



The sun was rising over the cold and dirty icy surface of Callisto, the second largest moon of Jupiter, which was clearly visible. The tenuous atmosphere made it possible to see the space stations at low orbit around the moon.

Five large mining colonies were situated near Callisto's equator. Having found water under the ice mantle, the early explorers of the Far Station Cluster decided to collect as much water and 'clean' ice as possible. This would give them a leverage in bargaining with Terra Force, as Earth's freshwater supply was being depleted rapidly.

At colony Calli-Three a group of men was called to report at in the chief engineer's office. They stood in their thermosuits, waiting for the engineer to arrive. When he came in he had a troubled look on his face. The engineer knew they weren't going to like this.

"Good day, men. Take a seat, please," he said, gesturing to the neatly lined up chairs behind the men.

"What's this about, chief?" one of the men asked eagerly.

"Well, Hakama, I'll get right down to business. I just received word from the big guys that we are in the green for project Europa." He held his breath and waited for the men's response.

"Damn, Sir. Like it isn't cold enough out here! We're going down there, are we?" one of the other miners said.

"Yes, we certainly are. We have been preparing for this for years, right? We are ready to finally find out if we can hit the jackpot. And you guys are the heroes who will!" said the chief, trying to excite his men.

Going through the ice crust on Europa is no picnic. The frozen surface crust may be a few kilometers thick. Europa has a bulk density of three times the density of water, so it is believed to be primarily composed of silicates. Still, this density allows for an outer shell of water and/or ice up to sixty miles thick surrounding the rocky interior.

"So, what do you say? A hundred-thousand credit bonus will be waiting for every miner at homecoming," said the chief.

"I'll go," said Hakama "but only if I get extra vacation days on top of the bonus."

"Yeah, me too," said other miners.

"Okay, guys. I'll see to it personally. Now, go and prepare yourselves for the journey of your lives. We leave in ten standard hours!"

Not far from Callisto, onboard the command station, Zachary Dunn cursed and spat blood at Mikiyaka Oshiro. After his attempt to attack Oshiro, two men came in and one of them used a stungun on him, again. He felt the pain in every muscles and nerve he had. When he woke up, he found himself restrained to a wall inside a dark and cold room. The air was very different. It smelled bad and it wasn't as dense as Oshiro's office. In front of him he could see stars through a small widow. Occasionally, he could see a planet's surface pass the station. It told him that this was an older station, for it depended on rotation to generate gravity. The newer Terra Force stations were equipped with artificial gravity generators.

"Still feisty, are we?" Oshiro said, wiping the blood of his face and out of his hair. He took a step towards Dunn, "Well, I have a little surprise for you that will change your attitude. You see, we are in one of our maintenance airlocks and if you don't tell me what I want to know, I will tell the operator on the other side of that door to slowly depressurize the airlock." Oshiro searched Dunn's eyes to see if he had any luck with his threat.

Dunn looked Oshiro straight into his eyes. "Fine, go ahead. Kill me. You will dispose of me anyway. You don't scare me with this crap."

Oshiro chuckled. "Oh really? So, you are trying to tell me that you will calmly withstand your blood boiling, your eyes being pulled out of their sockets and your lungs collapsing?" Oshiro bend himself backward and started laughing loudly.

Dunn looked up at Oshiro and said, "You sick son of a b..."

Oshiro punched Dunn hard in his stomach with a swift and fast blow.

Dunn doubled and tried to catch his breath while coughing and nearly hurling.

"My people will find me," Dunn spoke slowly under his breath. "And when they do, you are in ..."

Again, Oshiro wouldn't let Dunn finish. Instead, he grabbed him by the throat and leaned close to Dunn face.

"I really don't care about your sorry Terra fucks. You will tell me what I want to hear, now!" Oshiro yelled at Dunn.

Dunn stared Oshiro fiercely in his eyes. He gritted his teeth. "Never," he said.

"Fine. As you wish," said Oshiro and walked out of the room.

First Dunn looked at the door to see Oshiro leave. There was silence for a short time, which could have easily seemed an eternity to Dunn. Then he heard locks and servos switch and red warning lights inside the room started to blink. The violent suction in the room took him by surprise.

It was early afternoon, three days after Ousha La Guilla had contacted Jack Raman. La Guilla was getting ready to leave her office to attend a conference organized by the democratic labor association. She was walking to the door when her tc-console announced an incoming call. La Guilla entered her access code to open the secured line and Raman appeared on screen.

"Hello, Ousha," he said.

