and the crew became incapacitated, Spirit could as a last resort take control of the ship and do what was needed to preserve the crew and the ship. It was however incapable, through hardwired programming, of refusing a legitimate order from one of the ship's officers, thus could not lead some sort of hypothetical robotic mutiny against the human crew.

Tina found only two ship technicians at the airlock entrance to Craft Hangar Number 3, one of them at the controls of the pressurization system of the hangar and airlock complex. A quick look at the viewing screen showing the inside of Craft Airlock Number 2, adjacent to Hangar Number 3, told her that the Martian shuttle was just entering the big airlock. Once the shuttle was inside, the armored outer doors of the airlock shut close, allowing the technician to send air inside the airlock to pressurize it. Once the pressure was equalized between the airlock and the hangar, an armored door opened to let the shuttle slowly float inside the hangar. By the time that the process was completed and the shuttle was safely inside the pressurized hangar, Natalia Vasilyeva, Piotr Romanski and Winnie Zambela had joined Tina at the entrance to the hangar. While Natalia was the ship's hostess, responsible to greet and help visitors and passengers to the ship, Piotr was both the ship's purser and its commercial and financial agent. As the one responsible for finding paying customers and cargo for the ship, Piotr was a key member of the crew and had proved invaluable to Tina. As for Winnie, she was the assistant purser and was also in charge of the crew mess and other crew facilities. As such, she had a big role in keeping high the morale of the crew during long space runs. All of them wore like Tina informal Spacers' work coveralls, plus ball caps adorned with the crest of the KOSTROMA. The three women and one man walked inside the craft hangar once the technician had declared it pressurized and secure, going to the landed shuttle. The rear access ramp of the shuttle was already coming down as the group approached it. Tina hesitated, then stopped, on recognizing the second person to step out of the shuttle.

"Governor Watts? But, we were expecting a simple delegation from the Mars Food Administration and from the Commerce Board."

Charles Watts, a man of medium height and built in his sixties who sported graying black hair, smiled while admiring quickly Tina, a tall brunette of thirty with gray eyes, who could easily be described as more than pretty.

“Well, one of my responsibilities is to oversee the members of my administration and evaluate their work, so I decided to impose myself on them today. It also gave me a good excuse to meet you again, Captain Forster, or should I say Fleet Captain Forster?”

“Just Tina will do, Governor.” Replied Tina while exchanging a handshake with Watts.

“In that case, simply call me Charles, Tina.”

The other Martian delegates exchanged looks on hearing that, something not lost on Watts, who grinned to Tina.

“Don’t worry about our friendship affecting the opinions and judgment of my delegates when time will come to test the foodstuff you are offering for sale. Since I will also play the taster, I will have no interest in pushing them into buying less than good quality products. Besides, from what I have seen of you and your ship during the war against the Terran Federation, you are not the kind to swindle your customers.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence...Charles. I believe that you already know Natalia Vasilyeva, Piotr Romanski and Winnie Zambela?”

“I sure do, Tina.” Said Watts, shaking hands with the three others before turning to present the fourteen members of his delegation, functionaries and experts from both the Mars Food Administration and the Mars Commerce Board, all of them carrying large briefcases and suitcases. After the exchange of greetings and handshakes, Tina led the group out of the hangar and into the maintenance workshop, heading for the central shaft elevator banks.

“We will now go up to the Main Cafeteria Deck, on Level 10, where a display of our food products available for sale has been set up.”

“Will we be able also to visit your various food production facilities, Captain Forster?” Asked a male delegate of the Mars Food Administration. Tina nodded her head at that, having expected that request.

“You will have access to all our facilities during your stay, mister, so that you can assess the level of hygiene of our facilities. I hope that you have more than a few hours available for this visit, though: my ship is huge by any standards.”

