

# MASTER OF SHADOWS



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*By Michael D. Cooper*

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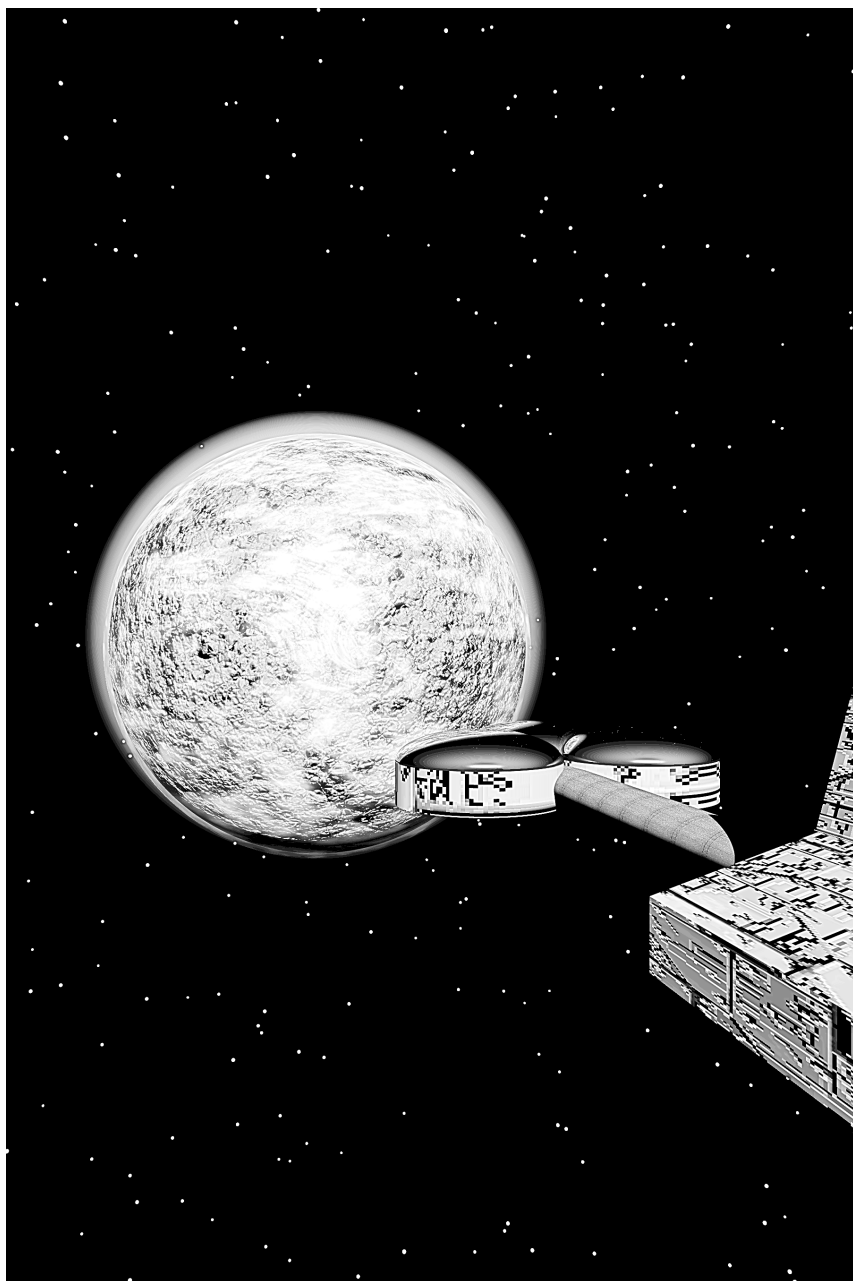
**THE HEART OF DANGER**

**THE LAST COMMAND**

*By Jonathan Cooper*

**MASTER OF SHADOWS**

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*The giant red starship was plummeting toward the planet  
(page 80)*

*An All-New Starman Tale*

# MASTER OF SHADOWS



**by Jonathan Cooper**

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January 2010  
First edition

to Emily

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# MASTER OF SHADOWS



## Prologue: The Third Scar

*SO THIS is what fear looks like*, Alice thought to herself.