"Good day, Jack," La Guilla said. "How are you today?"

"Fine. Listen, I can't talk long. I have set up a pre-op briefing with Team Blue on the *Dantra Prime*. The meeting is highly classified. Even SA Op-center is not aware of it. They will board a state-of-the-art class 5 shuttle and leave for The Cluster. It's a prototype, but I've heard it's fully operational. They will be able to reach it in four days. They leave tomorrow."

"Holy God. That's some prototype," La Guilla said, baffled, "Jack, I don't know the skills of Team Blue, but I want Lieutenant Brooks, Team Gold's medic, to be part of the team."

"Okay, Ousha. I will send her an off-the-record activation message. I will keep you informed. I've got to go. Bye."

The screen went blank before La Guilla could respond.

Joanna Brooks sat down on the porch of her house with a cold glass of water in her hand.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said to Michael, her fiancé. "Listen, honey," she continued, "I'm sorry I left for Geneva in such a hurry. You know what the team means to me. I feel terrible that I haven't heard from them in over two weeks now. I..."

"I understand, Jo," said Michael, trying to hide his frustrations. "I just think that you should rest and take some time off from SA. Just accept your inactive status and come with me."

Brooks was surprised, "Come with you? What do you mean?"

Michael looked at his hands trying to find the right words. "You know how you always talk about Hawaii and Maui?" He waited for Brooks to nod. "Well, I've been thinking about what has happened to you, about you and me..." Michael paused and took a deep breath, "OK, here it goes. I have bought 2 roundtrip tickets to Hawaii and made reservations at a very luxurious hotel for fifteen days!" Michael raised his brows, smiled and spread his hands, expecting Brooks to jump around his neck.

"Oh Michael," Brooks started, "that's great! Really fantastic," she said, but it was obvious she wasn't pleasantly surprised.

"But?" Michael said, clearly getting upset.

"But...but I was trying to tell you that..." she said, looking at the sea. "Half an hour ago, Miss La Guilla asked me if I wanted to be part of an investigation. She is trying to find out where our team members are and wants me to join the team. I can't tell more than this. I don't know..."

"Damn it, Jo!" Michael said. "You have been seriously hurt and now you can't wait to put your life on the line again. I can't take this anymore. I don't like to, no, let me rephrase that," Michael's face was getting red. He rose to his feet and pointed his finger at her in anger. "I hate to worry about you every second of the day. Wondering where you are, what you are doing. If you are OK, or not. I didn't mind when you applied at the academy. I thought you'd be working here, on Earth, as a doctor. But when you joined the SA, I didn't know you were signing up for mission with a high risk of getting hurt or killed. For months, I've been in pain of missing you all the time. Your last mission proved to me that joining the SA was a mistake." Michael was furious. He hoped Brooks would consider changing jobs after the incident, but she clearly wasn't.

"I'm sorry, Michael," Brooks said, tears welling up in her eyes. During missions she was tough, but she loved Michael very much. Seeing him this angry and still feeling tired from her recovery, she couldn't stop her tears. "I'm so sorry Michael. I really like the idea of us going off to Hawaii, but I can't right now. I..."

"You can't, or won't?" Michael interrupted.

"I have to find them, don't you understand? If I was out there, I know they would be looking in every corner on every planet to find me. I have to do this..." she stopped to take a drink and wipe the tears of her cheek with the back of her hand.

"Fine! If you feel you must, go ahead," said Michael. "But I don't know if I'll be here when you come back. If you come back!"

"Michael, please. Don't do this," Brooks pleaded. "I love you. You know that don't you?"

"If you love me, as much as you say you do, you should quit your job and look for safer work here on

Earth," said Michael. "Do it for yourself, if you won't do it for us," he said, as he walked off to the beach ending the discussion.

Brook's crying eyes followed him and wondered if she hated him or loved him with all her heart. She emptied her glass and walked inside the house. She ran to their bedroom, packed her gear and wrote Michael a note. Leaving the apartment, she activated her datacrystal, connected to the Data-Construct and sent La Guilla the message: *I'm on my way.*

On the Galaxy Mining Trade Center, near Mars, the situation for the Independent Extra Terrestrial Mining Company (IET Mining Company) was frustrating. The assumed act of aggression by the Far Station Cluster towards Terra Force compromised the independent miner's position. They didn't want to lose their business with Terra Force, nor the Cluster. Yet, the circumstances forced them to choose.

Mike O'Reilly, founder and CEO of the IET Mining Company looked at his console. It projected the trade in standard credits, relative sales and revenue of the last four weeks. The numbers went down, a lot. He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes.

