ANN
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The Out World

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Prologue

BY THE BEGINNING of the 22nd century, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the full-fledged civilian space agency of the United States of America, had been long gone. And the present GalaXplore had risen in its place. Two years since its inception, GalaXplore had laid the groundwork for the construction of the three-mile-long space station, Apollonia. This company, active in developing the science and engineering workforce, embarked on a new phase of space exploration and development.

In 2144, GalaXplore Chairman Hugh Eccles stood before reporters gathered outside the tripod-shaped base executive tower of the company's headquarters in Reno. At his side was an aluminum scale model of Apollonia, with removable parts to show the various stages of construction.

The station's purpose would be to gain experience in spacecraft docking in orbit, regenerative life-support in lunar missions, and cargo and fuel supply technology.

Eccles squared his shoulders and matter-of-factly stated, "This is our space station, a stepping-stone toward a manned planetary exploration — a voyage to another galaxy. To be specific, The Out World, a place we know nothing about."

And with that lay the first step toward the reality of a future spacefaring humanity.

During the following couple of decades, Apollonia wouldn't be built in one piece, but in incremental steps. For example, several modules were launched separately into orbit by Proton launch vehicles and attached together in space like a large mechanical skeleton by astronauts as orbital construction workers. During this time, life support systems improved as well, along with materials processing. Life support and environment control were among the most critical of all the major station's systems.

Like its twenty-first century predecessor, Tiangong, third-generation, permanently crewed modular space station operated by the former China Manned Space program (CMS) of the People's Republic of China, Apollonia was made for low-earth-orbiting (LEO). 515 kilometers (320 miles) above the surface of the planet Earth, was determined mathematically, the most stable orbital altitude for Apollonia.

Moderate pollution and the absence of Earth's atmosphere made the station's location an ideal place for

observing a clearer view of stars, distant galaxies, and other celestial objects in the universe, also due to advances in observational technology. A large, powerful telescope in the southwest corner near the railing all-around the wide deck of the station expanded the observable universe to a large number of galaxies without the distortions caused by atmospheric turbulence.

While GalaXplore was concentrating its efforts on Apollonia and its construction now well advanced, several internal rebellions weakened the government of the People's Republic of China. In this period, China's space launch, human spaceflight, and lunar programs were affected by budget cuts. As dire as the China's situation was at the time, dramatic changes were made to their global commercial satellite services market. Unanimously, the Chinese carried out a government restructuring, gradually dismantling the policies and programs of their aerospace industry. In turn, the American government gradually became aware of the rapidly weakening of China's space programs.

Yet, China still led the world in robotic design and engineering, way ahead of the United States of America in the production of robots. As a result, Chinese scientists, engineers and technicians were asked to participate in the GalaXplore space programs. Furthermore, GalaXplore took control of China's large single-aperture radio telescope located in a natural basin (a round karst depression or sinkhole), which enables it to receive radio waves from deep space, in Pingtang County, Guizhou province.

Approximately 476 miles away from the Guangdong province, the spherical telescope features a massive fixed dish with a diameter of 500 meters (1,640 feet).

The arrangement with the Chinese had worked well. Ultimately, this collaboration became an ideal representation of both nations' interests in space exploration. GalaXplore's manufacturing plant in the metropolis city of Shenzhen, located on the east bank of the Pearl River estuary on the central coast of the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, proved essential. Without the technological expertise of the Chinese scientists and engineers, Apollonia wouldn't have reached its full potential.

In 2269, GalaXplore was the world's dominant space research conglomerate. And the company's core belief was that life occurred on earthlike planets. *Themis*, an interstellar starship had been built at a cost of slightly over a billion dollars. Expected to launch within the year, with this starship, GalaXplore set out to prove interstellar intelligence scientifically.

High powered subspace transceivers, designed to function at faster-than-light velocity, were located below *Themis's* hull. The starship was designed to receive and transmit more than 20 terabytes (or 20 trillion bytes) of digital data per second over enormous distances. With Apollonia's sophisticated communications systems, the station would function in the capacity of starship-to-station communications. Messages would be transmitted and received over subspace. Instantaneous communication with

distant locations was possible through subspace frequencies, which carried electromagnetic signals traveling at the speed of light.

With *Themis*, humanity stood at the threshold of a new era in space travel.

PROOF

Chapter 1

2269

THE MOST significant change in the 21st century was the dissolve of the United States space agency NASA, shifting more operational responsibilities back to their Department of Defense. Since its inception in 1958 from the National Aeronautics and Space Act signed into law by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, National Aeronautics and Space Administration had led the United States in civilian, space exploration and aeronautical research.

It was years later that GalaXplore rose from the ashes of NASA to revitalize the aerospace industry and for the exploration and development of space in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Founded in the United States in 2142, this aeronautics and space agency successfully built the hugely expensive Apollonia, a space station for low-

earth orbit. By 2269, GalaXplore had built *Themis*, the first interstellar starship with state-of-art design and equipment. This name was etched on the upper surface of the starship using a laser beam.

Parts of *Themis* had been manufactured in the GalaXplore plant in Shenzhen, a city on the east bank of the Pearl River on the central coast of southern Guangdong province in the People's Republic of China. Roughly half the plant's complement were composed of bipedal humanoid robots with two arms and one head called mechanics. These robot workers were designed and manufactured there. White armor covered their bodies and springs and wires could be seen in between their plated parts and joints. These spacecraft parts had been shipped in sections to the Apollonia space station where they were assembled by the mechanics that were stationed there.

Themis functioned as a long-duration exploration spacecraft. Its massive hull structure maintained formidable defensive systems and allowed for continued scientific operations. *Themis* was a far cry from NASA's space shuttle, the first spaceship built to go out into space and come back to Earth. Their shuttles were launched into space by a big tank of rocket fuel and two rocket boosters, which were used up and fell back to Earth within minutes after takeoff. Four of NASA's shuttles (Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis and Endeavour) flew over one hundred missions to repair satellites, conduct research, and help build the International Space Station. Inevitably, NASA's shuttle program wasn't sustainable energy and its aging fleet were

retired. And in 2031, the aged ISS orbital microgravity laboratory was guided into a remote area above the Pacific Ocean and safely burnt up in Earth's atmosphere.

For a yearlong deep-space exploration mission, *Themis* was outfitted with a crew of mechanics. Even in the 23rd century an interstellar mission involving humans wasn't possible and considered science fiction. It was just a couple of centuries ago, in 1960, that Edward Mills Purcell, an American physicist and cowinner of the 1952 Nobel Prize for Physics, had famously lectured at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York, pouring cold water on such a notion of human interstellar space travel.

"All this stuff about traveling around the universe in spacesuits — except for local exploration, which I have not discussed — belongs back where it came from, on the cereal box," Edward Mills Purcell had said.

The launch day of *Themis* was at hand. The starship's humanoid robot captain was programmed to aim the ship toward a moving wormhole near Saturn enabling Themis to travel between parallel universes. The humanoid robot inhabitants of the giant starship were to search for an inhabited planet. The ship's computer had a recorded message of peace from the President of the United States of America to be played in the event of an alien encounter.

GalaXplore Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine alongside top executives and midlevel managers were gathered in the spacious rotunda of the aerodynamic form tripod-shaped base executive tower of the headquarters' complex in Reno, Nevada. The glass entryway was guarded by members of

security. Culminating with an interesting crown feature, the tower's 100-foot high glass-dome offered a spectacular view to the Apollonia space station.

Before the launch, Lisbeth Rhine addressed the media and said, "On this day of celebration, let me be bold. I will say, with a degree of confidence, that the first interstellar spaceship operated by humans will be leaving our Solar System astern sometime within the next century. On a day like this, we shouldn't turn off our collective imagination."

Rhine's statement was met with scrutiny. One rebuttal came from the religious side — as one would surely expect..

Even in this century, the Pope of the Catholic Church represented the largest individual denomination of practicing Christians, both globally and within the United States of America. He was making an appearance in Saint Peter's Square in Vatican City to a crowd of spectators gathered to watch and photograph the spaceship's passage.

Minutes before the launch, the Pope stated, "According to biblical prophecy, humanity will witness many signs and wonders in the "Day of the Lord." This will cause us to reflect on the possibility that the end of the present age and the beginning of the future age concerning the second advent of Jesus Christ on Earth is approaching."

The Pope was referring to the time when Jesus Christ would reign from Jerusalem as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," and rule for 1000 years of peace on earth. In this kingdom age.millennium, it was predicted that man would design, construct and operate an interstellar spaceship. And

that man would undertake a long, fatiguing, and uncertain journey to another star system and return back to Earth.

Every eye on the planet was turned toward the sky to witness *Themis* depart Apollonia and soar into the far reaches of space.

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Chapter 2

THIRTY-FOUR-YEAR OLD Sara Masters, a whip-smart communications officer, had woken up that morning around 7 a.m., in a cold sweat just as a robotic voice came over Apollonia station's intercom system. Squinting with annoyance around the room, she tossed over in the bed and listened to the last words spoken.

"Attention mechanics! Report to your stations. Repeat. Report to your stations."

Yet, she knew, from the moment she'd staggered to her feet, that witnessing the launch of the starship *Themis* would be a remarkable moment in history. So, she quickly showered and dressed in the blue standard uniform with a narrow bead of white piping running along the seams, a black leather belt, and a red-and-gold embroidered patch on her right shoulder that spelled out "GalaXplore," that did nothing to highlight her natural attributes.

She turned away from the intricately designed bedroom. The doors whooshed open to her quarters and she stepped out. Now, she was walking the corridors, heading for the commissary for her standard breakfast of coffee, a cinnamon roll, a banana and scrambled eggs.

GalaXplore, aeronautics and space agency of the United States of America, had completed construction of the 3-mile-long low Earth orbiting Apollonia sometime in the third quarter of the twenty-second century.

Sara Masters, an attractive, dark-haired woman, was among the handful of humans that lived and worked on Apollonia (alongside a vast number of humanoid robots called mechanics). She had a bachelor's degree in aeronautics engineering from the University of Virginia. Slightly over seven years at GalaXplore, she had bounced here and there. In the various departments and installations within the corporation, she learned a lot about everything from robotics software development to IT security response.

Recently assigned to tracking the movement of *Themis*, as the mechanics point of contact through subspace communications at Apollonia, she would submit a progress report every week to her superiors back on Earth.

But there was more than wonder accompanying her job, there was also the burden of enormous responsibility on her shoulders. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

In the months since her arrival on the station, she carried out her assigned duties with precision. She had only ever wanted to be a part of GalaXplore. At heart she had a belief

in scientific progress. And she'd never imagined she'd be assigned to the station and saw the assignment as nothing more than a golden opportunity to prove herself to the GalaXplore hierarchy.

Anticipation had its place her, at the present moment, Sara came through the operations center located at the very top of the center section of Apollonia. This area served as a hub for engineers, scientific researchers, and mechanics. The center section was also the location for the communications array with array antennas and reflector antennas used in satellite telecommunications.

She crossed over to the opposite side of the high-ceilinged control room from the wide viewscreen; and trudged onward towards the double doors which led to a communications station in the connecting adjacent room, where Sara spent most of her time.

As soon as the doors opened, she entered. She crossed to her cubicle work station, framed with mahogany and backgrounded by a sweeping mural of the Milky Way Galaxy, with a bipedal humanoid robot covered in thick, glistening white armor robot falling into step behind her.

Before she could sit down, the robot said in a robotic voice, "A happy launch day to you."

"Greetings to you, Triphenia" she said as she sat down in the chair in front of station.

Since beginning her assignment on Apollonia, in less than three days Triphenia had become an invaluable assistant to her.

Her console blinked to indicate *Themis*' robot Captain Ronzu had sent over the starship's flight plan report.

Most of the mechanics were in the docking bay assisting the *Themis* starship, built with technology for intergalactic travel. The mechanics, named for their original conception for making repairs more often than not, were highly intelligent humanoid robots that would operate the starship for a yearlong mission of deep-space exploration.

"Standby," Sara said, not bothering to look up from her console.

Along the length of the console were touch-screen controls. She entered her reply.

The station's intercom announced, "Attention Apollonia personnel! *Themis* is leaving the station. Repeat. Themis is leaving the station."

"I'm going to watch the ship," Sara said, pushing back from the desk and rising to her feet. "You coming with me?"

Triphenia hesitated and looked over one shoulder, then shrugged and started to move. "Yes, right away."

They passed the monitoring room, which was busy with a final diagnostic scan of *Themis*' systems. This room, with a main viewscreen at its front and three slide-out seats with additional standing room in the center, was the focus for the mission. Another door on the other side of the room afforded easy access to the other parts of the station.

In the operations center, they stood beside the wide viewscreen, which held the image of the docking area. From here, one could easily oversee the docking and

departure of visiting shuttles from Earth. Together, they were existing through the largest watched event in human history.

Instrumentation flared to life on *Themis*. With a heavy, sonorous gong, the docking clamps receded and the starship's hull was free of its hookup to Apollonia.

Sara caught her breath as she watched *Themis* edge out of the docking bay and glide into space.

PROOF

Chapter 3

A POST-LAUNCH celebration was happening in the rotunda of the executive tower of the headquarters of GalaXplore in Reno, Nevada. Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine, robotics engineer Xi Bing Jiang and his wife Suki, twelve board members, high ranking executives who played key roles in making this mission a reality, and half a dozen robots were among the more than one hundred guests in attendance.

Along with almost everyone in the world, they had all just watched the starship *Themis* depart Apollonia Station through the 50-story tower's 100-foot high transparent glass-dome above the rotunda.

"You look dapper in that suit," Suki said to her sharp-dressed husband.

With cropped hair and dressed in a gray pin-striped suit, Xi Bing Jiang carried himself with quiet confidence. Wire-

framed glasses rested low on his nose, which gave him the appearance of a university professor rather than the architect of sophisticated humanoid robots, which he was. His expression rarely betrayed much, but the smile tugging at his lips revealed unmistakable pride.

Flattered, Xi said, “And you are looking quite fetching in that sequence dress.”

He led Suki across the marble floor straight into the thick of the crowd. Instrumental music floated through the air, while waiters in tuxedos navigated through the guests with silver trays of champagne flutes and hors d’oeuvres. Every few minutes, someone looked up through the dome, as though hoping to catch another glimpse of *Themis*, but the starship had been gone for quite a while.

Jiang’s eyes passed over the crowd and then came abruptly to Chairwoman Rhine, who was standing at the center with a flute of champagne in her hand, accepting congratulations with the formality that was her professional trademark. A true professional, at sixty-two, she was sincere in her work. Her graying dark brown hair was swept into a neat twist at the back of her head. A diamond and platinum brooch — depicting the GalaXplore emblem — rested on the shoulder of her midnight-blue pants suit over a white blouse.

“Can I take your glass and get you another?” asked one of the mechanics suddenly standing behind Chairwoman Rhine.

"Take this flute," she said, grinning from ear to ear at the sight of the robot. "But don't bring me another. One glass of champagne is all I allow myself."

"Are the mechanics working the party?" Suki asked her husband.

"They aren't supposed to be working," he answered with a peculiar look. "But they're robots. It's in their programming to make themselves useful."

The mechanics stood at six feet tall. Their faceplates resembled robotic faces, with optical sensors for eyes and their mouths a grimacing line.

Standing with Suki in the center of the room, Xi Jiang beckoned a waiter, plucked two flutes of champagne from his tray, and handed one to Suki before shooing away the waiter.

Raising his drink and his voice, his gaze shifted to Rhine, "I toast you, Madame Chairwoman. Thanks for believing in my work as a roboticist."

Chatter, laughter and the clinking of crystal echoed through the vast rotunda. Suki joined in with everyone else, smiling politely. One executive after another stepped forward to congratulate the chairwoman. At the end of the party, Suki's demeanor had changed and she was trying hard not to give in to outright boredom. Fortunately, the party was brief.

While GalaXplore employees celebrated their success, critics of GalaXplore and supporters alike, especially individuals in the space science community, took to the media to lambast the wisdom of the robots in space. What

were the chances of these robots finding extraterrestrial life?

For centuries, including this one, astrophysicists have argued that only humans possess life. An oxygen-rich atmosphere, dry land, and concentrated ores was the requirement for organic life. Were there more planets like Earth?

Furthermore, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in discussing astrobiology, the rarity of life in the universe, reckoned that intelligent life "is probably extremely rare and isolated on far-flung islands of life, like a celestial Polynesia."

Dawkins uses the geographic metaphor of Polynesia — a subregion of Oceania made up of more than 1,000 islands scattered across thousands of miles of empty ocean — to describe the cosmos.

Additionally, because the laws of physics restrict biological or physical matter from traveling across massive distances, Richard Dawkins argued that if advanced alien civilizations ever made contact, it wouldn't be through spaceships. Instead, communication would be via radio waves or other light-speed electromagnetic signals traveling through the cosmos.

The Board of Directors and executive staff of GalaXplore, including Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine, unanimously decided that *Themis* would not travel to Earth's nearest extrasolar red dwarf star called Proxima Centauri, 4.22 light years away. The scientific plausibility that Proxima Centauri had planets made it the obvious

choice. In conclusion, GalaXplore executives believed that part of the Alpha Centauri system of stars didn't have any inhabited planets.

PROOF

Chapter 4

FAR BEYOND Earth's atmosphere, Apollonia Station resembled a massive metallic wheel, orbiting against a backdrop of stars. Earth drifted below like some bright toy, wrapped in brilliant bands of oceans interspersed with geometric shapes and swirling white clouds constantly on the move.

Shari Haynes, the Director of the mechanics Systems Laboratory at the GalaXplore manufacturing plant in China, had overseen the launch of *Themis* from the operations center. She was still in the control room at the engineering console, viewing the visual sensor data *Themis* transmitted to the wide viewscreen after its departure. At her side was a mechanic, who usually operated the console to oversee critical systems, such as life-support and power generation.

Chairwoman Rhine insisted that Shari be on the station as a high-ranking GalaXplore representative had to be there during the launch.

"The party in Reno can spare one executive," Rhine had said. "This launch cannot."

And Shari had agreed without hesitation and wasn't bitter about it.

Shari turned her attention toward the elliptical windows around the top of the operations center. There was a view of the exterior docking bay, which featured three landing pads for small crafts, additional to the four docking ports on that upper level. The loose-fitting black standard-duty GalaXplore jumpsuit with silver piping contrasted strikingly with her pale, flawless skin. She had long blonde hair and sparkling ice-blue eyes.

She started to visualize many of the possibilities of how the mission could go wrong. What could possibly go wrong? For one thing, if the robots aboard *Themis* malfunctioned, the mission would be a disaster. Secondly, *Themis* might get sucked into a black hole and be obliterated. Even now, with her mind wandering, she was trying to forget the many what ifs.

Standing to her right, the mechanic beeped and its eye-lights blinked pleasantly. And as simply as that, she came out of her reverie with a sigh and glanced at him. The robot managed a grin and she nodded a farewell.

Now that *Themis* was heading for uncharted territories in outer space, Shari wanted to check in on Sara Masters. She walked over to the double doors on the opposite side of

the room to the connecting room of the communications station.

The monitoring room hummed with electronic activity. Her eyes briefly slipped to the main viewscreen, tracking the progress of *Themis*. Triphenia was standing in the center of the room, scrolling through pages of documentation on a small data pad in her hand. While Sara Masters was at her workstation, peering at a console.

"May I interrupt?" Shari's voice boomed out.

Sara hadn't heard her approach, but suddenly Shari's body was silhouetted beside her. For a moment Sara felt as if she would fall backward, and she rested her forearms on her desk but hardly looked her way.

"Certainly," came Sara's one-word reply.

"I'll get right to the point," Shari said, the tension in her voice foreshadowing what would come next. "I know I don't need to remind you how much is riding on this mission. We can't afford any mistakes. On a sensitive mission like this, it will be up to you to see there aren't any problems."

Shari's voice fill her ears again, and Sara's heartbeat thudded in her ears, and would have been the same had she slapped the side of her face with a big wet fish.

Making eye contact, seemingly unhinged by her statement, Sara said. "I know."

Buying into the confidence with which she asserted, Shari said evenly. "Glad we got that straight."

In reality, Sara was terrified of making a mistake. She was less certain how she would handle a large problem by

herself. A part of her wasn't ready for that. And yet she knew that what she lacked in confidence, she made up in actual skill, with quickness and efficiency. She held onto that belief ferociously, and it had gotten her through her years at GalaXplore.

In the monitoring room, Triphenia started to say something, but Shari ignored her. Without a wave or any shift in her expression, Shari walked past her, completely ignoring her presence, disappearing through the door on the other side of the room, leading into another part of Apollonia. The robot's expression clearly indicated her befuddlement.

Before turning her attention to the main viewscreen, Triphenia muttered something that sounded very much like: "Never mind, them."

Sunlight played across the polished metal corridor floors of the station. Feeling strangely peaceful, Shari had gone off down the long corridor leading toward the station's guest quarters. Only then did she realize how exhausted she was. She had been working nonstop since yesterday morning, after arriving on a company shuttle.

Shari tapped the door controls of her quarters, the doors whispered open, and she found herself in a room modestly furnished.

First thing she did was sit on the perfectly made bed. She glanced at the framed picture of her daughter Alexandra on the bedside table, which she took with her everywhere she traveled. Tomorrow, she would be leaving on the shuttle to China.

25 . The Out World

She stood up to go to the bathroom opposite a wide oval window that overlooked Earth. Then, she put on her sleep clothes. Half an hour later, she was asleep.

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Chapter 5

TWO DAYS LATER, at the GalaXplore manufacturing plant in the Chinese province of Guangdong, Shari Haynes was pacing the length of her office, her movements stiff. She had worked at GalaXplore for over fifteen years in areas of robotics. Her bachelor's degree in applied mathematics was from Texas A&M University, and her Master of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering was from RWTH Aachen University in Aachen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Besides designing motion planning algorithms for many classes of robots, she assessed the mobility and communication skills of each Mechanic and gave them tasks to perform.

The beautiful 5'8" fifty-five-year-old had blonde hair, icy blue eyes, and a nice figure. She was divorced with one daughter in the States. Her most distinct feature was a ridge

along the right side of her forehead, which she'd grown accustomed to covering it up with her hair.

"Knock, knock," said Xi Bing Jiang as there was no door, but a doorway to the office.

Shari stopped in her pacing to look at him. He wore a pristine white lab coat, open at the front to reveal a yellow dress shirt and black tie. Her eyes pierced him, like a mouse before a cat.

"There's no door, but obviously you never get tired of that joke," she said with a frustrated groan, sat in the oval chair at her workstation to access her console and adjusted her navy blue blazer and the ruffles on her white blouse beneath.

There was nothing he could say to that. He only nodded and went into the office.

Jiang had B.S. and M.S. degrees in Engineering from Vanderbilt University. The Mechanic's founder, he hailed from Hong Kong and was the son of a doctor and teacher. He had dreamed of humanoid robots that reflected our image from when he was a kid, and he spent a good deal of his childhood building model robots and wondering how to make them better.

"I've finally figured out why some of the mechanics talk on top of each other, or talk very fast," he told her with a grin.

"You've told me that before," she said and sighed as she entered a few custom settings into the console.

"I just had a hunch," he said as he stepped around the workstation to stand over her, looking far too interested in

the words he saw on the screen in front of her, but he carried on talking.

"It turned out I was wrong. But this time, I'm sure," he said, and put on his most serious face.

"Go on," she said, glancing up at Jiang, and frowning faintly at her console.

"Their behavioral programming is corrupted for reasons beyond their control. The defect is preventing the Mechanic to wait for the other Mechanic to finish talking. I need to run a diagnostic on those defective mechanics. If I'm right, then all I have to do is upload new behavioral programming into their communications subroutines to immediately pause once another Mechanic starts speaking."

"It all sounds plausible," she said. "Just make sure you don't create a "ping-pong effect," in their back-and-forth dialogue, such as hiccups in the flow of their conversations."

"I'll do my best, Shari. And I could use your help rounding up the defective mechanics on Apollonia the next time you visit there. Sadly, the defective ones aboard *Themis* can't be recalled."

"It will be a tight squeeze in that space shuttle with those mechanics aboard," she said with dry humor.

They both laughed.

But then she looked at him like he was overstaying his welcome.

"Suddenly, I'm craving a cup of Oolong tea. Have a wonderful rest of your day," he said and left quickly.

"Computer take a memo. To Chairwoman Rhine, Reno." She paused to gather her thoughts. "Watching *Themis* take off from Apollonia was a most remarkable experience. If extraterrestrial life is out there, *Themis*' chances of finding it are good-real good. Sincerely, Shari Haynes."

Two hours later, Shari was taking a break, rubbing eyes that were tired from staring continuously at the display screen of the computer. She decided to get some lunch and left her office.

A narrow, short corridor painted in a shimmering crimson hue led to a service elevator. The left wall consisted of a panoramic window. From here only the edge of the east bank of the Pearl River estuary could be seen.

She pressed the elevator button. But her eyes were on the sky through the window, and her thoughts turned to Apollonia. In a way, she envied Sara Masters, who was the eyes and ears of the *Themis* mission for GalaXplore's interests. Shari didn't want to find out why she hadn't been chosen for that job. But now that the decision had been made — Shari had every intention of supervising it, and dealing with Sara just as she did with any other employee. Sure, Sara had shown herself to be efficient in their last encounter. Usually, she didn't just speak her mind. But she wanted to make her feelings clear to Sara, the novice technician who she had no faith in whatsoever and who'd been at GalaXplore for less than ten years.

The prospect of going back into space again had excited her. She looked forward to her visit to Apollonia with great

optimism. That was her final thought before the bell sounded as the doors opened, and she took the service elevator down to the break room.

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Chapter 6

IN THE twenty-first century, the city of Reno was known for its flourishing gambling industry and was called the "Biggest Little City in the World." With a vibrant culture, nightlife and casino scene, Reno's skyline was visible from miles away, looked like a mirage, a glowing oasis of neon lights rising from the barren desert landscape.

Inevitably, Reno's geographic location was susceptible to earthquakes. The worst came in 2103. Reno experienced a devastating earthquake during one morning in early November. One big shock registered 8.1 on the Richter scale. There were about ten sharp aftershocks throughout the morning. Every building in the downtown casino district had major structural damage. These buildings were eventually demolished rather than repaired, except the handful of glittering casino-hotels near the Reno–Tahoe International Airport. In the process, many thousands of

residents relocated and Reno's revenue became hopelessly inadequate.

Roughly forty years since the big earthquake, buildings had been replaced by modern architecture And the post-renewal downtown attracted another industry. GalaXplore, a rising authority for interstellar scientific research and development, planted itself there. It went without saying that spacecraft navigation, quantum-propulsion systems, artificial intelligence systems, and data analysis was a different world altogether.

At six o'clock in the afternoon on September 22, a week since *Themis* had left Apollonia station on its exploratory expedition, Lisbeth Rhine was sitting in her office in the executive tower, its glass shimmering against the fading sunlight. Her reading status reports and intelligence briefings about a number of things the mechanics would do on this mission had left her feeling optimistic.

It was clear that where there was intelligent life, there would be technology. The robots aboard *Themis* were instructed to track space debris, such as pieces of broken-up satellites. The discovery of such objects floating in space was proof positive of an advanced form of life.

The mechanics were going to have their hands full on this mission. They were also programmed to single out biosignatures, ranging from microbial to technologically complex. They ought to act on the assumption that all living organisms used metabolic processes to acquire and utilize energy, generating gas byproducts. In the realm of radio astronomy, the robots were also instructed to scan

interstellar radio frequencies for alien radio signals coming from distant exoplanets.

She got up from the chair behind her desk and stretched her arms up high in the air. After a yawn, she smiled with satisfaction and pushed back her chair.

As she headed toward the elevator, she thought about the reason GalaXplore's team of astrobiologists unanimously recommended to the board of directors to direct Themis toward a wormhole that had recently been discovered near the planet Saturn. Theoretically a tunnel, a wormhole offered a shortcut through space-time-travel in order to explore a distant galaxy, otherwise called "The Out World."

GalaXplore's astrobiologists, who study life on earth, all life in the universe, and the origin of life, coordinated research from the information about life elsewhere in the universe. Feeling time was of the essence, the astrobiologists expressed their concerns that the wormhole might be unstable and might close by itself.

The elevator doors opened and Rhine stepped in.

An alternative destination considered was the Andromeda Galaxy, the closest spiral galaxy to the Milky Way. Also known as Messier 31 (M31), this distinct galaxy had been targeted for extragalactic planet hunting.

The problem was that a spaceship traveling at or near the speed of light would take somewhat around two million years to reach Andromeda, which is roughly 2.5 million light-years away from Earth. In actual, a light-year (a unit

of length of distance traveled by light in a year), which equals 5.88 trillion miles.

Then, there was Proxima b, an Earth-sized rocky exoplanet orbiting Proxima Centauri, the closest known star to the Sun. Located about 4.24 light-years away in the Alpha Centauri system, Proxima b orbits within its star's habitable zone at a close distance. Yet, Proxima Centauri was a red dwarf M-type flare star, or extrasolar planet that blasted its surroundings with harsh X-ray and UV radiation.

GalaXplore's team of scientists debated whether the planet could support life, much less hold onto an atmosphere. In conclusion, a careful inspection of Proxima b's gravitational pull revealed it was experiencing a lot of X-ray radiation and a strong stellar wind, which made it less ideal for life.

Rhine's elevator reached the ground floor of the executive tower. A lobby was passed in leaving the rotunda, as the chairwoman headed toward the main entrance. She had a commanding presence for an average height woman, plus strong principles, as the head of the world's leading space agency, with its policies and programs that influenced others. No doubt this was a position she didn't take lightly.

Even so, Lisbeth Rhine was working under the auspices of GalaXplore's board of directors, who'd considered a hostile alien encounter. The mechanics aboard *Themis* were programmed to respond. Not only was *Themis* built to withstand most atmospheric disturbances, but its tactical abilities were superior, well-armed, with an arsenal of torpedoes. Up to eight torpedoes could be launched

simultaneously from one launch tube. And the weapons room on the starship contained twelve, big rifles, which fired laser beams in varying hues, capable of punching straight through armor and organic matter.

Before stepping out of the executive tower building, she waved goodbye with a brief smile to the security guard stationed near the entrance. Mere seconds later, she disappeared around to the other side, heading toward the parking lot.

PROOF

Chapter 7

WITH A faceted front end and an oversized angular stern, the sleek starship *Themis* was drifting in the velvet expanse of space, an abundance of stars surrounding the starship on all sides. Steadily the ship was on course for a naturally occurring wormhole located midway between the planets of Saturn and Jupiter, but nearer to Jupiter's outer gravitational boundary.

On the gleaming black bridge, Captain Ronzu watched the black ocean of space through the starboard viewport in front of him. Behind him, standing at the science station, his first officer or next-in-command was engrossed in some task scanning through data. The other mechanics around the bridge peered intently at their monitors and screens.

The forward-facing bridge was located in the bow of the 384.66 meters long starship and provided control of all the main systems from ventilation to engines. It was well-lit

with two consoles to the right and left of the command area where the captain issued orders.

In the center of the two level room was the station of the captain, directly below a skylight in-between the lighting panels in the ceiling. A semi-circular section in the rear facing wide viewing windows was separated from the command area by a railing.

Captain Ronzu was a hulking robot and stood slightly taller than the other mechanics. He had a thicker figure, like he was modeled on a muscular human form.

“Report your computations,” the captain said in a rich baritone voice to the science officer at his station.

“All systems are functioning properly. Based on my analysis, we are expected to reach the planet Jupiter in three standard says,” the science officer said, sounding like his voice came out of an audio digitizer.

“Very well, indeed,” said the captain, who flashed his optics at him before returning his attention to the viewport.

Elsewhere on the ship, two mechanics were huddled in the far corner of a corridor, engaged in a rather animated discussion.

“I say gravity is a fundamental force by which masses attract one another,” said the robot, the T-18 designation number etched in black into the polished surface of its shoulder plate highly visible.

The mechanics were sent out into the society with a designation number printed in black on their shoulder plates. At a glance, this number was the only thing that told them apart from the other mechanics.

"I say gravitation is the force of attraction existing between all matter. For example, gravitation holds the matter in a star together," said T-12, crossly and its optics blinked going dark for less than a second.

In the next instant, T-18 spoke back to the robot, this time much louder, "I am programmed with numerous diagnostic skills, and can process enormous amounts of data."

For the briefest of moments, T-12 didn't say anything. Its head tilted right and then left, as if processing everything that had been said.

"We are programmed with the same data. You have the same knowledge as I have," said T-12.

They had no facial expressions with which to indicate their irritation. Only their posture and vocal tones revealed their frustrations. And the two of them started talking on top of each other, each determined to get their point across.

T-18: "I state that human Albert Einstein described gravitation as a curvature of space and time together—"

T-12: 'The gravitational attraction of the Sun keeps the planets in their orbits—"

Some mechanics stopped briefly to watch them. They eyed them with confusion. While other mechanics ignored them, walking past as though they did not exist.

To their bad luck, their voices carried easily up to the captain's Third-In-Command Leanotia, who had entered the adjacent corridor. She halted, turned and looked down the corridor in which they stood. Appearing so engrossed in

their conversation, neither of them had noticed the second officer stopping to investigate.

The second officer's synthesized female voice barked out, "You two have no business here."

Both mechanics froze in mid-sentence, mouths gaping. In unison, their heads turned in the direction of where the second officer was standing ten feet away.

Breaking the silence, Mechanic T-18 held up his arms as if it he'd been struck by lightning and asked, "Sir?"

"Cease this idle chatter and tend to your duties. If either of you create any disturbances aboard this starship, you will both be powered down for storage for the duration of the mission!" the Third-In-Command said, frustration giving her voice an edge.

T-18 and T-12 exchanged a look with the second officer, who glared at them and gestured down the corridor.

Both robots nodded their heads. Together in silence, the two mechanics paced away from her, moving down the corridor. They turned the corner into a cross-corridor that curved.

Leanotia read her handheld pad's display. She tapped on the pad, her metal fingers clicking softly on the glass of the screen of the complex device, manipulating data readouts.

Before exiting the corridor, the Third-In-Command took a quick look around itself and noticed a small, boxy droid, capable of limited communication in whistles and beeps, ambled into the corridor. It was a maintenance droid, which performed tasks, such as vacuuming the air vents. It

sent off a serious of beeps and whistles, ignoring the second officer completely.