Starman Alice Montaine was standing on the rooftop of a ruined skyscraper. In the distance a weak sun hovered on the horizon and gave off a tired gray light. The failing sunlight was just barely strong enough to illuminate the towering buildings that surrounded her. At one time, eons ago, the metallic blue structures must have looked majestic. Today there was nothing left of them but empty skeletons. Any glass windows or other furnishings had long since been destroyed by the slow march of endless time.

The whole planet was a vast, forlorn ruin. Alice had been exploring this uncharted world since she first discovered it three months ago and had found no signs of life whatsoever. Aside from this one city (if indeed one could still call it a city) the planet was completely empty. For thousands of miles around there was nothing but an empty desert, littered with strange bits of blue steel. At one time those bits of metal might have been important clues, but countless ages had eroded them into meaningless shards. At 28 years old Alice Montaine had been a Starman for ten years, and she had never seen or even heard of a world that looked this ancient. Even the sun looked tired, as if it barely had the strength to keep giving out light. She knew it was silly but she couldn't shake the idea that the sun was about to go out at any moment.

Alice pressed a small button on the arm of her suit and immediately a holoscreen appeared in front of her. She knew that

the screen was only a trick of light being projected into her eye and that there was nothing really there, but the illusion was quite convincing. After studying the screen for a moment she reached over and gently tapped on a portion of the imaginary screen. The information on the display changed and told her that her starship, the *Raptor*, was currently in a low planetary orbit. Alice watched her ship for a few moments and then pressed another button that connected her to the communication system on board her ship.

"How's that survey going, Rachel?" Alice asked. "Are you almost done?"

"Mapping the underground levels of the city is proving to be very tedious," the ship's computer replied. "The alien metal is giving off a great deal of interference. I will require at least another twenty minutes before the task will be complete."

Alice sighed. "I figured as much. Just remember that I do have a meeting with the head of Starlight Enterprise next week. I can't be late, you know, and it's a long trip back to Ahmanya. If I'm right about this planet then a lot of lives are at stake."

"I am aware of your events calendar and will see to it that you arrive on time. Caedmon Starlight will not be kept waiting. Do you require anything else?"

Alice shook her head. "I require a lot of things, but it's nothing you can help with. People have just gotten too complacent. They think that just because the Xenobots are gone there are no other dangers. They're forgetting their history! Last time they had someone there to rescue them. This time they might not be so lucky."

"I am afraid that is more than a simple starship can tell. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Just come and get me when you're done," Alice replied.

The ship paused for a moment. "Might I remind you that I am quite capable of transporting you off the surface using my wormhole transporter? There is no need for me to land."

"But you can't beam me underground from planetary orbit," Alice pointed out. "That blasted blue metal gives off too much interference. I just want to check out one more thing before we

head back to Eagle City.”

“Very good,” the computer replied.

Alice pressed another button on her suit sleeve and the holoscreen vanished. She then made her way back inside the decrepit building and began walking down the empty stairwell. The building had a shaft for an elevator, but if there had ever been one installed it had long since disappeared. As she worked her way down to the surface she shook her head. *I just can't believe I found this place*, she thought to herself. *All of the home worlds of the First Races have been known for ages and none of them are located anywhere near this place. They weren't supposed to have any lost settlements.*

The early history of the galaxy had been a subject of intense debate for as long as Alice could remember. When the Xenobot race was defeated at Luxa in 2160 the galaxy was finally made safe for exploration. Over the next forty-five years much had changed. By 2205 hundreds of star systems were colonized and countless discoveries were made. In terms of scientific progress it had been a golden age.