"I just can't believe it," O'Reilly said. "My last years in the company and it's falling apart right under my fingers."

"I don't know what to do, Mike," said Simmy, his assistant and administrator. "If we go along with the Cluster, we might offend Terra Force and lose their contracts. On the other hand, if we do business with Terra Force, the Cluster stops trading with us."

"But they haven't claimed the attack. Not yet anyway," said O'Reilly. "I don't understand why they just stopped arriving here. No message, no report, just nothing. I know this station is Terra Force hardware, but this is our marketplace. We do business here, too, for God's sake!" he yelled.

"They might be pissed at Terra Force for falsely assuming the Cluster is responsible," suggested the administrator. "Maybe that's why they stop coming here. Maybe they hope that we will try to convince Terra Force to reconsider their opinion and restore the confidence in the Cluster."

"Hell, no!" burst O'Reilly, slamming his hands on the table, "I will not be played like that. They nearly killed me. I was fortunate to make it to a shuttle on time before they blew up the station."

"Do you believe it was the Cluster?" asked the assistant. He placed his hand under his chin and awaited O'Reilly's answer.

O'Reilly sighed and said in a calm voice, "Yes, Simmy, I do. Mister Oshiro fled in a real big hurry. Terra Force saw his shuttle blast its way out of the station. He had to have known what was going to happen. I never liked the bastard, but we made good trade agreements," he said, sitting down and looking at the charts. "Now, he just doesn't even contact us anymore."

The assistant stood up and walked over to the fiberglass shield. The view was absolutely breathtaking, almost two hundred thousand miles high in orbit around Mars. The fiberglass shield reached from the floor to the ceiling displaying the countless stars spread out on the vast darkness of the universe.

The assistant spoke in a determined, low and confident voice. "We are going to have to make a choice. And I prefer dealing with Terra Force. They depend on our trade. The Cluster has back-stabbed us before and I draw the line here, Mike!"

O'Reilly sank his face in his hands. "I know, Simmy," he moaned, "I've been putting this decision off, but you are right. Let's set up a meeting with Bruce Hunt and stick with our plans. Maybe this way we can officially earn our independence."

Dunn felt all the air beings sucked out of his lungs. He didn't think Oshiro would actually do it, but Oshiro did. He opened the airlocks enough for the room to decompress. Dunn sat on the floor, gasping for air. He tried to hold his breath, but eventually he had to give up. The veins in his arms and legs started to swell, like they were about to pop. When he almost passed out the doors slammed shut and the pressure and oxygen were restored. The entry door opened and Oshiro stepped back into the room.

"*Tsk...tsk...tsk.* Zachary Dunn, hero of the Saturn Operation," started Oshiro, "You really thought I was bluffing. Well, I wasn't."

Dunn was not able to speak at that moment. All he could concentrate on was breathing and the pain in his chest. Oshiro knelt down beside him. His long hair shaded his face, but Dunn felt his eyes.

"So, now that you know I'm not bluffing," said Oshiro, almost whispering the words, "You might want to reconsider your attitude and talk to me. I will not hesitate to walk and leave you here to meet your death." Dunn coughed and moaned. He took a slow deep breath and whispered, "Fine...I'll talk. Just...just get me some water, you piece of shit."

Oshiro smirked. "Good. You *can* cooperate. That's a first, isn't it?" said Oshiro as he signaled for the guards to come in and take Dunn back to his office.

Dunn screamed in pain when the guards grabbed him and pulled him to his feet.

Ten minutes later Dunn was back in Oshiro's office, strapped down in a chair. He was offered water, which he drank carefully. Oshiro sat down behind his desk and faced Dunn.

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry?" he asked Dunn.

Dunn closed his eyes and nodded. Oshiro tapped his console and asked his assistant to bring two meals

up to his office.

"Okay, Zach, let's get down to business. I'll tell you exactly what I want to know."

Oshiro leaned back into his chair and looked out the fiberglass shield as Callisto came into view again.

"Ten years ago I received classified information about the Saturn Operation," said Oshiro, "It revealed plans, objectives and engagement tactics. First I thought that Terra Force was going to attack the Cluster. Why else would they deploy four frigates, ten cruisers, fifty perimeter scouts and nearly a thousand troopers, packed into twenty trooper-transports, in the Jupiter area? I thought they were afraid we were growing too fast and gain too much power. But, I was wrong. Wasn't I?" he said rhetorically.