“We can stay overnight if need be, Tina.” Replied Charles Watts, preempting any objection from his functionaries to such an overnight stay. In truth, he had fallen in

love with this ship while traveling on it during the last war. It represented what he believed to be the ideal goal of Spacers: to live in space while keeping alive the past beauty of Earth, a now polluted, overpopulated and depleted planet. The building of decks especially made to accommodate large forests and plantations aboard the ship had particularly inflamed his imagination. He still relished the souvenirs of his days spent in one of the suites that gave a direct view to a complete Boreal forest covering 7.5 hectares. And there had been four such forests on the Bow Gravity Sail Deck. In comparison, Mars had only a handful of underground parks with trees available to its citizens, none as big as the four forests on the KOSTROMA.

Going up forty meters by elevator, the group then stepped in the central rotunda of the Main Cafeteria Deck, with Tina leading the Martian delegation into a long corridor running outward from the central axis of the ship. That corridor turned out to lead to a large dining lounge about 45 meters long and twenty meters wide and with a ten meter high ceiling. Apart from four waiting cooks and waitresses, the dining lounge was deserted at this hour. The Martian delegates admired for a moment the decoration of the room, which included potted plants, aquariums with fish and large holographic screens made to look like windows and replicating Earth natural vistas. Tina then gave the lead to Natalia Vasilyeva, who stepped forward to address the Martians.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are now inside our business class dining lounge, which has a capacity of 240 seated customers. If you will leave your luggage in this corner, we will then go see our products display.”

Obeying the tall blonde, the delegates left their suitcases in the designated corner, but took out of their briefcases electronic tablets and plastic sample bags before following Natalia towards the service counter, where the cooks and waitresses were now busy taking out of refrigerators or shelves an assortment of plastic containers and bottles, lining them up on the counter, along with plates, utensils and glasses. The sheer variety of the products seemed to impress at once the Martian delegates.

“My god!” Exclaimed an expert from the Mars Food Administration. “Are all these items really produced on this ship?”

“Absolutely, mister!” Answered Natalia. “We have produced during the course of last year 82 different main types of vegetables, fruits and spices, twenty different types of fish and shellfish, meat from five different main animal species and a total of 2.2 million liters of fresh milk and other dairy products. We had ample food for our crew and

passengers and, even after keeping a comfortable reserve of processed foodstuff, were left with sizeable surplus available for sale. As an example of our surplus, we had 280 metric tons of wheat, 145 metric tons of corn grain and 375 metric tons of rice available for sale after one year of full production. Some of those surplus have been sold already in the Jovian System and the Asteroid Belt, but there is still plenty available if the Mars Food Administration will certify their quality level and allow their sale to Mars customers. We are also growing yet more fresh products as I speak. I propose to let you first take for analysis samples of each of our products, then we will make you taste a few of our more refined foodstuff.”

“That sounds like a good program, Miss Vasilyeva.” Said Charles Watts before looking at a bearded man in his fifties. “Mister Bernardi, you may have your food inspectors start collecting samples.”

“Yes, Mister Governor!” Replied Bernardi before giving a few orders to his four food inspectors, who then started taking samples, putting them in their labeled plastic bags. As they were working, the delegates from the Mars Commerce Board and Charles Watts started reviewing with interest the long line of labeled products on the counter. One delegate soon got quite excited on examining the collection of spices available for sale, which were tagged with their proposed sale prices.

“You produce curry spice and chili peppers on this ship? And at such low prices?”

“We in fact produce seventeen different types of spices on the KOSTROMA, along with cocoa, tea, coffee, sugar and vegetable oils, mister. In view of the outrageous prices Earth suppliers are asking for those kind of products, we decided to boost their production, in order to provide spices, tea, coffee, chocolate and vegetable oils at reasonable prices to other Spacers.”

“Reasonable prices? But this bottle of powdered curry, if of truly good quality, is listed at less than a fifth of what we in Mars have to pay for the same quantity of curry from Earth, which was up to now our sole supplier of curry.”

Natalia smiled at the remark from the Martian delegate.

“Having eaten many times the various curry dishes served by our cooks, I can assure you that our variety of curry spices is as good or better than anything the Earth sells, mister. If you want to taste a bit of our various curry grades, you are welcome to it. Jorge, can you take out a few small spoons, so that our guests can taste our spices?”

“Right away, Natalia.” Replied one of the cooks, who then hurried to put on the counter near the spices an assortment of small spoons, small plates and napkins, plus glasses full of water. The delegate from the Commerce Board looked with confusion at the glasses of water.