But there was one mystery that no one had been able to solve. Before the Xenobots became an alien menace intent on destroying all other forms of life they were the Lucians – one of the very first races to ever inhabit the galaxy. This magnificent race eventually launched a war against the other First Races. Much of the details had been lost in time but history said the First Races won that war and as a result the Lucians fell and became the Xenobots. The First Races then left the galaxy to pursue a new life somewhere else. After they left a mysterious being known as the Janitor took care of their now-empty worlds in the hope that they would one day come back home.

As these worlds were explored, however, it began to look less and less likely that the First Races had simply relocated. Alice had no trouble believing that the Lucians had lost the war. The once-mighty race had clearly been devastated during the conflict, and it was a very long time before they became the half-robot, half-monster cyborgs that once again threatened the galaxy. It was

also true that the thirty-four star systems the First Races left behind showed almost no signs of battle damage.

But Alice could not shake the idea that one day they had simply *disappeared*. All at once, without warning, in a single moment, the First Races vanished from history. It was a deeply disturbing thought. *What could make an entire group of civilizations disappear in an instant – and is that force still around today? Is there really no one out there that knows what really happened?* Alice knew that other Starmen had been wondering this since before she was born, but in more than four decades of searching no one had come close to an answer.

Alice at last made it to the ground floor of the empty skyscraper and left the building. Outside a cold wind gently blew down the deserted street, raising small clouds of gritty black dust. On the horizon Alice could see that the faint sun had almost set. It had taken the Starman some time to get used to the world's 16-hour days, and even now she longed for the normal day/night cycle of home. As she walked down the street toward the edge of town she noticed that the buildings around her were starting to give off a flickering blue light. Parts of their superstructure glowed in the dark, like a candle that had been burning for too long and was about to go out.

*I hate this darkness, Alice thought. I know there's no life on this planet but I just can't help it. I can feel something evil here. Something malignant. I can't see it but I know it's out there.*

Alice's suit beeped. "Yes?" she said aloud.

"The planetary survey you requested has been completed," her starship reported. "I am now beginning my descent. I should be at your position shortly."

"Thanks," Alice responded.

It did not take her long to walk to the outskirts of the city. When she finally left the city limits she couldn't resist turning around for one last look. In the shadows she could see the dying metropolis as it eerily flickered in the growing darkness. Alice shuddered. *At one time the entire city probably glowed in the dark, but that was a long time ago. Now all that remains are hints*

*of what it once was.*

Alice turned her attention back to the desert and quietly waited for her starship to arrive. Even though she was standing on this world she still found it difficult to believe that it really existed. Before the war with the Lucians the First Races inhabited star systems very close to the center of the galaxy. Since that was where they once lived that was naturally where the search for clues had begun. But after an entire generation of Starmen searched that sector in vain Alice decided to take a different approach. Using the fabrication equipment on board the *Raptor* she built and launched thousands of small, inexpensive probes that were dispatched to look where no one else had – at the extreme outer edges of the galaxy's spiral arms. It was the last place anyone had ever expected to find signs of a race that had once inhabited the core of the galaxy, but after five long years of intense searching that was exactly where Alice had found this planet.

She knew it wasn't supposed to exist. Everyone had always believed that the Janitor maintained *all* of the original planets that once belonged to the First Races. In Starlight Academy her own history teacher had taught that the First Races never ventured this far from home. *And yet here we are*, Alice thought. *I wonder what other critical information has been lost to the passage of time.*

As the Starman quietly watched the horizon she saw her starship make its final approach. Less than two minutes later the *Raptor* gently set down right in front of her. The giant red starship was easily three hundred feet long, but the ship's computer piloted it with exquisite precision.

A door in the ship's hull slid open and Alice quickly stepped inside. As the door closed behind her she made her way down the hallways and up to the ship's bridge. When she stepped onto the bridge a hologram of a young lady appeared in front of her. The lady had short red hair, green eyes, and wore an orange uniform, which was the standard attire assigned to the computers of all Starlight Enterprise starships.