Dunn just listened and waited for Oshiro to continue. Dunn was well aware of what happened during the Saturn Operation. He was twenty-five years old when he was recruited for the operation and one of the few survivors.

"You weren't interested in the Cluster, right?" Oshiro continued, "Europa was your target. You wanted to gain possession of Europa, right?"

Dunn said nothing.

"Terra Force wanted to play us out of the market and get that precious water themselves," said Oshiro. He knew that there wasn't any secrecy about it. He said, "I can understand such a move. However, what I don't understand is why the hell you guys backed out. It couldn't have been our weak opposition that made you guys scurry like that." Oshiro placed his hands on the table and leaned closer to Dunn, "What happened, Dunn? What scared you? Why did you run? Why did so many die?"

The following morning Joanna arrived at the space station *Dantra Prime*. It orbited the Moon and served as a secondary op-center. When she left her apartment she had shuttled to Cape Kennedy where she met Jack Raman and Vince Burton, a Team Blue member. They boarded a shuttlepod that took them up to *Dantra Prime*.

It was a small station that was build before Terra Force was formed. It had no internal gravity generators. Instead, the station's main structure rotated to create near standard gravity.

Raman, Burton and Brooks stepped out of the shuttlepod and walked through the docking tube.

Raman turned back to Brooks and said, "Ever been on one of these old stations before?"

"Once," said Brooks, "during my training with the Navy S.O.S."

Raman smiled, "So you are used to the weird gravity fluxes?"

"Never," Brooks responded.

Inside the docking bay the rest of Team Blue waited for the new arrivals.

Raman stepped into the middle of the group and signaled them to follow him. He lead them through several corridors and down some stairways until they arrived in the secondary docking bay on the other side of the station. When the group had gathered again, Raman explained the situation.

"Everybody, this is Lieutenant Joanna Brooks. She was field medic with Team Gold and volunteered to join this search and rescue mission. Now remember, this mission does not exist. There will be no records, logs or files about your whereabouts. The shuttle that will take you to your destination is a prototype and nobody knows we are using it. During this mission you will not attempt or accept any long-range transmissions. Is that clear?" Raman said.

"Yes, sir!" the group acknowledged.

"This shuttle will take you to the Cluster in less than a hundred standard hours," Raman continued.

"How is that possible, sir?" asked Sergeant Kai Shima, the team's pilot, "I mean, how will we survive the acceleration shifts?"

"During the flight you will remain in hibernated stasis in the specially designed gel tubes. These tubes have grav-antigrav modulators that will adjust and countermeasure the g-forces during acceleration. The damage to your organs and brain cells are within acceptable margins," Raman said carefully.

The group stood silent.

"As soon as you reach the first rendezvous point," Raman continued, "the auto-pilot will resume its plotted course and start the first of six acceleration shifts. By then you will all be sleeping like babies. Exactly seventy-nine hours later, you will wake up. The ship has then finished the final auto-deceleration."

The faces of the team members were serious and tense. None of them had been in hibernated stasis before.

"When you wake up," Raman said, "you will be approximately a hundred thousand miles away from the moon Ganymede. Nobody will see you, since the ship has an advanced stealth shield. On the far side of Ganymede orbits an old service station. You will board the station, hide the ship and use one of the rock-tugs to get to the surface. Your search will start there. If you can't get any information, proceed to Callisto and the inner stations of the Cluster. Any questions?"

Shima had a question. "What happens when we get exposed?"

"As soon as you initiate the search, you split into two teams to keep a low profile," Raman said, "If one of the teams gets made use all means necessary to get back to the ship. From there you contact the other team members and withdraw to basecamp two, on Europa. The coordinates are stored in the ship's computer. From there proceed with a second attempt to locate any Team Gold operatives. If you have no

luck of finding them regroup at basecamp two, return to the old service station and come back here to this station in stealth mode. Contact me when you have arrived here."

Joanna spoke first. "So there is no back-up at all, right?"

Raman looked at the faces of the men and woman that were about to embark on a mission that seemed a one-way trip. He said, "No, no back-up. Once you have passed the border of Territorium and entered the neutral zone, you are on your own."

There was a silence. Again, the operatives were considering the possible consequences of this mission. They knew they were on their own. *No help from the cavalry.*

When Raman asked if anybody wanted to leave there was no reply. He continued explaining the remaining details of the mission until it was time to go.

"Okay people. Let's get ready," Raman said.

It was dark on Europa. Hard, freezing winds blew snow and dust against the basecamp modules of a small group of miners. It had been twenty-four hours since they arrived on Europa, ten miles away from the planned drilling site. They had quickly assembled the nine modules, installed the power generators and water supply tanks. These modules would be their home for the next three months.