“Uh, why the water, mister?”

Jorge Batista smiled to him while answering with good humor.

“Well, wait until you taste our hot variety of curry spice, then you will get your answer, mister.”

“Excellent!” Said Charles Watts. “I love spicy food! Let’s start tasting, ladies and gentlemen.”

It didn’t take long before the assembled Martians declared that they liked what they tasted, with the man from the Commerce Board eyeing with glee the bottle of hot curry on display.

“Damn! I must get this for our consumers and restaurant owners. And how much of these spices do you have available for sale, Miss Vasilyeva?”

Natalia consulted her electronic tablet before answering with a proud smile.

“Even after selling a good portion of our products in the Jovian System, we still have 1,200 kilos of curry powder available for sale, including 450 kilos of the hot variant. We are of course talking about net weights. We also have at least a few hundred kilos left of each of our other spices.”

The Martians jaws collectively fell to the floor at that announcement, with the Commerce Board delegate looking at Natalia with bulging eyes.

“But, that would be enough for the needs of most of Ares City for a year. Our restaurant owners will kill to get those spices at your listed prices.”

“We always could rise our prices if you find them too low, mister.” Replied Tina Forster, grinning with amusement. That prompted a quick response from Charles Watts while he eyed crossly the Commerce Board man.

“No need for that, Tina. Your prices are quite satisfactory. You may continue your presentation, Miss Vasilyeva.”

“Thank you, Mister Governor. Next, we have our fresh fruits and their various derivative products, like juices, jams and bottled baby food.”

The next big surprise for the Martian delegates was when they finally arrived at the collection of bottled alcoholic beverages on display. A female delegate opened her eyes wide with delight after sipping a bit of strawberry liquor, one of the fourteen types of alcohol displayed.

"Hmm, I love this! We do produce some fresh strawberries on Mars, but we have nothing like this liquor, or your cream of green mint."

"You can thank Miss Petra Manzini, the manager of our APEROSSIMO lounge-bar, for those liquors, miss." Replied Natalia. "She was the one who proposed to produce liquors out of our surplus fruits and mint. She also concocted their recipes and supervised their production, along with those of our wines and beers."

"Heck, I don't care what Mister Bernardi or his experts will say about this. I want these liquors for our consumers! Do you have much left of that strawberry liquor and of that green cream of mint?"

"Well, most of our strawberry production is sold as either fresh fruits, jam or juice, but we still have over 16,000 bottles of strawberry liquor and 1,840 bottles of green cream of mint left in our stocks available for sale after onboard consumption. We only recently started production of those liquors and you would be our first customers for them."

The female delegate only needed one look at her superior and at Charles Watts before nodding to Natalia.

"Then, we will be most happy to acquire your available stock of all those liquors, miss."

Piotr Romanski, who was most satisfied up to date with how the presentation was going, used that opportunity to start distributing data chips to the delegates.

"You will find on the data chip I am giving to each of you a list of what we produce, what is available for sale and their prices. It will help us in discussing sales arrangements later on."

The delegates quickly downloaded that data on their tablets and started reviewing it. The more they saw, the more they became impressed, with the head of the Commerce Board delegation looking with admiration at Tina Forster.

"You decidedly have everything on this ship to provide for a small town, Captain Forster."

Tina nodded her head soberly in response, becoming most serious.

“We indeed have, Mister Gardner. This ship is actually a lot more to me than just a giant cargo ship, or a battleship: it is to me primarily a space community, a human village in space able to sustain itself and to prosper. It is home for me and my crew and I hope to see one day all Spacers able to live like we do, free to roam the planets and moons of the Solar System.”

**16:49 (India Time)**

**Friday, June 15, 2317**

**Small apartment, city of Sehore**

**West of Bhopal, State of Madhya Pradesh**

**India, Southern Federation**

“You see, Priya: there are many recipes for curry spice, but few of them are really worthy of the name. Everything is in having the right mix and proportions of ingredients. My curry sells well because I make my own curry according to a recipe long held by my family. With your studies in agronomy and hydroponics, you should know already how even a small modification to a spice mix can dramatically alter the final taste of that spice.”