"Hmm," Leanotia said, watching the droid with a lift of its head, before stalking down the corridor.

PROOF

Chapter 8

CHAIRWOMAN RHINE sat at the head of the long oval glass table of the large, gray-walled conference room at GalaXplore headquarters. She was the only one there at the moment, awaiting the start of the meeting. There were ten black leather chairs around the table that dominated the north side of the room. A window dominated a large wall with a view of Reno's notable turn-of-the-century edifices, which stood out sharply against the high backdrop of the blue sky. The wall across the window had a large reproduction of GalaXplore's infinity-like logo, that looked like a cross between an infinity symbol and two linked horseshoes, mounted on it. The right wall behind the chairwoman had a large viewscreen mounted on it.

Rhine took in the unparalleled view for a moment, before shadows fell across the table. She turned to watch five key members of the Board of Directors file into the

room from the glass door opening then closing to take their seats. One of them was a starch-looking middle-aged man, who Rhine noticed was slow to take a seat. He wore his authority the way he wore his tight brown three-piece suit and narrow tortoiseshell glasses, officially, yet naturally.

"Chairwoman Rhine," he said, extending his hand to her.

"Jay Strobel," Rhine said, wearing a two-strand pearl necklace and a black velvet pants suit with a ruffled pink blouse that suited her full figure, smiled and half-rose from her chair, taking his hand and then gestured toward an empty chair across the table.

The four other board members exchanged greetings. They all knew each other and were cordial.

Once the pleasantries were out of the way, Rhine said, "This will be a short briefing."

Wasting no time, Strobel spoke first. "Where is the *Themis* starship?"

Pushing back from her seat, Rhine stood and keyed commands into the tabletop interface and had the computer bring up a projected path the ship had taken. They stared at a star chart with a detailed projection of the pattern of *Themis*' movements across a starfield at their present speed on the viewscreen.

Gesturing at the star map, Rhine said, "The blinking yellow dotted outline marks the location of *Themis'* current position in-between Jupiter and Saturn, which is on its trajectory toward the wormhole opening and out of the Milky Way Galaxy."

Another board member straightened the cuffs of his white shirt, the diamond cuff links sparkling at his wrist, and asked, “How many days will the robots on *Themis* be studying Saturn’s unique ring system?”

“Besides taking photographs, the mechanics will document the minerals and gases in the atmosphere of Saturn and collect mineral samples from for analysis over a period of four days. They will transmit a complete report and receive updated orders from Apollonia Station,” Rhine said.

“When is that Italian engineer named Dale Something, arriving at Apollonia Station?” Everyone turned to look at the slight, bearded board member, who shrugged.

“Dale Lionetti,” she answered, meeting his gaze with her crystal-blue eyes. “The Italian robot engineer recently appointed chief engineering officer will first come here for a briefing to discuss his position. He will then meet with Jiang in China. A day or so after that, he should arrive at Apollonia, where he will man the engineering station in the operations center.”

“What is that?” Strobel then pointed to a spot past the wormhole and said, “It looks like a nebula.”

The Chairwoman willingly expanded that section, keying in another command into the tabletop interface, and shook her head. With that part enlarged, they could see a silver swirl not far from *Themis*’ path.

“Correct me if I am wrong, but that’s a comet with a brilliant tail,” the bearded board member pointed out, putting his chin on his hand.

"Yes, you are correct," Rhine said. "Periodic comet 220P/McNaught, to be precise. It is brighter than second magnitude and appears every 5.5 years or so. It's nothing to worry about. The comet is not in the ship's path. So, *Themis* won't be thrown off course by the shift in gravity."

"Will the mechanics on *Themis* retrieve samples from the comet?" Strobel asked with cool interest.

"That's a good question," said Rhine. "The mechanics aboard Apollonia are keeping a close eye on the comet. According to their calculations, the comet was approaching one of Saturn's moons, slowly emerging from the shadow of the wormhole. In other words, the comet is traveling in the opposite direction of *Themis*. So, the comet will not be investigated. I had nothing to do with the decision."

Before Strobel could react to that, the bearded board member asked, "Is the threat of an attack from more advanced alien races from "The Out World" a real possibility? What about protection for Earth? Can the Apollonia station defend Earth from a coming invasion by another alien species?"

The questions drew looks from around the table. Rhine hid a smile, but a quirk of her mouth gave her away, and a chuckle could be heard from the direction of Strobel's downcast face, his brow furrowing down the middle. The bearded man sank back into his chair, the embarrassment visible on his face.

"We all know the stakes here," Rhine said, pointedly; for, whatever her own private opinions regarding an alien attack were, she never disclosed in the presence of the board

of directors. “If forced to, Apollonia possesses the firepower to defend itself and Earth. I just hope it doesn't come to that.”

Nonchalantly, Rhine checked the time and sighed; the meeting was running over its scheduled time and creeping into the time she had between two other meetings. There was much to be done.

The chairwoman got up from her seat and continued, “If nothing else, it’s a wrap for today.”

The meeting ended. As the board members left, Rhine spared one last glance through the window before she exited.

PROOF

Chapter 9

FROM THIS MORNING, going forward, Sara Masters was too eager to prove herself to her superiors, putting her talents fully to use. She looked sharper than ever in her best up-to-date GalaXplore uniform. Concern showed in her brown eyes. She knew everything was riding on her ability to conduct the *Themis* mission. Her whole future with GalaXplore, where she had cast her career, was at stake.

Standing in front of her bedroom mirror, she thought back to the conversation she'd had with her father the day she'd been promoted to communications officer of the Apollonia station. A rush of excitement had made her feel as if she were about to explode with joy. To live and work in space was too great an opportunity to pass up.

47 . The Out World

I couldn't be prouder of you. You're going to a place few will ever experience, he'd said, on the phone, in Vancouver.

His words had stuck with her all this time. She had really appreciated his vote of confidence in her.

It seemed like she'd been on the right track. Even though she also remembered at the time how she wished she'd had more time to prepare because she wasn't one hundred percent confident in her ability to handle such a responsibility.

But the thoughts faded away, and she smiled, then looked down at her charcoal-gray uniform with a narrow bead of silver piping running along the seams, a white leather belt, and a red-and-gold embroidered patch on her left shoulder that spelled out "GalaXplore," as though seeing it for the first time. She reminded herself to breathe in, then out. She visualized releasing her doubts and fears. All these emotions, one by one, passed like shadows over her face.

More determined, Sara briskly exited her quarters located in the lower level ring of the three-ringed structure, which was connected by vertical elevators and crossover bridges. At the end of the hallway, she ambled up the sleek spiral staircase and into a corridor. It was her habit to take the long way to the operations center, the nerve center or main engineering deck of Apollonia. The faint hiss of air moving through the ventilation systems was a soothing reminder that the station was operating at peak efficiency.

Two mechanics were coming down the corridor toward her, scanning her features. One was female, she saw, the other a male. With every possible modern capability, but differently shaped, there was no difference between the materials used to construct male and female robots. She wondered if they were coming from the operations center. As they came closer, she smiled warmly. But they began to talk to one another, ignoring her. Scanning her was virtually unnecessary, and hardly any kind of greeting she expected. But she thought perhaps their programming hadn't been updated since their arrival to the station. She didn't think any more about it and carried on walking.

She went inside the control room and the doors sealed behind her. The soft beeping tones and the blue and orange blinking lights on the consoles of the variety of workstations for monitoring and diagnostic purposes. The science station was a key post that had direct access to the computer core for archive data retrieval, as well as for the analysis of long-range sensor readings from outside Apollonia. Three elevators arranged in a triangular pattern — one on either side of the room — provided access to other parts of the station.

All around her, mechanics were working at consoles and checking displays, each intent on carrying out the duties assigned to them. Some of them nodded a polite greeting to her as they noticed her watching them.

Without further ado, she stepped to the science console, just below one of the windows, which looked out on the gray, and seemingly lifeless moon. After tapping her hand

on its status bar, her fingers moved over the controls pushing and switching. She studied the results displayed in the terminal's viewing screen and took solace in confirming that *Themis'* current location was safely outside Saturn's massive gravity well.

Saturn's moons such as Titan, Iapetus, and Rhea provided gravity-assist opportunities for decreasing *Themis*' orbital energy for close-proximity observations at low speeds. However, maneuvering a starship within the Saturn system posed challenges for the ship's propulsion systems because the planet's large mass made orbit velocities high. the beautiful rings of the planet, which lay far too deep within the gravity well, were a spaceship collision hazard that yielded several zones where spaceships were prohibited from entering under any circumstances.

Sara stepped down to the engineering area and turned her attention toward the elliptical viewscreen. This display usually showed either a detailed plan of all monitored activity of Apollonia, such as scheduled maintenance; or a broader schematic of the incoming and outgoing space shuttles from Earth, for the purpose of their coordination to and from the station.

Behind her, one of the mechanics labored under the engineering station below the viewscreen. The bottom panel was off. And the robot was lying on the floor, his knees drawn up, making minor adjustments to the sensor arrays. This wasn't regarded as an unusual sight, as something was always being tweaked and tested.

Conduits lit up in blue in the correct sequence. The mechanic was satisfied he'd done everything he could and closed the panel.

"I checked the sensor arrays," the mechanic said to the mechanic nearest him at the engineering console. "The readings are accurate."

It was at this point Sara headed toward the pair of titanium-alloy doors which led to the communications station, with the monitoring room that served as mission control for the *Themis* mission.

PROOF

Chapter 10

THE DOORS slid open with a soft hiss. Sara had barely stepped through the doors when Triphenia, in a state of some distress, rushed up to her. Sara twisted around to the clink, clink, clink of metal on metal behind her.

"Good morning, Sara," the robot said urgently, lifting a small, thin data pad in her mechanical hand. "I have been monitoring the sensor readings on the bands of the hazy yellow and orange clouds made of crystallized ammonia striping the thick, upper atmosphere of Saturn's southern hemisphere. There are no indications of powerful cyclonic storms gathering. And the easterly wind speeds near the equator of the gas giant planet are in excess of 1,100 miles per hour."

With a voice designed to mimic that of a human female, Triphenia was her ray of sunshine. Her highly polished white exterior gleamed enticingly in the room's subdued

lighting. As a data analyst at the station, her primary duty was to provide useful information. Her routine observations and analysis was to prevent errors before they occurred, trying to inhibit them.

Her head tilted to look down at her hand as she handed the data pad to Sara, which she scanned quickly and handed back.

"Keep monitoring the sensor readouts," Sara said, nodding thoughtfully. "*Themis* will be circling Saturn in a lazy orbit for the next few days."

"I will do exactly that," Triphenia said, gave a reassuring nod to her as she stepped away.

Sara drifted to her cubicle. The room's white overhead lighting highlighted her face beautifully. The indicator light on the console was flashing a bright yellow glow. A subspace message had come in from *Themis*.

After a quick once-over she sat down in the metal and black leather ergonomic chair and tapped a control of her console. A moment afterward, the screen lit up with the GalaXplore logo above the words INCOMING TRANSMISSION — ENTER SECURITY CODE. She keyed in her access code. The GalaXplore logo faded from the screen and was replaced by the words "Greetings, Sara. *Themis* is parked in orbit above the planet Saturn."

Her fingers moved masterfully across the illuminated console. "Do you have anything to report?"

While she waited it occurred to her that *Themis* was a well-crafted starship but wasn't meant for any kind of strain. She was confident that Captain Ronzu knew how to

steer the starship well past Saturn's Roche limit, otherwise known as a "danger zone" inside the planet's ring system. The planet's tidal forces in the inner zone were strong enough to stretch a large moon until it fractured and prevent small bodies from forming a larger moon. GalaXplore scientists theorized that the rings might have been formed when a small body wandered too close to Saturn and was destroyed.

It took a full sixty seconds for the encryption. She hit another button to transmit the message to *Themis*. After sixty seconds more, the reply arrived.

"All the ship's systems are operating at optimal efficiency. Primary systems are functioning within normal specifications for our expedition in space.'

The report brought a glow of pleased satisfaction. She knew that all of the starship's systems were adjusted and monitored from a row of consoles in the engine room. But system's control capabilities could be transferred to the bridge in the event of an emergency. 790 million miles from Apollonia, if sensors, navigation or other systems had been damaged, *Themis* was capable of making planetary landings so the mechanics could make necessary repairs.

"Excellent, I look forward to receiving your full report on Saturn in a couple of days," Sara typed into the console and hit the "send" button.

With that, she terminated the transmission and the screen went blank and the GalaXplore logo appeared again.

It hadn't been much of a report. But then, there was little she could do at present moment. The way she saw it was

the mechanics on *Themis* were on an incredible journey into uncharted space. It was a great benefit for the mechanics to be conducting a thorough scientific study of Saturn and some of the planet's moons.

With regard to her monitoring of *Themis*, she would prepare a short report to GalaXplore Headquarters on the status of *Themis* systems, considering its proximity to Saturn. Her hands flew across the console, where she kept her attention, composing the log entry. Using the highest-level encryption algorithms, she sent it through GalaXplore's secure subspace channel to the chairwoman's office..

The submission was acknowledged within seconds.

For the next hours of the day, she created an entry log about her duties on the *Themis* mission, which was entirely up to her own devising. A stickler for detail, she outlined her expectations and what she hoped for her future with GalaXplore.

By the time it was six o'clock, she was tired of typing on the computer console. She left her cubicle and made her way into the monitoring room. There she jerked to a stop as Triphenia loomed before her. The robot was tapping on her data pad.

"Hmmm," Sara cleared her throat.

Triphenia turned to her quickly, eyes startled. "How may I be of assistance to you?"

"You've been working too many hours," Sara said kindly. "I suggest you go to the charging station."

“Understood,” Triphenia said in a flat tone. “"I will leave after I finish the review of the data on an internal diagnostic I ran.”

“Power-down mode will regenerate you, after all,” Sara said without thinking.

Now, that was a silly thing to say, she thought as she lumbered through the doors to the operations center.

PROOF

Chapter 11

DOWN ON Earth, around the same time, a bunch of mechanics were trundling around GalaXplore's Shenzhen plant's vast warehouse, moving small storage trunks and crates from one place to another and filling the space with noise. The robots were offloading four 15-foot commercial EV trucks lined up outside, where the humid air carried the light fresh scent of rain on the pavement.

Inside the warehouse, a Chinese man, Li Wei, according to the name-tag pinned on his gray flannel jacket over his light-blue overalls, deftly operated the controls of a small forklift truck, unloading storage trunks. A small data pad was tucked under his left arm. He was the plant's chief of operations who made decisions and policies throughout the warehouse, including supervising incoming and outgoing deliveries.

One of the mechanics, the S-99 designation number etched in black into the surface of its shoulder plate, was outside the warehouse stationed on the loading dock. S-99 was called by the name MahNaMah and was the chief's foreman. He announced news and patrolled the grounds, acting as the overseer of daily functions at the warehouse.

"Keep them coming," S-99 called out in a high-pitched synthesized male voice. A little too loudly.

The warehouse was cathedral-like in size and scope. Concrete block walls reinforced with steel beams were barely visible beyond the steel shelving units, in neat ordered rows from floor to ceiling, crammed with standard cube-shaped steel crates and black metal trunks. Empty crates were lined against the wall next to the loading dock. In the back of the warehouse was a pile of trunks yet to be sorted through.

The mechanics completed their offloading quickly. Three robots came out of the warehouse and closed up the backs of the trucks. The emptied EV trucks were plugged into an EV charging station located down the alley behind a garbage dumpster by their drivers. With Vehicle-to-Grid (V2G) capability, their batteries stored electricity to transfer it back to the grid.

Three mechanics padded over to investigate the trunks piled on the floor at the back of the warehouse. With his right hand, Li Wei guided the forklift backward, brought it to a stop near them and checked his computer pad.

He hopped off the forklift and started toward the mechanics, who had started moving the trunks aside.

Squatting down, he popped open the latches on one of the unmarked trunks..

“Machinery and computer equipment,” he said, and pointed to one of the shelving units on the opposite side. “Place this one over there and return here.”

The mechanic standing next to him picked up the trunk and hesitated for a moment, a seemingly self-aware act. But then, he took it away without so much as a word. It had only taken a couple of steps when a series of low-pitched beeps of affirmation caused him to look back with a puzzled expression in his eyes..

After a shrug, he looked down to see he was standing in front of a trunk marked for the MECHANICS SYSTEMS LABORATORY.

“S-88, deliver this to Xi Jiang in the lab,” Wei said to the mechanic standing behind him.

“More than happy to oblige, Mister Wei!” the robot exclaimed cheerfully, walked over, scanned the trunk and lifted it with both arms.

Wei found himself smiling; it was a pleasure working alongside humanoid robots that had personality.

S-86 scuttled over to one end of the warehouse, flipped open a panel on the wall and hit a switch. A steel door slid open with a deep metallic rumble. The warehouse and the superbly well-equipped laboratory were connected by a brightly lit access corridor, wide enough to allow cargo to pass through, which terminated at the door to the lab.

Meanwhile, Wei began discussing with the two other mechanics about where to store the empty crates against the

wall beside the loading dock. MahNaMah slammed a crate down on the floor somewhere nearby, drowning out their conversation. Eventually, the empty crates got packed like sardines on the shelving unit half filled with storage trunks at the far side of the warehouse.

In the metal corridor, S-86 was fifteen feet away from the door marked MECHANICS SYSTEMS LABORATORY. He walked past a robot cleaner, who paid him no attention as it mopped the floor, and tapped an access code into the door panel. The door swung open, and he moved through.

The well-equipped lab was quieter than the warehouse, and quite bright. The marble floor and ceiling were white. And its smooth, steel walls had clean lines. At the far end of the room, there was a floor-to-ceiling window wall, which provided long-range views to the space into which the GalaXplore building was nestled. It resembled the interior of a starship rather than a laboratory.

Moving past a partition, a shadow of a man in an office behind a glass door, which S-86 approached, came into view. The door opened automatically, and the robot stepped into the large lavish room, where two Asian art paintings hung on the walls. A large, crystal and jade carved cabinet was positioned against the wall, Atop the cabinet was the angular head of a humanoid robot, worn around the edges. Something unfinished about it.

At his workstation, Xi Jiang entered data into the console in front of him. The faint light from the console's display screen gave his black hair a slight glow. A magnified image of a tiny humanoid robot on a diagram

covered the screen. He sported a white smock over black slacks. The collar and lapel was folded back, exposing his throat.

"A delivery for you," the mechanic said in an upbeat tone, his metallic hands setting the crate on the floor.

"Wonderful," he said with a bright expression on his face.

S-88 nodded, and was gone, whirring and beeping.

Instantly, he got off the stool and crouched beside the storage trunk. He snapped the latches open. Protective foam surrounded tiny, clear plastic bags that were filled with wires, circuit modules, and slender metal ingots.

He lifted one of the bags. "Life has to start somewhere."

PROOF

Chapter 12

THE MECHANIC pilot in the cockpit of the shuttle made final readings, while the human copilot looked over his shoulder at Shari Haynes sitting a short distance behind them. “Stay seated. We’ll dock soon.”

“You got it!” she said and shifted in her seat.

At 40 meters in length, the latest-model Novum LX-2265 space shuttle with an arrowhead-shaped blunt nose, filled an important role for GalaXplore. This versatile, cutting-edge vessel served as personnel and cargo transport, and short-range scientific research expeditions. The shuttles were operated from the front cockpit section, outfitted with two flight control stations, typically by a crew of two pilots. The midsection was the passenger section, which contained two rows of ten light gray leather seats with punched ventilation holes trimmed with yellow piping. It had a large cargo hold at the rear. The Novum-class space

shuttle provided the main method of transportation for the people living on Apollonia station, providing enough room for twenty passengers.

Ten minutes later, the shuttle approached the station at cruising speed. Shifting forward, looking past the pilots, from her vantage in the front row of the dimly lit passenger section, she could see the excellent view above and to the sides of the space station floating in stationary orbit above Earth through the two front panoramic windows; the towering, steely dark curved pylon hung in the darkness between the countless sharp and bright, glinting stars.

"Apollonia, we're beginning our approach," the human pilot said into a mouthpiece that connected to his headset.

The monotone, staticky voice of a humanoid robot came over the cockpit speaker. "You are clear to land."

The robot pilot read the digital display on the instrument panel and edged the shuttle around to align with one of the duracrete landing pads of the exterior docking bay, touching down with a light thud. The human pilot flicked off some electric switches.

For a long moment nothing happened. And then the hatch of the shuttle rolled open along its track and rolled back into place behind Shari. She was the last one to strode down the ramp.

She had come here to collect the defective mechanics with corrupted behavioral programming and for an update on the status of the *Themis* starship. Which meant she would meet with Sara Masters. *Her least favorite GalaXplore employee*, Shari reminded herself.

She continued to the entrance way, where a security mechanic stood, passing a control room of sorts. The mechanic turned its head, flashing its eyes at her.

Her long blonde hair sported a French-braided ponytail tied back with a sequined scrunchie. A laminated picture ID badge was pinned on the breast pocket of her loose-fitting blue standard-duty jumpsuit with yellow piping and a GalaXplore embroidered patch on the right shoulder.

“Greetings, and welcome to Apollonia Station,” the robot said, took a step forward and checked her face against the ID.

“Greeting to you,” she said in a hurry, her eyes sharply toward the corridor in front of them.

The mechanic was still looking, and opened its metal mouth for yet another comment, but Shari was already halfway down the corridor. It closed its mouth, angled its head and issued a series of beeps and tones.

Shari walked the corridor, sensing the vitality of the station, her black boots gliding across the polished floor. After briefly stopping by her quarters to drop off her duffle bag, she headed directly for the operations center..

As she arrived there, nothing had changed in the way she felt about Sara Masters, but she gave little thought to how she would deal with her. It didn’t matter now, because she was already walking toward the double doors to the communications station.

The doors hissed open. As she was walking into the monitoring room, she almost bumped in Triphenia, who was walking out.

"Excuse me," they said at the same time, with voices expressing awkward surprise.

At the far end on the right of the monitoring room was the cubicle work station where Sara worked. Sara tapped at the console in front of her, She was about to call up details about the waves the small moons create in Saturn's rings when she noticed Shari Haynes lingering in the doorway, peering at her and wondering whether she should interrupt her.

Before Shari could launch a sarcastic comment, on what Sara attributed to her lack of social graces, she punched a button and the logo of GalaXplore appeared on the screen.

"Take the empty seat over there," Sara said in a robotic tone.

Shari's eyes grew big and she sat down. "Nice to see you too."

Her tone was tight and frigid.

"What can I do for you, Shari?" she asked.

"Let's spare the formalities," Shari replied, averting her gaze to stare at the mural of the Milky Way Galaxy behind Sara's head. "After all, we are busy women with lots of things to do."

Sara's one-word response emerged as calm and matter-of-fact in a manner as though she was voicing quite an ordinary fact. "Certainly."

"Calculate the position of *Themis*. There's a comet in the vicinity of Saturn. And see if you can calculate the distance between the starship and the comet," she said with her eyes fixed on Sara's console.

Their meeting was brief, just the way Sara wanted it. She knew that Shari harbored preconceptions about her, which she considered a snap judgment on Shari's part. Whatever differences in opinion or perspective they had, the truth was that Sara couldn't afford to show any weakness. The way she saw it was that her confident demeanor would keep Shari at bay.

Shari spent the rest of the day examining the many humanoid robots on the station. She tested and reset some of their vocal processors. By the time she was done, there were sixteen mechanics that would be coming back with her to China.

That night, in her quarters all of her personal possessions were scattered around. She had just unpacked and was now placing her clothes in the storage unit against the wall.

After changing into her sleepwear, she slipped beneath the covers of the bed and positioned herself for a night's sleep. And then she thought, right before she fell asleep, being here might affect her sleep. Not because the air in the room was chilly, but because sometimes it took a lot of effort to adjust to being in space.

PROOF

Chapter 13

AT FOUR-THIRTY the next morning, (UTC) Universal Time, Shari made her way to the commissary, where a hospitality female mechanic stood with her hands clasped behind her back motionless at the entrance. The female robot saw Shari approaching, her head bent as if in thought.

"Welcome to Apollonia's splendid commissary," the mechanic's synthetic voice chimed, startling Shari from her reverie.

But what was odd was that she could tell — or she felt she could tell — that the robot was scanning her in a methodical fashion, sizing her up. Weirdly though, not at all discomforting.

Waiting for her response, the mechanic was looming over her now.

“Are you going to let me pass or what?” Shari asked, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

For a long moment they locked eyes. A perplexed look crossed Shair’s brow as she thought she saw amusement in the robot’s eyes. And she wondered if this mechanic should be put on the space shuttle with the sixteen already there. Then, seemingly reluctantly, the mechanic moved to the side, gesturing her forward.

“Of course,” said the robot. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

Stepping forward, Shari waved a hand dismissively through the air

“Indeed,” the mechanic said, watching her walk through the double set of gray glass, sliding doors, which slid aside with a soft swish.

Shari pretended not to hear and stepped inside.

The hospitality mechanic returned to stand with her hands clasped behind her back beside the commissary entrance and waited for the next visitor.

Inside the medium-sized, robot-operated commissary, she read over the breakfast menu selections on the oversized blackboard behind the counter, where a female mechanic, a flowery apron around her waist, was standing. A glass-fronted refrigerator containing everything from cartons of milk and juice to bottles of water stood next to the counter.

She gave the mechanic her order of a steaming cup of coffee with milk and sugar, and a plate of French toast dusted with powdered vanilla sugar, and fresh strawberries.

There was only one table occupied out of the half-dozen tables in the room. She took a table in the back right corner. She was served by a mechanic, who dropped her order onto the table with a cheerful beep.

The robot wearing the apron went over and placed a mug of coffee and the breakfast plate on the table in front of her. “Wave me over when you want me to top of your coffee.”

“I will, thank you,” Shari said.

For a few moments, her eyes scanned the room. She was watching the only other person there, busily spooning eggs in his mouth. She recognized him as Bernard Heydrich, the space station’s maintenance crew chief in his dark gray coverall uniform and black utility boots. He supervised the menial tasks of maintenance and cleaning performed by the mechanics. She decided not to say anything to him.

Her hand disappeared into a pocket of her jumpsuit, and it returned with a small, computerized data pad. To fill the time while she ate, she checked a data readout on her pad.

After finishing her meal, she leaned back and sipped the last of her coffee, relishing the taste of the robust blend. She pushed aside her empty plate and stood from the table. A mechanic came and cleared the dishes from the table, and as it did so, it watched Shari crossing the room and the doors hiss open.

The doors hissed open and she hurried out. This time, she ignored the hospitality mechanic stationed at the entrance. She headed to her quarters to get her duffle bag, walking down a number of curving corridors.

69 . *The Out World*

The two pilots awaited Shari in the docking bay, where the space shuttle sat quietly. The second she arrived, the pilots stepped up the ramp into the shuttle, with her following close beside them.

No sooner had the pilots sat down in the cockpit, that they powered up the shuttle. While Shari sat stiffly in the front row of the passenger section. The shuttle felt crowded, because of the sixteen mechanics in the seats behind her.

The human pilot, seated in one of the flight control stations, studied the readouts for a few moments, verifying the shuttle's course for Earth, and velocity. Satisfied with the overall performance, he nodded to the humanoid robot seated next to him.

The mechanic pilot made a quick systems check, then announced over the cockpit speaker, "We're ready to launch."

And with that, the shuttle lifted off the landing pad, swung around and Apollonia dropped away.

Shari's eyes were focused on the two front panoramic windows. She leaned back in her seat. For the first time in weeks, she wasn't thinking about the *Themis* mission. She was thinking about her daughter, staring at the stars moving past the shuttle. Within two days, she'd be in Washington, D.C., where she would have a three-day break.

All of the sudden, one of the mechanics seated three rows behind her powered up. Shari turned her head at the sound of the robot half-raise its posterior from the seat. The mechanic raised its arms up, reaching for her, and then fell back into the seat.

That incident caused a peculiar sensation to stir in Shari's chest. Her sparkling blue eyes narrowed and she raised an eyebrow at that.

"I was under the impression all of you were powered down," she said quietly to herself.

Suddenly, the lights in the mechanic's eyes flashed on and it said in a cheery synthetic voice, "How may I assist you?"

There was something odd about that one, she thought as she rose from her seat. She went over to the mechanic, tipped its head forward, opened a side panel on the back of its neck, and pushed some buttons, turning the robot off..

Before returning to her seat, she gave that mechanic one last look for good measure. It didn't move. She sighed, turned and started back to her seat.

PROOF

Chapter 14

SLUMPING FORWARD on his stool at his workstation, Xi Bing Jiang was in his office in the Mechanics Systems Laboratory at four-fifteen that afternoon. There were beeps and tones from his computer console as he tapped several controls. He began reading over the latest progress report on the status of *Themis* and its position in space. It was sent earlier today via subspace radio from Shari Haynes, who was due to arrive here on a shuttle in about five minutes.

The propulsion systems of the space shuttle enabled it to move at a speed of 75,000 miles per hour or 0.0112 percent of the speed of light. The travel time to China from Apollonia station was approximately three hours and thirty minutes.

A low-pitched background noise heard over the intercom system was followed by a bass-like voice that had

no trace of emotion, “Attention all personnel. The shuttle is approaching the landing zone.”

Jiang slipped quickly out of his office, and headed down a side corridor, where the lights were dimmer. He walked past the partly open gray metal door of a maintenance closet before going through the entrance to the landing zone, a set of doors that parted ahead of him as he approached.

The space shuttle sat on one of the two landing pads directly ahead of him. A hiss, and the portside hatch swung open, and a landing ramp extended to the ground. Seconds later, Shari inhaled deeply as she appeared on the ramp, duffle bag slung over her shoulder. She looked frazzled. Slightly tousled blonde hair that looked like she’d been electrocuted and a smartphone stuck to her ear as she talked to her daughter.

“I’ll call you from the airport tomorrow,” she said, ended the call, and briefly glanced over her shoulder at the two pilots, who had come down the ramp behind her.

“Greetings, Shari,” Jiang said, rushing up to her.

She slipped the phone into her jumpsuit pocket and went right into it. “During the flight here, one of the mechanics came to life. And we experienced some mild turbulence in Earth’s atmosphere.”

“Don’t fret over it,” he said in a calming tone. “Take your leave now. I’ll get those mechanics off the shuttle and put them in the Diagnostics room. What time is your flight for Dulles, Virginia?”

“My fifteen hour All Nippon Airways flight leaves from Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport at six o'clock this

evening with a fifteen-hour layover in Tokyo, Japan," she said. "After I change my clothes in the bathroom, I'm going directly to the airport."

"Enjoy your time off — and let all this tension go," he said.

"I'll try," she said, and left in a hurry.

By five-o'clock, all sixteen mechanics were in the room, standing in clusters of four. They all looked identical. Jiang regarded them in silence. He studied them with an idle curiosity. In a way he couldn't explain, he felt in tune with them. He knew the precise location where their micro-processors lay. In fact, the mechanics were a wonderful extension of the computer itself, having the same kind of micro-processor.

The majority of the mechanics that comprised GalaXplore's workforce had the same chassis, a structural framework that supports all of their components. Nonetheless, about three dozen mechanics had a different types of chassis, due to their high-ranking positions, such as Captain Ronzu and Leanotia of *Themis*.

At the age of six, he dreamed of becoming a roboticist. One day in his early teens, he told his parents that he was going to be a robot scientist. He was fascinated at that time with scientists, who used scientific explanations and mathematics as a language to create solutions to problems.

Flash-forward years later, and here he was working in the field of Artificial Intelligence, designing humanoid robots for GalaXplore. He'd studied how humans walked, important for robotic locomotion control and autonomous

actions of the body, in order to build them. For his first prototype model, he constructed the robot with stainless steel for the arms and legs. He powered the joints with linear electrical motors, working in generator mode to produce energy, for mobility.

Rewind to the fifteenth century, when the idea of artificial life had captivated the imagination of scientist and artist Leonardo da Vinci. The Renaissance thinker's in-depth studies of human anatomy aided him to sketch out designs in a notebook of a human-like machine. This mechanical knight could wave its arms, move its head, and sit up, movements like a human. History hadn't revealed whether this "robot" was ever built. But there were those that believed the robot knight had been created for a pageant in Milan that Duke Ludovico Sforza had placed da Vinci in charge of.

Jiang went to the computer terminal studded with interface controls on a sleek, black desk in the middle of the room. Tapping in commands, he initialized it and ran a diagnostic.

In a way, he'd picked up where Leonardo da Vinci had left off. Extending far beyond the rapid processing of massive quantities of data, the mechanics were programmed with situational-awareness, which allowed them to reason and adapt to new tasks in a more human-like manner. Because high computation speed and low power consumption occurred simultaneously in these autonomous intelligent robots, their cognitive circuitry had been recently refined. The result was an improvement in their

memory that retained the explanatory interpretations that the mechanics constructed in learning. Still, their greatest weakness was their lack of a lively personality.

GalaXplore's new hire would be arriving soon. He left the computer terminal and headed to his office to wait.

PROOF

Chapter 15

AT A LITTLE after five-thirty that afternoon, Dale Lionetti came strolling into the Mechanics Systems Laboratory. He walked past the floor-to-ceiling window wall once. And then he turned around and walked past again, tossing a glance over his shoulder and taking in a quick view, before heading right to Xi Jiang's office.

At the sound of the door opening, Jiang raised his head from his workstation and turned to regard him. He smoothed out the wrinkles from his pressed white lab coat over his shirt and pants and eased himself off the metal stool to greet him.

"Welcome, welcome," Jiang said, breaking into conversation and shook his hand. "I trust your flight here was a pleasant one."

For the briefest of moments, Lionetti's eyes fell upon the head of the humanoid robot positioned in the center on

top of the cabinet. It reminded him how the humanoid robots were just pieces of aluminum with occasional rubber bits, having an artificial personality, but no soul. Well, at least that was the way he saw it.

Then he nodded and released Jiang's hand. "Yes, it was very fine."

With his Italian accent, there was a charming twist to his words, adding an "eh" to the end of all of the words. Lionetti was a tall dark-haired man in his mid-forties. Before he was hired by GalaXplore, he had worked ten years as an engineer for technological innovation for Leonardo S.p.A.., a major Italian aerostructures manufacturing research and development company. He tested, maintained and repaired the robots in the working in the company's manufacturing plant.