"God, it's cold out here!" said Hakama when he entered the kitchen where the others had gathered to eat lunch.

"Here, I've made some soup to keep us warm," said Firaet Mouya. He had recently started working as a miner. This operation was his first trip away from the Calli-Three colony.

"Thanks, Firaet," smiled Hakama. "I've prepared the truck and the skiffs. Mouya and I will fly to the site in about an hour from now to place the drillpod and get it up and running. Miles and Rick take the other two skiff to accompany the truck." Hakama paused to eat, "Good soup," he said. "Tio will wait here for news from the command station. I was told to expect more details about the objects we're retrieving."

Firaet sat down next to Hakama and scooped some rice onto his plate. He looked at Hakama and asked, "Do you know what happened here during the battle?"

The others stopped eating and looked at Hakama. They knew this was a painful subject for him. He was one of many to lose one or more family members during Terra Force's Saturn Operation. Hakama had lost his brother who died in his arms, not far from the site they were about to drill soon.

Hakama stopped eating. "Yes I do, son. It was horrific and mysterious. One day Terra Force arrived here at Europa with quite an army. We thought they were going to attack the Cluster and we sent people to stop them. We expected them to attack the stations and launch a full-scale attack, but they didn't. They ferociously defended their expanding grounds on Europa and eventually conquered the moon." Hakama paused a second and looked at his hands. "My brother died in my hands while we were held captive here. He suffered internal bleeding from shot wounds.

Terra Force was looking for something. Once they had taken the moon they didn't proceed to the orbiting stations or other colonies. Then everything went wrong. From inside the containers where we were held we could hear explosions and weapons being fired. People were screaming and yelling and there was panic and chaos throughout campsite. Then the door of the container was opened and a bleeding soldier stepped in and told us to follow him. When we stepped out of the container it was hell outside. Modules and structures were on fire. There were soldiers shooting heavy rockets and rifles into the darkness. We ran with our restraints on our feet to a nearby trooper transport. Just before I stepped into the hatch I looked back and saw..." Hakama looked at the intrigued face of Mouya. Hakama slowly shook his head. "I still can't describe and believe what I saw. Big, dark shapes had entered the camp and killed the soldiers. The soldiers fired their weapons at close range, but that didn't stop whatever they were. We stepped into the transport and we were dropped off at *Baia Chori*, which served as a supply station for our troops. Terra Force released all the prisoners and the remaining army fled in a hurry. They never told the Cluster what had happened here. They just left. Since then we are continuously scanning the moon for activity, but there haven't been any readings. The Clusters hasn't returned here until last year. And here we are..." Hakama said, with a slight smile on his face.

"Aren't you scared?" asked Tio.

"I will be scared for as long as I live, my friend. Everyone that has witnessed what happened here would be scared."

"Then why did you come back here?" Firaet asked.

Hakama sighed. "They have been monitoring this moon for almost a decade now and no activity has been registered. But, to be honest, I need the bonus to support my family." Hakama paused to give his team a reassuring smile. "They will be proud when I get back and so will you families."

"You know I can't tell you that," Dunn sneered.

Oshiro was losing his patience with Dunn and wanted some answers, soon. He knew the team on Europa was about to engage drilling.

"Zach, I have witnesses that saw creatures killing your soldiers. They withstood the weapons you fired at them," Oshiro said while came out of his chair and walked around the table, approaching Dunn. He

grabbed Dunn by his hair and pulled his head backwards. Leaning close to his face, he said, "You were with the last platoon to leave Europa. You were there when it all happened." Oshiro bent down closer and pulled Dunn's hair harder making Dunn grit his teeth. "Tell me what the fuck happened!" yelled Oshiro loudly into Dunn face.

"Let it go, Oshiro. Let it go. Don't ever go there again. We fired thermonuclear warheads in a two thousand miles radius around the campsite. I hope we killed what ever they were. The rest is history," said Dunn as Oshiro let his hair go.

"No, damn you. I need to know!" demanded Oshiro. "I want Europa. The Cluster needs Europa. You know that. We need the water to survive, to trade. Terra Force needs the water. I need to know if there is any threat left. If we can safely drill for water, anywhere."

Dunn looked at Oshiro. "You will die if you go there. If they don't kill you, the radiation will," he said.

"Then tell me where they came from, what they are?" begged Oshiro.

"Let it go!" yelled Dunn.