“I do, Mother.” Answered patiently the nineteen year-old teenage girl watching her mother prepare one of the home-cooked recipes that she then sold daily at the town market in order to supplement the meager family budget. Priya Mistry counted herself lucky to have the parents she had: despite their low revenues, they had sacrificed much already to ensure that she could get a good education and thus have a chance at having a better life. They had also treated her on the same footing as her two brothers, contrary to still too many families in India who treated girls and women as second class persons. The last two years, with the chaos caused by the war between the forces of Marshal Khan and President Zembelo on one side and the Northern Alliance and their Spacers allies on the other side, had been hard enough without having to deal with sexual discrimination. Now that the Northern Alliance had won that war thanks to the Spacers, what remained of the Khan and Zembelo regime had formed the Southern Federation, of which India was a part of. Her thoughts were then interrupted by the noise of the door of their cramped apartment being unlocked and opened. Turning her head, like her mother, Priya smiled on seeing that it was her father coming back home from work. Her

smile then faded on seeing the despondent expression on her father's face. Her mother also saw that and she hurried to her husband, forgetting about her curry recipe.

"Rajeev, you are back early from work. Is something wrong?"

Rajeev, a thin man in his mid forties, nodded his head slowly before sitting down in the sofa of their small lounge, then put his head into his hands, obviously distraught.

"I...I lost my job at the food warehouse. In fact, all the ones working at the warehouse lost their jobs: the company went bankrupt and the plant manager is said to have fled with the company funds."

Priya's heart skipped a beat then as her father started crying quietly, with his wife trying to console him as best she could. Jobs were hard to come by in these difficult times and to get one often necessitated paying substantial bribes to local officials. Her family was too poor to afford such bribes, which meant that her father would probably be jobless for quite a while, if not for months and years. Unfortunately, the citizens of the Southern Federation didn't enjoy such niceties as social welfare and unemployment insurance, contrary to the much wealthier citizens of the Northern Alliance. Just finding money to pay for their rent and buy a minimum of food would be hard enough. Priya slowly sat down on a chair as she realized that she would not be able to finish her studies now: the money set aside by her father to pay for her next college semester will now be sorely needed by her family to simply survive the next few weeks and months. Seeing all her dreams evaporate in an instant, Priya got up from her chair and went to her tiny bedroom, dazed and in shock, to sit on her bed. She then started to cry quietly. She could not fault her father, who had done everything to support his family as best he could. Neither could she either think only about her now doomed studies. Her whole family was now in real danger of soon ending in the street, homeless and without food. At best, they would have to join the ranks of the other unfortunate families who depended on charities and food banks, but those were already overtaxed, thanks to the chronic mismanagement and corruption of the Southern Federation's administration. At worst, the family would become street beggars in a region already stricken hard by poverty.

As she cried out her despair and bitterness, Priya understood that she would have to help her family by finding work herself. Thankfully, she already had completed two years in agronomy and hydroponics techniques, a formation that should make her interesting to at least a few employers. If she didn't find anything locally, then she would

not hesitate to look beyond India. Thinking of it, she decided to start looking both locally and internationally at once for a job: the prospects in India itself had been bad for months now and limiting her search could make her waste precious time. Taking out of a locked drawer her electronic tablet, Priya started typing an employment résumé, intent on sending it around afterwards on the WorldNet. Later, she was going to tell her parents about her intentions. They were certainly going to understand and approve. Even if they didn't, she was already technically an adult and could take decisions by herself.