Alice sat down in the captain's chair and relaxed. *It's nice to*

*leave that haunted world and be back in familiar surroundings.* Aloud she said, “Thanks for coming to get me, Rachel. Now show me that survey you just completed.”

Rachel nodded and a holoscreen appeared in midair in front of Alice. She stared at it for a moment and then used her hand to manipulate the image. After navigating through several different sections of the city she was finally satisfied.

“So that chamber we discovered really is at the lowest level,” Alice said at last.

“That is correct,” Rachel replied. “The underground levels appear to be almost entirely intact. I see few signs of damage.”

Alice nodded. “It doesn't look like there's any way to get down there either.”

“That is also correct. It appears that the underground section was designed to be separate and distinct from the city above it. There are no connecting passages and the two are separated by more than a half-mile of solid rock. The only means of entrance is by wormhole transporter.”

“Which is exactly what we thought,” Alice said. “Curious. Have you reached any conclusions about their relative ages?”

“An exact reading is not possible, but both the city and the underground layers appear to have been built with the same technology. It is not unreasonable to conclude that they were constructed at the same time.”

“Which makes sense, I guess. My theory is that the city was built to guard whatever is being kept in that chamber. The underground section has simply fared better because it's been sealed off. It hasn't been eaten away by that awful atmosphere.”

“The atmosphere is not toxic,” Rachel pointed out. “It is quite amenable to human life and has minimal corrosive properties.”

“Sure, from a strictly biological standpoint,” Alice retorted. “But it's creepy. I'm telling you there is something out there. *Something* is alive in those deserts. Those lights just aren't natural.”

“That observation cannot be verified,” Rachel replied.

“I know, I know,” Alice said, sighing. “Anyway. I know we



need to be going, but can you beam me to that chamber one more time?"

"I cannot transport you directly into the chamber," Rachel replied. "All I can do is transport you to a location nearby. As you know the chamber itself is impenetrable. All of our efforts to see what is inside have failed."

"C'mon, Rachel, you know what I mean. Just beam me down there. I'll let you know when I'm ready to go. I won't be long."

"Very good," Rachel replied. Alice stood up and was immediately enveloped in a brilliant white light. She felt a strange sensation of movement, and a moment later she found herself standing in front of a giant airlock.

Alice had spent days in this room. She was almost a mile underground, at the end of a long hallway that sloped down to the deepest part of the underground passageways. The walls, ceiling, and floor were made of the same blue metal she had seen on the surface. A gentle white light filled the area, coming from no visible source. That technology was common in the cities built by the First Races, but an omnipresent light that cast no shadows still filled her with awe.

The focus of her attention was on the airlock itself. Embedded in the end of the hallway was a pair of giant doors that were almost thirty feet tall. Instead of being made of blue steel, however, they were fashioned out of an incredibly strong translucent material. Even though the white metal was partially transparent she still couldn't quite see what was on the other side of the doors.

All of her attempts to open them had failed. The material itself was unknown and had resisted her every attempt to analyze it. Experience had taught her that it was impervious to lasers and every other tool she had with her on the *Raptor*. The walls on either side of the airlock doors had no obvious controls of any kind. Over the past three months she had conducted a detailed search of the underground portion of the city, and while she had found many computer systems none of them appeared to be connected to this chamber. As far as she could tell it was sealed

off from the rest of the city.

The Starman turned her attention to the wall on the right side of the door. As she stared at the blue steel she caught her breath. Embedded into the wall were three long, jagged scars where the metal had been violently torn away. Beneath the metal she could see the same impenetrable white material that guarded the airlock.

Alice already knew that the entire chamber in front of her was made of the same white material. The blue metal plating on either side of the airlock was simply for decorative purposes. What chilled Alice was that when she had last been down here two days ago there were only two gashes in the wall. Today there were three.