Oshiro had started to walk back to his chair, but he turned and came at Dunn. He smashed his fist into Dunn's face repeatedly, screaming, "I...will...not!"

In his rage he had punched Dunn unconscious. Thick blood ran out of Dunn's nose and ripped eyebrow. Oshiro left the room leaving Dunn behind. He walked to his private quarters and contacted the men on Europa.

"What's your status?" he asked when Rick Roul, one of the miners at the basecamp, appeared on the screen.

"Hakama and Mouya have left to install the drillpod, sir," said Roul.

"Tell everyone to proceed as planned. Report back to me when you have commenced drilling."

"Yes, sir. Do you have any details for us, yet?" Roul asked.

"No. I'll let you know when I do," said Oshiro and disconnected.

Oshiro returned to his office. He opened the door, and saw it was empty. He looked around, but he couldn't find Dunn. He walked to his desk and opened a cabinet that stood next to it. The second drawer opened and revealed a disruptor pistol. Oshiro took it out, grabbed a few new charges and hurried out as he concealed the weapon in his robe.

Two hours later, after searching the whole station, Oshiro returned to his private quarters. He had looked everywhere, but Dunn was nowhere to be seen.

Brooks strapped herself inside the gel tube. Raman walked in-between the tubes. "Are you okay in there, Vince?" Raman asked.

"It feels like I'm in a coffin, sir," chuckled Burton nervously through his oxygen mask. He gave Raman thumbs up nonetheless.

"Be careful out there, alright?" Raman said. He could hear them all cheer and holler over the intercom speaker. He knew they were excited and very nervous.

Raman walked over to the last gel tube, which was still empty. Kai Shima, the pilot had to get in before reaching the rendezvous point, where the autopilot takes over. Raman checked it and left the room, climbing up to the cockpit. Shima was running checks and warmed up the thruster coils.

"Nice bird, isn't she?" Raman asked Shima.

"Oh yes she is, sir," Shima said as he engaged the primary controls. "I'm eager to see what it can do."

"Remember, this is still a prototype. There is no information about its performance and capability. Don't push it, okay?" Raman patted Shima on the shoulders. "You get yourself home safe. That's an order."

"I hear you, sir," Shima said.

Raman turned around and left the cockpit and stepped out of the ship into the docking gate. He was about to step through the hatch door, when he felt compelled to look back. He was overwhelmed with the fear that he would never see this ship or the passengers again. He hadn't had the feeling before. He shook his head and told himself they would be fine. They are experienced operatives who could handle themselves perfectly in hostile environments.

Back in the vessel that took him back to Earth, he looked out the small windshield and saw the ship detach itself from the station. It was hard to see the black ship against the blackness of space, but he knew what to look for.

Onboard the ship, Shima piloted the ship towards the coordinates of the rendezvous point. It would take him an hour to fly the distance. The stealth mode wouldn't be affective at high velocity. The ship would show on radar at all nearby waypoint stations and considered hostile immediately.

Nearly fifty minutes later Shima engaged the autopilot and stepped out of the chair. Inside the gel tubes he found the others asleep, floating in blue gel. He checked all the biosensor arrays and cardiovascular support consoles and undressed himself. Once strapped inside the tube, he sealed it and placed the oxygen mask on his face. As the sedation-gas entered through his mask he felt himself drifting off into deep sleep. He could feel the gel pouring into the tube, but he lost consciousness before the tube had filled up. The ship entered its first acceleration shift a minute later.

Back at her apartment, Ousha La Guilla stepped out of the dermal cleansing vaporizer. Dressed in a comfortable robe she walked into the kitchen to prepare supper. As she prepared the nutrio mixer the tc-console beeped. La Guilla walked over to it and tabbed the blinking message at the top of the index. It was encrypted and the sender information was absent, which struck her as awkward. After tabbing the message it was decrypted and displayed. It read: *Meet me on the corner of Johnson and Kennedy at 10:30pm. I have information for you. Come alone.*

"How cliché!" she said as she looked at the clock on the console. It read 9:52pm. She reasoned it probably was a message from Jack Raman. But she felt a mix of curiosity, doubt and fear. If it was indeed a message from Jack she couldn't ignore the invitation. She had to let someone know where she was going in case of trouble.

A quick change of clothes later she rushed out of her apartment and headed to the elevator. The cool evening breeze waved her hair when she stepped out onto the walkway.

A PTC (public transportation coach) turned a corner and headed towards the nearby stop. She rushed to the stop and was just in time to board the PTC. It resumed its course as La Guilla chose a seat near the window, opposite of two extravagantly dressed women. They were very much engaged in a discussion and didn't notice the new passenger across from them.