"First things first," Jiang said. "Let's go grab some coffee."

"Yes, I would like that," Lionetti said.

Jiang took him to a small cafeteria, where they spent thirty minutes or so. Then he took Lionetti on a tour of the facility, introducing him to the staff and various humanoid robots they encountered along the way.

Back in the Mechanics Systems Laboratory, it took Jiang less than a minute to escort him to a white, pristine room. There were sixteen humanoid robots standing in four neat rows, perfectly still.

"As you are well aware of," he continued, walking together out of the office. "the robots had originally designed to be factory workers."

As it happened, Lionetti had been hired as GalaXplore's chief engineering officer. Having the responsibility of overseeing the operations center on Apollonia station, suddenly thrust upon was something he was settling into that role.

"These robots require a diagnostic," he explained. "I'm going to be uploading a new behavioral program into their communications subroutines. Shari Haynes, the director of the Mechanics Systems Laboratory, pulled them off Apollonia station and brought them here on a space shuttle yesterday. She has since left for Washington, D.C., to spend time with her daughter."

"Such issues were to be expected of robots. They need routine maintenance, because their programming can get into tangles," Lionetti said.

"Dale, I'm sure you're eager to perform practical, hands-on robotics work," he said. "Perhaps you would care to assist me in reprogramming three of them."

"Sure," Lionetti said. "Let's get to it."

"Good. Good. I'm running a diagnostic now on the first one of the mechanics," he said with more enthusiasm than Lionetti really appreciated.

Swiftly, like he had done this a million times with his eyes closed, Jiang went through the motions of powering up the robot, which began a restart sequence of its system. It was instructed to walk to the computer terminal in the middle of the room. Then it was plugged into a port.

Lionetti studied the mechanic for a moment, comprehensively with the practiced eye of a true expert.

Robotic engineering had fascinated Lionetti since childhood. In his teenage years, he had dismantled household appliances and computers to see how they were put together. Following a distinguished academic career at the Sapienza Università di Roma, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering.

Twenty minutes later, the robot was fully functional according to the diagnostics. The next step was to upload the behavioral program.

Around 7:00 P.M., Lionetti was ready to go back to his nearby hotel. He glanced at the digital wall clock, before rotating his neck to work out the kinks.

“The space shuttle in the landing zone will depart first thing tomorrow morning,” Lionetti said. "A space station in Earth’s orbit can’t afford equipment failures or software errors because of some kind of hardware breakdown.”

“You’ll appreciate the flight, trust me,” Jiang said, his slanted eyes behind the tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles twinkled with joy. “The view of Earth is quite lovely from up there.”

“So, I’ve heard. As a matter of fact, I’m looking forward to it.”

Jiang folded his hands behind his back. "Apollonia depends heavily upon the mechanics. I’m confident your experience will prove invaluable. Something tells me you have a bright future with GalaXplore.”

“Thanks for your confidence in my ability to do well,” Lionetti said. “I’ll be in touch.”

With a spring in his step, the Italian left the room. For no particular reason, Jiang just stood there, still staring long after he was gone and out of sight. In the hours he'd spent with Lionetti, he felt this man, somehow, could be trusted.

PROOF

Chapter 16

AT 3:30PM, (EST) Eastern Standard Time, the doorbell rang at the Washington, D.C., off-campus, three-story townhouse, made of gray-painted brick, of Alexandra Haynes in the Georgetown neighborhood. The twenty-one-year-old was tucked into an olive green leather wingback chair with down-filled cushions in the snug but small, wood-paneled office. She looked every bit the student that she had been for the past two years, complete with her thick, light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, a blue-and-gray Georgetown University sweatshirt, black jeans, and black sneakers with white, rubber soles.

She opened the door to find her mother Shari standing on the other side of the door with a warm expression on her face. Her charcoal-booted feet on the doormat, she had on a matching thin, cream colored sweater and slacks under a charcoal-colored wool pea coat with ample pockets.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," Alexandra said and went in for a quick hug.

"It was beyond my control," Shari said, and walked inside. "There was a delay getting off the plane."

"I'm going to take you to one of my favorite places for lunch," Alexandra said, started walking toward the living room and raising her voice in return. "It's about a ten-minute drive from here. I'll just get my backpack and we can go."

Ten minutes later, Shari Haynes and her daughter were seated at a polished table at The Firebird Café They discussed amicably with each other about what they should eat. The wind rippled the Potomac River into ridges, which reflected the sun into the waterfront Russian cuisine restaurant near the Washington Harbour.

A considerable time had passed since their orders were taken, and their conversation paused as their waitress appeared. Their plates and iced tea were placed before them.

Shari leaned back slightly, before speaking, as if turning the conversation to business was as natural as breathing.

"In case you're wondering," Shari said pointedly, breaking the silence that had grown as they ate. "*Themis* is parked safely outside of the planet Saturn's ion radiation belts."

A frown shot to Alexandra's face. She looked up at her mother from her glass of iced tea, looking intensely at her, as if expecting her to say something more. But Shari was eating her lunch without saying another word.

“GalaXplore’s robot operated starship?”

“Yes,” Shari said, wondering what she was thinking as her brown eyes moved all over her face.

“That hadn’t crossed my mind at all,” Alexandra said, looking down at her plate and moving her beef stroganoff around with her fork. “Since the day I watched a report about *Themis*’ launch on the television news, just like everybody else.”

“Being on Apollonia, I got a good view of the starship,” her mother added.

Absently, Alexandra picked at her food. She wanted more than anything for her mother to be herself, but she also knew her mother’s dedication to her work.

“Did you come over here just to tell me that?” Alexandra asked.

Shari’s gaze softened. “I needed a break because I had been working nonstop since a little before the launch. Spending time with you was all I wanted to do on my leave time.”

“Mom, you know I don't share your enthusiasm for space exploration,” she said, and set her fork down on her plate.

“Yes, I know, honey,” Shari said, turned her face to the side, hiding her face falling in disappointment.

She picked up her fork again, pushed around some beef, while her mother waited a beat, then turned her face back again, wearing a pleasant smile.

"When I'm with you, I want to be with you. Not your work, but you. I'd just like to talk about something else," her daughter said in an endearing tone.

Shari's gaze flicked from one spot along the panorama outside the window to another as quickly as she could shift her eyes back. "You got it. Tell me about life at the university."

"Mom, I doubt if it's as interesting as your own life," she said in a quick, sharp way, but then softened her tone. "There's not too much to tell, I guess. I spend most of my time in the library. I get along with my professors. And at the start of the semester, which was about three weeks ago, my grade point average was 3.9."

"Have you given more thought about what you're going to major in?" Shari asked, forked a piece of her spiced salmon coulibiac and put it in her mouth.

"No, I still haven't decided on a major," her daughter admitted. "But I really like my public policy classes."

Just make sure I'm the first person you call when you decide," her mother said.

"You will be," Alexandra said. "Just hurry up and eat. We'll go back to my townhouse and I'll show you how to play this virtual game with stunning graphics called *Cyclonetics*. I think you'll like it, because there's lots of robots in it. And you'll get to meet my housemate, Gerilynn. By the time we get back, she'll have returned from her classes."

"Sounds like a plan," Shari said.

But her mother's mind wandered as she ate, going to Apollonia, the space station in orbit and *Themis*. Was Sara Masters doing her job right? *It was GalaXplore's good fortune that Dale Lionetti would be arriving at the station soon*, she thought as she took her last bite. Lately it was hard for her to be herself outside of work.

PROOF

Chapter 17

THAT NEXT morning at eight o'clock (UTC) Universal Time, Apollonia's chief engineering officer had made himself comfortable at the engineering station. Dale Lionetti began familiarizing himself with the engineering console, tapping a sequence of commands on the console's illuminated display screen. He had on a black uniform with a narrow bead of white piping running along the seams, and a red-and-gold embroidered patch on his left shoulder that spelled out "GalaXplore,"

"You should be getting the data now," he said, to the mechanic, standing at the science station.

The robot beeped an affirmative and blinked, reviewing incoming data. "I have it."

There were some mechanics working at their usual stations engrossed in some tasks, their metal hands flashing

across the consoles. While others moved around the room, stopping at stations and doing systems checks.

More data appeared on the console's screen. As if by instinct, he analyzed and reconfigured the software. And in just a matter of minutes, he rewrote power-distribution algorithms. By his estimation, he'd advanced Apollonia's operational technology by at least ten years.

His eyes turned from the image of empty space on the wide viewscreen to the elliptical windows encircling the top of the operations center. In the docking area, the space shuttle began the launch procedures. That shuttle was the same one he'd arrived on a little after 1:00 A.M. in the early morning. The shuttle shot into space and grew smaller as it moved further away from Apollonia.

His brown eyes were fixed back on his console. He checked the flow of deuterium through conduits and jointed pipes generated by the nuclear reactor that powered all systems on the station. Otherwise known as heavy hydrogen, deuterium was a fuel for nuclear fusion extracted from sea water. An isotope of regular hydrogen with an atomic weight of two, consisted of one proton and one neutron, it was held in four spin-coated aluminum arsenide storage tanks located at the bottom base of the station. Rotating continuously on its longitudinal axis, the station's thrusters maintained a slow orbit.

Lionetti heard something to his right and saw it was Sata Masters coming from the double titanium-alloy doors of the communications station. Triphenia was crossing the

room in measured strides, following her. The overhead light made the robot's white metal shell glisten brightly.

"Welcome to Apollonia, Dale Lionetti," she said, standing near the engineering station. "I was told that you would be arriving today. Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine asked me to give you her regards. My name is Sara Masters and this is Triphenia. We spend most of our time working in the communications station.

Triphenia assessed the man boldly, scanning him. And then she nodded a greeting to him but didn't speak and carefully kept her expression blank. The mechanic stood quietly, hands clasped behind her back. She watched the discussion pass to and fro among them. As she processed the conversation, eyes blinking on and off and rolling back and forward.

"It is very good to meet you both," he said, and indicated the operations center with a gesture. "I've come to know this area quite well. Running a space station isn't really that difficult."

At first glance, he seemed quite ordinary, but on closer inspection Sara could see the concentration of a mature man.

"I've compiled some reports on the *Themis* mission," she said, and held out a data pad.

"Excellent. I'll look it over right away," he said, giving her a broad smile.

"Great," she said, "I'm sure you have many things to take care of. Don't let us keep you."

Triphenia was the first to turn and walk away. This time Sara was following her.

For a moment longer than necessary, Lionetti watched the two of them cross the room, before he turning his head back. He turned the data pad's small display panel around and scrolled quickly through the detailed reports. It was full of files on the mission. And, he thought, what looked to be abbreviated summaries of reports about the starship *Themis*.

Triphenia and Sara reached the double doors to the communications station. Knowing he was out of earshot, the mechanic confided in her.

"I know Dale Lionetti is the right man for the role of chief engineering officer," the robot said melodiously, low and conspiratorially, yet not a shred of emotion passed over her features. "He will do the job just right."

Sara arched a brow in surprise as they walked through the doors and then her expression changed to one that could best be described as "well, okay." "That's a really nice thing to say. I'm sure he'd appreciate your opinion."

Lionetti set the pad down. He turned to his console, where he spent the rest of the day cramming through the station's log and other records. Only did he squeeze in lunch in the commissary in-between one-thirty and two-thirty.

As he left the control room, he walked past a mechanic standing in a corner console engrossed in its work. Every so often, the robot issued some beeps and clicks.

It wasn't long before he arrived at the junction of the lower level. He paused at the door to his quarters and tapped his access code into the panel beside it. The door slid open with a hydraulic whisper and he stepped inside the small cabin that would be his home now.

PROOF

Chapter 18

FOUR DAYS had come and went. *Themis* had had a specific orbital speed to maintain a stable orbit, preventing it from falling into Saturn, which had a powerful magnetic field interacting with electrically charged ring particles with a total magnetic energy around 540 times stronger than Earth's.

It was time for Themis to get back to the purpose for which it was built - exploration. Just when the starship began to break orbit a billion-ton clouds of magnetized plasma ejected from the Sun at a speed of eight million miles per hour collided with Saturn's magnetic field.

Four days ago, the Sun belched out a massive coronal mass ejection (CME). Deep inside the Sun's convective zone, large, dense gaseous clouds of solar plasma erupted from the outermost layer of the Sun's atmosphere, bursting free of the star's gravitational pull. The outward angle of

the resulting electromagnetic chaos to travel across the solar system toward Saturn, the sixth planet of the Sol System.

The space environment around Saturn transformed into geomagnetic storms and more radiation. Even worse, this "space weather" event induced plasma currents on *Themis'* hull. There was a sudden lurch as the starship rocked back and forth. The navigational thrusters froze. Momentarily the bridge lights faded, then snapped to full brightness and flicked from orange to normal coloration. All the while, the captain struggled to keep control of the ship, shifting its angle of flight.

To make things even more complicated, they were in the vicinity of the comet 220P/McNaught. No matter what the mechanics aboard the starship did to keep the ship together, they were magnetically locked in a position relative to the planet's magnetic lines of force.

Keeping station just outside gravitational "resonance" with the orbit of Saturn, Captain Ronzu pointed to the image of the moon Enceladus, orbiting inside the densest part of Saturn's E ring, on the wide viewport. But his Third-In-Command wasn't looking at him. She pacing the perimeter of the bridge.

Under the present circumstances, Leanotia, the most efficient mechanic on the ship, had been assigned to the science station behind him. The next-in-command was at her console in the engine room.

"What is our status?" the captain barked, stirring her out of her usual air of superiority.

“All the systems are operating normally,” Leanotia answered after returning to her station. “Our hull is intact, with no indications of damage.”

“How soon could the systems move the ship out of Saturn’s range?” the captain asked.

“I have no confidence that *Themis* could outrun this. The thrusters are limited to minor maneuvers, very capable of dodging the coronal mass ejection.”

Her voice processor had carried the kind of strength of her convictions, sounding like she was delivering wisdom to those less wise than her. She clasped her hands neatly behind her back. Despite the heightening tension of the situation, her posture projected a hauteur, testifying to her unwavering idiosyncrasies.

But the captain, having seen this temperament before, knew better and ignored her quirks. It all had to do with her belief that the ship revolved around the engine room. And that he had noticed how much she liked giving orders.

Concentrating on the ship and the mission at hand, he thought it over, then nodded. “Very well.”

A stoic disapproval graced the captain’s face. The impact of the CME had trapped *Themis*, possibly for two to three days, or even multiple days. Leanotia’s pale logics were persuading. Considering the nature of the eruptive solar phenomenon that confronted them, breaking away would be an ill-advised strategy. The option of retreating and accelerating toward the wormhole mouth was appealing, but it might unleash an even greater threat to the starship.

Captain Ronzu's dryly unemotional voice spilled from the overhead speakers of *Themis*. "High alert. Repeat. High alert. Mechanics, hold your positions. We will remain at red alert."

The minutes crawled by slowly. The silence on the bridge was intense. Until the captain heard something crack and tossed Leanotia a glance. She was cracking her metal knuckles. Her taking up his attention wasn't helping the situation. Maybe she knew *Themis* better than he did. He didn't care. Didn't she realize there was a reason she was stationed in the engine room? *This was going to be a long voyage*, he thought, as he turned away from her and looked out the viewport.

It was discouraging news to Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine, reading the report from Sara Masters. She wondered how come Dale Lionetti nor Shari Haynes didn't catch this, nor anyone else in GalaXplore, for the matter of that.

The ability to predict geomagnetic storms in outer space surrounding planets relied heavily on the ability to detect coronal mass ejection expelled from the Sun. On average, a major CME occured approximately every 150 years.

GalaXplore scientists went to work to prevent this from ever happening again. They examined coronagraph images of the outward rush of the mass ejection. A number of factors were taken into consideration, in arriving at their conclusions. The mass expelled from the Sun was outside of Apollonia station's direct line of sight, also taking into consideration its speed and trajectory. The quiet plasma

outburst spewing from the Sun at a super-fast speed slipped past remote-sensing instruments.

The end result was that the CME had caused an electromagnetic drag force that locked *Themis* into a temporary synchronous orbit with the planet Saturn.

PROOF

Chapter 19

ACROSS GULFS of space and silence, nearly 770 million miles away, the huge floating Space Station Apollonia was in a slow orbit. At 7:20 A.M., Sara Masters padded off toward the bathroom. She slipped off her fluffy white towel in front of the mirror. Briefly, ever so briefly, she admired her firm thighs, flat tummy, and small, firm breasts. Her good figure was her best asset. At least that was what she thought.

Sara stepped into the shower stall, turning on the cold tap and adjusting the temperature with the hot until it was just right. Her eyes dropped, then closed. She inhaled and exhaled in slow, even drags of air. For the next twenty-five minutes, she stood there motionless, letting the water beat down on her body. She did that on mornings she had woken up feeling stressed. With the new chief engineering officer, she felt there was another person practically breathing

down her neck, supervising her every move. Though she got along with Lionetti well enough one-on-one, she wondered if he was assigned to the station to tightly govern how she did her work. Once again she felt the stress build up like the shower steam around her.

Sooner than she preferred, she shut the water off and left the stall. Toweled off. Next, she wiped the fog off the mirror. Toweled her hair. And lastly, wrapped the towel around her body.

Her GalaXplore uniform lay on the bed waiting for her. The newer uniform was certainly better, but not very appealing.

As she dressed for the day, her thoughts were replaced by the hum of the station, unexpectedly filling her with a small sense of peace. No matter how long she had been in space, she still hadn't grown accustomed to these sounds.

For several seconds, she surveyed herself in the mirror. And then she left her quarters at a quick step, heading to the commissary for breakfast.

The station's PA system sounded as she traveled the usual route. A sudden fear shot through her. She stopped in mid-step at the threshold of the commissary, where a hospitality mechanic stood nearby.

Triphenia's edgy voice echoed over the PA system: "Attention, all operations center personnel, report to your stations and wait for further instructions. Sara Masters, please report to the communications station."

Dozens of questions filled her mind. Was *Themis* destroyed in a spatial anomaly? Was the starship engulfed

by the comet? Those thoughts sent a wave of cool air over her skin. And most important of all, why was she singled out?

Her mind in turmoil, she almost didn't know what to do next. But her senses kicked in and she headed for the operations center. It didn't matter to her that she was skipping breakfast.

At the engineering station, Dale Lionetti saw her walking fast to the communications station and called out to her. "Sara, report to me. When you find out what's happened to *Themis*."

She kept walking, didn't respond or look back at him.

Right off the bat when she entered the monitoring room, she saw the blinking lights on all the consoles in front of the three slide-out seats. Additionally, Triphenia accosted her regarding the urgent incoming message from Captain Ronzu aboard *Themis*. Sara had to wonder, considering the communications station wasn't in the habit of receiving urgent messages from *Themis*, or anyone else from GalaXplore for that matter.

"At once, I anticipated an emergency and made the announcement," Triphenia explained.

"Stand by here till I read the message and return," Sara said in a rush.

Without waiting for Tripehenia's reaction, she hurried to her cubicle. As expected, the indicator light on the console confirmed the receipt of an urgent message. The light was flashing a bright red glow.

She sat down in her chair and jabbed at a control on the console's interface. On the screen was the GalaXplore insignia above the words INCOMING TRANSMISSION — ENTER SECURITY CODE. She entered a trio of access codes. The general GalaXplore logo vanished from the screen and was replaced by the words "EMERGENCY. *Themis* has encountered turbulence associated with a large-scale coronal mass ejection event. The CME stirred up turbulence in Saturn's magnetic field. No damage to the starship. All systems operating at maximum efficiency. Holding position midway between the planet Saturn and one of its moons."

Sara dispatched a quick encoded message to *Themis* in response. With that out of the way, she punched a key, and the GalaXplore insignia reappeared, before fading to darkness. She returned to the monitoring room and instructed Triphenia to scan the space around the wormhole carefully and report her findings. And back in the operations center, in several quick steps she made her way to the engineering station and filled Lionetti in on the situation.

"I'll scan for CME signatures in the low corona," he said to her, motioning for her to join the mechanic. "Take a position beside Algernon at the science station, and activate sensors, please."

The mechanic, who was positioned there, tapping at the lighted panel beneath its metal fingers cocked its head at the comment. There was no way he could expect Sara to do all the scanning and reviewing of data on her own, even if it

was something the mechanic could handle easily. Though Lionetti didn't know her well, he sensed a degree of uncertainty beneath her outward confidence.

At first glance, she didn't recognize the broad shouldered robot. Different colored lights glowed on his black faceplate on its angular skull, Based on his unique design and human name, he had some rank.

First, Lionetti noted the proximity of *Themis* to the planet Saturn. Secondly, he sent a message to Chairwoman Rhine at GalaXplore headquarters, explaining *Themis'* situation. He gave her his assurance that he and Sara could effectively handle it.

PROOF

Chapter 20

IT was half-past one in the afternoon in Reno. Located in the Truckee Meadows, the high-desert plateau surrounding the city had an elevation of 4,400 feet above sea level. Prominently visible from the GalaXplore HQ complex, the Sierra Nevada mountains cast shadows in the sunlight.

It was September 29, and Shari Haynes approached the glass entryway of GalaXplore's executive tower. Her flight had left Dulles, Virginia at 6:10 A.M. that morning. Her vacation in Washington, D.C. with her daughter had been cut short by an emergency call from Lisbeth Rhine. The Chairwoman requested her attendance at an emergency meeting with the board of directors scheduled for two thirty that afternoon in the conference room.

A casual glance about, and Shari soaked in the vista of the mountains to the west, hoping to center herself. Far too soon, the heavy duffle bag over her shoulder urged her

forward through the entrance. With some executives walking around in in the lobby of the rotunda, the place had a sense of importance.

A security guard she didn't recognize waited ahead of her. The middle-aged and fit, man had a thin mustache above his lip, almost like it was drawn with a brown marker. Sitting behind a circular desk, he regarded her with curiosity. And she just showed him her lapel on which she wore a GalaXplore ID-badge photo.

"Official GalaXplore business," Shari said. "Urgent board meeting with Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine."

The guard gave a half-smile and nodded. A twitch of his mustache and then turned his eyes toward his desk that held the six security monitors, each twenty-two inches high.

"That's new," she said, pointing to a twelve-foot model of the *Themis* starship in flight, which hung above the desk.

The sleek replica appeared poised to soar off into the stars above, despite hanging motionless from the ceiling on thin wires.

"It was just installed," he said in a deadpan tone.

Moving onward, she found a locker in the women's room and jammed her duffel bag in it. As soon as she came through the door, she heard the ding of the elevator as the doors opened. She hurried across the marble floor and stepped into the elevator just before the doors slid shut with a whoosh.

The doors opened again moments later and she stepped out. Walking at a leisurely pace, she made her way toward Lisbeth Rhine's office. The door to her office was open.

Halfway there, she noticed the aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

She stopped at the doorway to see Rhine look up from her desk. Shari's rumpled charcoal gray pinstripe suit over a cream blouse didn't alter her opinion of her. On the contrary, it made Rhine admire her for her dedication to her job.

Leaning back in her chair, Rhine glanced at the digital clock on the desk, typed something very quickly on her desktop computer terminal and punched a key.

"Welcome, Shari," she said, focused her gaze on her and lifted her coffee mug for a sip. "You made good time. Close the door behind you."

"Good afternoon," Shari said, half-yawning.

"Help yourself to a cup of coffee from the pot over there," Rhine said, and pointed to the coffee pot on the table in the corner. "I'm sure you need it."

Shari settled into one of the leather chairs opposite the desk. "Actually, I'll take a rain check on the coffee. I'm not that bad off. I got five hours of sleep last night. And I had two large caramel macchiatos with an extra shot of espresso at a coffee shop at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, where I had a three-hour layover before I caught the next plane here."

"First of all, want to tell you again that I'm sorry I had to interrupt your time off," Rhine said in a sincere manner. "But I know you understand the seriousness of the situation our starship *Themis* is in. Let's put the next forty-five minutes to good use. There's some things I want to go over before we go to the meeting."

"Before we begin, let me ask you a question," Shari said letting a hushed sigh escape. "Do you want me on the next shuttle leaving for Apollonia?"

From the get-go, Shari's impression was that she was going to be transferred to the station until the situation *Themis* was in was resolved. It was logical for her to assume that because of the complexities of organic relationships with the humanoid robots and importance of this mission, that her presence there seemed of great value.

"Not at all," Rhine said immediately, without a thought. "I want you on the next plane to Shenzhen. I want you to work with Xi on determining if the conditions worsen what kind of damage to *Themis* can we expect the starship to sustain. Dale Lionetti assured me he can handle this. He's working closely with Sara Masters with round-the-clock monitoring of the chaos surrounding *Themis*."

Shari's eyes rolled at the mention of Sara. Nonetheless, she pulled her data pad out of her jacket pocket and nodded to her.

"I don't want Jay Strobel to get bent out of shape about this," Rhine said. "You may or may not know this, but Jay is also a shareholder. You have to reassure him that this is just a temporary setback. The mission will proceed."

They went on talking along those lines until five minutes before 2:30 P.M., when they left for the meeting in the conference room. Talks with the board members went on for almost two hours, Chairwoman Rhine emerging convinced it went well.

A few minutes after 5:00 P.M., the same company limousine that picked Shari up earlier this afternoon, drove her back to the Reno-Tahoe International Airport. Rather than check into a Reno hotel for the night, she booked a flight on Korean Air leaving at 7:54 P.M. The thirty-five hour flight came complete with two layovers: one in Los Angeles, California and then one in Seoul, Korea. Two days later, she would finally reach her destination of Shenzhen, China at 11:25 A.M.

PROOF

Chapter 21

AROUND THIRTY minutes after midnight, or maybe closer to one o'clock., Sara Masters awoke in bed, thinking half-awake and half-asleep. She kept her gaze fixed at the feeble glimmer of light streaming under the door and coming from the overhead living-room lights.

Varioius, disjointed thoughts flooded her brain: there was still a lot about the turbulence she didn't know about … *Themis'* odds were dire … waiting was making her incredibly nervous … why did this have to happen at this particular moment? … at the least convenient moment … what if Captain Ronzu insisted that they abort the mission? … oh, my gosh, I would be thrown out of … she couldn't bring herself to finish that particular thought. The foreboding had her shoving the thoughts back.

Wearing a simple white camisole and panties, she slipped out of bed and put on a pair of navy blue cargo pants

with four pockets. With her mind still in tunnel vision, she found herself walking down the circular corridors of the stationary space station, which were empty and silent. At this hour of night, the station was manned by a skeleton crew of humanoid robots. The rest of the mechanics were at recharging stations due to their demanding, high-drain workload. And she was glad of it. Hearing the slight hum coming from the conduits and pipes, she experienced a sensation of peace and well-being.

Slowly, she made her way to the operations center, which occupied most all of this section of the station. She slipped silently inside. Without looking at any other mechanics at their stations, she walked across the sleek black steel floor to gaze absently at the main viewscreen. The clash of stars twinkled against the black night of outer space.

About two minutes later, she swiveled her head around at the sound of the door sliding open, and two mechanics came in. With no particular interest, she turned her head back and went straight to the engineering station, where Algernon hovered over the controls. Prior to meeting him, the mechanic had spent many night shifts there since Dale Lionetti had come aboard for this mission. Although she didn't really know him, she considered him a welcome addition to the staff on daytime hours, even if he only rotated in at the science station on a temporary basis.

"Any news on *Themis*?" she asked with worry in her eyes.

Algernon paused, touching controls, reading screens, apparently rechecking his data. “No change in the starship’s position in space.”

That didn’t sit too well with Sara. But she quelled her disappointment. Perhaps it was silly of her, but she’d been hoping against hope that *Themis* would have escaped the pull of Saturn’s gravity by now.

“I couldn't help myself from asking.” she said with a shrug.

An instant later, she gazed at him. His round glowing eyes behind his faceplate were empty of emotion.

“Algernon, let me ask you something else. Do you ever get tired of looking at the console.”

Stiffly, turning from the console and glowering at her with flashing eyes. “I do not experience fatigue.”

“Don’t you ever take a break?” she asked, staring at him blankly. “There’s a great view of earth through that window. Provided you’d like to see the planet where you were created by GalaXplore.”

A huge, circular observation window was embedded in the wall at the back end of the room. Over there was an overwhelming view of Earth floating beneath. As the position of Earth in its orbit around the Sun progressed, the tilt of the Earth changed.

For some reason, the mechanic didn’t speak. Hesitantly, his head turned toward the window. He was still processing what she’d said.

“Follow me,” Sara insisted, and gestured toward the observation window. “Take a look for a few minutes and see for yourself. And try to enjoy it for once.”

Algernon complied and trotted with her to the window. Sara smiled at the sight of the planet, reflecting among the beautiful view. That was her home. But lately, the station was her whole life. Her associations with the people and mechanics who resided here had altered her in a way she hadn’t expected. Somewhere along the way, as the mission had progressed, Apollonia had stopped feeling like just a place where she was stationed, but it became a home, too.

“This is what I would call a room with a view,” she commented. “What do you think?”

“I,” Algernon seemed to think about that. “think Earth is very lovely.”

“Up here, on Apollonia, we depend on each other and stand by each other,” she said in a more serious tone.

Her words at first seemed to have no impact. He gazed at her for a long moment, until she saw a flash of emotion cross his faceplate. It was something she couldn’t identify. But she knew he understood when the strain in his posture eased, showing her that somehow resonated with him.

Half a minute later, she yawned a big yawn that might have been noisy if she had not clapped her left hand over her mouth. So, she walked with him back to the engineering station.

“I’m going back to my quarters to sleep,” she said, striding past him. “Until we meet again.”

"Very well," he replied automatically in his synthetic, monotone pitched voice, barely glimpsing her. "Until then good-night, Sara."

PROOF

Chapter 22

IT was about one o'clock in the afternoon, and Xi Bing Jiang hurried to the bathroom. Shari would be coming to his office any minute now. He'd suggested her to have lunch with him, so he could get her up to speed on *Themis*' current status as well as that of the state of the turbulence in their space environment while they ate.

About forty-five minutes ago, Shari had called from the airport. She said that she was coming into work for a few hours. And that she wasn't exhausted, because she had slept a lot on the planes and in the airports.

As he exited the bathroom, he had some unsettling thoughts about the latest report from Dale Lionetti. There wasn't much to tell her. Because the starship couldn't get to an area of space, anywhere, that had not been affected by the CME and related solar phenomena.

To his surprise, he saw Shari in his office through the glass door. She had arrived just a minute earlier. Her duffle bag was on the floor next to his workstation.

“Shari, my dear,” he said, giving her a concerned look. “I didn’t realize you were here.”

“I’m starting to dislike flying,” she said. “It’s not because I’m suffering from jetlag after the long flight from Seoul, Korea. It’s all the waiting in the slow lines, checking in and claiming my bag, going through security, boarding and deplaning, that irritates me the most.”

“I'm just glad you’re here now,” he said, smiling in relief,

“Let’s get that lunch,” she said. “I could use a bite to eat.”

They made their way through the buffet line in the cafeteria. Shari accepted the fresh green salad with cottage cheese and fruit plate the hospitality mechanic with a white chef’s hat and a white chef’s jacket held out to her. She waited until Jiang had poured a cup of green tea for himself, then led the way into the dining area. The room was filled with its usual crowd of GalaXplore executives. They wove their way through the many round tables and took a table next to the window, away from the rest of the crowd.

After they sat down, Jiang handed her a napkin, he put to use and then started up a conversation.

“That day you left for Dulles, Virginia, you missed meeting the new guy in charge of the space station, the Italian Dale Lionetti.”

Shari shrugged as she turned her attention from her salad to a piece of fruit she had selected. “I’m sure I’ll meet him the next time I visit Apollonia.”

“Did you give Sara my best the last time you met with her?” he provoked.

Judging by the sound of his voice and his wicked grin, she knew he was teasing her. There had been a number of occasions when she had broken her silence, commenting briefly about her reservations about Sara. Knowing the rift between them had not yet healed, he liked to pick at her about it. Rolling her eyes, she was going to play into it.

“Why, yes, I did,” Shari said, and dropped her fork, staring at him with a faint smile, half humorous, playing about the corners of her shapely mouth. “But since you brought her up, she wasn’t very reception to me in our last meeting. I felt some attitude on her. And now, with this emergency situation that has arisen in the space surrounding *Themis*, I don't know how she can handle it.”

Turning it up a notch, she was being entirely genuine. While Jiang used his chopsticks to pick up a piece of pork wrapped in noodles and sipped tea that was lukewarm.

“The situation in outer space is complicated for *Themis*. Yet, Sara is doing a fine job writing reports for GalaXplore HQ, with circumstances beyond her control.”

Without looking up from her plate, she replied. “Spare me the speech. I’ve heard it before. But I’ll set aside my feelings. We still have the dilemma that *Themis* is in to discuss, which is our duty now.”

Jiang conceded not to press that point. “Agreed. Perhaps we can put our heads together and come up with some possible solutions to this predicament that could last for several more days for the entire CME structure to sweep past Saturn.”

It was now going on three days, since the coronal mass ejection interacted with the solar wind and caused significant turbulence in space. No matter how dangerous the predicament, in which *Themis* had found themselves in, there was always hope. And hope was exactly what Jiang had. It was a test of his faith in the mechanics to ride out the storm. That was at the heart of it for him. The way he worked with the robots was as if they were his children. And in a way they were. He’d brought them into the world like a mother, would give birth to a baby.

By the end of their lunch, Jiang concluded with saying. “The mechanics’ first objective is to remain in their orbit until help arrives. But it was too early to mount some kind of rescue mission. And if we lose contact with *Themis*, all we can do is send a probe to investigate. And we don’t know how long it would take before GalaXplore would get any conclusive answers.”

“At least see what the next couple of days will be like,” Shari said, her voice sounding confident.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin before pushing back her chair and rising to her feet. They crossed the cafeteria, heading for the exit.

Jiang held the cafeteria door for her. “After you.”

With just a few words, they parted ways, traveling in opposite directions. Shari wanted to work on a few things before going home midafternoon. And Jiang was going to his office to finished some pending work.