**10:19 (India Time)**

**Saturday, June 16, 2317**

**The Mistrys' apartment, Sehore**

**Madhya Pradesh, India**

Priya opened her tablet to check on her job search, not expecting much: there had not been a single job offer online yesterday in her specialty field in the entire State of Madhya Pradesh, when she had started circulating her employment request. Her last check earlier this morning had shown no results yet. However, that had not surprised her: the contrary would have, as jobs were rare and postulants were many. She thus nearly jumped off her bed when she saw that a text message had been left in her electronic mail box, clearly connected to her job search. Her heart beating faster now, she read quickly the message and was not a little surprised to see that it had been sent by a space shipping agency office based on an orbital station around Earth. The implications of that made her pause for a moment. Technically, the Southern Federation was hostile to anything connected with the Spacers. To go work for Spacers could possibly attract unhealthy government attention on her family. She however knew that this could well be the best hope for her to find a decent paying job that would help support her family, thus she read carefully the message. Her heart accelerated further when she saw that it said that her application had been deemed promising and that she was being offered an online job interview for a position as an apprentice hydroponics technician aboard a spaceship. Priya quickly sent an affirmative response to the online interview offer before thinking fully about it, so anxious she was to find a job. She was further surprised when a video call came in barely ten minutes later, as she was about to go help her mother in the kitchen. Quickly sitting back on her bed, Priya opened the

channel and found herself looking at what appeared to be a Chinese woman in her forties. That reassured her a bit, as China was considered a neutral state by the Southern Federation and travel to there was allowed. The woman, who could see Priya via the camera integrated to the teenager's tablet, smiled to her.

"Miss Priya Mistry? My name is Wei Zang and I called you to give you an online job interview. Your résumé looked promising to us and you seemed qualified for one of the positions we are trying to fill on our ship. First off, tell me why you are postulating for a job aboard our ship."

"Uh, to be frank, I was ready to take any job offer I could get, Miss Wei. The economic situation in India is very bleak and I wanted a job so that I could help sustain my family. I understand that jobs in space rate some sort of premium, am I right?"

"That is correct, Miss Mistry. I understand from your résumé that you still had one year of studies left before completing your degree in agronomy and hydroponics techniques. Could you tell me why you decided not to complete your studies?" Priya couldn't hide completely her bitterness then and lowered her head a bit before answering.

"My family can't afford to pay for my studies anymore and I myself don't have a source of revenue that would let me continue my studies, miss. I am hoping to complete my studies at a later date, after I could accumulate some savings."

"I understand, Miss Mistry." Replied Wei Zang. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about your family?"

Surprised and confused by that, Priya hesitated before answering.

"Uh, what would you like to know, Miss Wei?"

The Chinese woman then gave her a sober look and got closer to the camera of her viewer.

"Miss Mistry, this may surprise you but my captain has specifically instructed me to give employment priority to those most in need, and you certainly seem to qualify in that aspect. From what you told me, I can deduce that the main breadwinner of your family no longer has a job, right?"

"Correct, miss. My father recently lost his job as a forklift operator at a foodstuff warehouse, when the warehouse closed. Without social welfare or unemployment insurance, the prospects for our family are now quite bleak and I wish to get a job so that I could help support my family."

“Who else is there in your family, and what job qualifications if any would they have for the work market, miss?”

Growing more confused by the minute, Priya nonetheless answered the Chinese woman.

“My mother sells home-made recipes at the local market. As for my two brothers and one sister, they are still in their early teens and are in school.”

“Are they all in reasonably good health, miss?”

“Yes! Why do you ask about that?”

Wei Zang looked at Priya with an encouraging smile.

“Because, if your family is interested, we would be ready to welcome your whole family on our ship, on top of you. We do have positions opened that could suit your father and your mother as well.”

That left Priya thunderstruck.

“My family, go on a spaceship? But, what about school for my younger siblings?”

“We do have elementary and secondary schools aboard our ship, miss. We even have facilities for post-secondary studies, so you will eventually be able to complete your studies on our ship.”

“Uh, how big is your ship actually, Miss Wei?”

“Big enough to be a self-sufficient space community, miss. If you and your family are interested by our offer, I am ready to transfer some travel funds to your bank account, so that you could travel to Shanghai, where we could conduct a face-to-face final interview with your family.”

“I...I would certainly be interested personally by your offer, miss. Let me just go get my parents, so that you could talk directly with them.”

Priya nearly ran out of her bedroom, her heart beating hard, as she rushed to the lounge, where her parents and her siblings were.

**15:50 (Universal Time)**

**Tuesday, June 19, 2317**

**Light shuttle on approach to the A.M.S. KOSTROMA**

**Earth low orbit**

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