La Guilla looked outside as the scenery silently rushed by. It was very crowded this evening. Thousands of pedestrians, illuminated by the numerous colorful holographic billboards and animations, occupied the walkways. As the PTC swiftly proceeded its journey, the surging crowd joined together again on the center traction corridor.

Ten minutes later she exited the carriage near a square where an eager crowd waits to get on the PTC. Once on the walkway she read the signs to find the crossing where she would meet the sender of the weird message.

The air carried a smelly mixture of Asian food, cheap colognes and garbage. A soft breeze blew through the streets, but it wasn't strong enough to rid the air of the stench.

She headed towards the crossing of Johnson and Kennedy and, instead of waiting for her appointment, she crossed the Johnson center corridor and continued to walk further down Kennedy. She would rather see this person before he or she saw her. She scanned the crowd looking for Jack Raman, but he wasn't here. Arriving at the next corridor junction she crossed the Kennedy corridor and headed back to the meeting point on the other end. But again she didn't see Jack or an individual waiting for her. She decided to wait there instead of being cautious. Many people passed her and occasionally bumped into her without an expected apology.

Across the walkway she noticed a tavern and the taste of coffee became tempting. The seats behind the window would provide a good view of the crossing. She nodded to herself, convinced of her decision.

Once inside the tavern, she seated herself at a table furthest away from the door by the window. A small group of people sat at the bar, laughing and talking loudly and only a couple of tables are occupied. The night was still young.

The waitress responded to her waving.

"What can I do you for, ma'am?" She asked with a southern accent.

"I'll have a coffee, please." La Guilla said.

"Comin' right up!" The waitress walked back to the bar.

The terrible music already annoyed La Guilla. It was a combination of the old Country & Western and modern Electronique, with loud guitars and distorted drums.

She looked outside and saw a small group of people standing in the middle of the junction of the traction corridor, pointing in different directions, clearly having a discussion about which way to go. She ignored them and looked at the waitress, who returned with her coffee. The flavored smell of the brown brew entered her nose, which she inhaled deeply. She cringed when hastily sipping the coffee and burning her lips and tongue. Cursing loudly, she looked up to see if anybody noticed, but her voice was lost in a cacophony of laughter, shouting and guitars.

Looking outside again, she was just in time to see the group of people scattering away from the center of the crossing, their faces illuminated by a bright, white light. A split second later a PTC crossed the junction. La Guilla tried her coffee a second time after blowing at it first. It tasted good. She looked outside again. On the walkway, opposite to the bar, a man stood waiting with his hands in his pockets and facing her. He was wearing a long, dark coat that ran all the way to his ankles. He had long dark hair and she couldn't see his face, but she felt he was looking at her. A moment later, which lasted an eternity, he almost unnoticeably nodded at her twice. It scared the life out of her.

*How the hell did he find me here!?*

Zachary Dunn wiped the blood off his face, which kept running out of his nose. He had hidden himself inside a cargo container near the shuttle bay where he was taken onboard the station.

When Oshiro had left the room, Dunn regained consciousness from the stinging pain in his nose. He found himself alone in Oshiro's office and he looked for a way to get out. A ventilation panel above the door provided him a narrow exit into a shaft that ran throughout the station. Restrained and exhausted he was

able to find his way to the abandoned shuttlebay. Getting off the station was a priority. When he climbed out of the ventilation shaft the panel started sealing and the warning lights near the outer hatches started flashing. That meant the hatches were about to open for a vessel to enter. The bay would decompress in a matter of seconds.

"Oh God, not again," he whispered.

He jumped down on top of a stack of containers and climbed down. As he opened one of the bottom containers he heard the hatches open. The loud whistling noise was unbearable. The force of the shifting air shook the containers and knocked Dunn on his knees. He crawled into the container and closed it. There was still oxygen left inside. He heard the shuttle touch down and its hatches closing. He waited for the shuttlebay to refill itself with breathable air and he opened the container door to let some in. A couple of men passed by and a cargo loader drove into the bay. Dunn thought of taking the shuttle, but in his condition he knew he wouldn't be able to succeed. Before he could make a choice, the loader lifted the containers and spun around towards the shuttle. Dunn closed the door and waited in the darkness.