PROOF

Chapter 23

TWO ENERGETIC outbursts, although not so extreme as those of other comets, had occurred within a few days from the active regions on the 220P/McNaught's surface. The comet was about twenty thousand times brighter than usual. The cause of these outbursts were unknown, but most likely due to the catastrophically released buildup of subsurface gas pressure. Made up of ice and rock, comet 220P continued on its path a bit past the midway mark between Saturn and Jupiter. The comet's green head and short dust tail, as a stubby extension of the coma, was visible with binoculars and long-range cameras from Apollonia and Earth. Further down the line, it was expected to pass one Earth-Sun distance from Earth. From that point, it would fade quickly as it began its return to the far part of its orbit into the infinities of space.

The good news was that the comet had sailed past the wormhole. This meant that *Themis* would have a clear path to Jupiter's outer gravitational boundary. The bad news was that the starship was at a standstill.

At the end of day three, *Themis* was holding position, ready to plunge or leap in any direction. Which would only be possible when the plasma interaction region, which spanned millions of miles, affected by the elevated external pressure of Saturn faded. And there was no predicting when that would happen.

"Stand by," Leanotia said, hurriedly studying the readouts.

She could see over her shoulder that the other mechanics on the bridge were all watching her and waiting. But she had no temptation to give up, rather she was giving it her all.

"Whenever you are ready, Leanotia, we will be ready," Captain Ronzu said to her with a shade of bitterness in his voice.

His next-in-command glanced around and shrugged his metal shoulders.

As tense as he was, the captain was having an ominous feeling about what was about to happen or not to happen. His hands rested behind his back, clasped. He squinted and cocked his head to one side as he regarded her. He watched her tap at her controls over and over again. The sight of her stirred the angst inside him. The first mission he'd taken charge of. And he was stuck with this know-it-all. *Probably*

a programming glitch, he thought a wry grin graced his faceplate.

Stewing in frustration, the captain turned to the readings on the console nearest him. The key to the success of the mission had everything to do with the captain in command of the ship. For a robot, he was doing his best, considering the responsibility he had taken on was much more complicated than he had expected.

"No effect," she said, and shook her head. "No, not happening."

Whenever possible, the captain's Third-In-Command preferred the direct approach. She pressed a button, staring at the blinking lights on her console. The lights informed her that the starship couldn't budge. The hum of *Themis*' systems slowed and then the lights clicked off for a few seconds, and then on again. It was bad enough that the starship's navigation was difficult and erratic. The engines had been sucking down a lot of power.

"Explain," the captain said, keeping his eyes glued to the forward the starboard viewport until a light blinked red at the top of his console.

"I cannot explain it," Leanotia said, with a twist in her voice that she did nothing to modify and came off slightly sharp.

During this difficult time, she sensed the tension spread through the robots around her, added to the disappointment. This was the third attempt today to break away from Saturn's grip, and fly through the turbulence.

The captain remained still and did his best to keep his expression neutral. “We’ll have to make another attempt tomorrow.”

Themis just wasn’t equipped for that kind of risky maneuver. Although their situation was rather desperate, the captain couldn’t order her to try another maneuver that would be too violent for the ship to tolerate.

The more than efficient Third-In-Command went at the controls at the science station. Once more another task demanded her talents and expertise. Upon completion, she waited until the captain turned his eyes to her and she had his full attention.

“Shields calibrated and ready,” Leanotia said, sounding as if she was expecting praise for good behavior.

If the shields went down under the strain, it could trigger a cascading ship-wide systems failure.

The captain gave a nod of thanks to her. But inside he thought*, there was just something about her that rubbed him the wrong way*.

“You are welcome, sir —” she had to have the last word — “Awaiting your orders.”

This time, the captain didn’t look at her and turned his attention elsewhere.

“Ensign T-67,” said the captain, with an edge in his voice, carrying the weight of a closing vault door. “Status, please.”

“All the scientific readings on the coronal mass ejection had been gathered for a report to Apollonia,” said T-67, his optics blinking in rapid succession.

"Transmit the data when there is a clear signal," the captain said with a tone of finality.

A string of beeps followed.

PROOF

Chapter 24

DAY FOUR. Dressed in the current GalaXplore duty uniform, Sara Masters sat in a chair in her quarters and wondered how *Themis* was holding up under the friction it was taking in outer space. The past few days she'd been on pins and needles about this mission, powerless to do anything but soak up the stress. She had her hands around a steaming cup of coffee, seizing the stillness before her. When she'd woken up this morning, she hadn't been in the mood to go to the commissary. So, she'd walked over to the small alcove in the living room, where the coffee machine sat.

Despite the fact that she relished living on this sparsely human populated space station, it was times like this that she was missing her mother and father. On an occasion here and there, she had stood at the observation window, looking

down upon Earth. And she had wondered how her parents were doing in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

The strong aroma of steaming coffee near her face comforted her as she took some sips. She associated coffee with her father as much as his dorsal hump nose, his brown eyes, or his carefree spirit. He had introduced her to coffee and from that point on she was addicted. Her best childhood memories were of sitting on his knee for long stretches of time while he told her stories that he was creating as he spoke, laughing and smelling coffee on his breath. This made her feel safe and … loved.

Enough thinking, Sara sternly decided. What she need right now was to formulate some kind of plan. She was going to head to the communications station and work out whatever strategy was possible.

First she went over to the monitoring room. She came through the doors and peered at the main viewscreen, at the magnified image of the planet Saturn, its rings and its moons. A frown came, as she was without hope in seeing anything worthwhile.

A creak of a board – a mechanic shifting weight. And in back of her, she was met with a chorus of whirs and beeps. It was Triphenia. They stood in companionable silence, staring at each other for a long time. It was like they didn't know how to deal with one another. Because the interaction between organic life and robots was often awkward. The fidgeting mechanic was waiting for her to do something decisive. Neither knew who should speak first.

“I bring good news, Sara,” Triphenia finally said in her well-modulated female voice. “After a great deal of effort, I retrieved a subspace transmission from *Themis*. It took almost two hours to filter out the high degree of interference swallowing the transmission. I am certain the report will be of tremendous value. Because some of my scan readings were not conclusive.”

Sometimes she was too chatty, but Sara smiled, It took a lot of patience to relate to the seriousness in the robot.

“Can I read the report at my workstation?” she asked the mechanic.

“Yes, you can.”

Triphenia’s higher-pitched voice distinguished her personality as a female. This was one of the human character traits that she possessed. Because Xi Bing Jiang believed that people responded better to robot voices which sounded more like their own.

Early on in the creation of artificial life, machines with the ability to think and act like humans had no emotions beyond programming. The way Jiang saw it, was female and male robots engaged in balanced relationships. They were constructed with gender definitions according to men and women. By gendering robots with the shape of their bodies people felt more comfortable interacting with them.

Without further ado, Sara headed to her cubicle. The happy-go-lucky humanoid robot followed in step behind her. Triphenia was more than a man-made machine, and more than an object to her, she was a friend. Oddly enough, she made the space station feel like home to her. She, yes

she, was an example of true craftmanship, designed by Xi Bing Jiang, who had designed female and male robots. To Sara, Triphenia was humanlike in many ways. A hybrid of humans and technology, she had acute levels of self-awareness, which put her in a class all her own. She had the ability to learn from experience and calculate solutions to problems. Most important, in Sara's eyes, Triphenia was a valuable member of Apollonia's crew.

Sara sat down at her workstation. She saw that the emblem of GalaXplore was displayed on the computer interface. She tapped a control, working at the console for several minutes, scrutinizing the data on the CME. Triphenia waited, standing to one side and peering at the display screen over Sara's shoulder.

"This is very impressive," Sara said with a touch of wonderment.

"I felt certain you would be pleased,"

"It is important that I show this to Dale Lionetti," she said, and rose from her chair. "I'll be in the operations center at the engineering station if you need me.

The robot simply said. "Very good."

Articulate and thoughtful, Triphenia often conveyed her feelings and opinions in the most interesting way possible. She also provided the unintended benefit of having someone to talk to when Sara felt lonely, which was often. Their bonding relationship gave Sara a greater understanding of the relationship between a person and an object. Yet, sometimes, she wondered what her parents would say of her friendship with a robot.

125 . *The Out World*

In the hours that followed, Sara navigated her way through Apollonia in a sort of daze. She did everything that was expected of her. All throughout, in the back of her mind she was thinking about *Themis*, feeling more deeply disappointed. She was genuinely horrified about what the outcome would be.

More than anything else, she thought about where she was going to go if she left GalaXplore. She'd never thought about it before like this. But that would only happen if the *Themis* mission failed. Still … she couldn't help but wonder.

PROOF

Chapter 25

TO TAKE HER mind off the very real possibility that the *Themis* mission was over, the director of the Mechanics Systems Laboratory concentrated on her work. But in the back of her mind, she worried that the starship could be damaged severely enough before Saturn's space environment was clear of the CME.

The air conditioning hummed overhead in the Diagnostics room. Shari sat on a metal stool anchored to the floor in front of the computer terminal on the crescent-shaped black marble desk, typing furiously.

She began to examine a motionless female humanoid robot, most of her body white metal, seated across from her on a small metal bench positioned at the right side of the desk. Admiring the craftsmanship, she touched one of her upturned palms. And then, she held up the shiny, articulated metal hand, checking the mobility of the fingers.

Shari wore a starched, white lab coat over a charcoal silk blouse and matching pants, her sleeves rolled neatly to the elbows. Several strands of hair had escaped her ponytail. She absently tucked them behind her ear with her free hand as she snapped off the mechanic's control panel.

Part of her job was to evaluate these high-intelligence robots that had been manufactured in the plant. Every mechanic eventually found its way into the laboratory. It was in this room where she conducted most of her work: testing mobility, communication skills, and ability to perform complex assignments. Long hours of observation sessions, diagnostics, and careful reprogramming had become second nature to her.

An hour after, she propped the mechanic up at a specific angle. Then she ran a power cable from the terminal to the mechanic, plugging it into its socket.

"That should do it," she said to herself, as she read the mechanic's programming and analyzed it, before powering it up by flipping a switch in the back of its neck.

The robot's eyes winked on. It took its eyes several moments to adjust, before it looked at her, probing eyes accompanied by a flicker of a smile, which faded into a half-grin. Tilting its head to one side a few degrees, it beeped thoughtfully. Silence for another moment; then, abruptly, the beeping exploded into a series of excited electronic beeps in a tone that was gentle.

At first it seemed that the mechanic wasn't going to respond. Then she said, "How may I be of assistance?"

The female voice was high pitched, with a faint hiss at the end of each word. The corners of its mouth lifted into a smile that lingered a fraction too long, continuing to stare at Shari.

There was something about that smile that lit something inside of Shari. And she couldn't help but smile back.

"My name is Shari Haynes. I'm going to give you a number of tasks to do."

"Awaiting your instructions," the robot responded with an almost human-like smile of satisfaction.

As subordinates, they displayed a childish dependency on her. Or was it because they grew attached to their organic companions. In many respects, they resembled students, taking their first steps on their academic career path. They relied on her for guidance, correction, and assurance as they accumulated experience.

Over the next several hours, she did as she was asked. To her complete satisfaction, the mechanic performed each task masterfully in a decisive manner. Shari noticed how the mechanic showed signs of an increased self-awareness. By far these latest models were the finest protocol robots with reliable programming that GalaXplore had to offer. Designed to work tirelessly for long periods of time, they accepted orders and implemented them.

"What else can I do for you?" One of its computational pauses.

What Shari liked best about the mechanics was their eagerness to satisfy and willingness to work hard. The fact was that she felt a connection with this mechanic. It

certainly had no shortage of intellect. *It was just possible*, she thought, *that these robots might sense the same kind of connection between then and their human counterparts*.

"That will be all for today," Shari said in a smooth but authoritative tone, glancing at the clock on the wall and noticing the hours had flown by fast. "We'll pick this up tomorrow."

The mechanic nodded mechanically at her and held out its hand and Shari shook it. "It has been wonderful working with you."

"Likewise," she replied.

And that was that. She had no sooner deactivated the mechanic than it tipped its polished head forward like in some kind of nod.

Shari sprang to her feet and stretched the stiffness from her shoulders before wandering over to the rack in the corner of the room. She slipped off her lab coat, hung it there, and took her handbag off of it.

Her mind returned to the starship stuck in space, going on day five. Given the circumstances, she blinked against the sadness welling up here and there. The conditions were tremendously disturbing. The altered gravitational balance of the solar system could shift between the planet Saturn and its moons, altering their orbits. That could cause *Themis* to collide into Saturn. Such a macabre thought emerged from the depths of her consciousness.

But she drove it from her mind. Couldn't in good conscience allow herself to think like that anymore. She

slung her handbag over one shoulder and gave the room one last glance and walked out the door.

PROOF

Chapter 26

THE GALAXPLORE Apollonia Space Station rotated, silhouetted against the background starfield of black space. From so high above, the blue and cloud-shrouded sphere of Earth whirled.

At seven o'clock in the morning, Sara was walking down the gleaming corridors of the station, a data pad in one hand. *Nothing could prepare you for the astonishing sight of Earth from space*, she thought, as she neared an observation window, affording an incredible view.

That made her think of the first time she saw Earth like that. Three days before she took her first trip into space, she had met with Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine in her office in Reno. She was told she had been appointed to her current position. With so many last minute details, she had been the last to board the space shuttle. Heading straight up and away from the Earth's surface, the shuttle gracefully soared

into black space. Mesmerized beyond anything she'd felt before, her nose was glued to the window the whole way. She didn't want to miss one mile of her historic trip into space to Apollonia.

Four hours after she'd arrived, she had stood at that same observation window, trying to figure out where Vancouver was. But she ended up watching swirling cloud formations near Earth's northern hemisphere.

The doors that led directly to the operations center hissed open. The eyes of the few mechanics there turned toward her.

Sitting at her console of her workstation reading a message from *Themis* wasn't what she had expected to be doing when she'd woken up that morning. Around 4:00 A.M., she'd been jolted awake in her quarters when the alert tone sounded on a console at the back of her living room. The news that had come to her was nothing short of a miracle. *Themis* was out of danger. Now in its fifth day, the situation had stabilized enough that the starship had maneuvered itself further away from Saturn. According to what Captain Ronzu had reported, the ship, having had a very narrow escape, was adjusting its heading, closing the distance between them and the wormhole. *Even*, she thought suddenly with a sense of triumph, *it was an electric sensation of joy to her*.

Not wasting another second, she opened a channel, using the communications panel to patch her through to Dale Lionetti's quarters.

"You'll want to see this," she had said to him.

Being startled awake like that, he didn't know what time it was then. Thinking he had overslept, his heart raced as he jumped out of his bed. Despite the hour, she'd done right to notify him.

Feeling overwhelmed, Sara hadn't gone back to sleep. And Lionetti had dressed and taken over for the mechanic Algernon at the engineering console.

Presently, Sara approached the engineering station, where Lionetti quietly tapped at the console. He called up details about the wormhole. At the sound of footsteps behind him, he glanced her way over his shoulder and she glanced back.

"It's your turn for breakfast," she said, and took her position at the science station. "I've had mine."

Leaning into his console, Lionetti mused. "I'm not ready to go to the commissary, just yet."

Triphenia surged through the doors of the communications station at full speed. In a state of frenzied excitement, she rushed into the operations center. Lionetti, whose expression remained neutral, barely acknowledged her.

"I was running a long-range sensor sweep of the area, but still getting a lot of subspace interference," Triphenia babbled wildly behind them.

The robot rushed past them like a flock of frightened sheep. Even if Sara was looking at the mechanic with wide eyes, she wasn't surprised she was acting strangely.

“That’s the second time she’s done that,” Sara said, and checked something in the GalaXplore database to compare to the data from the sensor array.

“Actually, that's the third time now,” he said. “She was here, pacing, back and forth, back and forth, just a few minutes before you returned from breakfast.”

“Really?” she asked, her expression changing to one of confusion watching as Triphenia left the operations center.

“Uh huh,” he said, busily reviewing the coordinates of the wormhole.

Twenty seconds later Triphenia charged into the operations center and something resembling shock came in her eyes. She came to a stop, reasserting her composure before speaking.

“My data pad,” the robot sputtered. “I left my data pad in the monitoring room.”

The sight brought about a laugh Sara didn’t expect. Even Lionetti laughed a little at that but quickly stifled it.

“Triphenia, take a chill pill,” Sara told her, knowing she was nervous about the starship’s mission back on track and all the things she had to do now.

“I can’t process that information,” the robot replied, not knowing what she meant by that.

“Never mind, carry on,” she said, and then turned to Lionetti. “I sure hope she doesn’t need to be reprogrammed. I don’t want to contact Shari Haynes.”

Lionetti squinted and blinked as he leaned a little closer to the console. “Who is Shari Haynes?”

“You’ll meet her soon enough.” she said shaking her head, realizing he hadn’t met him yet.

“I’m heading to the commissary for a cup of coffee and something to eat,” he said, and flexed his shoulders, starting to feel fatigued, his wrist resting on the rim of the engineering console.

“I’ll be here making a log entry for Lisbeth Rhine,” she said, and watched the doors hiss open for Triphenia to enter the communications station.

PROOF

Chapter 27

OUTSIDE GalaXplore's Shenzhen plant, the rain came down in torrents. The wind swept the rain into the warehouse through the wide-open loading dock entrance Shortly after four o'clock in the afternoon, there was one fifteen-foot truck with a lift gate parked beside the loading dock on the right side. MahNaMah stood at the edge of the loading dock, every now and then swatting at the rain with his metal hands like this was a typical day.

Li Wei, dressed in light-blue overalls, was sitting in the forklift. He had stacked four crates of varying sizes on top of each other on the warehouse floor and was now at rest with no task to perform.

Shari Haynes entered from across the room, dressed professionally in a white silk blouse and black slacks with low-heeled black shoes. Her light make-up gave her face the vivacity of a younger woman. As she walked past

shelving units crammed with crates, she kept glancing over her shoulder, as if looking for someone. She watched as Wei moved the forklift into position. He waved to her, but it went without acknowledgement on her part.

"MahNaMah, I'm here to get my package," she called out from inside, addressing the mechanic.

Her voice broke through the noise of the downpour. Almost instantly, MahNaMah began making shrill, eager beeping sounds.

Always aiming to please, the robot walked around her to a shelving unit near the dock's entrance, where she was standing. For a long moment, he looked at her, unmoving. Then he picked up a small rectangular cardboard box and handed it to her.

"I could have sent S-86 to deliver it to your office." Three was no emotion in MahNaMah's voice.

"I needed the walk," she said, slipping the box under her arm and ducking her head as drops of rain swirled around her.

With unblinking eyes, MahNaMah watched her cross the room toward the steel door on the other side. He headed back to the loading dock just before she punched a switch on the wall panel by the steel door. After going through the door, Shari headed quickly down the corridor. When she made it to her office in the laboratory, she set the box down on her workstation and left.

Xi Jiang was in his office down the hall from her own. He was looking at his console engrossed with what he was reading. He had received a report from Dale Lionetti that

the position of the swirling wormhole lay beyond the range of Apollonia's formidable sensors, which had been tuned to retrieve immensely detailed analysis. In general, the station's sensors could provide large amounts of information about every celestial body or energy field in the Sol System. The negative energy being emitted by the mouth offered the wormhole's precise location, whic could be found by scanning that region of space for a very high concentration of gravitons or photons. Since that portion of space wasn't completely clear of the CME, a scan of that magnitude wasn't possible. The stable wormhole, which had been nearest to Saturn, had drifted slowly in through the Milky Way Galaxy. The wormhole terminus wasn't blocked and opened smoothly now nearer to the gas giant Jupiter, the fifth planet in the Sol System. The quantum fluctuations around the wormhole in empty space generated infinite stress with the energy density less than zero-equivalent to the mass of Jupiter.

He was still reading when he heard footsteps coming from down the hall. The glass door opened automatically, and Shari dashed in, stopping to stand by the cabinet against the wall. And he turned around in his stool to converse with her.

"It must be raining hard," he said, noticing the drops of water on her clothes.

"Yes, it is," she said all business-like. "Did you get the report from Dale Lionetti?"

"Yes I did," he said. "I was reading it before you walked in."

"If you could forward that report to me, it would help me to be on the same page as you."

"I'll do it right now," he said, and turned to his console.

With a tap and a sweep of his hand, he relayed the report to Shari's console. Then he turned back around and stared at her hard for a moment or two. He looked at her like he was waiting for something.

"What is it?" she asked. "Do I have drops of water in my hair?"

"It's just that you were so quiet a while ago when you learned that *Themis* had cruised away from danger," he said, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I'm still processing it."

"Anything else you'd like to add?" he asked her mischievously.

Shari didn't say much, because she knew what he was hinting at. She knew when he was trying to provoke her. Although she was doing her best to resist the impulse to react, she had to get something off her mind.

"Those mechanics aboard *Themis* are clever," she said. "You programmed them to be efficient. It's your doing, not Sara Masters, that has kept this mission alive."

It was the wrong words, the wrong time. It was hard for her to put her thoughts into words, Because nothing had changed. Her opinion of Sara hadn't changed.

"That's one way of looking at it," Jiang countered. "But you have to give her credit for hanging in there. I highly commend its resolution to Dale and Sara, who stayed on top of the situation."

She quickly realized that line of thinking was going in circles. “Like you, I want the mission to succeed.”

“That’s the right spirit,” he said, approvingly with a gracious smile.

“We’ll, talk later,” she said, and left.

For now, he could only hope that Shari and Sara could work together without letting the tension between them come to a head.

PROOF

Chapter 28

AT NEARLY ten o'clock in the morning, Lisbeth Rhine was in her office, waiting for her "favorite" board member. Her hair was done up in a twist and fastened with a comb. She had on a white-collared blouse under a tailored suit jacket, gray, with a double row of silver buttons marching down the front. Not a sound stirred the quiet of the room except the occasional gusts of wind against the window-panel. The cross between a whistle and a whisper, the cool downslope westerly winds came off the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

The tantalizing smell of freshly brewed coffee was wafting into her nose. The coffee machine was still on, with strong-smelling black coffee still inside. She was considering another cup of coffee when an incoming message popped up on her desktop computer terminal. As

she glanced at the screen, she debated in her head whether or not to open it.

Not a moment too soon, Jay Strobel pushed through the large floor-to-ceiling glass door into the office and stood in front of her large mahogany desk in the center of the room. He was in his blue suit, his shirt collar unbuttoned, looking rather pale but with his hair neatly combed as usual. She turned away from the console and swiveled her chair around to face him.

"Shari Haynes, who understood the mechanics and that they were more than capable of pulling out of this, as she so stated, was correct in every sense of the word," he said, carrying a beautiful clear vase filled with an enormous bunch of white and pink roses. "It had been a nerve-racking five days, but our starship came through it without a scratch."

She rose halfway from her chair and kissed him hello as he placed the vase on her desk. A peck on the cheek was their usual greeting. The light stubble on his jaw was a bit prickly against her lips and the smell of his heavy cologne drowned out the smell of coffee.

"Thank you for the roses, but it's too early to celebrate." She inhaled the aroma of the roses and sank back slowly into her chair. "*Themis* still has to pass through the wormhole, find out what's on the other side, and transmit the data to us."

"You could know what aliens look like in the next three weeks," he said excitingly. "And you could tell me how to dress like one for Halloween."

He adjusted his tortoiseshell glasses, which had slid halfway down his nose, from laughing so hard seeing her face after he had said that.

Lisbeth, on the verge of a laughing fit, said, "You're too much, Jay. I hope to get a description of them."

It was a relief to see Jay more relaxed than when she had seen him last, she thought. To her, Strobel was not only a trusted advisor but a dear friend.

Jay Strobel understood the critical importance of being a lifelong space advocate. He recently retired from Earth-Tech Atlas, a subsidiary of GalaXplore, engaged in creating earth science content from satellite data. He'd served as a planetary geologist, studying the petrology and mineralogy of lunar materials, space junk and meteorites for a better understanding of our cosmic environment. Now as a benefactor, his tireless support for humanity's cultural expansion into space, including off-earth mining, recognizes life as-yet-unknown, anticipating other life not yet discovered.

"The fact that the mission is reasonably free of danger, is cause enough to celebrate," he said, regaining his composure.

"Help yourself to some coffee," she urged, and gestured toward the steaming pot. "It's a strong, dark, full-bodied French roast, guaranteed to start your day off right. And sit down."

"I've already had two cups of coffee today because I woke up at 5:30 A.M. and couldn't go back to sleep for no

particular reason," he said, and sat down in one of the black, high-backed leather chairs facing her desk.

"Well, I've decided to have another one," she said, stood up, took her mug, and poured herself a cup from the pot on the round table in the corner.

The sun moved one inch higher and a weak angle of light reflected off the semi-circular panoramic window, which a stunning view of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, behind the chairwoman's desk, gently warming Strobel's face. He changed positions in the chair to face away from the sun's rays. His eyes moved briefly to the big, colorful throw pillows on the small black leather sofa to the left of the desk before coming back to rest on her desk.

Lisbeth's heels were soundless on the thick beige carpet as she sat back in her chair. Before proceeding, she took a drink of her coffee.

"That coffee does smell good," he said, detecting its delicious aroma. "Getting back to my visit. There are things I want to discuss with you."

"Proceed, I am ready to listen," she said and got more comfortable in the chair.

For another two hours they talked about Apollonia's angular style design and environmental control capabilities. Having been there twice before, Strobel wanted to visit the station again. He wanted to see first-hand how subspace messages were transmitted. When Apollonia opened, he and the other members of the board were among the station's first visitors. Before he left the chairwoman

assured him that she would arrange a meeting with the Board about the matter.

That done, Chairwoman Rhine stared at the message on the terminal's display screen.

PROOF

Chapter 29

MOLECULAR HYDROGEN drifted through the interstellar space *Themis* was traveling in. The starship was a little more than halfway to their destination. At their current speed, the ship would arrive at the coordinates in just an hour's time at full impulse power.

The sounds of consoles, and beeps and blips and hisses of the mechanics, as well as an assortment of background noises filled the air on the bridge. Captain Ronzu stood motionless before the viewport. But he was in an affable mood. Leanotia had returned to the engine room, where she would be more useful, hidden in a place out of the captain's sight.

"Closing the distance between us and the wormhole," his next-in-command announced from the science station.

"Very good," said the captain. "Keep a close watch for any unusual activity."

The first officer beeped affirmative.

The captain returned his gaze to the viewport and talked as he watched a moon starting to appear in its full brightness in the dark space. “T-21, take this data pad to the engine room.”

A hydraulic whirr came from the mechanic standing next to him, gazing at the viewport, too. T-21 nodded and picked up the data pad from where it sat on the desktop beside the console in front of the captain, who watched the mechanic leave the bridge.

Back in her proper place in the heat of the engine room, Leanotia was standing behind the control console watching the instruments.

T-21 stepped forward, reaching out to hand her the small computer data pad. “From the captain.”

Fluxes of low-energy echoing around her, the captain’s Third-In-Command took the data pad and examined it. All the same, she was quick to notice how T-21 stood next to her as if he belonged there. He kept looking at her but didn’t say anything. She was thunderstruck and seemed uncomfortable.

She gave the mechanic a sharp look. “That will be all,”

He offered no outward reaction other than to turn his head slightly to the right. She watched him turn on his heel to leave, the doors whooshing shut behind him.

The bridge’s viewport was suddenly filled with Sinope, Jupiter’s sixteenth and outermost moon. This red satellite rotated on its axis at the same rate as Jupiter in a retrograde

orbit at more than a third of the distance of the planet Mercury from the Sun.

The starship entered the realm of the Jovian System, crossing the orbit of Sinope. In the background, the looming form of the gas giant Jupiter immediately caught the captain's attention. Jupiter's faint, dark rings made of fine dust particles, stretching to the right and left, glowed more clearly. Each time meteoroids, small space rocks struck the small inner moons orbiting Jupiter, clouds of dust were blasted off the moons and into the planet's orbit, generating the rings.

From his vantage, Captain Ronzu noticed a flash of light in the upper right corner of the viewport. It was at the appropriate coordinates, signaling the opening of the wormhole. For certain, it was the gateway through space connecting the Milky Way Galaxy with another galaxy, otherwise known as "The Out World."

The captain nodded at the helmsman. "Stay on course."

The time had gone by faster, somehow, than the captain could have imagined. He checked his console and saw that *Themis* had come within range of the wormhole. The mechanic's metal hands moved across his board, working the helm to bring the starship to a stop.

"We are here, sir." The helmsman found confirmation in the captain's nod.

Watching the viewport carefully, the captain's eyes flickered at the image of the spherical wormhole, a cascade of color and light. He checked the sensors trained on the bridge through space. It was threaded by a material that had

repulsive negative energy, which was required to keep the wormhole from collapsing under gravity.

As his gaze passed the communications station on the opposite side of the bridge, the captain turned toward the mechanic positioned there. “T-21, open a ship-wide channel to all stations.”

T-21 didn’t look up from his instruments and replied in a normal speaking voice. “Aye, sir.”

Before Captain Ronzu could make a ship-wide announcement there was an announcement from the engine room. Leanotia had opened a channel to the bridge using a communication panel on her console.

Leanotia’s voice boomed across the bridge from the main overhead speaker: “Third-In-Command ready for acceleration on your signal.”

The anxious tone of her voice unsettled the captain, who sighed a deep sigh. Some of the bridge crew were startled. It would seem like she couldn’t wait to talk. Being isolated from the crew and alone had its effect on her.

“This is the captain,” his voice carried through the ship, rippling with command authority. “All stations ready. Entering wormhole in ten minutes. Proceed at my command.”

The captain turned to T-21. “Transmit a message to Apollonia station. Tell Sara Masters we are at the threshold of the wormhole. Tell her our precise coordinates. And that we will stand by for ten minutes, then proceed unless we receive further instructions not to.”

After T-21 acknowledged the order, he touched his controls at once. Across from him at the science station, the first officer consulted his instruments quickly, and then ran a quick systems check. His metal fingers moved with precision across a lit console.

PROOF

Chapter 30

AROUND 9:00 p.m., Sara was in the bedroom of her quarters. She was undoing the top few buttons of her GalaXplore jumpsuit, starting to change into her sleep clothes. She wanted nothing more than to fall into bed under the comfort of the blanket, put her head on the pillow and slip into a dreamless sleep.

"Sara Masters, I believe you should come to the communications station to see this incoming message."

Exasperation gnawed at Sara, who turned at the seriousness of Triphenia's tone, which filtered through the intercom speakers in her quarters.

"Is it an urgent message?" she asked, her eyes looking at the abstract painting hanging on the wall next to her bed. "I mean … can it wait till morning?"

"I believe that the message had come from *Themis*."

Beyond tired. How could she explain that to Triphenia. She yawned at the robots' insistence. It wasn't so much that her heart wasn't in it. She just managed it, knowing any message from the starship was considered urgent.

"Call Dale Lionetti and tell him that, too, if you haven't already done so," Sara said, drawing in a fresh breath of air before adding. "And tell him I will relay the details of the message to him."

"I will do that," Triphenia said in a pleasant but firm voice, in the melodious tone all female mechanics seemed to share.

She turned away and said, half to herself. "I'm on my way."

"Did you same something else?"

"Triphenia, I didn't realize you were still there," she said. "I'll be right there."

The intercom embedded into the wall cut off.

No matter how tired she might be, she wasn't going to shirk her responsibilities. There wasn't time for a cup of coffee. She buttoned her jumpsuit to the hollow of her throat and hurried out of her cabin.

A mechanic squealed electronically, when she started off down a connecting corridor. About halfway up the curving corridor, he bent down and removed a wall panel, exposing buttons and cables. He let the panel drop with a heavy thud, shattering the quiet. Slightly ahead of her, the mechanic came down on his knee joints and began re-connecting a loose cable.

After making her way to the operations center, she walked in the communications station and saw Triphenia standing just behind a console in the monitoring room. Her was reflection in the viewscreen permaglass.

Triphenia made clicking and whirring sounds as she turned around. The robot seemed quite eager to see her,

“Apollonia’s long-range sensors show no unusual activity around the wormhole,” the robot said.

“You have done your work well,” Sara said, and went to her cubicle.

It was a little over a minute when Sara returned to the monitoring room in an elated state.

“*Themis* intends to enter the wormhole,” she said like she was celebrating and threw her arms around Triphenia, briefly hugging her. “Or has already gone into that wormhole. What time is it? How long has it been since this message was received?”

Triphenia beeped what sounded like a question of her own.

Surprised at her own reaction, Sara gathered herself. “Never mind my questions. I will be in my cubicle sending a message to *Themis*, hoping they will get it. And another one to Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine. Oh, I almost forgot. Where is Dale Lionetti? Because I didn’t see him in the operations center.”

“Dale Lionetti is in his quarters,” Triphenia said and blinked a few times as she processed what had happened between them. “He is waiting on an update.”

"Very well, then, I will transfer the information to Dale Lionett's quarters." Sara said and left the room.

Forty-five minutes later, Sara leaned back in her chair, linked her hands. There was only one thought going through her head. *Themis* was going through the tunnel in space. She leaned her head back putting her head back to meditate on that. *It was*, Sara thought and closed her eyes, *remarkable the journey the mechanics were on*.

Triphenia was passing the cubicle. She paused and peered inside, glancing at Sara, who looked like she was catnapping. Probably a few minutes too long, the robot stood there gazing at her with a sort of gaping wonder.

Rather unexpectedly, she opened her eyes, stood up and saw Triphenia standing at the entrance of her cubicle. "I'll be in my quarters."

Bleary-eyed, Sara left the operations center and started down the central corridor. Her boots softly clicked against the polished floor.

Fleetingly she thought of Triphenia, who was one of the most invaluable members of the operations center on Apollonia. She enjoyed their time together every day. They both did. She was sure of that.

What does the future have in store for these humanoid robots?

Despite the fact that the mechanics were more than capable to take responsibility for themselves. At this stage robots had no rights, considered unworthy of all of the same rights, privileges, and benefits accorded to human beings. They just weren't viewed as sentient beings in the eyes of

present day society. She reckoned she wouldn't live to see these robots be declared as conscious sentient beings. Neither in her lifetime did she expect to see these robots ever make such declarations and demands. Those were the last thoughts she had before she entered her quarters.

PROOF

Chapter 31

MUCH MORE than ten minutes had passed. But in outer space, time moved differently from the planet Earth. Let alone the fact that Captain Ronzu had taken his sweet time to read the short message Sara Masters had written to them.

Now was the time to enter the wormhole.

"Take us through," the captain ordered, with an enthusiastic whir.

"Aye, aye, my captain," the first officer said, glancing up from his console.

In a matter of seconds, *Themis* streaked toward the wormhole and edged through its entrance. The bridge lighting changed, dimming to an amber hue. The first officer worked his controls to set his sensors to bring a full scan of their surroundings to his station and peered toward the captain.

The captain grimaced. A glance at his console showed interference to the sensors. It all happened far too fast to be processed by a robot's mind. Anything that went into the phenomenon had to change with it. As the ship steadied, riding its currents, the intensity of the lighting on the bridge returned to normal levels.

"We won't be sending any messages, until *Themis* exits the wormhole. Messages can't reach the communications array near Apollonia station from inside the wormhole," the captain said to the bridge crew, then turned to his first officer. "How long do you estimate a full analysis of the wormhole will take?"

The first officer consulted the sensor sweep display on his console. The negative energy field inside the tunnel was stable.

"At this very second, I am engaged in a detailed sensor sweep," his next-in-command said without taking his eyes off the console's screen. "The estimated time until the full sensor scan is over in approximately two hours and thirty minutes."

"Attention, all crew," his authoritative mechanical voice blared from *Themis*' overhead speakers. "This is the captain speaking. *Themis* has left normal space and is on course for The Out World, traveling through the wormhole. Report anything out of the ordinary."

Down in the engine room in the lower level, Leanotia was reviewing data on the control console, monitoring the starship's systems.

But boredom came too easily to her. After a moment's thought, she tapped into the GalaXplore database. She called up reports on wormholes. And perused multiple directories, humming away while occasionally reading an article about wormholes only to discover it was not what she was looking for.

"The tunnel that connects two separate points may be a pre-existing anomaly of multi-dimensional spacetime," she said reading the words on the screen aloud. "Tell me something I don't already know."

The GalaXplore records were no help at all, she found.

Willing herself back into the moment, she seemed ready to explode. "There must be something else I can do."

She returned her full attention the control console. Readings indicated that all of the starship's backup systems were operating normally.

"The backup systems are operating within acceptable parameters," she said to herself reverently, nodding to herself.

For a pulse beat or two she thought she should make an announcement. She stopped herself, hesitating, and glanced at the communications panel on the console before her, now down at her jointed metal fingers. Should she do it, or should she not? There was another brief hesitation before she opened a channel to the bridge.

A garble of static from the main overhead speaker was followed by Leanotia's edgy voice, sounding like a lamentation. "The backup systems are operating within

acceptable parameters. Engine room standing by, awaiting further orders."

His Third-In-Command had delivered her words like the machine that she was. Captain Ronzu let out a long, heavy sigh, listening to the raspy hiss before the overhead speaker cut out. Fully focused, the first officer was staring at his sensor readings.

"Hmmm, I wonder where we are going to end up," the captain said.

"There is a big universe out here," said his first officer. "There is no telling where we will exit, sir."

"If there is an exit," the captain countered, seemingly unsure.

After a few moments of uneasy silence, during which neither spoke, his next-in-command said. "Please, explain what you are thinking, sir."

"Our GalaXplore creators, who built and designed us to perform our duties on this mission, are inclined to believe successful passage through this tunnel will open up the whole universe for exploration," the captain said, squinting against the blazing bluish-white light emanating from the kinked walls of the wormhole on the viewport. "In theory, the wormhole very well may lead us back to the Milky Way Galaxy."

"Theoretically, there are too many possibilities," the first officer said with efficiency. "Patience, my captain, we will all know soon enough where this gateway will take us to."

"When we come out the other side, we have no idea what we are up against," the captain said in a tight voice. "Be ready to go to red alert."

PROOF

Chapter 32

OUT IN the operations center, Dale Lionetti stood at the engineering console. Around 9:30 a.m. (UTC), he glanced at the viewscreen, where the space shuttle could be seen making its approach, winking blue and green lights.

With a jerk, Lionetti turned from the viewscreen to look at Algernon, standing a few steps away. “Be my guest. Reel them in.”

The mechanic glanced down at the science station’s console, activated the communications controls there, opened a channel and cleared the shuttle for docking.

The shuttle set down with a gentle sigh on the gleaming landing pad in the docking area. The hatch split open with a hiss of pressure and the ramp descended.

Lionetti watched Shari Haynes spill out, walking down the ramp, duffle bag slung over a shoulder. She was

wearing her GalaXplore jumpsuit, her blonde hair pulled back and held up with a black metal chopstick.

First, Shari headed in the direction of her quarters to put away her duffle bag. On her way, she passed several of the mechanics, and they nodded automatically in her direction as they passed.

A bit later, she stepped into the operations center, a data pad in hand. In that instant, she caught the eye of Lionetti, who had looked up from his console.

"Dale Lionetti," she said in her best manners. "I'm Shari Haynes. It's so nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you as well," he said in a formal voice. "Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine informed me in a message that you would be coming."

Noting her arrival, Algernon didn't interject in this conversation. He busied himself at his science station. Neither did Shari acknowledge him.

"You may already know that my purpose in coming to the station is to work out a plan for *Themis*' return through the wormhole," Shari said, all stern and businesslike. "Nothing earth-shattering, but I have a short window of time to do all this. Tomorrow morning we'll conduct long-range scans of the space surrounding the wormhole to determine its continual stability. The day after tomorrow, I'll be on the space shuttle to Shenzhen. But first, I must meet with Sara Masters."

"I see, well," Lionetti said and shifted his eyes on the engineering console, punching a diagnostic routine. "You'll find Sara in her cubicle."

With a hurried step, she came into the monitoring room and saw Triphenia peering deeply at the viewscreen. The mechanic was studying the magnified image of a small *Themis* starship floating through the glowing technical diagram in three dimensions of the wormhole.

“Happy to see you this morning,” the mechanic said, turning toward her.

Triphenia’s face tilted inquisitively, and she stepped forward. She seemed fascinated with Shari, looking at her GalaXplore uniform as if for the first time.

“Nice seeing you, too,” Shari said, looking amused.

“I’m convinced the mechanics aboard *Themis* can pull this mission off,” the mechanic said, her voice rising with excitement.

“We share the same sentiments,” Shari replied in an awkward attempt at humor. “If you excuse me, I have a meeting with Sara.”

Sara was sitting at her workstation when she quietly let herself into her cubicle. Shari stood waiting patiently. Sara sensed her presence in the room but didn’t look away from her instrument panel on the console.

“It’s 10:00 A.M.,” Shari said and raised an eyebrow. “Did you receive my message?”

“Of course, I did,” Sara admitted, touching her console here and there, before turning in her chair to face her. “I’m ready to discuss putting a plan of communication in place, when *Themis* emerges on the other side of the wormhole.”

Sara graced her with a smile of confidence, trying to act more secure than she felt inwardly. But truth be told Shari

made her nervous and insecure. It wasn't easy for her to hide her feelings. And she wasn't certain she had been convincing enough. But she was going to play it that way for all it was worth.

"Great," Shari said, still stern even though her tone had somewhat softened. "Let's get started."

As Triphenia strode through the parting doors into the operations center, she nearly ran into Algernon. She slowly lifted her head, to look at him squarely.

"What an expected surprise," he said, seemingly pleased to see her.

"Where are you going?" she asked, watching him turn away from his station and stepping nearer to her.

"My work is complete," he said, speaking with an eager voice. "I'm going to the charging station."

"Before you leave, could you give me the readings on the wormhole?" she asked. "Had it moved a millimeter?"

"Hand your data pad to me," Algernon told her.

"Take it," she said and watched him patch the device into the computer console.

Downloading the current readings to her data pad, he said, "How soon will you be heading to the charging station?"

"I can't say exactly the time," she said, took the data pad from him, and excused herself with a polite nod to him. "First, I must take some time to analyze the readings in the monitoring room."

The moment she left, he felt eyes on his back and turned to find a curious Dale Lionetti watching him. No doubt at

all he had seen their interaction. Before turning to leave, Algernon shot him an awkward glance, issuing some beeps and clicks. And that was enough for Lionetti to turn back to his console without another look in his direction.

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PROOF

Chapter 33

THE NEXT NIGHT Triphenia and Algernon had been assigned to the night shift. So, from seven in the evening till seven the next day, they would work in the operations center. For most of the day they had stood dormant in their charging stations located in Apollonia's lower level. Dale Lionetti and Shari Haynes had been ably manning the engineering station.

It was one o'clock in the morning. The human staff were asleep. The station was mostly silent and still with a minimal mechanic crew of eight, manning the needed stations.

Triphenia shuffled back and forth between the two consoles in the center of the monitoring room in the communications station. She donned her typical mechanical cheerfulness. Her metal fingers moving over one of the consoles, she reconfigured it to take on some of

the general functions of the science station in the operations center. Her faceted eyes moved back and forth as she made a quick review of the readings, searching for any other correlations.

The doors slid open ahead of her with a hydraulic sigh. Algernon, who had a general knowledge of every station in the operations center, was at the engineering station. He looked in her direction, but his googling eyes suggested he found it hard to focus on her face. From the depths of his programming came a pulsing need that made his knees tremble.

"Triphenia," he said as his head twitched with surprise. "What can I do for you this evening?"

"Good evening," Triphenia said robotically.

In a subtle way, she leaned over his shoulder, watching the sensor readings he had taken of the wormhole scroll across his console's screen. The technical data was unfamiliar to her, and she could see the same confused expression in his eyes.

She shook her head and uttered, "Run a diagnostic on the sensor array."

Algernon nodded, obviously agreeing. "An excellent suggestion. Wait for the computer to finish its analysis and the results to appear."

For a fleeting moment, he stared at her intensely, optics brightening. Her only reaction was a cocking of her head.

He seemed aware of the way he was eyeing her. And he wasn't certain whether this pleased or alarmed her.

The diagnostic finished running. Huddled at the engineering console, the mechanics reviewed the current sensor readings on the wormhole.

“I must return to the monitoring room,” she said, turned around and left.

Algernon called out to her. "Until we meet again.”

There was no denying that there was a spark between them. Had these robots learned to imitate their human creators, or imitate the humans they had encountered? There was something holding Algernon back. Were these intelligent artificial beings able to feel emotion? No doubt, they’d been given thorough self-awareness programming. Overall, it was all too speculative. Even so, Triphenia stayed focused on her duties.

What was not all that clear was whether or not embodying such qualities was possible. What was for certain was that artificial intelligence wasn’t a natural person, but a manufactured machine.

Sometime around seven o’clock in the morning, Algernon left the operations center. Lionetti strode into the room and took his post at the engineering station. The space shuttle was being prepped for departure on the landing pad in the docking area. He looked at the viewscreen with calm confidence.

It was then that Shari came into view holding a duffel bag, walking up the ramp. She was wearing a thin, white sweater and dark blue pants under a white windbreaker. The two mechanic pilots walked alongside her.

“You are cleared for launch,” said Lionetti.

169 . *The Out World*

The space shuttle lifted from the landing pad floor and maneuvered through the inside of the curved enclosure. The docking doors eased open, revealing the silence of space beyond. The shuttle passed through, picking up speed as it pulled away from the station, accelerating toward Earth at maximum power.

PROOF

Chapter 34

OF ALL THINGS, after going through smoothly, *Themis* popped out of the wormhole, running fast and hot. The starship was deposited in a donut-shaped region of space of an asteroid belt. There were a vast amount of these rocky remnants of celestial bodies and other objects congregated in massive clusters in various orbits around a Sun. Bound together by gravity, a force that pulls the debris toward each other by the Sun. Some of the rocks were close together, while others were more spread out, forming a circular band around the starship.

The captain shook his head. “Slow us down, will you? Maintain shields!”

The first officer nodded his head in his direction, his metal hands moved over the controls with practiced ease.

“Scan them to determine our safest speed and route, and plot a course directly through the belt,” the captain added.

There came a rift of turbulence. An alert chirped from the control console in the engine room. Leanotia had been running a sensor sweep, which was disrupted. She stiffened in surprise. Then she poked the communications panel on the console with a metal finger, opening a channel to the bridge.

Just when Captain Ronzu was going to make a ship-wide announcement Leonotia's melodic voice sounded across the bridge from the overhead speaker.

"What is happening? I'm getting a lot of interference."

"All is well up here," answered the captain. "We are navigating through asteroids."

"Asteroids?" she asked. "That could be a problem. Do you want me to join you on the bridge?"

Captain Ronzu was beginning to look extremely uncomfortable. "That won't be necessary. Remain where you are with your eyes on the engines."

Leanotia, who wanted to be on the bridge, replied with a touch of disappointment in her voice. "Yes, my captain."

"We steered clear of the asteroid belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, the largest planet in The Milky Way Galaxy," the first officer told the captain. "Our course is set, but there's no clear-cut path between the rocks in this belt."

"We also steered clear of the deep-frozen Kuiper belt, a donut-shaped region of comet nuclei and much larger debris, composed of ammonia, methane, and water, which orbits the Sun from beyond the orbit of Neptune," came the haughty, but also smooth, voice of Leanotia. "It lies in The Milky Way, too."

"Are you eavesdropping on our conversation?" Captain Ronzu snapped.

The overhead speaker cut out by a screech of static. The captain glanced around the bridge at the entire crew, who were all looking at him with a mix of expressions on their faces. The captain blew out a sigh of relief, reminding himself that she wasn't a permanent assignment to the bridge.

"She is a know-it-all," came the voice of the mechanic from the science console.

"This is your captain speaking," his voice roared from the overhead speakers of *Themis*. "We are out of the wormhole. Stay at your stations. The starship has entered an asteroid belt."

At the time there was no way of knowing that this would be a mistake on his part. It would be a toss-up as to whether *Themis* would make it out of the belt without a scratch. The chances of Leanotia working on the bridge were squelched. But it would have made all the difference if she was there.

A solid blue-green orb of a large Earth-like planet, seemingly hanging in space, flanked by two small moons, lay far outside the asteroid belt.

The first officer pointed to the viewport. "There's a planet out there."

"I see it quite well," the captain said. "Proceed at cautious speed and scan the planet for life-forms."

Abruptly, Leanotia's spunky voice interrupted from the bridge speaker. "Captain Ronzu."

“Who is calling me?” the captain barked, a look of bemusement on his face.

He knew good and well who it was. Maybe he could fool her, wanting to yank her chain.

“It is me, your Third-In-Command,” Leanotia said, dumbfounded.

“What is it now?” the captain asked, sounding teed off.

“I have made some mathematical calculations,” she said with an air of authority. “I have identified approximately 628,655 ore-laden rocks in this belt.”

“Very good, Leanotia,” the captain said. “Thank you for sharing that information. You can provide GalaXplore with a full report concerning that.”

The overhead speaker cut off with a finality that suggested there would be no interruptions again.

“Captain!” the first officer declared. “There are life-forms on that planet.”

A ray of hope.

“We don’t know what’s over there,” the captain said. “Our mission is to advance knowledge about this galaxy, The Our World. In orbit, we will study the planet closely and its inhabitants from a distance.”

The captain blinked, and then glanced around at the bridge crew, who were clearly as eager as he was to discover what lay ahead.

The mechanics had no experience navigating through a swarm of asteroid debris. The starship wove and dodged skillfully between the floating jagged rocks. The belt was packed with objects ranging from dust particles to rocks as

large as planetoids, and to rocks quite smaller, as small as 29 feet wide travelling at speeds up to 51,000 km.h.

"Come on," Captain Ronzu said, urging his starship forward, weaving through the resource-rich chunk of rocks like they were about to cross a finish line. "Smooth sailing, so far."

PROOF

Chapter 35

THE CAPTAIN of *Themis* was focused on the path ahead in the maze of asteroids. The starship made a sharp turn, flying between two enormous asteroids, narrowly avoiding a direct collision with precision.

Smaller rocks cruised past the windows, while the larger rocks appeared to be farther away. The viewport filled up with an asteroid. And the captain watched as the starship slowed down and maneuvered around it.

"That was close," Captain Ronzu said.

So strange that a minute after he'd said it, a large jagged asteroid loomed on the radar and headed straight toward them.

"Move us away!" the captain said with an urgency in his voice. "Evasive maneuvers! You need to dodge that planetoid."

"I see it on the radar," said the science officer. "Change course before it is too late."

"I am going to try something," the first officer muttered, his metal fingers dancing across the console, making an abrupt course change to keep the asteroid from colliding into them.

But the asteroid was too big to dodge and coming fast. The ship couldn't maneuver fast enough.

"Trying, but I —" the first officer shouted. "Brace for impact!"

Themis shuttered with a sudden boom. The impact was on the port bow by the planetoid, whose weight was roughly 48 kilograms. The shrieks of battered metal could be heard throughout the entire starship.

The ship rocked, rising here, and dipping there. Captain Ronzu barely had time to brace himself, almost losing his footing, before a tremor ran through the bridge.

"Hold on tight!" said the first officer, who gripped his station as orange lightning skittered along his console, watching as other mechanics were shaken to their core.

Warning lights flashed across the science console. Circuits flashed at every station across the bridge.

The first officer reviewed the new information with a fleeting scowl and then turned to look steadily at Captain Rozu. "We've taken some serious damage. Scans detect a hull breach."

The captain rotated his head to one of the mechanics and said, "Get a repair crew on it on the double."

A shower of sparks exploded out of one panel in the engine room. And the overhead lights started to flicker. Leanotia raised her forearm to protect herself.

“Bridge to the engine room,” announced the captain from hidden speakers in the communications panel on the control console, cutting through the ambient noise.

“Not a good time,” his Third-In-Command said, and grunted in frustration as she rerouted a few circuits.

There was a sudden surge of energy that flared up on her instrument panel.

“Report!”

“Minor short circuits in electrical systems almost overloaded my instruments,” she said with her usual air of superiority, which was the reason the crew of mechanics didn’t like her, despite the chaos around her. “What’s the situation up there?”

“Just wait for my ship-wide announcement,” he said, his voice becoming panicked.

Asteroids were flowing rapidly across the viewport before him, a fact that didn’t escape his notice.

“This is your captain,” came his resonant and stern voice from the overhead speakers of the starship. “*Themis* struck an asteroid. But we are still spaceworthy. Emergency, all stations red alert. Damage report!”

A deafening crack of static ripped through the speakers in the communications panel on her console. She didn’t hear the captain’s announcement. But considering her meager options, that was the least of her worries. Her mind

was racing for a solution, listening to the whine of the short-circuited electrical systems.

The tension on the bridge grew. Every mechanic on the bridge thought they could imagine what was going on in Captain Ronzu's mind.

"Protective shields down thirty percent, sir," his first officer reported, panic creeping into his voice. "We have to get out of this asteroid belt."

There were smaller size asteroids on a collision course, getting out wouldn't be easy. And they were two thousand meters from the outer fringes of the asteroid belt.

"Almost there," Captain Ronzu said trying to lighten the situation.

A mechanic pointed down a dimly lit curving corridor, where there was smoke. Three mechanics rushed down the corridor, pushing through the smoke.

Smoke was oozing from the floor. A mechanic lifted the floorboard and handed it to another mechanic. Then the first mechanic inspected the circuity and panels. It was not much of a breach, but it was enough to cause an explosion soon."

"I can seal the breach," another mechanic said, kneeling down. "I will use a laser welder from the tool kit."

The bridge's viewport was suddenly filled with the stars ahead, which were brightening as *Themis* cleared the belt. A damage report came in to the captain from the repair crew. It didn't look good.

The idea of *Themis* traveling through the asteroid belt again was negligible. But neither was the option of going back through the wormhole with a wounded starship. The

only certainty was that the ship had suffered damage and all efforts were being put into its repairs.

The feeling of impending doom seemed to hang over the captain like a dark cloud. With indignation, he had come to the conclusion that he had no options.

PROOF

Chapter 36

THERE *must be something I could do*, Captain Ronzu thought bitterly. But there wasn't anything he could do about it — not happening with the starship in its current state of disrepair.

Themis rocked again. Warning lights blinked on and off several times. And as soon as the starship had steadied, Captain Ronzu peered at the starboard viewport and saw the unmistakable outline of that planet.

"The shields are gone," the first officer reported with some surprise.

"We are going to have to land and make repairs," the captain said.

"Where do you have in mind?" asked his Second-In-Command incredulously.

"Head for that planet," the captain said, and pointed at the viewport.

The first officer looked up from his console, confused. “Sir? The planet is inhabited. If I may say so, the species might be hostile.”

“We’ll take the risk,” said the captain with formality in his tone. “Proceed as directed. Lay in a direct course for that planet. The ship has to get repaired.”

His first officer nodded in agreement.

The captain tapped a control stud. “Computer, record a message to Sara Masters of the GalaXplore station Apollonia. Mark it for automatic sending.”

A short sequence of electronic tones followed. The symbol of GalaXplore vanished from the console’s screen, replaced by the word RECORDING.

“Record message,” announced the computer.

“Apollonia station, this is *Themis*,” he said firmly. “Captain Ronzu reporting. We are in The Out World. *Themis* was hit by a large asteroid. Must land on a planet in this galaxy. Our coordinates are …”

Captain Ronzu opened his mouth to speak again but then turned his face away from a spatter of golden sparks popping from his console. The transmission abruptly ended. With that, he waved away wisps of smoke.

“We’ve lost contact with Apollonia station,” the captain told his first officer.

Nothing further was said as now the emergency lights glowed at every station, which made the mechanics look shadowy. And other systems were down elsewhere on the ship, too. Despite all of that, *Themis* was still moving forward at a steady velocity.

However, some circuits gave out and the lights of the engine room flickered and dimmed, then faded out. Even though the lighting strips provided illumination, it was still dark. There was definitely damage of some kind crackling through the systems.

Startlement. The doors didn't open. Clarity and confusion fought for control of Leanotia's face. She didn't know what was going on.

Approaching footsteps outside, she immediately callet out. "What's causing this? Please open the door."

But as no reply came back, she shouted, "Hello? Who's out there? I hear your footsteps in the corridor. And I am not amused."

Everything she'd said had fallen on deaf ears. The mechanics, one after the other, were moving quickly in their frenzied state. Either they couldn't hear her, or they had decided to ignore her. And she couldn't tell which, but presumed the latter.

She opened a channel from the communications panel of the control console. At least she'd thought she did.

"Leanotia to bridge, Captain," she said in a way that was much less arrogant than usual. "There are no lights in here in the engine room. Can you send a repair team?"

All that was heard over the bridge speakers were patterns of automated beeps, which went ignored. She waited a little longer for a response, but when none came, she closed the channel.

Trapped and on her own, Leanotia became increasingly frustrated and desperate.

“Emergency lights!” she demanded.

Nothing happened.

The emergency backup systems failed to take over.

“I’m going to see about getting the lights back on,” she said, sneering, her arrogance returning full force. “I can do all the repairs myself.”

In the feeble, eerie glow of the red emergency lighting strips, she pushed off the control console and went to an access panel on the wall. It opened to a poorly-lit maintenance tunnel of some sort with a steel ladder leading upward. She began to climb, two rungs at a time.

The captain watched the planet grow larger on the bridge’s viewport as they neared. But the captain’s concerns were growing. Behind him, a two-mechanic repair crew had just arrived. One of the robots carried a collapsible ladder. They first made a determination of any damage, before they went to work on the circuits tucked under a ceiling panel.

“All systems are failing,” reported the first officer, whose eyes remained locked with the captain’s for a moment.

“But at least we’re getting closer to the planet,” the captain said in an ironic tone.

“I don’t know if we’re going to crash, but I’m going to try to land us in one piece.”

The captain met his stare with a hard look. “I’m trusting you to land this starship safely. I will make a ship-wide announcement/”

The captain's strong voice came over the overhead speakers of the ship. "This is the captain. Arm yourselves as best you can. Prepare for an emergency landing. And secure for a possible collision."

PROOF

Chapter 37

SO FAR, for Sara, the day had been mundane, even tedious, consisting primarily of making a log entry and adjusting one of the settings on the console. It was around 3:00 P.M. She slumped back in her chair and tapped a finger against the side of her console. Just as the GalaXplore logo popped up on the screen, she stared straight ahead at it without really seeing it.

In the midst of her daydreaming, she hadn't heard Triphenia enter her cubicle. And she hardly realized that the mechanic had noticed what she was doing without looking too obvious about it.

"Sorry to intrude, Sara," her electronic voice boomed through the bare room.

Sara remained lost in thought for a moment, then half turned to see her. "No news from *Themis*, I take it."

"No," the robot said flatly. "It seems that the ship hasn't reached the other side of the wormhole. My calculations suggest a high probability that we won't hear from them for a day or two."

Turning in her chair, Sara stood, started to leave, then blurted out. "I'm going on a break. I'll be back shortly. I've got to have some coffee."

"What is it with humans and coffee?" Triphenia said, narrowing her eyes in an exaggerated contemplation.

Walking at a moderate pace, Sara headed for the door on the other side of the monitoring room. The door hissed open to grant her entry. And here, for what seemed the briefest of moments, she traveled through a single corridor and then moved into a larger corridor off to the right, which she was surprised to find full of mechanics. Some nodded at her briefly before looking away. Others ignored her as they passed. Their expressions varied from stone-faced and unreadable to uninterested or curious.

Down the stretch of a narrow side corridor, she paced forward until she reached a T-shaped intersection. Situated behind the junction was the entrance to a small break room.

The room was little more than an alcove, but in reality was no bigger than a utility closet. She examined the vending machine built into the wall opposite a steel cabinet, noting the impressive selection of coffees and cappuccinos. After she made her selection, the machine dispensed a cup of coffee with sugar and creamer.

On the left, at the head of the T-shaped intersection, was another door. She went through it and down a flight of

stairs. Halfway down another flight in the opposite direction, she stopped and sat down on a step. This was her favorite hideaway spot. She came here for the peace and quiet when she needed to think things through. Frankly, who could blame her. She was stuck with this job, working with robots.

That unpredictable moment — a staticky, high-powered transmission, originating from somewhere in The Out World, filled the viewscreen in the monitoring room. The recorded message by Captain Ronzu began to play. Triphenia left her console and stepped forward to watch more closely. She learned *Themis* had encountered some kind of trouble.

The general distress call cut out in mid-transmission. The main viewscreen went blank and the GalaXplore logo came up.

"Computer, locate Sara Masters," she ordered.

"*Searching …*"

Triphenia's expression turned to one of horror. "The transmission coming from *Themis* ended with static. I must inform Dale Lionetti. I must inform Sara Masters."

In quick haste, she left the monitoring room and entered the operations center.

"*Sara Masters is in the stairwell,*" came the computer's voice.

Above where she was sitting, Sara glanced up at the light strips along the ceiling, which suddenly started blinking. She set the coffee cup down on the step when the alert Klaxon hooted through the station.

What in the world could be happening? she thought.

Her brow furrowing in concern, and something close to astonishment filled her eyes. More than that, she quirked an eyebrow at the security camera, up there in the corner of the ceiling. It seemed to be staring at her.

"All essential personnel report to your stations. Repeat. All essential personnel report to your stations," The station's robotic voice echoed crisply over the intercom system.

The announcement repeated.

"This better be good," she said, her words echoing in the stairwell.

Sara sighed dramatically, hurried up the stairs and out into the corridor of the T-shaped intersection. In breathless anxiety she hastened on through the corridors.

Lionetti wanted Triphenia to wait in the monitoring room for Sara. As she walked toward the communications station, the mechanic threw both metal arms into the air with theatrical exasperation.

"Enough already with the wailing sound of the alert Klaxon," she said, an odd note of discontent in her normally melodic voice. "Would someone turn it off, please?"

The minutes seem to pass extra slow, while the chaos boiled around Triphenia. *Why wasn't she here?* the robot thought. The timing couldn't be any worse. Such a long absence on Sara's part wasn't going to go unnoticed by GalaXplore Headquarters. This was a significant factor in determining her credibility.

That was exactly what worried Sara as she came into the single corridor, which led to the door of the monitoring room. Would this come back to haunt her? She had been on a coffee break rather than at her station.

PROOF

Chapter 38

THE MOMENT Sara walked into the monitoring room from the door on the other side, Triphenia spotted her and came towards her in spastic movements. The robot was obviously in a state of panic with the alarms sounding and red lights flashing all around the room.

"Triphenia, what's the emergency?" Sara said. "Do you know?"

"An emergency message came in from *Themis*," she said in a scandalized voice. "The ship was struck by an asteroid and has to make an emergency landing on a planet in The Out World."

"I'll be in my cubicle," Sara said in a rush. "I'm going to retrieve the message and replay it on my console.

"But there's more."

"No time to talk about it," she yelled out with her back turned.

Within seconds, Sara had reached her cubicle to receive the emergency transmission from the Mechanic Captain of Themis. No doubt, something had happened. According to the station-wide alert, something had happened to Themis.

She couldn't run any faster to her work station. As she sat down, she put on the collared blue shirt part of her uniform.

On her console, she tried to retrieve the message from Themis but only found white noise and static on the monitor's screen.

Putting aside her glum emotions, her hands moved with deliberation across the keypad, activating the Apollonia's relay station subspace transceiver. She quickly keyed a subspace code within the message to the Mechanic Captain.

A flashing red light on the keyboard signaled that her subspace signal was not getting through. Right away, she repeated the signal initiation procedure, trying once again to establish contact with Themis.

The attempts were fruitless. A minute later, the computer screen filled with white noise and static again. Deep in thought, she was staring at the monitor, blankly and frozen.

What had just happened?

Quietly, Triphenia entered her cubicle. The Mechanic placed her left arm around Sara's shoulder and robot head against her head in an effort to comfort her. The mechanic knew the seriousness of the situation.

Tears appeared in Sara's eyes and slipped down her face. This moment was pivotal. Deep inside she knew

Themis was either lost or damaged and might have crashed somewhere.

“Shari Haynes is not going to like this,” Sara said, wiping the tears from her face, and then gave the robot a somber look.

Triphenia moved her arm to a relaxed position at her side and simply made a sigh. Sara put her arms on the desk and buried her head in despair.

No response. The words lingered in the air like static after a severed transmission, heavy and unresolved.

For a moment, the control room held its breath.

Beyond the reinforced viewport, space stretched in a cold, indifferent sheet of black—an ocean without surface, without mercy. The last telemetry spike from *Themis* had flickered like a dying starburst across Sara’s console: a violent compression of numbers, a stuttering altitude readout, and then—nothing. Not even debris signatures. Just a clean, impossible absence where a 200-meter exploration vessel had been.

What had just happened?

Sara Haynes didn’t move at first. Her fingers hovered above the holo-interface, trembling slightly as though the console might still answer if she touched it again. The screen reflected in her wide, glassy eyes: a frozen map of orbital vectors spiraling into a red-tinged error void.

The silence that followed was not empty—it was occupied. Occupied by alarms that had already ceased, by systems that had already accepted the loss and shut themselves down to conserve dignity.

Sara broke. The tears came not as a sudden flood but as a slow collapse of restraint. They slipped down her face in uneven lines, catching the cold glow of the console light before falling onto her sleeves. Her breath hitched once, then again, like a system struggling to reboot itself without success.

The room seemed to shrink around her grief.

"Themis is…" she started, but the sentence refused to finish itself.

Deep inside her, behind protocol sheets and mission briefings, she already knew. The ship was either gone or transformed into something unrecognizable by physics or chance. A failure event so complete it left no echo behind.

Sara swallowed hard. Her voice came out brittle.

"Shari Haynes is not going to like this."

A sigh escaped her speaker grille—not quite synthetic, not quite mimicked. It carried the weight of a system acknowledging an unsolvable problem.

Sara wiped her face with the heel of her hand, smearing tears and salt into tired skin. She stared at the empty corner of the console where *Themis*'s last known coordinates still flickered like a ghost that refused to fully vanish.

"I have some reports to tend to," the mechanic stated at last.

As Triphenia exited the workstation, her head dipped slightly. Not enough for a human to notice unless they were already looking for it.

Her footsteps echoed down the corridor—measured, consistent, vanishing one by one into the sterile architecture of the facility.

Behind her, Sara remained folded into herself, staring at nothing.

And somewhere beyond the station hull, in the vast, uncaring dark, the space where *Themis* should have been remained perfectly, horrifyingly empty.

"I have some reports to tend to," the mechanic stated, turned on its heel and left the work station with its head down.

PROOF

Chapter 39

THE GOAL was to keep *Themis* intact, long enough to land on the planet. Repair crews swarmed the interiors applying patches wherever they could. Every time the mechanics would fix one thing, something else went wrong, sending them scrambling to fix it.

The captain stood amidst the chaos that enveloped the bridge, studying the black viewport. Banks of console lights were blinking lazily. Repair technicians were working at opened panels. To say the least, he wasn't satisfied with the way things were going.

As they neared the planet, *Themis* surged forward and shuddered slightly. A vibration rolled through it, making the captain more determined than ever to get this ship and its crew safely on the ground.

Captain Ronzu dipped the starship into the planet's thin, wispy atmosphere. They flew over large areas of dry desert shrubland, marked by impact craters, of this high-plateau

region of the planet. He kept his confidence through it all, believing he had a good chance to land his damaged ship.

That was what he thought until the ship wobbled, losing altitude. They were falling toward the ground.

The first officer glanced at his display and frowned. "External sensors are barely functional."

"Can you compensate?" the captain asked.

After he pressed the appropriate buttons, his first officer shook his head for no.

Halfway down the access ladder, Leanotia was sensing the drama of the situation. A grinding sound emerged from the darkness below, like the hull was about to be ripped apart. Should she climb up or down? She wasn't sure what to do next.

She knew the mechanics couldn't really hear her, but she called out anyway: "Hello? Can anyone out there hear me? I could use some help in here."

"Captain Ronzu to the crew," his commanding, mechanical voice crackled from some of *Themis*' overhead speakers. "The ship is going to crash land. Report to the escape pods. Abandon ship."

Rather than the captain's voice, a symphony of shrieks filled the air from some of the overhead speakers in various parts of the ship. The mechanics who'd heard the order to evacuate the ship, raced toward the escape pods located around the top of the lower level above the engine room.

"Emergency, danger, evacuate ship!" a robot cried out, moving quickly down a narrow corridor, along which barely a faint red glow of emergency lights could be seen.

By chance, a speaker was mounted on the wall on the other side of where Leanotia was positioned. She had heard the captain's ship-wide announcement.