The shaking of the landing freight-shuttle awoke Dunn. He had fallen asleep inside the container, weary of torture and exhaustion. Stepping out of the container, he heard several voices on the outside of the shuttle's cargo hold. He heard they were getting ready to unload and Dunn prepared to run for cover. The hatches of the cargo hold opened and Dunn felt the pressurized air rush out. Then steel beams slid into the first row of containers. He could see personnel leave and he carefully stepped out of the container, avoiding the automated loading system. The platform where the shuttle had landed was abandoned. There were odd structures and other loading platforms surrounding this one. None of them appeared to be residential. Dunn figured that this had to be some sort of hub or cargo transfer station.

Uncertain of the existence of nearby settlements, he chose to stay here for a while and not hitch a ride to another spaceport.

He sprinted to the edge of the platform, which was nearly half a mile across, and climbed onto a ramp. It led him to an elevator at the far end of the compound. Once inside the elevator, he was confronted with a variety of colored buttons that probably corresponded with different floors and sections that he to choose from. Fortunately the going language was Standard English, but the destination still had to be a lucky guess. He chose exit a. The sign above the door still warned 'caution – vacuum'. This reminded him to check his oxygen tank. The gauge indicated it was nearly empty. Dunn hoped that 'exit A' and whatever was there would contain oxygen. Moments later the elevator had arrived at exit a. Dunn's heartbeat had increased during the descent. He was very uncomfortable not having a sidearm to defend him.

There could be security staff, heavily armed with pistols or disruptors, waiting in the other side of the elevator doors, which were about to open. Loaders, pilots or other personnel could easily tell he wasn't one of them. His emergency oxygen mask and clothing were a dead give-away.

The door opened an air rushed into the small, dark elevator. From the corner of his eyes he saw the warning sign change from 'caution – vacuum' to 'airlock open'.

Dunn stepped out of the elevator and found himself in a scarcely lit room. Jumpsuits, boots and helmets were stashed in racks and cabinets. He took off his mask and inhaled slowly. The air was cool and filled with a musty bitter scent and flavor that made his throat itch. He quickly searched for a jumpsuit that matched his size. However, none fit and he put on one of the larger ones. When he was about to try on a pair of boots, a door on the far side of the room opened.

On the other side of Jupiter, on the moon Europa a landing craft set down nearby the settlement Euro-One where Hakama and his drill team were stationed. The command station, orbiting Callisto, had lost contact with the settlement two days ago. A search and rescue team was deployed to restore contact and determine the situation.

It was dark, windy and extremely cold when six men stepped out of the landing craft. They raised their hands against dirt and debris blowing against their visors. They walked carefully to the modules, barely visible through the blizzard. The settlement appeared to be abandoned – no lights were on inside or around the site. The commander ordered the men to split up and search every module, but there was nobody to be found.

"Isn't it standard procedure that there is always one person here?" asked one of the men.

"Yes, it sure is," the commander replied, worried.

"We looked everywhere, but every module is empty. It looks like they left in a hurry. There is food and clothing scattered all over the place."

"Sir!" another man yelled over the communicator. "I tried to contact the drill site, but nobody responded. We should request some back-up."

"Good idea," replied the commander. "I'll report to the ship. Let's go to the central module and wait for advice from the board."

Twenty minutes later the rescue team sat in the kitchen drinking coffee. The officer that had checked the communications module stepped in and removed his helmet. He had a puzzled look on his face.

"Sir, I went through the logs and found that they experienced some sort of phenomenon at the drill-site. I could hear the men screaming excitedly, but then the line was cutoff." He sat down and looked at the



others. "Those were the last transmissions stored in the logs. The weird thing is that the watchman here at the basecamp never reported anything to the command station. It was like he wasn't here anymore."

"Dammit!" said the commander. "Mitakay and Winslow, get the Pythons from the ship and bring some extra ammunition."

The men nodded and put on their helmets. They stepped outside and disappeared into the darkness.

The others sealed the module and took off their equipment, while the commander contacted the Oshiro.

Without a debate he was given the back-up he needed.

Roughly thirty minutes later, Mitakay and Winslow hadn't returned from the landing craft. After several unsuccessful attempts to contact them, the remaining men geared up and headed back to the landing site.

When they arrived there, they were shocked. The ship was gone. Instead, they found some smouldering debris from the craft's exterior and landing gear. It lay dispersed around a large drafting hole in the ice crust.

The men started to panic, but the commander slowly stepped towards the hole. He turned on the flashlight, attached to his wrist, and directed it down into the hole. He carefully stepped closer to the edge, pushing the debris aside.

It was the commander that started screaming first, when he felt something big rushing by him, brushing his thick armoured jumpsuit.

--- *End of episode 3* ---

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