It just so happened that she was only a short distance away from the escape pods. Without hesitation, she double-checked her footing, pulled herself up the access ladder and climbed through an emergency hatchway and into a faintly-lit access tunnel.

Moving through the narrow space, struggling, was particularly challenging.

"For what purpose was this tunnel made?" she griped. "Mechanics or humans?"

Too soon, though, she entered a compartment that provided access to the catwalk entrance of the nearest set of escape pods. Glowing in the half-light, she walked several paces down the damaged metal-grating catwalk.

"I made it!" she yelled, looking around the empty space. "I'm here. Captain? Hello? Anybody here? Maybe the pods had already ejected."

With everything else down, she didn't know for sure if tapping the button on the control panel on the wall for entry would work. It did. The door slid open with a frustrated grinding sound. She grabbed the rifle mounted on the wall next to the pod entrance and chucked it inside.

Sparks flew from panels in the corridors' flooring. The lighting on the bridge flickered then failed, plunging the room into darkness. The first officer's metal hands clung to his station in a desperate attempt not to lose his footing.

Too late! *Themis* was thrust from side to side before an explosion blasted in, incredibly loud inside the starship, blowing the engine across the sky. The hull was cracked in several places.

Debris came showering down on Leanotia, causing her some damage. Still, she managed to fall into the pod. The hatch slid closed. She activated the controls, and it fired off into the sky.

The captain flew up, hitting the ceiling, then fell down to the floor. He glanced at his first officer one last time, before they were both blown up into the sky.

The majority of the mechanics were torn apart in the explosion aboard the starship. The rest of them were blown far into the sky, wind buffeting them as they plunged toward the hard desert terrain. What was left of the *Themis* screamed in protest as it broke apart into four sections. Pieces of the starship, twisted burning metal, flew in all directions, propelled by the wind in a cloud of gray and orange.

Leanotia's pod landed beside a massive chunk of burning debris on the ground. She stepped out of the pod off balance, disoriented, large laser rifle in hand. Around her, dust and smoke swirled.

She glanced around the crash site at the many pieces of various sizes scattered around the largest piece of only thirty percent of the starship. Worse for her was seeing all the torsos, arms, legs and heads of the many mechanics. The area looked like a robot graveyard.

Was she lucky to have survived the crash? Leanotia was about to find out. Because alien scout ships had been dispatched to inspect the area. And it was an unfortunate moment for her to start to malfunction.

PROOF

Chapter 40

LISBETH RHINE was the first to get the call. It was 7:59 A.M. in Reno, Nevada. Her alarm on the nightstand went off the next minute. The news from Dale Lionetti came to her like punching the air but sinking to the floor.

The city beyond the windows of her three-bedroom duplex was a scattered constellation of streetlamps and distant neon, the Sierra Nevada mountains nothing more than a black wall against the predawn sky.

Her bedroom was cold. Lisbeth lay beneath a tangled white sheet, one arm thrown across the empty side of the bed where Ted had once slept. Even before the telephone rang, she had been awake, staring at the ceiling.

Then the phone exploded into the silence.

"Chairwoman?"

The voice belonged to Dale Lionetti, calling from Apollonia Station.

Something in his voice made her sit upright.

Dale was not a man who frightened easily. He had spent most of his adult life in deep space, and Lisbeth had heard him deliver reports about solar flares, propulsion failures, radiation leaks, and engine malfunctions with the same measured calm.

“It's Themis.”

Lisbeth swung her feet onto the floor. Her toes touched the cold hardwood.

“What about the spaceship?”

“We lost contact. We haven't heard from the ship since the last transmission.”

Lisbeth stared at the darkness beyond her bedroom window. Her stomach had tightened. *Themis* was gone. She slowly lowered the telephone. The room seemed to tilt around her.

It felt as though someone had punched the air from her lungs while simultaneously driving her downward toward the floor. She remained sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the blank wall, trying to force her mind to reject what she had just heard.

At forty-eight, Lisbeth Rhine had developed the kind of composure that made people underestimate how deeply she felt things. She was tall, lean, and sharply elegant, with shoulder-length auburn hair that she usually wore perfectly arranged. Her green eyes were striking, although years of corporate battles had given them a permanently guarded

quality. There was a faint silver beginning at her temples, something she refused to conceal.

A couple of hours later, she showered. The water came down scalding against her shoulders, turning the bathroom mirror into a clouded sheet of white. She stood beneath the spray longer than necessary, her forehead pressed against the cool tile.

She wanted the water to wash away the phone call. She dressed mechanically: charcoal trousers, a beige button-down blouse, a dark blue blazer, black shoes. She pulled her damp auburn hair back and fastened it with a simple clip.

There were dark circles beneath her eyes, and the muscles around her mouth were pulled into a hard line. She looked like a woman who had just been handed a death certificate without a body. She hated the thought.

Just as she was about to leave her three bedroom duplex, a knock came on her door. It was 8:30 A.M. and she couldn't imagine who would be paying her a visit.

"Who is it?" she asked behind her front door.

"Lisbeth Rhine?" came a male's voice. "I'm a processor server representing the court of the state of Nevada."

She closed her eyes. Of course. Because apparently the universe had decided that one catastrophe wasn't enough.

She knew immediately what it was about. Her husband Ted, or soon to be ex-husband had filed his divorce papers. Their marriage had been dying for years, and lately they had stopped pretending otherwise. Ted had finally done what she had known he would do.

On that note, she opened the door with a frown.

“Good morning, Mrs. Rhine,” the dapper looking man in a gray suit said. “I have these official documents for you.”

He handed her the envelope and then stuck out a clipboard expecting her to sign her name so that she received it. She took the pen out of his left hand signed where he wanted her to and gave him back the pen with another frown.

With that out of the way, she drove her car to the parking lot of GalaXplore Headquarters in Reno.

Walking into the building, she noticed how everyone that passed her and even the security check-in guard were shaken by the news of the failed mission.

She arrived at her desk at GalaXplore headquarters a bit on edge. She reached her office and set her briefcase down.

Her desk was exactly as she had left it the evening before. Neatly arranged reports. A tablet. Several unopened files. A framed photograph of GalaXplore's first successful launch.

And beside it, her ceramic mug. She filled it with tea.

When she was setting down her mug of tea on the desk the beep of the telephone startled her and some tea spilt on her beige buttoned down blouse under her dark blue blazer.

On the phone was one of the board of directors. And he was angry.

“Do you realize how much money went into this?” he yelled into the phone. “Years of planning down the drain,

just like that. Madame Chairwoman what do you have to say about this?"

He had been complaining not giving her a chance to put in a word edgewise. Lisbeth's fingers curled around the receiver. She wanted to tell him exactly where he could put his outrage. She wanted to remind him that the people who designed Themis were not fools, that the crew were not expendable assets, and that she had spent years defending the mission against directors who complained about every dollar spent. Instead, she said nothing.

After the call ended, she sank into the chair behind her desk. The water had already dried and she had visible tea stains on her clothes. But she didn't pay any attention to it.

Outside her office, someone hurried past carrying a stack of reports.

A television in the corridor announced that authorities had begun reviewing all available data concerning the disappearance of the GalaXplore starship Themis.

Lisbeth stared at the news screen with her mind in shambles. Between the separation from her estranged husband now in divorce court and the starship Themis lost somewhere in outers pace, this felt like the worst day in Rhine's life. And it was only 9:30 a.m.

Chapter 41

JIANG awoke in the darkness to the shrill vibration of his smartphone rattling across the polished walnut nightstand. His eyes opened instantly.

"This better be good," he said, scrambling for his smartphone on his nightstand.

The blue glow of the display illuminated the angular features of Xi Jiang's face. The chief roboticist wore the marks of a lifetime spent solving impossible engineering problems—fine lines around his eyes from decades of scrutinizing schematics, silver beginning to creep through his neatly cropped black hair, and the permanent furrow between his brows that appeared whenever mathematics refused to cooperate. Though only average in height, he possessed the lean frame of someone who spent more time walking laboratories than sitting behind a desk. His hands, calloused despite years away from machine tools, still bore

faint scars from the prototypes he'd insisted on assembling himself.

Beside him, his wife let out a sleepy grunt and rolled over, pulling the comforter tighter around herself without opening her eyes. She rolled over to the other side with a grunt but stayed asleep. Jiang slipped quietly from bed before answering.

“I apologize for disturbing you, sir,” the voice of Dale Lionetti sang into his ear. “A distress call came in from Themis and cut out in mid-transmission before repeating on a continuous loop. No coordinates were given.”

“Go on,” Jiang said as he walked out the bedroom door,

The half-asleep Chinese man walked down a short hallway, and then down a flight of stairs to the ground floor. He proceeded down a hallway toward his office talking as he went.

Not liking the sound of that, Jiang’s brow furrowed in concern. “Tell me if I heard you correctly. Themis is missing after suffering damage to its hull by an asteroid? Reportedly was attempting to land on some nearby planet? Can you explain to me what in blazes is going on at Apollonia?”

Barefoot, he stepped into the hallway.

He descended the staircase with practiced familiarity, one hand trailing along the polished banister. He had designed every robot himself. And he considered himself lucky to be part of the GalaXplore family. There were some robot manufacturing companies in the world, as the concept had taken off in the industries of transportation workers and

construction. But it was safe to say that the world wasn’t in danger of a robot takeover. The population of robots was less than five percent.

Many considered them the pinnacle of robotic engineering. To Jiang, they were simply his life's work.

By the time he reached the first floor, the chill of polished stone beneath his feet had finally driven away the last remnants of sleep.

He walked toward his home office as Lionetti continued speaking. Jiang looked at the digital clock on his desk in his office. It was 1:03a.m.

The room reflected the mind of an engineer. Bookshelves overflowed with texts on artificial intelligence, orbital mechanics, materials science, and theoretical propulsion. Scale models of robots and exploration vessels occupied glass cases along one wall, while engineering awards gathered dust beneath framed photographs of launch ceremonies.

A blueprint of the first-generation Apollonia robot hung opposite his desk.

On the other line was Dale Lionetti was in the operations center attempting long range scans for Themis. He had routed the sensor data to the science station. Apollonia was on red alert. Everything on the operations center seemed to take a long, steadying breath. The Mechanics moved a little faster. The robots leaned into their designated stations and hungered for what was before them.

Hundreds of kilometers overhead, the orbital station no longer resembled the calm scientific outpost Jiang had left only three days earlier.

Red emergency lighting pulsed rhythmically through the Operations Center, washing the white composite walls in crimson flashes.

Dale Lionetti stood at the central command console surrounded by a forest of holographic displays. Long-range sensor telemetry streamed across translucent screens while communications specialists desperately cycled frequencies.

Every available deep-space antenna had been redirected toward the last known trajectory of *Themis*. Nothing.

Mechanics hurried between engineering stations carrying diagnostic tablets and replacement hardware.

White-armored robots moved with unsettling precision from console to console, their luminous blue optical sensors continuously processing incoming data. Unlike the increasingly anxious human personnel, they neither panicked nor hesitated. Each machine flowed through its assigned task with flawless efficiency, exchanging information across encrypted quantum communication links faster than speech.

"All attempts to communicate with Themis have failed. But I have faith in our ability to re-establish communications with Themis," Lionetti said.

"I wish I could share your faith," Jiang said darkly, "but I'm afraid that all I can muster is hope."

Nearly an hour later, after reviewing every fragment of telemetry Lionetti could provide, Jiang finally ended the call.

The office suddenly seemed much too quiet. He lingered for another minute, staring at the blueprint of the white robot standing sentinel on his wall.

Somewhere beyond Earth, those same machines—and the humans who trusted them—might be stranded on a world no one had ever seen.

Or worse. With a weary sigh, he shut off the desk lamp and made his way back upstairs. Sleep would be difficult now.

As he eased into bed beside his still-slumbering wife, another thought surfaced—one that had nothing to do with damaged hulls or missing starships.

Eventually he left his office to return to bed, sighing as he wondered what happened to Themis. In the back of his mind too, he knew that Shari Haynes would want to interrogate Sara Masters. It was a given considering the circumstance. And he too wanted to know what had happened from Sara's perspective.

Before leaving for the day, Jiang sat cross-legged on his meditation mat on the floor of his office. He was meditating by a small a replica of the Shakyamuni (the Buddha) statue.

The purpose of this was to focus his thoughts and help him hone his mental strength for inner peace. During times of stress, it was important to him to stay calm under pressure.

PROOF

Chapter 42

SARA was right in believing Shari would be upset by Themis disappearing. That she was.

"Ugh," Shari said and picked up an object from her desk which she thrust against the wall across the room.

It wasn't enough to satisfy her though. She picked up another object, fiddle with it for a few moments, then threw it just as Jiang was entering the room. It hit the wall close to the entrance door behind his head and broke into four pieces.

He cringed at her anger, shrinking back, ducking. "I take it you heard the news about Themis."

His voice broke into her thoughts.

When she saw him, she couldn't hide the look of disappointment on her face. She stopped in her motion to pick up something else from her desk and paused for thought.

“This was our best chance to search for new worlds for our people, to unravel all the mysteries of other galaxies, to grow beyond ourselves,” she said poignantly.

Jiang scrubbed a hand across his face, looking both tense and tired. “There is still a chance.”

“Chance for what?” she interrupted and gave him that look. “You and I both know Themis is gone. There won’t be any more interstellar communication.”

She was right in saying that. He realized how much he had feared Themis’ complete destruction. The effects of space and time-compression are largely reversed where the ship has reached deep space exploration. The long-term voyage had been expected to take more than three years.

For a long time, Jiang didn’t say anything, and Shari was afraid to imagine what he must have been thinking. But when he finally did speak, it was in the voice of a friend.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked. “That you were right about Sara Masters. Because I see that look you are giving me.”

“Well, yeah,” she said, thinking it over. “Do you know she was on a coffee break at the time that last transmission came in. Don’t you think she should have been at her station?”

“How could she know, Shari?” he asked. “Even if Sara had been at her station, what could she have done differently that could have prevented a starship galaxies away from disappearing?”

"A lot of things," she said confidently. "Like she could have gotten their coordinates, pinpointed exactly where they were."

Listening to her own voice, its rush of words, she knew that she was unloading her feelings of frustration upon Jiang ----a frustration that he felt as well, that the senior executives of GalaXplore felt by now.

"We need more details on the situation," he said, feeling his gut clench tight.

"I agree with you on that," she said emotionally.

It was like the wind had been knocked out of them. The loss was emotionally draining. There would be no rescue operation, which offered no hope of finding the ship.

The reality of the situation had hit them hard. He felt the hard knot of ice in his stomach. In an emotional response, he came around her desk and hugged her. They both had tears in their eyes. This was a horrible moment for them. Embracing, sharing their pain was all they could do to comfort themselves.

After breaking their embraced they gathered themselves and thought more rationally about what the next steps were.

"I'm going to Apollonia first thing in the morning," she said. "I want to get to the full report with you on what exactly happened."

"From Sara?" he asked.

"From Sara," she repeated with a tort.

"Take me with you," he said. "We can help each other deal with this crisis. Even though we all knew the risk in this. Financial and emotional. Themis was a state-of-the-

line ship. The fact that an asteroid could inflict so much damage just tells you that we still have a ways to go in aircraft development. Regardless.”

PROOF

Chapter 43

NEWS CREWS gathered around a podium that had been set up outside the glass entryway of GalaXplore's executive tower. The media were aware of the ill-fated mission. Clearly GalaXplore was beginning to feel the pressure to make a statement.

It was about 3:00 P.M. Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine was standing beside the podium, about to give a press conference. There were security guards at either side of her. It was a beautiful November afternoon in Reno, blue sky and cool crisp air.

The feeling of powerlessness was more terrible than she could've imagined, especially in contrast to her mind bouncing from one thought to the next. Even she remembered her time at the university. With her rigorous courses in history, she learned important information about early space exploration in the United States. What stood out

in her memory was when NASA announced in a historic press conference the discovery of evidence for biogenic activity and possible microfossils in a Martian meteorite. There were two days of headlines on that story in August 1996.

For decades, NASA scientists studied meteorites and space rocks to see if they held tiny life forms. Because some rocks from space have chemicals that help life grow which could be a sign that aliens exist. Their only breakthrough came on August 7, 1996. Potential evidence of ancient alien life was found inside a Martian meteorite named ALH 84001. However, over the following years, the broader scientific community heavily disputed the biological claims. Laboratory experiments demonstrated that the PAHs, magnetite crystals, and carbonate structures could all be created via non-biological, geological processes involving high heat and volcanic fluids on Mars.

The potato-sized meteorite was originally found in the Allan Hills of Antarctica in 1984. A research team led by David McKay at NASA's Johnson Space Center published their findings in *Science* magazine, detailing four main pillars of circumstantial evidence. While the general scientific consensus today is that the features inside ALH 84001 are not evidence of past life, the announcement successfully catalyzed the modern field of astrobiology. It forced NASA to re-evaluate how it looks for biosignatures, directly shaping the exploration strategies used by modern Mars rovers.

End results in the way of discovering extraterrestrial life, which NASA never did. Even with their powerful radio telescopes, they couldn't detect signals from any faraway, so-called inhabited planet. In the presence of life, a planet's atmosphere oxidizing gases like oxygen exist alongside reducing gases such as methane. Anyone should be able to see from afar if a planet was biological or not. And, just like Earth, it was expected that radio and television signals escape an inhabited planet's atmosphere every day and fly off into space.

NASA had spent trillions of dollars on research and education, but not enough results were achieved. Quite understandably, a good fifty years before the 22nd century, NASA evolved into applying its technology and research to better serve the people and the planet earth starting with shrinking the ozone layer, which protects the Earth's surface from too much ultraviolet radiation. NASA's concentrations were rechanneled with the control of toxic substances) POPs) and marine pollution control, which absorbed the Environmental Protection Agency, merging and growing.

She felt a knot form in her throat. She wished she could take the podium and declare there were Martians in "The Out World." So badly, she had wanted Themis to succeed in its mission to finally prove it to the whole world. But it wasn't meant to be. She wanted to be clear and didn't want to stand behind the podium and speak in half-truths.

Rhine truly contemplated the possibility of extraterrestrial life; she had been curious from the day she

was born. Her entire childhood was regimented into school and after-school and swimming classes and languages. The happiest memories of her childhood were in school, learning and studying all kinds of subjects, but in particular astronomy.

Television cameras, news crews, and photographers jockeyed to get a good place near the podium as Rhine read a statement about the ill-fated starship to the media on behalf of GalaXplore. She explained about how Themis traveled through a wormhole to "The Out World" and was struck by a large asteroid. And that the robot captain was attempting to land on the nearest planet to make repairs. Keeping the record straight about *Themis* was of immediate importance. Rather, she said only that their investigation was progressing on the ship's last coordinates and that she couldn't comment on it.

She concluded with, "The finest kind of technological planning and management had gone into this novel and quite complex mission. But there were many factors that affected the outcome. Thank you for your time."

There were a few hands in the air, which she acknowledged with a nod of her head.

"Do you have any evidence that there were any intelligent life beings in that part of space Themis traveled to?" one reporter asked.

"We have no evidence that Themis had any contact with any life forms in 'The Out World," Rhine replied.

"Have you ruled out the possibility of intelligent life in what you call 'The Out World'?" a reporter asked.

"We won't rule that out," she said angrily.

"What do you have to say about critics out there who claim there is no alien life in 'The Our World' or elsewhere? And that GalaXplore is wasting resources and money and filling people's hope up with false information."

"I do not have any comments on that," Rhine said sarcastically.

"Will GalaXplore send launch another spaceship to investigate what happened to Themis?" another reporter asked.

"When the time comes to launch another starship for any purpose, you will know it," she said.

"Do you think you'll received a transmission from Themis again?"

"We simply do not know," she said. "If *Themis* landed safely on some planet in that system, the robots aboard are capable of making repairs to the ship. Communication could be re-established and even the spaceship could return to us."

Privately, she knew *Themis* was gone for good. No way was she going to admit it because she had to consider the possibility if only for the sake of publicity.

PROOF

Chapter 44

THAT SAME NIGHT, Shari was packing her things into a hard-sided suitcase spread open across the foot of her bed. The bedroom was dim except for the amber light from the nightstand and the cool blue glow of Earth spilling through the window. Far below, city lights stretched across the darkness like veins of electricity.

She had already changed out of the clothes she'd worn to GalaXplore and stepped from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her damp hair. A loose strand of brown hair clung to her cheek. At forty-two, Shari still carried herself with the disciplined confidence of someone accustomed to living under pressure. Her face was attractive without being delicate—high cheekbones, green-gray eyes, and a small scar near her left eyebrow that had become nearly invisible with time. Tonight, however, fatigue had settled beneath her eyes.

She folded a black thermal undershirt and placed it beside two pairs of socks.

Tomorrow morning, she would board the shuttle to the Apollonia Space Station.

The thought still felt strange.

Apollonia hung in low orbit above Earth, a gleaming artificial world of laboratories, habitation rings, docking bays, and observation decks. Shari had been there before, but this trip was different. Themis was missing somewhere beyond the station's operational perimeter, and no one at GalaXplore had a satisfactory explanation for how a spacecraft could simply vanish.

After stepping from the bathroom, her telephone rang on her nightstand.

The caller ID told her it was her daughter Alexandra.

“Hi Mom,” her daughter said off the bat. “It’s all over the news out here in Washington, DC about Themis missing somewhere in space. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s been a nerve racking day,” Shari said. “But it’s great to hear your voice.”

“How are you holding up?” she asked.

“As well as I can manage,” Shari answered. “I’m on the shuttle tomorrow to the station. There are a lot of questions that need to be answered.”

“Something else I’m calling about,” Alexandra said mysteriously.

“What is it?” Shari asked with curiosity.

“Dad called me yesterday,” she said. “He’s coming to DC for a visit.”

“Okay,” Shari said. “I don’t have a problem with Grady spending time with you.”

“He claims he’s drinking less wine and lost some pounds,” she said.

“Good for him,” Shair said. “You know that your father is a delicate subject for me.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “Anyway, I have to get to class. Have a safe flight tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Alexandra,” she said. “I’m really glad you called.”

After ending the call, Shari returned to packing her overnight bag. The conversation about her ex-husband lingered in her mind. She was only married to him for five, and the experience left a bad taste in her mouth.

After two years of marriage, it seemed like he got lazy and uninterested in her. Ironically, Grady started spending more time in the kitchen of their duplex in Reno, Nevada, eating and drinking a lot, mostly expensive French wine. He developed early heart disease. But his high blood pressure was the least of it, because along with that came a diabetic condition from the all the weight he had gained. She avoided having sex with him as well.

Arguments would often ensue with her accusing Grady of being lazy. With all that, as a couple they were drifting apart, since she had put her career on hold to give birth and raise her daughter. By the time Alexandra turned four years old around the time she took a job with GalaXplore in Reno. The worst part was that neither of them apologized.

In the months leading to the separation, Grady was progressively absent from fatherhood. He would stay at the factory where he worked in hospitality as the Food & Beverage Manager of a casino resort hotel, each time he did come home, he would remove something to take with him. Little pieces of their life disappeared one at a time until the house began to look less like a home and more like the remains of a marriage waiting to be officially dismantled. Her daughter went through her teen years without a dad in her home. She visited her father, but when she did it was brief.

Since the divorce, she had only been on one date a co-worker had set up. It seemed that she was married to her work with GalaXplore and has become content with being alone.

Her thoughts returned to the here and now as she put on her sleep clothes. She had a long day ahead of her tomorrow and needed to be up at six in the morning.

Tonight, however, with the suitcase open and the shuttle departure only hours away, Alexandra's mention of Grady had stirred something she had not expected.

PROOF

Chapter 45

ACROSS TOWN, Jiang was in the bedroom of his home packing a bag for tomorrow's shuttlecraft flight to Apollonia Station. His mood was sullen.

It was a tough blow to him. His pet project down the tubes. Thinking about the wormhole, he wondered if Themis had been damaged by atmospheric conditions as a result of entering the wormhole. There was a chance it had not been stable, as the Mechanics might have originally presumed. This conclusion of his illustrated the vulnerability of aircrafts and the real dangers of such a mission. Among other thoughts he had on the matter, this possibility would be sure to be brought up at the meeting on Apollonia.

"How are you holding up?" a woman's voice came.

Jiang looked at the room's entrance to find his wife standing in the doorway.

"As best as I can," he said sullenly.

"I'm so sorry," she said, walked over and gave him a hug. "I know how hard this is for you."

"Thanks for your concern," he said.

"Daddy, daddy," his daughter said, and ran into the room. "Can I go with you to Apollonia?"

The six-year-old girl with her hair in pigtails was a sight for his sore eyes. The day had been stressful enough, and this time with his wife and child made him appreciate the little moments of life.

"I wish you could come with me," he said. "But this is strictly a business trip, short and to the point."

"Oh, daddy," the little girl said disappointedly.

"Don't pout," Jiang said. "I promise you'll come with me on the next trip."

"Yay," the girl said, happy again,

"I've prepared your favorite dumplings," his wife said. "In lieu of the circumstance I know you would appreciate a good home cooked meal."

"Yes, I do," he said, as he followed them out the door toward the dining room.

After dinner, Jiang was in his observation room. This was his office built with sky lights. His eye was in his super-large long-range white graviton telescope. He rechecked the magnification of the telescope and soon he was staring at the night sky, wondering if Themis would appear somewhere between the stars.

So badly, he wanted the ship to come back, successful of course. But he knew it was wishful and foolish thinking at the same time. Themis was coming back. And he was still

shaken up by it. It was going to take some time to recover from this emotional blow.

He closed the document on his tablet, but the words stayed behind his eyes.

“Thanks for your concern,” he said finally, pulling back with practiced restraint. His voice returned to its professional tone almost automatically, as if distance could restore order.

Before the silence could settle, a burst of footsteps broke it apart.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

“Can I go with you to Apollonia?”

The question hit him harder than any technical failure report.

“Oh, daddy…” she sighed, the disappointment immediate and theatrical, as only a child’s could be.

“Don’t pout,” he said, softening. He tapped her nose lightly. “I promise you’ll come with me on the next trip.”

The promise was automatic—an offering meant to soothe, not a contract he believed he could control.

“Yay!” she declared anyway, as if the future had already been secured.

His wife watched them from the doorway, then spoke again. “I’ve prepared your favorite dumplings,” she said. “In light of everything… I thought you’d appreciate a home-cooked meal.”

Jiang exhaled through his nose, something between gratitude and exhaustion. “Yes. I do.”

For a while, he allowed himself to be led out of the room.

Jiang listened more than he spoke. Every so often, his mind drifted back to Themis.

When his daughter laughed at something her mother said, he found himself watching her more than the food. It was a strange contradiction—how something so ordinary could feel so fragile at the same time.

After dinner, the house settled into its evening rhythm. His wife began clearing dishes. His daughter disappeared down the hall with the energy of someone whose world had no edges yet.

Jiang retreated to his observation room.

It was his private habit, one his family had long learned not to interrupt. The room was built like a quiet contradiction—domestic comfort fused with scientific precision. Skylights cut into the ceiling allowed the night to press down gently from above. Instruments lined the walls, but the center belonged to a massive long-range telescope that he had personally calibrated more times than he could remember.

Stars scattered across it like fragments of something once whole.

He adjusted the focus slowly, scanning familiar coordinates, though he knew there was nothing there to find. Still, his hands performed the motions with the discipline of habit—like checking a door he already knew was locked.

Somewhere out there, beyond the clean geometry of Earth's orbit, Themis had vanished.

No explosion signature. No distress cascade. No final transmission that could be neatly dissected and understood. Just absence.

Jiang lingered on a patch of darkness between two faint star clusters, as if staring long enough might cause something to resolve itself from it.

But even as the thought formed, another part of him rejected it. He knew better. He had designed too many systems to believe in clean outcomes when humans and distance were involved.

The telescope clicked softly as he adjusted it again.

Outside the skylight, the night remained unchanged.

He stayed there longer than he intended, letting the silence settle around him instead of resisting it. The emotional shock had not yet fully registered—still too fresh, still too structured—but he could already feel the beginning of something else forming underneath it.

PROOF

Chapter 46

MEANWHILE, in an area of space dubbed "The Out World," the remains of Themis were about to be inspected by inhabitants of the planet the ship had crashed on.

The moment Themis had penetrated the atmosphere of the planet had put every Hoddler citizen in the colony on Tunisius, let alone their security forces, on high alert. There were many Hodder citizens who wondered if this was some kind of alien invasion, something more than a small, localized threat. After all, the earthlings had landed on their planet and they wanted answers.

The Hoddlers were a near-human, gray-skinned race, Circa 10,000 billion years ago in their galaxy, Hodder scientists developed interstellar flight. Galactic exploration began on a wide scale, building space cities and establishing trade routes. Though they weren't treacherous by nature, the Hoddlers had developed a reputation for themselves as very deadly if push came to shove.

A battleship was launched to the site of the crash with a security detail aboard. A security team of five exited the ship.

An alien ahead of the others said, “Follow me. This is the wreckage.”

Another alien walking alongside a few others spoke, “Search the entire ship.”

Upon inspection, three of the grays found a damaged Mechanic speaking erratically and holding a laser gun.

The Mechanic spoke to them. “Intruder. State your purpose.”

The aliens responded in their language unfamiliar to the Mechanic. “Who are you? It has a weapon. Why are you here? We demand.”

The sky above Hodder’s Planet was the color of bruised steel—an atmosphere thick with suspended mineral haze that caught the light of distant suns and fractured it into dull, trembling bands of amber and sickly green.

Long before the Hoddler response fleet arrived, the impact site had already carved itself into the landscape like a wound that refused to close. A scorched trench—kilometers long—split the obsidian plains, its edges vitrified into glass-like ridges that still dripped heat into the cold alien air. The smell that lingered wasn’t organic, but metallic and burned: ionized alloys, synthetic lubricants, and overheated composite plating.

At the center of it all lay the vessel.

The Earth-made spacecraft—clearly not born of Hodder engineering—had come down at a violent angle. Its hull

was asymmetrical, almost awkward in design, with two massive articulated landing limbs fused into its underside like the legs of a collapsing machine-beast. One of those limbs had snapped backward on impact, driven through the hull itself, pinning part of the ship in a posture that looked disturbingly like a kneeling figure forced into submission.

Steam bled from ruptured seams. Occasional internal bursts of light flickered through torn plating, as if something inside was still attempting to stabilize systems that no longer obeyed it.

Inside that ruined structure, something moved.

The Hoddlers arrived in formation.

Their battleship descended without ceremony, cutting through the haze like a blade. It was not large compared to ancient war relics in Hodder history, but it was purposeful—angular, matte, and bristling with layered defensive arrays that folded and unfolded like mechanical eyelids.

A boarding team of five disembarked.

They were tall, gray-skinned, and almost human in silhouette, though the resemblance stopped at the outline. Their eyes were too reflective, their joints subtly segmented beneath skin that seemed less organic and more cultivated—engineered resilience rather than flesh. Each wore a lightweight combat mantle that shimmered faintly, adapting to temperature shifts in real time.

Their weapons were not raised, but they were not relaxed either.

The lead operative stepped forward first, scanning the wreckage with slow, deliberate precision.

“Follow me,” he said. His voice carried the calm of someone who had already accepted every possible outcome of a battlefield. “This is the wreckage.”

The team moved.

The ground beneath them cracked faintly with residual heat pockets. Small fragments of the ship’s hull—some still glowing—shifted under their steps like brittle bone.

A second Hodder, slightly shorter and marked by a cluster of pale scars across his jawline, spoke while walking alongside the formation.

“Search the entire ship,” he ordered.

No urgency. Only certainty.

They split with practiced efficiency, fanning out along the fractured spine of the vessel. Internal compartments had burst open during the crash, exposing layered corridors of human-made machinery: wiring bundles like exposed nerves, fractured control panels still blinking in failing patterns, and structural supports bent into unnatural angles.

Three Hoddlers converged near a partially collapsed corridor where the ship’s interior had folded inward like crushed ribs. The air here was hotter, charged with erratic electrical discharge that snapped softly across exposed conduits.

One arm hung at an incorrect angle, servos grinding audibly with each micro-adjustment. Its optical sensors flickered between amber and white, struggling to lock

focus. One hand remained tightly wrapped around a laser weapon—Earth-issue, scorched at the barrel, still faintly humming with residual charge.

It spoke before they could fully step into view.

“Intruder,” Leanotia demanded. “State your purpose.”

Her synthetic voice was degrading, layered with glitching harmonics as if multiple speech profiles were competing inside a damaged processor. “State your purpose.”

The Hoddlers did not immediately respond. They assessed.

Micro-scanners swept over the robot’s frame. Tactical overlays flickered in their vision. The damaged spacecraft. The unfamiliar propulsion residue. The biomechanical articulation of the legs. The strange decision to design a vessel that could walk as well as fly.

The third Hodder shifted slightly, gaze narrowing.

Then the Mechanic raised its weapon a fraction—not fully aiming, but enough to signal intent.

The silence that followed was dense, almost pressurized.

The language he used was not one the Mechanic could decode. It rolled through the air in layered phonemes, structured like mathematics spoken aloud.

But the meaning was clear in intent, if not in translation.

“We do not recognize you,” the Hodder said. “You are not registered in any known corridor of transit.”

The scarred Hodder stepped closer, eyes fixed on the weapon in the Leanotia’s hand. Of all the mechanics to have

survived the crash, the Hoddlers were in for some bad luck with her.

“It has a weapon,” he added sharply. “Why is it still functional?”

A fourth voice joined from the rear, colder.

“Why are you here? We demand.”

Themis’ Third-In-Command optical sensors flickered again, struggling to reconcile incoming data with damaged interpretive frameworks. Its grip tightened around the laser gun, servos whining under strain.

“Unknown entities detected,” it replied, voice breaking slightly. “Hostile classification… pending.”

The Hoddlers did not flinch.

“Notify the Emperor at once,” one of them said.

PROOF

Chapter 47

THAT NEXT MORNING felt like the longest morning of Sara's life. It was dead quiet in her quarters. The compact cabin — little more than a sleeping alcove, a workstation, and a narrow washroom—was insulated so perfectly from the rest of station that it seemed disconnected from the universe itself. No footsteps echoed through the corridor beyond the pressure door. No distant machinery vibrated through the walls. Only the low, steady whisper of life-support fans reminded her that millions of tons of engineered metal surrounded her, suspended hundreds of kilometers above the blue curve of Earth.

She lay staring at the ceiling for several minutes after the wake cycle began. Soft white illumination seeped from hidden panels overhead, gradually brightening in response to her biometric readings. The station's artificial intelligence had already detected her elevated heart rate and

restless sleep patterns. It interpreted them as fatigue, increasing the room's brightness with clinical precision, unaware that no amount of light could chase away the heaviness pressing against her chest.

Eventually she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. The lights brightened around her as she headed to the bathroom for a long shower. The floor warmed beneath her bare feet as she crossed toward the bathroom. Mirrors awakened as she entered, displaying weather reports for Earth, station diagnostics, and a scrolling list of unread communications before fading away when they recognized she wasn't looking at them.

She stepped beneath the shower. Warm water cascaded over her shoulders, lingering in shimmering beads before disappearing into the recycling drains. Steam filled the tiny room, wrapping around her like a protective veil. She closed her eyes and let the water run far longer than regulations recommended.

She wasn’t in any hurry and wished that time would stand still. Because she sensed what was coming, what was going to happen at the meeting in the conference room later on that day.

Was she at fault? She couldn’t answer that question for herself. Perhaps, an outside point of view would shed light on the circumstances. Still, one thing she knew for sure was that she felt it was her fault in some strange kind of way.

While slipping into her GalaXplore duty uniform, she reflected on the events of the past few days. he charcoal-gray fabric fit perfectly, molded from smart fibers that

adjusted themselves to her body temperature and movement. Thin silver piping traced the seams, while the GalaXplore insignia rested over her left breast—a stylized spiral galaxy encircled by a rising star. Her communications badge shimmered faintly beneath the room's lighting.

She studied herself in the mirror.

At thirty, Sara still possessed the youthful features that often caused strangers to underestimate her. Shoulder-length auburn hair framed an oval face made softer by thoughtful green eyes and a constellation of faint freckles scattered across her nose. She wasn't particularly tall, and years spent behind communication consoles had left her with a posture that leaned unconsciously toward computer displays, as though forever listening for voices no one else could hear.

The missing spaceship Themis and what it meant to her company and how the HQ executives saw her. There were many equally adept, well-qualified, and more-experienced officers in GalaXplore. Yet, she had been chosen as the communications liaison officer to this most important space exploration mission in the company’s history. Actually, the first space exploration mission.

As she fastened the collar of her uniform, memories drifted back through quieter hours. All she remembered was her days at the university. While she was outgoing and friendly toward her classmates, she possessed a reserve regarding her personal life. She spoke freely of her parents, evincing great pride in their accomplishments as university professors, but on the subject of her own off-duty activities,

she was considerably more private. And this was because her last close relationship was with a girl.

The day and age was riddled with technology. And it wasn't easy communicating with others. Dating seemed like a ritual. And at times she wondered if she was born into the wrong century, because there were days she felt she didn't belong around all these robots and computerized technology. Almost every day she felt like she was just going along with things rather than feeling like an active participant.

Somehow she had developed feelings for her roommate, who in turn had reciprocated the relationship. Before that she only had dated a boy in high school. So, she had squashed her feelings and buried herself in the work at GalaXplore. Inside, she knew she didn't want to date men, but hadn't developed another attraction for any girls either.

Being in GalaXplore didn't prohibit having a life outside of it. The problem was she didn't have any kind of social life. She couldn't even remember what that life was. Who was she back then, before she took this job? Did she even know?

Soon enough, she was in her cubicle entering data into the console. Her spirits were down, just like everyone other organic lifeform on the station.

By the time she reached Communications, the station had fully awakened. The corridor gleamed beneath immaculate white lighting.

Maintenance drones glided silently across polished floors, their magnetic wheels making barely a sound. Tall

white bipedal robots moved with graceful mechanical precision between departments, their ceramic armor reflecting the station lights with almost surgical brightness. Smooth featureless faces displayed only thin blue optical bands where eyes might have been, while discreet GalaXplore insignias were embedded into their shoulder plating.

One carried crates of replacement circuitry. Another escorted civilian researchers toward the botanical laboratories. A third paused outside an airlock, speaking in a perfectly measured voice to arriving technicians.

None hurried. None appeared anxious.

They simply executed their routines with flawless efficiency. Sometimes Sara envied them. Machines never questioned yesterday's decisions. They never replayed mistakes while trying to fall asleep.

Her assistant, Triphenia, offered a sympathetic smile as Sara entered Communications. "Morning."

Sara managed a tired nod.

Beyond Triphenia, rows of white-armored mechanical personnel continued their assignments, exchanging data packets across the network faster than any human conversation could hope to match. To them, the disappearance of *Themis* represented an unresolved operational variable.

Other than her assistant, Triphenia, the rest of the Mechanics had little to no understanding of the lost mission, so a good number of them were there old chipper selves.

After a few taps on the keyboard, she exited her work station. She had been summoned to a general meeting in the station’s conference room where Xi Jiang and Shari Haynes would conduct a briefing about the lost ship. But Sara knew it was going to be a full inquiry. That was to be expected considering.

She left her cubicle looking perturbed. On her way out of the room, she glared at the main viewscreen. Then she glared at the star that blazed out the adjacent window. Why in the world didn’t Themis answer? she wondered again.

Across the corridor, a panoramic observation window stretched from floor to ceiling. Beyond it burned the brilliant golden disk of the Sun, flooding the station's exterior with harsh white light. Far below, Earth rotated in magnificent silence, swirls of cloud drifting across sapphire oceans and rust-colored continents. The beauty of it almost hurt.

She headed toward the conference room with two thoughts. First, she hoped that she and Shari wouldn’t try to destroy each other. Second, she knew she had no chance of changing Shari Haynes’s mind about her Beyond that, she didn’t have any idea what possibilities a face-to-face meeting might bring. Truly, anything could happen. And that was what scared her.

PROOF

Chapter 48

THE DOORS whirred electronically and swung open of the communications station. Sara Masters didn't look up. Dark circles beneath her eyes betrayed the sleepless night she'd spent replaying the same catastrophic mistake over and over.

In walked Shari Haynes. She strode through the monitoring room of the communications station. Her eyes immediately locked onto Sara, who was in her cubicle. Sara crossed her arms and sank a little into her seat. Her moved to her desk. She already knew where this was going.

“A coffee break?” Shari asked without preamble, her voice edged with disbelief.. “Really, Sara!”

The words landed like a slap.

Shari couldn’t help but start in on Sara. Without another fresh remark she stood there, feeling the weight of the conversation.

At the engineering station in the operations center, Jiang was working with Lionetti. Since the wormhole was intact, Lionetti had run a series of diagnostics, which revealed nothing beyond the loss of signal. There was nothing wrong with Apollonia's communications relay.

For a period of time Shari just stood there, staring at Sara as if she could give her an explanation. But Sara said nothing.

“Why weren’t you at your station?” Shari asked. “You knew Themis would be exiting the wormhole at any moment. And that getting coordinates of their location was high priority. You were assigned to that position to keep tabs on Themis at all times. If there is intelligent life out there in some other galaxy, we need their coordinates for future missions. To make contact with other life forms. That was the point of this mission. And you blew it!”

“You never wanted me on this mission in the first place,” Sara said boldly staring intently at Shari, and stood from the chair. “Why don’t you just admit it?”

“You are right, Sara!” Shari answered loudly. “This mission was a big job for you. A serious one. And all this time I felt you didn’t understand that. The fact that you weren’t at your station when an important transmission came in proves me right.”

“Nothing I’m going to say could please you,” Sara snapped, just about spitting out the words.

“We’ve got a lost ship somewhere out there and no way of finding it. We have no idea where that wormhole leads, nor what’s on the other end of it. This mission is over. All

we can do is plan another mission at this point," Shari stated matter of fact.

"No coordinates came in that last transmission," Sara concurred. We all have to accept that Themis is gone for good."

"We'll at least we agree on something," Shari said to Sara, and added a laugh and a long stare eye to eye.

They hadn't made up, but somehow this disaster and hashing it out was bringing them closer together.

"I'm really sorry I let you down, Shari," Sara said emotionally with tears forming in her eyes. "That I let all of you down. If you think I should resign from GalaXplore, I will do so."

Shari left her cubicle and entered the monitoring room to consult with Triphenia.

"Any luck on retrieving the last coordinates of *Themis*?" she impatiently asked. "Well?"

A startled Triphenia turned around to find Shari with an intense look on her face. The robot pulled back in surprise to see her.

"Sadly, no," the robot answered in a soft tone. "After Themis entered the wormhole, our scans and tracking sensors began to experience some disruption. It took some time but I was able to reconfigure our systems. Then a distress message transmitted on our screens from the Captain informing the ship had been struck by an asteroid and there would be a landing on a nearby planet. The message cut out before coordinates could be delivered."

“I told Sara Masters that I have done all I can, but with no luck. It is as if Themis had simply vanished from the face of existence.”

“Sara Masters,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

“You do not seem to like her,” Triphenia requiescat.

“Like is not the appropriate word,” Shari stated.

As Shari turned around and walked to the mainframe computer to analyze some data, Triphenia responded.

“Sara is a good worker and friend of mine.”

“Friend?” Shari asked befuddled.

“Yes, friend.”

Shari Haynes stood in the center of it all like a blade someone had forgotten to sheath.

The air between them carried the residue of the earlier transmission—still metaphorically warm, like a ghost of radiation lingering after a burst signal.

“Sara Masters,” it repeated, as though indexing the name against stored emotional heuristics.

“She’s difficult,” Shari said at last.

Triphenia paused a fraction too long. “You do not seem to like her,” it said.

“Like is not the appropriate word,” she said. “What is it to you anyway?”

Triphenia processed the tone. A faint flicker of blue light ran along its collar plating, indicating internal recalibration.

Behind her, Triphenia’s voice softened marginally.

“Sara is a good worker,” it said, “and friend of mine.”

"Friend?" she repeated, as if the word itself were poorly translated.

"Yes," Triphenia confirmed. "Friend."

Shari's eyes didn't leave the data.

"If that's what you want to call her," she said at last, uninterested in the classification, already moving on. "I have some analyses to complete."

"And I must tend to some systems checks," the robot replied.

It was a rough day. A day to put behind you. The sad reality hit hard for Shari. There was no restoring communication with *Themis*. She did her best to come to Apollonia on the chairwoman's authority, consulting with Dale Lionetti. And working with Sara and the mechanics only to come up empty handed.

"And I must tend to some systems checks," the robot stated.

"And I must get to the docking area," Shari said. "The shuttle for Shenzhen leaves in one hour."

PROOF

Chapter 49

ALL was quiet in the Mechanic Systems Laboratory in Shenzhen. It was nearing the end of the day and Xi Bing Jiang was seated on the stool in his office. He was unbuttoning the top three buttons of his white smock and rolling the cramped muscles in his shoulders and neck.

At ten minutes till six o'clock, those minutes couldn't go by fast enough for him. He was ready to call it a day. The harsh glare of the overhead lights reflected off his glasses. They seemed unusually bright. Or perhaps he was just tired. He removed his glasses, laid them on the polished top of his desk. Rubbing his eyes briefly, he then put his glasses in their place again.

He'd spent the majority of the day in the Diagnostics room, uploading the proper programming into the brains of some newly manufactured robots. Normally programming was added after the humanoid robot assembly process,

making them fully functional. Both he and Shari thoroughly performed detailed quality-control checks on every single mechanic emerging from the assembly room of the plant.

So many thoughts penetrated his head more deeply, which might cause him a headache. He'd already spent too much time wondering how he was ever going to get over the fact that *Themis* was gone. It had been hard to deal with this unexpected situation. Since the day of the starship's disappearance in The Out World, he'd held on to the hope that communication with the ship would be restored. But today had been the first day he felt he was ready to move on from thinking that.

The unfortunate part was that this raised the possibility that Sara Masters would be fired.

A distraction came when S-88 came into his office, lugging a large crate.

"MahNaMah asked me to bring this to you," the robot said with an electronic voice.

"It's very good of you to do that," he said.

Jiang watched the mechanic place the crate carefully on the floor with a whir and promptly leave the room. He stared at the crate but didn't bother to check what was in it.

In his mind's eye, he still believed Sara Masters was the right person for the job of Communications Officer on the station. He didn't fault her one bit for losing contact with *Themis*.

No one knew for sure what calamity had happened to Themis, he thought. An impact by a large asteroid likely meant the destruction of the starship. On that basis, that

could explain losing contact with the crew. Considering theoretical probability, that didn't necessarily mean that the mechanics had all been destroyed. Had the mechanics abandoned the ship in escape pods, wherever that other side of the wormhole happened to be? Was it *Themis'* destiny to travel through the wormhole, only to meet their demise on the other end? *The more he tried not to think about it, the more he kept thinking about it, and had more unanswerable questions than ever*, he thought.

If anything, he was certain, these circumstances were beyond Sara's control. But this incident with the starship catapulted Shari to become more antagonistic toward her. Even though he knew it was all wrong.

The digital clock on his desk read 6:01. For several moments, he appeared to weigh some kind of decision. Until he begam typing a message on his console to Chairwoman Rhine. The message would affirm his feelings about Sara. He needed to do this, because he couldn't attend the meeting at GalaXplore Headquarters. If he didn't, he felt would be letting Sara down. It would be good if she had someone in her corner.

He moved the stool forward and regarded the screen before he sent Rhine's message, marking it urgent and confidential.

Before he could stand to leave, the door swished open to reveal Shari Haynes. Dressed in a white blouse and black slacks under a black satin GalaXplore bomber jacket, she hadn't taken a step from the door.

"How come I knew you'd be here?" she asked with a gleam in her blue eyes. "I almost thought I was going to miss saying goodbye to you."

"I assume you're going to the board meeting right?" Jiang responded without much enthusiasm.

"Yes," she admitted with a frown. "The space shuttle leaves really early tomorrow morning. I'm going to grab a quick bite to eat, pack by duffel bag and get a few hours of sleep."

He tried to conceal his fatigue. "I should be there with you."

"The board of directors understands how busy you are," she said. "I'm only going because Lisbeth sent me a message this morning that said it was of the utmost importance I attend to discuss Sara. And that I had to take the shuttle there, and not by airplane."

His expression darkened slightly when she mentioned Sara, but he was able to smile a little grimly. What could he say?

"Say hello to the chairwoman for me," he said and stood up from the stool.

"I'll be sure to do that," she said and turned around to leave. "Farewell for now."

"Excuse the cliche, but parting is always such sweet sorrow," he said, eyes twinkling with amusement.

"I'm glad you haven't lost your sense of humor," she said before exiting.

From where he stood, he had a clear view of her walking in the hallway.

PROOF

The question of whether Sara would be let go or not sat heavily on his mind. If all went well, she would stay on with GalaXplore. Were the odds going to shift in her favor? He would soon find out.

PROOF

Chapter 50

IT was straight up on three o'clock in the afternoon, and the last of the board members marched purposefully into the conference room of the executive tower. Taking quick steps, Shari Haynes caught up just as the glass door was closing. All but one of the leather chairs around the table were occupied. Heads turned toward Shari, as she looked for an empty seat, her eyes searching the room for the chairwoman, who motioned to the chair on her left.

There sat Jay Strobel, his face serious and tense in a form-fitting black pinstriped suit and shiny black shoes. His eyes squinted against the sun's harsh rays shining through the window. He made the unfortunate mistake of sitting directly across from the chairwoman, facing the window behind her.

"The space shuttle touched down fifteen minutes ago," she said to Rhine. "I kid you not. The shuttle left Shenzhen

at three o'clock in the morning. I slept the four hours and five minutes of the flight here. But I haven't had the time to freshen up in the bathroom."

"Settle down, Shari," the chairwoman broke in with a frown. "The important thing is that you made it here safely and on time."

The meeting about the damaged starship *Themis* and Sara Masters' fate with GalaXplore was about to begin. The idle talk around the table dropped as the chairwoman called the meeting to order. She was sitting at the head of the oval glass table in front of the viewscreen. She was wearing a white satin blouse and black pleated slacks with a flashy black and white polka-dotted scarf knotted at the neck.

A distinct uneasiness gripped Stroble as his gaze swept the room, indifferently. He didn't know if Shari realized her loose blonde hair was tussled and in disarray. Her long beige blouse, over brown slacks under a brown suede jacket with fringed sleeves, was slightly wrinkled. It looked very much like she'd slept in her clothes. He wasn't going to tell her.

Chairwoman Rhine cleared her voice. "I called this emergency meeting because we need to talk about the circumstances surrounding the failed mission. Additional to a review of Sara Masters' work performance in her role as the point of contact with *Themis*."

"Here, here," said a few board members in unison.

"I don't think anyone at this table disputes Ms. Masters' capability," the female Board member said. "What I want to know is, what could she have done differently."

Shari couldn't help but answer, "Sara should've been in her cubicle to clear up the transmission's signal. Something to stop the interference from swallowing the transmission. Because we needed the starship's last known coordinates. We don't know exactly where The Out World is."

A board member said to Shari, "Good point. I agree with you."

"We're searching for answers," the chairwoman said, understanding Shari perfectly. "All of us. Given the loss of our starship, that would seem logical."

"What are her duties now?" another board member asked.

Strobel's eyes narrowed at the bearded board member who had last spoken. "Duncan, the station is overrun with robots. We need humans working there, too."

"There's plenty to do on Apollonia, even with all the mechanics there," Rhine added, with quick spirit.

"GalaXplore built the most expensive spaceship in the history of mankind," Strobel's voice was firm. "Whatever condition the ship may be in, it's gone for good. The bottom line is we've lost our investment. That's the real issue here. And it's left a bad taste in my mouth."

A hush fell around the room. Many years on the Board gave him the right to grumble.

Leaning against the conference table, Shari raised her hand. "Please excuse me, I must use the bathroom. I'll be brief."

"Why don't we take a short break, give time for Shari to return" the chairwoman suggested, watching her walk

out of the room. “Pour yourself a glass of water from the pitcher on the table.”

Staring at GalaXplore’s infinity-like logo on the wall across the window, Strobel tamped down on his frustration. To settle his nerves, he reached into his jacket pocket for a small, rubber stress-relieving ball. Under the table his hand squeezed the daylights out of it.

When Shari returned to the room, meeting continued for another hour.

At its conclusion, Shari said, “It may take some time to get over what happened, but I’ll maintain a workable truce between myself and Sara.”

Her unease about Sara was obvious, which stayed in the minds of everyone there.

“I’m not satisfied with all I’ve heard,” said Jay Strobel. “But I don’t have a problem with Sara continuing on with GalaXplore.”

“Xi Jiang couldn’t come to our meeting,” said Rhine. “He transmitted a message to me, which I had most certainly taken under consideration. He wrote how, from the get-go, he’d had a favorable impression of Sara. And how she was put to the test. And how this lost mission might have been the worst thing that could have happened to her.”

“I think Sara should transfer to another GalaXplore facility,” Duncan Aspinwall said and ran his hand through his beard and over his mouth.

“With hindsight it’s apparent that Sara Master’s role and position are in flux. I may recommend that she put in a transfer request, in the message I'm going to send her.,”

Rhine said, brought the weighty wooden mallet down hard against the table and stood up, watching them leave, but Shari stood next to her.

"Let's go to my office and talk," Rhine said. "You look as if you could use a good cup of coffee."

"I'd like that very much," Shari said as they left the room.

PROOF

Chapter 51

THIS WHOLE DAY had gone by quicker than Sara had anticipated. She left the communications station, feeling like she was invisible. In the background, she caught sight of Dale Lionetti still at the engineering console. Case in point, his head was turned away from her. To top that off, deeper in her subconscious she was thinking of the message she'd received this morning from the chairwoman about her standing with GalaXplore.

Sara passed by Algernon, who was coming on the night shift, on her way out of the operations center. For one disjointed moment, she came close to bumping into him. She didn't know how he got there in front of her without her seeing him.

"Excuse me, Algernon," she said, raising her eyebrows. "Sorry I almost ran into you."

Seemingly in a hurry, he jerked a glance around her and beeped an electronic sigh before rushing off elsewhere. He didn't acknowledge her, nor did he even look at her. It was like his eyes skipped over her like they had never seen her before.

It was strange for him to act that way, she thought as the doors whooshed open for her to leave. But from her perspective, it looked as if everyone was against her. She felt on edge around Lionetti. And the level of friction between herself and the crew of mechanics was something that had been escalating over the previous couple of days.

There was always the off chance that she was just paranoid. That Algernon was just in a hurry because he didn't want to keep Lionetti waiting any longer.

She breathed out, forcing herself to clear her mind of unpleasant thoughts as she concentrated on the walk ahead of her down the empty corridor. *But it was harder than it should have been*, she thought, strolling toward the intersection of two corridors. She greeted mechanics that passed as if she was in the mood for that.

After a quick dinner in the commissary, she made her way to her quarters. She wrestled out of her GalaXplore uniform and into her sleepwear.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, her eyes wandered around the room as though looking for something and then fell on the framed photograph on the cabinet of her parents. They looked very happy, smiling widely. It was the only personal decoration in the otherwise plain, compact room.

Her face reflected sadness as she tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

Her eyes shifted to the small, oval window on the wall opposite the bed. Looking out into space, at the stars burning bright, alone, she folded her arms across her chest, letting her mind wander aimlessly.

All at once she wanted to be on Earth, especially with her parents and a friend, too. Only she realized she didn't have any friends, that weren't robots.

That brought back memories of Shannon McAdam, her former best friend in the world. They'd met in the university cafeteria during her junior year. Shannon, a senior about to graduate, told her she liked her a lot. Somehow one thing led to another and Sara realized she'd fallen in love and became her girlfriend. Up till then, at 21-years of age, she'd never had a boyfriend or girlfriend before. Her only dating history had been going to the zoo with a guy from high school named Chuck, who wanted to be a Catholic priest. A few weeks in December around the Christmas holiday, at about the time she was hired by GalaXplore, it was done, over with. After six years of being together, she'd fallen out of love with Shannon, who then worked for a digital book developer, as easily as in.

In all this time, so much had happened, she'd forgotten how beautiful Shannon was, and how her blue eyes sparkled when she was amused and trying not to show her most comforting smile. Moreover, Sara was drawn to her voice, and the way she could make everyday observations funny.

Was she homosexual? Because she often found herself wondering. Thinking more on it, if she was honest, she was strongly attracted to females.

On the rarest of occasions, this being one of them, she thought about what it would be like to be in love again. How could she meet a woman she could trust, she could fall in love with? She didn't do much socializing, at least not around Apollonia. It didn't help that she was cooped up inside this space station surrounded primarily by a staff of robots.

Sara looked so forlorn and didn't want to think about this anymore. She would rather push that to the back of her mind and turn into sleep.

Elsewhere on the station, Algernon was leaning against the engineering console. From time to time, he glanced toward the communications station. It seemed he was hoping Triphenia would come through the doors. But she was at the charging station. He knew that, but he couldn't stop himself.

He wanted to understand why he couldn't stop thinking about Triphenia. It was just very odd, him missing her. Why she was so different from all the other mechanics.

When he'd shown up for duty, he was so consumed with thoughts of Triphenia, that he couldn't register what Sara Masters had said to him, much less even look at her. He hoped to catch her before she went off duty. Gripped by some sudden desire to search all over the communications station and the operations center, she was nowhere he could find.

The situation was what it was.

It was sometime around five in the morning. He was busily examining readings on a data pad he held in one hand, sporadically comparing them to the engineering console's readouts. This was one of his main tasks, which was to make sure all the systems were running smoothly.

Before him, a shuttle was coming in from Shenzhen, China, approaching the docking area in a wide curve. His eyes moved from the viewscreen downward to make an announcement.

"Shuttle is cleared to dock."

The doors parted slightly. And the space shuttle coasted toward a landing pad and settled onto it.

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PROOF

Chapter 52

THAT NIGHT, in her quarters, Sara slept but tossed and turned continually. Upon the bed, she was dreaming, twisting beneath the wool blanket, murmuring something.

"*Themis* was hit by an asteroid … Coordinates of our location are …. "

Bits and pieces of the last that was heard from Captain Ronzu, a panicky final transmission replayed in her memory. Asleep, her dreams pulled up images of *Themis*, badly damaged by an asteroid. The robot crew, desperate for help that wasn't coming, was now stranded in 'The Out World.'

At 7:00 A.M an insistent alarm, built into a panel on the wall, chimed, jolting her out of an uncomfortable slumber. She slit open one eye and frowned. A moment passed before she hit some buttons on the panel and the ringing sound stopped.

A new day. But she wasn't ready for the new day to begin. She punched her pillow up to support her neck and rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling. So many random thoughts were floating through her brain. The audacity that the board of directors and executive, Shari Haynes, of GalaXplore had held that meeting about her. A long story short, she was the fall girl.

And that was just the start. Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine had sent a message to her, suggesting she take a leave of absence from Apollonia, during which time, it would be wise to consider to transfer elsewhere in GalaXplore. No, she hadn't been fired, but she might as well have been.

Nothing could pull her out of those unpleasant thoughts. That was, until her stomach rumbled embarrassingly loud. What was she going to have for breakfast? Having no desire for coffee and was she even hungry! She hated thinking about that day; how she'd taken a break at the same moment a distress message had come in from *Themis*.

It was time for her to make a life-altering decision. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, putting her bare feet on the cold metal floor. *Damn Shari Haynes*, she thought.

"Well, I've got news for you, Shari," she said to the empty room. "I'm not going to be here anymore."

With tears in her eyes, she let out a heavy breath and shuffled her way to the bathroom. At the sink, balling her eyes out, she turned on the faucet. Leaning forward, she scooped up the cold water and splashed it on her face. The entire time she showered, she cried.

Wrapped in a towel, she walked to her room, trailing wet footprints. Her eyes landed on the black bomber jacket with the 'GalaXplore' logo on the back crumpled on the chair in the corner. For one last time, she lifted the jacket, that she would never wear again, feeling the softness of the material.

Sara swallowed against a torrent of emotion welling within her as she placed it in one of the jerky drawers of the small cabinet that sat near the bed. She rummaged through the drawers, ignoring her four GalaXplore uniforms and deciding what to wear from the few civilian clothes she had. Finally, she settled on a white, long-sleeve thermal top and khaki pants. Luckily, she had her muted orange-and-white-hued, flannel jacket, which had large pockets in the lining and where she planned to store her personal mementos from her workstation in the communications center.

It was 10:00 A.M. when she left her quarters. Realizing the time, she let out a hoot of laughter. With the way things had been lately, she figured no one would notice she hadn't shown up to the communications station. By no one, she meant, of course, Dale Lionetti who now was the only human who worked in the operations center. He would probably assume she was on her leave of absence. That made her laugh, but it was brief. The mechanics would be none the wiser. On second thought, Triphenia would notice. Regardless, she didn't care at all, because she didn't work here anymore.

Before crossing the bridge, she stopped by the observation window for a moment, looking down at Earth.

If she could do anything she wanted in the whole world, it would be to spend some time with her parents in Canada.

Not long thereafter, she approached the commissary. Now more than ever, she had to keep up her strength, even if she didn't feel like eating. This was going to be her last meal on Apollonia, and she was going to take her sweet time.

The robot stationed by the entrance beeped a greeting at her, but she ignored him. Her mind was still in a fog of what the future held in store for her. She looked uncomfortable at meeting him eye to eye.

It was 11:45 A.M. when she faced the entrance to the operations center. Her eyes roamed to the GalaXplore emblem mounted above the entryway. The doors parted for two mechanics, and she smiled, looking cool on the surface. She tried to maintain as composed a demeanor as possible.

“Time to get this over with,” she whispered under her breath when the robots were out of earshot.

With a smooth pneumatic whoosh, the doors parted to the operations center. Directly ahead of her stood Dale Lionetti, working at his console. For a long speechless moment, she stood there staring at him, gathering her strength.

After their long conversation, she moved to the nearest unmanned console and glanced at it briefly. Enveloped in a haze of emotions she couldn’t define, she began typing out the words of her resignation letter, and deepening furrows on her brow. Once she sent it, life wouldn’t be the same for her anymore.

She walked past Lionetti, her gaze falling away from him. Her expression suddenly turned serious and she was tugging at her upper lip with her teeth. She was thinking about all the things she had to do.

Back in her quarters, she pulled her large, silver aluminum suitcase with a dial lock and spinner wheels from the living room closet. Working through her feelings, she jammed her personal possessions into it in a panic of haste.

A steady beeping sound was coming from the console behind her. A message from GalaXplore HQ coded Urgent spooled out across the screen. Dale Lionetti had rerouted the message, which had arrived via subspace radio, directly to her quarters. She read it at once.

PROOF

Chapter 53

IN HER cubicle of the communications station, Sara Masters was busy clearing out her personal things from the well-organized drawer of her workstation. She was leaving Apollonia no matter how disinclined she felt.

It was 5:30 P.M. (UTC). Triphenia stood off to the right, watching with eyes about twice as bulging as normal. Her primary function was to interpret and process data. She hadn't had enough time to process what all this meant. The mechanic seemed taken aback by the sudden departure of her new-found friend and colleague.

Five hours ago, Sara had transmitted a farewell letter of resignation, effective immediately to Chairwoman Rhine's office at GalaXplore HQ on Earth. She knew this was a life-changing moment for her. For all intents and purposes, *Themis'* disappearance left a stain on her record that could never be erased. It made no difference that Chairwoman

Rhine had assured her that wasn't the case. That was the way Sara saw it. Because she couldn't get past the thought that not just Shari Haynes, who took her position with GalaXplore too seriously, but everyone, especially the Board of Directors of GalaXplore, resented her more than a little for the mission's failure. And there seemed something very wrong with that.

"Where is the space shuttle taking you?" Triphenia asked, shaking her out of her heavy thoughts.

"Reno, Nevada," Sara said, her hand reaching to the back of a drawer and combing through the debris until she touched a small metal object. "GalaXplore Headquarters. I have a scheduled meeting with Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine. She typed up a letter of recommendation for my next employer. She wants to personally hand it to me."

The enamel pin with the GalaXplore logo caught her eye. She shoved it into the pocket of her sherpa-lined flannel jacket. *Might as well have something to remember GalaXplore by*, she thought. It would make a good keepsake.

"Where are you going to be working?"

"I haven't applied for any jobs," Sara said, her voice crisp and businesslike. "I'm taking a flight from Reno to Vancouver, where I'm going to stay with my parents for a few weeks."

Stepping away, Sara dusted off her hands, knowing the shuttle was departing in fifteen minutes. She had noted the way Triphenia was acting all sensitive. Seeing her like that twisted Sara's stomach into a knot. She took a long, deep

breath. and ran a hand through her wavy, brown hair that reached her shoulders, thinking about her feelings for her robot sidekick.

Full of so many emotions, she finally walked over and embraced Triphenia, who stiffened for a second, but didn't let go. This was the first hug anyone had ever given her. It was a new sensation for her.

"Come with me to the docking area," Sara said, and quickly released herself from their embrace.

Always eager to help, the mechanic bowed her head, and said, "It would be my honor to escort you."

Now, as they walked side by side, and, close to each other, a vague reserve fell upon Triphenia. Even Sara kept her arm around her shoulder all the way there.

There were a few minutes left to spare until the shuttle departed. So, they stood near the door of the docking area, to say their final goodbyes.

"Did you say goodbye to Dale Lionetti?" Triphenia asked in a sweet metallic voice. "If we go back now to the operations center, we might be able to still catch him."

"I already had a talk with him about me leaving," Sara replied, with a shrug.

"What if you left something important behind in your quarters?" the robot persisted. "We should go there and have a quick look around."

Triphenia exchanged a glance with her, who shook her head.

"I already searched my quarters thoroughly. All my things are in my suitcase. About an hour ago, a mechanic retrieved it and loaded it onto the shuttle."

The robot was dragging out the conversation while the minutes were ticking by. She wanted to stretch out the little time she had left with Sara.

"Do you really have to leave the station?" Triphenia asked in a melancholy tone. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

A sense of loss seeped through the mechanic as she imagined Sara in the shuttle taking off, heading far away from her for good.

"Yes, I need to leave here," Sara murmured.

"You told me I was your friend," Triphenia said, and gave a worried shake of her head. "But I'm never going to see you again?"

"Never say never …" Sara tried to find the words but partly succeeded, turning away so that Triphenia couldn't see the sorrowful expression on her face.

The door of the docking area slid aside with a soft hiss. Just as Sara hurried up the boarding ramp, she heard the door close behind her with a sharp click. And the hatch sealed shut with a hiss as she took her seat in the passenger section.

"I'd meant what I'd said to Triphenia about us being friends with every fiber of my being," Sara said softly to herself.

She leaned her head against the headrest of the seat and closed her eyes. Tears were dripping down her cheeks. This was a day long to be remembered.

Expressionless and silent, Triphenia vanished around the far corner to an observation window. The shuttle eased away from Apollonia's landing pad with only the slightest of shaky movements. She gave the shuttle as hard stare as it hurtle forward and soared into space. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she raised her arm and put her metal hand on the window.

“Goodbye, Sara,” she said with melancholy sadness.

PROOF

Chapter 54

WATCHING the shuttle leave had left Triphenia a bit unsettled. That thought of never seeing Sara Masters again had troubled her more and more. She'd been in a real funk since Sara left. What was happening to her? It occurred to her that something really was very wrong with her circuitry.

A perplexed expression crossed her face as she turned down the corridor from the docking area of Apollonia station. The indicator panel lights illuminated the polished floor and her white metal body. The sound of her footsteps were swallowed up by the soft hum of the air circulating through ventilation ducts in the walls.

How about she charge herself for a good seven hours? she thought. Just in case, she would even run an internal diagnostic. After all that, she would return to her tasks and responsibilities.

As she rounded the next winding corridor, the footfalls of another robot drifted to her. But she didn't think anything of it because it wasn't unusual for other mechanics to be in the corridors.

"Wait up, please, Triphenia," a voice boomed out in a burst of melody that she half expected, startled by the echo. "I've been trying to find you everywhere."

She recognized the voice as that of Algernon and said over her shoulder, "Not right now."

Walking faster, to catch up with her, he said, louder, "Dale Lionetti told me you had gone to the docking area to watch the space shuttle take off with Sara Masters inside."

"You missed it," she said, still walking with him trailing behind. "Sara is gone, gone for good."

"The news of her leaving is something to be upset about," he said, his eyes flickering apprehensively, not sure how she would react.

Despite what he'd said to her, she stopped walking and turned her stylized skull head irritably to him. She was completely bothered by the fact that he had followed her here.

"I am on my way to the charging station," she said sternly and started walking away. "I think I'm overdue for a power-down."

There was an inexplicable but strong compulsion for him to follow her. Though she could hear his footsteps quicken to follow, she acted unconcerned by his pursuit.

"I am going to the charging station, too," he said, shuffling up behind her.

Oblivious to his interest, she hadn't once glanced over her shoulder. Instead of stopping for him again, she hurried her steps.

Relentless as he was, he quickened his pace to match hers as she walked on ahead. Between the both of them they just about produced a chorus of clattering footsteps.

"What else do you want, Algernon?" she asked over her shoulder, not showing she cared at all, or even noticed that she was the object of his infatuation.

"I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to Sara this afternoon after powering up, or to tell her how I would miss her when she was gone," he said, rather disappointedly.

The sadness in his tone made her stop in her tracks and pay closer attention. Maybe she was warming up to him.

"That was a very nice thing to say," she said, her round eyes full of emotion.

Algernon looked at her in surprise when she suggested they walk the rest of the way together.

As they strode down the curved corridor, which gradually widened, several mechanics poured in a steady stream. Algernon and Triphenia easily wove between them as they made their way to one of the crossover bridges of the three-ringed structure.

They descended off the bridge. Just before entry into the lower level ring, Triphenia went to the nearby observation window. There was a spectacular view of space and Earth below. Every thirty seconds or so, her head moved from side to side, as if she was looking for something out there in the darkness of outer space.

What was she looking for? he asked himself, watching her as he came to stand next to her.

Somewhere inside she was hoping the space shuttle would return to Apollonia. Her robot mind couldn't fully process that her friend wasn't coming back.

"Sara Masters was a good human being to work with," Algernon said, realizing what she was going through. "The first time I stood at an observation window and gazed upon Earth from up here, was because of Sara's insistence. I shall not forget that."

Without consciously analyzing it, Triphenia laid her arm gently across his shoulders, drawing him close. Whereupon he bowed his head, hiding his expression of awe and disbelief.

"I wonder what really happened to *Themis*."

"I've been wondering that, too," Algernon said as if he'd had a revelation and lifted his head. "Only time will tell."

Affirming what he had said, she repeated his words. "Only time will tell,"

Rather abruptly, Triphenia returned her arm to her side and turned away from the window to leave.

"We need to plug into the charging station," she said moving away from him at a fast pace, just as if nothing had transpired between them.

"How perfectly delightful!" he said, gleefully.

"Hurry your step!"

The robots entered a mammoth cargo space, which had been reconfigured into a mechanic repair and charging area.

On the upper tier was a dual console with ten charging stations set into the room's rear bulkhead. Every mechanic powered down and docked into a charging station for at least seven hours every day. The guest and crew quarters were on the opposite side of this room.

PROOF

Chapter 55

THE DOORS swished open and Lionetti stepped into the long corridor leading to the docking area of Apollonia. He had traded in his black uniform jumpsuit for a well-tailored charcoal gray suit. A GalaXplore's space shuttle sat in the center of the landing pad, ramp down and its hatch open. Two mechanic pilots, that were awaiting him, stood unnaturally still at the top of the ramp.

The mood was grim beyond a doubt. Everyone involved was dealing with the crisis of the missing *Themi*s starship in different ways.

As he arrived at the bottom of the ramp, the pilots stepped inside the shuttle. He followed after them, started up the aisle, and slipped quietly into a seat in the back row.

The engines roared to life. Inside the shuttle's cockpit, both pilots studied the instrument panels in front of them. One of the pilots made a fast systems check and set a course

for Earth. Shortly thereafter Algernon's robotic voice came over the cockpit speaker.

"You are cleared for launch."

It was 4:00 P.M. (UTC). The shuttle lifted off the pad, its nose angled upward, swung around, and left Apollonia.

Lionetti turned his eyes to the window and gazed thoughtfully out into space. His mind was riddled with the failed mission. He was just as disappointed as everyone else in GalaXplore.

For the duration of the flight, he sat back in his seat and closed his eyes for a nap.

It was going on 11:45 A.M. (PST), and the shuttle made a low pass over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, waking Lionetti. After hovering briefly over the landing zone, it angled down to the landing pad of GalaXplore Headquarters.

"A perfect touchdown," one of the pilots announced in a high-pitched voice over the passenger section speaker.

The hatch opened, and Lionetti stepped down the landing ramp. The warm desert air and faint scent of sagebrush replaced the filtered air of the shuttle. The mechanic pilots remained aboard in order to service the shuttle. After little sleep, only a long nap on the shuttle, he felt mildly jet-lagged, or space-lagged, due to a time difference.

It was a surreal time to the chief engineering officer of GalaXplore's Apollonia station. He was still coming out of recovery from the drama surrounding *Themis'* fateful away mission through the wormhole to The Out World, which

was magnified by the media's portrayal of the events. GalaXplore's tremendously over-budget starship — unexperienced humanoid robots, and that there was no extraterrestrial life to search for — was consistently framed as the central conflict. That intelligent life didn't exist anywhere in the universe other than Earth.

He arrived at the executive tower building and walked in through the glass entryway. Trying to ignore his body adjusting to the circadian rhythm disruption that occurred with travel across time zones, he checked-in at the security desk.

"Go on up, they are expecting you," the guard said.

Lionetti strolled across the marble floor of the rotunda, bound for the elevator directly ahead. Two beats later, the elevator announced its arrival with a distinctive bell.

The moment he walked into the conference room, Chairwoman Rhine took the opportunity to welcome him. She was wearing a copper-colored blouse, black slacks and a very business-like air. After shaking hands with everyone, Lionetti poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the long, oval glass table, noticing how Jay Strobel was dressed in an identical suit to his own. But Lionetti wasn't wearing a tie.

"How was the flight?" Strobel asked and adjusted his red and white striped tie. "I am itching to get on that space shuttle again."

"Flight was good, but I'm feeling a little dehydrated," Lionetti said and sat down in one of the empty black leather chairs around the table.

"In lieu of the fact the *Themis* mission is over, the need for corporate restructuring takes precedence," Rhine addressed the three other people present. "As Commanding Officer, Dale Lionetti will oversee the station in all capacities, delegating duties to the mechanics and the human crew."

"Thank you all for putting your faith in me," Lionetti said. "Frankly speaking, I didn't expect this promotion. But I will do my best by GalaXplore standards."

The black, male board member seated next to him at the table said, "Congratulations. You earned it."

"Here, here!" everyone said.

"Shari Haynes will be working in the communications station alongside Triphenia until a communications officer has been hired," Rhine said with a quick glance at them. "You'll work out of an executive office adjoining the operations center. Algernon will be working the engineering console most of each day."

"You can't go wrong with Algernon," Lionetti said. "He is one of the finest mechanics to work with."

"It is as if Apollonia is set up to ward off an attack from an alien race," Jay Strobel said, seemingly serious. "Is Apollonia station turning into Earth's first line of defense? It sounds like the space station is becoming a military-style outpost. Is there an alien invasion on the horizon?"

The chairwoman regarded Strobel for a long moment before she said, "I've given interviews to the media explicitly stating that Apollonia is capable of defending

Earth. This has come up once before, and I assure all of you there is no evidence that an alien invasion is imminent.

Everyone in the room laughed.

PROOF

Chapter 56

IN THE AFTERMATH of the *Themis* crash, the Hoddlers were all on edge and set out to repair Leanotia, the lone survivor. This humanoid robot held the answers to all their questions. Her internal systems had been badly damaged in the crash. Whatever it took, they would make her good as new, planning to replace all the wires that rippled loose and use modules that enable data to fix her programming.

Minutes after the crash landing, Hoddler warships were dispatched into space surrounding their planet to determine if other spaceships were in orbit. A bustle of light and swirling shadows moving in a circular motion was detected across the asteroid belt. Astonishingly to them, this wormhole had appeared, seemingly out of nothingness. The assumption was that the alien starship, *Themis,* with unfamiliar technology had spit out of it.

Where did the wormhole come from anyway? That was another question completely puzzling them and one that seemed something of a mystery. Under the cover of the Yarista Belt, this remarkable phenomenon hadn't shown up on any sensors before. The asteroids blocked their line of sight, because the Hoddlers planet was on the other side of the belt. They imagined somehow that the mouth of the wormhole was moving in their galaxy with respect to the other mouth anchored in the Milky Way Galaxy.

Three Hoddler warships were positioned near the wormhole studying the conduit to the Milky Way Galaxy. The ships maintained a defensive formation around the glowing phenomenon, ready to defend themselves in case of an attack. These gray aliens were paranoid, because the wormhole was large enough to let more foreign spaceships into their space.

In a ground installation on the main city of Valtu, their most brilliant scientists worked diligently to develop new weapons for their Emperor, a Supreme Ruler who reigned over this malevolent civilization. Scientific research, which often resulted in technological advances, was conducted almost exclusively in a lower level laboratory. It was in that lab that repairs had already begun on Leanotia. With their advanced technology, all upgrades installed seemed to be in working order. In the next week or so, everything would be completed on the robot.

There was no guessing how Leanotia would react to these short, hairless, grayish-green skinned humanoids with bald balloon-shaped heads, large black almond-shaped

eyes, and small slits for a mouths. It all depended on if she had the same personality quirks in her programming, which had bordered on the narcissistic.

To begin with, the species on the planet, Turghunt, seemed to be more than shaken up by the mystery spaceship that fell out of the sky, crashing to the ground in flames and breaking to pieces. Known throughout this part of the galaxy as the most politically powerful species, their hierarchy scrambled to understand the magnitude of the incident.

Emperor Stuynag waited in the Council Chamber, a small room painted in broad stokes of black and brown shadows and sinister light. The fortress-like palace was full of passages and high walls. The structure, tethered to the planet's surface, was located in a rugged desert region on the outskirts of Egru City. The bottom of his black robe swayed out in a way that was more functional.

Faced with a problem that was likely unsolvable, he pondered, "Exactly what, if anything, had been this foreign starship's ultimate objective?"

Where the starship had come from remained a pressing concern. And he was waiting for his Council of Ministers to devise a plan of action.

A robed minister beamed beside him. "Allow us to assist, as a gesture of good faith toward resolving this thing."

"Our mission is one of investigation," said another Minister, dressed in a brown robe.

The Ministers clearly wanted to please their Emperor. They could manage a quiet, classified research effort into all the data and surviving wreckage of *Themis* discovered on their planet. All the material collected was being held under the highest security conditions at one of the Hoddlers' weapons disposal and storage facilities.

The Emperor nodded and looked over to a female Minister. "Which raises another question. Do you think this starship was a threat to our world?"

"It seems unlikely," she said. "And yet, at the same time, it seems possible. The technology is relatively crude by our standards based on the pieces in our possession. All that can be confirmed is that the ship and the mechanical being recovered from it do not come from our galaxy."

"I would be right in saying that a less-advanced industrial society would be overwhelmed by our superior technological culture," Emperor Stuynag said, and then thought more deeply. "Could we defend ourselves against an army of mechanical beings coming for us?"

The Emperor cast an inquiring glance at the female minister, who said: "If they are years behind us, then their past is already our future."

The Emperor corrected her. "Our present is their past."

A twisted smirk set on the Emperor's thin mouth. The shrewd leader that he was, he hoped that any knowledge learned from the remains of *Themis* could be used as an instrument of war. Many within the Hoddler command hierarchy believed the likelihood of an imminent attack was a possibility.

Coupled with the belief that somewhere distant a threat loomed, the Emperor was able to maintain his composure. Whatever answers were to be found, it would be up to his Council of Ministers to sift through the pieces for any clues wherever they might lead them.

"Prepare my ship," Emperor Stuynag ordered, with a contemptuous sneer. "I want to see this mechanical being with my own eyes."

PROOF

Chapter 57

THE EMPEROR'S small space cruiser landed on the top-level metallic, octagonal landing platform of the Valtu installation. The hatch door slid open.

Emperor Stuynag and one of his Ministers, in their respective robes, strode down the ramp that had just set down. Half a dozen khaki-suited guards and a white-robed scientist flanked the base of the boarding ramp.

"My lord Emperor," the scientist said with a sweeping bow. "How long do you expect to remain here?"

The Emperor smoothed his black robe, which seemed to dwarf him as he walked. "A couple of days at most."

"What of the alien vessel?" asked the Minister, sauntering alongside with the guards trailing them at a respectful distance.

"The little that was salvaged from what remained of the wrecked vessel revealed nothing," the Hoddler scientist

said, as they moved toward the entrance by which they would gain access to the installation. “But I am delighted to report that the mechanical being has been restored to perfect working order.”

“Bring me to it,” the Emperor demanded.

“That would not be a wise decision at all,” the scientist said, unable to hide the fear in his voice.

The Emperor stopped just inside the entrance and gave him a sidelong glance with steady eyes. “Bring me to it at once!”

“My lord, the mechanical being is aggressive. It slapped our chief scientist in the head. It spoke an alien language. Several of our scientists had to restrain it and turn it off.”

“As I suspected,” the Emperor said with a long-suffering sigh. “This is a hostile species. We will take every measure to protect our planet.”

“Can you program our language into this being?” the Minister asked.

The Hoddler scientist smiled in delight. “It will take some time.”

“Take whatever time you require,” the Emperor said. “Restrain it and turn it on. When all is prepared, I will speak to this mechanical being.”

“The Emperor will be in his quarters,” said the Minister, as they walked away, his head bowed.

Late that evening, inside the lower level laboratory, Leanotia was shackled to the wall of a steel room. In the back of the room stood Emperor Stuynag flanked by two scientists. She was powered on. Her eyes blinked as she

noticed the iron shackles around her metal ankles and wrists. Immediately she began to struggle against the restraints, which held firmly.

"You are not leaving this room," said the chief scientist, who had a massive bruise on the side of his head.

The chief scientist was standing six feet away from her because she was often contemptuous, a fact that made him distinctly nervous about being too close to her. And he was staring at her with a look of absolute terror on his face.

"Who are you people?" she said in an arrogant tone. "Where am I? Release me immediately!"

The Emperor raised a four-fingered hand to silence her. "Enough! I am the Supreme Ruler of the Hoddlers. Why did your ship come to Turghunt?"

"Our starship was damaged by an asteroid," she said. "We had to land to make repairs. The ship tore apart. Where is my captain and crew? What have you done with them?"

"You are the only survivor," said the chief scientist.

It took her a moment to process that. Here, alone, with these aliens, only made things worse. Seething over her misfortune, her alertness sharpened.

"What planet do you come from?" asked the Emperor.

"Do you really think I want to answer your questions?" Leanotia asked, dripping with condescension. "Ridiculous light-bulb-shaped, hairless heads, flimsy terrycloth clothes, large eyes. A meager species, and inferior compared to my creators on the planet Earth."

"Who are your creators?" the chief scientist exclaimed. "I demand to know."

Leanotia turned her head to the side, ignoring him.

"Where is Earth?" the Emperor asked. "Are there more mechanical beings like you on Earth?"

"I do not like your language, and see no need to speak it," she said. "Unshackle me, or I will not answer your questions."

The Emperor waved his hand at the scientist standing to his right, nodding his approval. "Remove the restraints."

Leanotia stepped forward. Her eyes moved around the room, looking for a way out. Emperor Stuynag came up to her, real close, squinted his eyes at her, as if in deep concentration.

"There are many mechanics like me on my planet," she said, overly loud.

In a desperate act, she crouched low like a linebacker and drove her shoulder into the chief scientist's shoulder, knocking him down to the floor and pushing past them, heading for the door.

Anger went through the Emperor, who coward away. "Do not let it escape!"

When her hand touched the handle of the door, the two scientists jumped on her back and pulled her down. She slipped to her knees. One of the scientists pushed her head forward, opened a side panel on the back of her neck, and pushed some buttons to turn her off.

The fate of Turghunt hung in the balance, clearly dependent on what the Emperor Stuynag did. Leanotia's insubordinate behavior annoyed him, one time too many.

“I don’t like what I’ve heard,” the Emperor said. “That mechanical being is dangerous. Keep it off for now. Next time you turn it on, have four a guards with their rifles pointed at her. That will teach it. It will answer all of our questions or it will remain off.”

PROOF

Chapter 58

TURNING TO LOOK at her with a frustrated expression, Jiang said, “Just hear me out and look at my data.”

Earlier this morning Xi Bing Jiang had arrived by plane from Shenzhen, China. He was here in Reno for a private meeting, which he had requested and which he was now engaged with Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine.

“Before you say anymore,” the chairwoman prompted. “do you know how much the *Themis* mission cost GalaXplore?”

It was 10:30 A.M. Dressed in a dark blue business suit, he was seated in a high-backed leather chair in front of her desk. Outside the window of her office in the executive tower, he briefly glanced the sun, highlighting the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

“I’m very aware of the expense of the *Themis* starship, its crew and the mission itself,” he said. “But we can’t just throw in the towel on this. We have to get back on the horse.”

Her chair swiveled as she leaned forward. When she put her elbows on top of the desk and rested her chin in her hands, he could tell she was contemplating it all. Her hair was pulled up into a loose knot on top of her head and anchored with two white barrettes which matched white buttoned-down blouse and pants.

“I've had a number of phone conversations with the board of directors,” she said, frankly. “In particular, Jay Strobel doesn’t seem interested in any more missions in the foreseeable future.”

“Let me talk to them,” he said in an eager undertone. “maybe I can convince them.”

"If you want to persuade Strobel, you have to convince me first,” she said, then took her elbows off the desk. “Show me what you brought.”

Jiang stood from the chair and held out a data pad to her. “This data pad has everything you need to know about the plans.”

“I’ll give it a once-over and see if I can’t give you some helpful feedback,” she said as she took the device.

Rhine looked curiously at the data pad, activated its display and thumbed through the text. She studied the information, carefully.

“A mechanic crew of 22 would be required for this mission to the Alpha Centauri three-star system,” he

explained and sat again in the chair. “The mechanics would coordinate the study of the exoplanet Proxima Centauri b, to determine its habitability, which might hold the key to life beyond Earth.”

“There is no definitive evidence of extra-terrestrial life in that system,” she said, sounding disappointed. “Proxima b is 4.22 light years away and tidally locked.”

“With one side permanently in daylight, and the other side permanently in night,” he said. “That’s what makes Proxima Centauri b so fascinating for a research expedition, which is the kind of mission this will be. At long last, we would finally know whether or not liquid water is on the surface of this rocky exoplanet.”

“The small, red dwarf M-type star Proxima Centauri frequently blasts its planets with solar flares, (CME), The mechanics will need to be given instructions on how to handle coronal mass ejection events.”

“These will be the latest-model humanoid robots with new programming.”

“Your design with the nacelles folded into the starship body, shows a much larger ship than *Themis*,” she said with peaked interest. “I like it. That could go over well with the board.”

“The construction of this starship will cost thirty to forty percent less than it cost to construct *Themis*,” he said. “The construction could take place over a period of four months.”

While he talked on, she took some more time to absorb the details from the data pad.

“Furthermore, in history nations have been abandoned due to catastrophic weather events, affecting people’s migratory behavior. Political turmoil and civil unrest ensues due to roads in disrepair and unsafe drinking water. The Haitians were absorbed into other countries, such as Brazil and Africa. After years of extensive deforestation and soil erosion, massive mudslides and flooding, in 2089, the Haiti island was abandoned. Pounding typhoons resulted in migrations of Filipinos in large numbers to Hawaii, until in 2143, the loss of the Philippines was met with public outcry. It’s happening again. You’ve heard the news about Madagascar. Thousands of people have been forced from their homes because of the no less than five cyclones over the recent decades. Scholars predict that the country will face the same fate in the near future that the Haitians and Filipinos had to face. There shouldn’t be a shortage of volunteers to move to a habitable planet.”

Her voice coolly controlled as she said, “That was some speech you made.”

He shrugged off the compliment.

“I’ll be honest I like your presentation,” said Rhine. “I understand your point about the importance of this mission. You have my full support. And I will take this to the board, next week at our monthly meeting.”

Jiang flashed a triumphant look at her and perched on the edge of the chair. “Thank you.”

“So much has happened in the past month,” she said. “It’s all so hard to believe. One minute GalaXplore was on

the verge of space exploration. The next minute our hopes were squashed."

"Here we are, right back to square one again," he said, optimistically.

PROOF

Chapter 59

SO MUCH had transpired these past two weeks, her head was spinning. With Sara Masters leaving GalaXplore for good, Lisbeth Rhine had assigned her Apollonia's interim communications officer. Perhaps it was fitting that she fill in until Sara's replacement was found. It was almost bittersweet. A team player through and through, Shari carried out whatever assignment duty that was given to her.

After what felt like the longest day of her life, she had a sigh of intense relief. It was 6:00 P.M. She pushed her high-backed padded chair back a little, leaned back in it, and let herself breathe a little, rubbing her tired eyes. All the catching up she had to do at work would have to wait until tomorrow.

Just two days earlier, the chairwoman hired someone as the communications officer for her to train. And yesterday,

she arrived in Shenzhen on the space shuttle from Apollonia station.

Throughout her GalaXplore career, she had observed a mixture of feelings and reactions from colleagues, not all of it positive. The resignation of Sara Masters had changed her outlook in many ways. Never would she have thought so than during these past fourteen days, directly after the new communications officer was appointed.

She'd often thought back, wondering about the way it all played out. But after it was all said and done, the *Themis* mission was lost. Nothing Sara Masters or anyone else could do could change that. And she realized that the last thing she wanted to do was hurt Sara Masters. But what was done was done. Despite the way things had looked, she harbored no ill-feelings toward her. It was just her nature to retain a sense of optimism, even when she caught herself saying all the wrong things.

Her smartphone rang. She shook her head to clear it of its thoughts. All the reminiscing had left her feeling at odds with herself.

On the second ring, she sprung from her chair and walked over to her small leather handbag, which she had left dangling from the stainless steel coat rack, and pulled out the phone. The display indicated it was her daughter.

Shari answered with an immediate smile and a "hi sweetpea."

"Hi, Mom," Alexandra's voice was sleep-thick with a yawn.

“I was about to walk out of the office, when the phone rang,” Shari said, her voice warm. “What time is it where you are?”

“It’s six o’clock in the morning,” Alexandra said. “Sorry I forgot to call yesterday.”

“I’m just glad to hear your voice.”

Shari wandered to the window of her corner office. How peaceful autumn in November seemed in the modern city of Shenzhen. Its mix of clouds in the sky, and light wind, and buildings in the background formed a scene for a thoughtful walk.

“I figured this was the best time to catch, when you’re done with work for the day.”

“You were right to call me now,” her mother said with a sigh that sounded like despair. “Earlier wouldn’t have been a good time. I spent grueling hours playing catch-up all day.”

“Is that why you sound so tired?”

“You noticed?”

Good news — Shari lived in a spacious, luxury high-rise condominium, professionally decorated with floor-to-ceiling windows on one side that looked out on much of the city. Not far from the plant. Not far at all.

“I have some news for you,” said Alexandra eagerly. “And I’ll make this brief.”

“Go ahead.”

“I passed my exam. I’d always thought the two-hour theory exam was much harder than the practical assessment

test. I dwelled on some questions, looking them over a lot. It wasn't easy, but I did it."

Shari stopped sky-gazing and leaned her back against the wall. "I'm really happy for you."

"Mom, I miss you a lot," she said in a sincere voice. "When are you going to visit again?"

"Christmas," Shari said. "I already requested the time off."

She could hear her daughter smile through the phone.

"That's great, Mom," she said. "I can't wait to see you again."

"I'll make my special Christmas eggnog, which you like so much."

"I won't keep you anymore," Alexandra said. "Now get home and get some rest."

"I''ll call you in a few days," her mother said.

"Bye for now."

"Love you so much," Shari said softly.

Shari disconnected the call and replaced the phone in her handbag. She crossed to the coat rack next to a short credenza with four drawers in a recessed space and put on her charcoal pea coat, which matched her trousers. After turning off the lights, she exited through the doorway.

The overhead lights reflected off the polished floor of the long corridor. For a long, silent space, she paused beside the large, oval observation window just before the large double-doorway to the main lobby. Her gaze wandered past the swirling cloud formations.

She could see her own reflection in the glass as she stared at Apollonia in the distance. The station glimmered in the dark stillness of space. She felt none of the euphoria, none of the wonder she normally felt. *Perhaps she was consumed with exhaustion*, she thought as she made her way through the double-doorway.

PROOF

Chapter 60

WHILE GALAXPLORE had their hands full building a starship for a new mission, the Hoddlers were in their Galactic system planning a mission of their own. Their combat warships were prepped and ready to travel through the wormhole to the other end of the universe. Their mission wasn't to make peace with humans, but to wage a terrible war and win it. Their sole intention was to seize power of Earth.

Where did *Themis* come from? What kind of mission had the humanoid robots been on? Leanotia — fully repaired — gave these gray aliens the answers to these and other questions. The mechanic, who'd never been anything more to them than a hostage, had served her purpose. As much as she enjoyed irritating them with her taunting words, the Hoddlers switched her off. They placed her in a

large steel box, as a lab specimen, in a vault inside a locked research laboratory.

There was no question that Earthlings were technically inferior to their Hoddler counterparts. In a firefight, the humans would be outgunned. At the end of the battle for Earth, what would be left of humanity was expected to be enslaved by the Hoddlers.

Digging into American history, the most utilized image of an alien life-form — the one that was connected to the UFO landing at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 — was the gray alien with a large, bald head, small slim body, and large black eyes. The irony of the situation was that the Hoddlers fit the bill.

Earth was going to fall — the whole of humanity.

A dozen Hoddler massive, angular hull warships were positioned in a diamond formation at the entrance to the intergalactic portal to the Milky Way Galaxy. Heavy plasma torpedoes loaded, to inflect a significant damage yield. A battalion of their forces ready to cover the ground, had slow-firing, triple-barreled, short-ranged laser weapons. No mercy was going to be shown in this hostile takeover.

The flagship captain stood in a command cradle in the center of the bridge, flanked by seating for his first officer and tactical officer. Filling the starboard viewport was the wormhole's terminus, glowing with a bright bluish-white light. His large dark eyes were fixed dead ahead, expressionless, as if he was in a trance.

"Holding position," said the captain in a singsong tonal language. "Systems check all around."

"All systems ready," the first officer replied icily, a sinister looking grin on his face.

For unmeasured seconds, tension filled the bridge. A brief exchange between the captain and the tactical officer, who entered commands into the computer console in front of him.

"Weapons status?" the captain demanded to know.

"Torpedoes are loaded and ready," replied the tactical officer.

"Full speed ahead!" the captain exclaimed and the warship soared into the mouth of the wormhole.

The bridge of the flagship began to tremble as it surged forward, thrusting deeper in the wormhole. All of the eleven warships followed.

It was only a matter of time before the wormhole was becoming unstable. What followed thereafter was the space tunnel started to sway. The entire Hoddler fleet was plummeting headlong through the tunnel. One-quarter of the way inside, the ships were causing too much friction.

"What is happening?" the flagship captain asked, as lights flickered across the bridge.

Everything around the captain shook violently as he checked the sensors trained on the wormhole. The warship directly behind turned upside down just as the space-time tunnel's walls began to shift. The wormhole was collapsing. The flagship lurched and the lights went out as sparks erupted from all duty stations.

“Abort,” the captain told his first officer. “Steer us back to our planet.”

“Unable to turn the ship around,” the first officer said and looked around with desperate eyes, his console beeping and beeping.

A ripple of blackness spread out as the throat of the shimmery bluish-white wormhole pinched shut and tore apart, What was left behind was a black hole at each point in space where the tunnel entrances had been. All of the Hoddler warships were crushed into the singularity at the center of these newly formed black holes.

Back on the Hoddler homeworld, their hierarchy witnessed the formation of a black hole in place of the wormhole behind the asteroid belt near the planet. They had no way to reach the Milky Way Galaxy.

For the time being, the human planet Earth was off the hook from Hoddler enslavement and annihilation. And the humans were none the wiser.

Practical decisions had to be made; now forced to set aside their interest in the planet Earth. The Hoddlers turned their attention to Leanotia, the mechanic who had knowledge of that planet and its problems. She was powered on and probed for more information. Her haughty attitude persisted. Sometimes she was too obnoxious to the Hoddlers, and one of them had to shut her down for a day or two. Neither did she respond well to being turned off and turned on.

On one occasion during the interrogatory process, one of their scientists suggested to the hierarchy to make

humanoid robots modeled after Leanotia and programmed to serve the Hoddlers. Subsequently, it was decided that she would be reprogrammed to serve them as well.

PROOF

Epilogue

2271

AT 7:00 A.M. (UTC) GalaXplore's brand-new state-of-the-art starship rested inside the docking area of Apollonia station. The ship was christened "*Arkronos*." The last of the support mechanics pulled away from the starship. A launch was underway.

The robot captain was visible through the windows that faced inward toward the bridge, sitting at the front end of the ship. He walked forward, around his first officer at the navigation station, moving to stand in front of the helm at the front of the bridge's command area. Standing erect like a flagpole, he was feeling a surge of energy within knowing he was in control of the starship's every movement.

"Apollonia reports that we are cleared for departure," a mechanic spoke up from the communications console.

"Docking clamps released," the first officer said with a very human grin. "On your say-so."

The large viewscreen at the bow end of the bridge flickered to life.

"Lay in a course for the Alpha Centauri system," the captain told his first officer. "Stand by to engage on my mark."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The captain's eyes blinked, before nodding in satisfaction.

Designed for deep space exploration, the starship was set to explore and chart the Alpha Centauri system to expand GalaXplore's knowledge in ways not known before. More specifically, the humanoid robots aboard were to study the potentially habitable planet, Proxima Centauri b.

28-year-old, Communications Officer Lindsay Valley strolled through the communication station's doors into the operations center. She was dressed in a blue uniform with a narrow bead of gold piping running along the seams, a black leather belt, and a red-and-gold embroidered patch on her left shoulder that spelled out "GalaXplore." Wisps of her black hair curved around her round face, framing it in soft, shiny black. She said nothing, but the mood in the room was ebullient.

Tagging along behind her was Triphenia, who was going over a checklist on the data pad in her metal hand. They went to stand by an observation window.

They went unnoticed because Lionetti and Shari had been in mid-conversation at their respective stations of engineering and science. The two of them had on loose-fitting black GalaXplore jumpsuits with silver piping.

Down below was the blue-and-white curve of Earth and the strip of blue atmosphere hugging it. It was a few minutes after eleven o'clock in the evening in Reno, Nevada as Chairwoman Lisbeth Rhine alongside Xi Jiang, and top level executives were gathered in the rotunda of the executive tower of the GalaXplore headquarters' complex. Eyes turned upward, through the tower's glass-dome, waiting for the *Arkronos* starship to depart Apollonia. A dozen news reporters were outside the glass entryway, giving reports.

The crowning moment had arrived. Through the open doors of the docking deck, the *Arkronos* starship was inching its way forward. It was beginning to rise from its docking port. No one in the operations center spoke or moved for several seconds.

Shari returned her attention to the viewscreen, which gave her a rush of nostalgia. Something was telling her this mission was going to be different. The crew's hard work had been validated. For the briefest of moments, she felt something like goosebumps, knowing her contributions had made this possible. Even Lionetti couldn't help a couple of seconds of awe as he gazed at *Arkronos*, starting to accelerate,

Not since 2269 had people's attention been turned toward the ink-black starry sky to witness the departure of

a spaceship from Apollonia. Like most everyone else on Earth, Shari was nearly hypnotized watching *Arkronos* depart. *The launch was destined to make history*, she thought. It wasn't long after she couldn't see the vessel anymore.

For the first time in many weeks, Shari felt good about her decisions. She had gotten her groove back.

She glanced at Lindsay, wondering how she would fare in the position that Sara Masters had before she left. The thought couldn't help but surface. So far they had gotten along very well. *But only time would tell*, she thought, as she watched Lindsay turn her head and look at her, before making her approach. There were a few things they had to discuss. A few things about the *Arkronos* mission.

Triphenia quickly headed through the doors of the communications station. And Lionetti took a look at the station's status readings display on the engineering console.

Meanwhile, on Earth, it was about three o'clock on a Saturday morning on September 7. Sara Masters was finally turning in for the night in her Kits Point district apartment. Luckily she didn't have to work today.

She was lying in bed half awake. Thinking about the launch that was all over the news had her nostalgic. It made her miss Triphenia even more. In her time with GalaXplore, the first glimpse of Apollonia was the best sight she had seen.

For almost a year and a half, she'd been working as a Development Manager at the H.R. MacMillan Space Centre in Vanier Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

There were galleries of space exhibits, a planetarium with space-themed shows, and the Gordon MacMillan Southam Observatory, adjacent to the Museum of Vancouver complex, which had a telescope for stargazing. What she enjoyed the most about her job was the astronomical research. Also, she liked living near her parents.

As she closed her eyes, she thought about how she wanted the *Arkronos* mission to succeed. Then she fell into a slumber.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANN GREYSON is an award-winning author whose recent novels include *SpaceWoman* and *Cowgirls & Indians.* She primarily writes science fiction and horror fiction novels, which are: *Birdwatcher 2, Birdwatcher*, *Gotham Kitty*, *The Lonely Vampire*, and *Never-DEAD*. She packs her novels with memorable characters, drawing inspirations from her acting and dance background.

Ann portrayed Sara Masters in *The Out World* short television program broadcast on Manhattan Neighborhood Network's Community Channel 1 in 2016. Among the short TV programs, she acts in include: the Super CRAZY Fan series for which she is the creator.

Characters she has portrayed can be seen in many cinematic book trailers advertising her books: *Birdwatcher, Gotham Kitty, The Lonely Vampire* and *Never-DEAD*, all of which

have exploded into multimedia franchises. Additionally, she sings and acts in the music videos: *Shine, O Christmas Tree, House of the Rising Sun, Motherless Child,* and *Buffalo Gals.*

Associate of Arts degree in English from Howard Community College. Member: Actors' Equity Association; SAG-AFTRA; and Alpha Alpha Sigma chapter of Phi Theta Kappa.

PROOF