*So there is someone else down here, Alice thought. Fear clutched at her heart as she realized the implications. We can't see them with our sensors but they're here, and they want to release the evil that is on the other side of that door. If that happens – if it is set free – then we're all dead. The First Races aren't here to defeat it a second time. I've got to act before it's too late!*

## Chapter 1: Caedmon Starlight

AT PRECISELY seven o'clock Eagle City Time a gentle voice jarred Starman Alice Montaine awake. It took her a moment to realize that the female voice was actually Ahmanyen, and it took her another moment to realize it was being broadcast through the ship's intercom system. The *Raptor* was still several thousand light-years from Ahmanyen, but evidently the ship's computer had been able to pick up a broadcast transmission from the planet.

*“Good morning, citizens of Ahmanyen! Today is October 23, 2205. The weather in Eagle City will be mostly sunny, with a slight chance of rain this afternoon. The high will be ...”*

Alice sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes, and yawned. “Hey, Rachel, what's with that voice?”

“It is the morning wakeup call you requested,” the computer replied. “We are only an hour away from landing in Eagle City. You expressed a desire to be ready when I touched down but you showed no signs of waking up on your own. I therefore decided to intervene.”

“Efficient as always, I see,” Alice grumbled. “And at such an unearthly hour, too. If you ask me morning comes much too quickly these days. But how is it you happened to pick that particular station?”

“That broadcast is originating from the *Eagle City Chronicle's* primary broadcasting station. You worked there for six months before you were accepted at Starlight Academy. I thought you might enjoy the sounds of home.”

“Thanks,” Alice said appreciatively. “But I think at this hour

what I'd enjoy even more is a little more sleep."

Still grumbling, she quickly showered, put on her red Starman uniform, and then headed to the galley for a quick breakfast. Alice had been given the *Raptor* six years ago after she left Venus to begin her exploration of the outer reaches of the galaxy. During those six years Rachel had been her only companion, as she spent most of her time far beyond the reaches of even the most distant colony. Alice did not mind the solitude, but Rachel was constantly urging her to find someone to team up with. Her short blond hair, amber eyes, and tall stature made for an attractive picture, but Alice had always replied that she had better things to do with her time than get involved in romance. Rachel had only given up pestering her when Alice threatened to have her replaced with an electronic toaster.

Alice finally made it to the bridge a full hour after her unexpected wakeup call. She yawned as she settled into the captain's chair and began studying the information displayed on the holoscreen.

"I'm tired," she said.

"I am not surprised," the computer replied. The holographic person projected by the ship's computer looked at her and shook its head. "You have slept for only six hours over the past three days. I am surprised you can still function."

"I didn't have a choice!" Alice protested. "I had to get that report on my findings off to Starlight Enterprise as soon as possible. If I got there before my report did then my meeting would be pretty useless. Caedmon Starlight needs at least a *little* time to go over the data before I talk with him. I really should have sent it last week but I hadn't finished my investigation yet."

"I wish you would let me reschedule your appointment with him," Rachel said gently. "I know he is a busy man but under the circumstances I do not think he would mind. It is not often that one of his Starmen come all the way to Luna to pay him a personal visit."

Alice shook her head. "We don't have the time, Rachel. You saw that third scar! Somebody else already knows what's inside

that chamber. If we don't act now then we're going to be in a world of hurt."

"As you wish," she replied.

Several minutes ticked by. Alice pulled up a task list on the holoscreen in front of her and frowned. "How are we doing on this checklist? Have you made all the necessary arrangements?"

"I believe so," Rachel replied. The holographic figure walked over to the screen and began gesturing at the items on the list. "I have contacted Starlight Enterprise and explained that this ship is eighteen months overdue for its regularly scheduled maintenance. They have placed us at the top of their priority list. As soon as the ship lands at the David Foster Spaceport it will be handed over to a maintenance crew, which will begin the necessary repairs."

Alice winced. "Has it really been that long?"

Rachel nodded. "They did request that we be more punctual next time, but I explained to them that exploring the unknown does not always go as planned. I have given them a complete list of all the systems that need their attention, and they promised me that they can have the ship repaired and restocked with supplies by the first of November."

"Hmmm," Alice muttered, frowning. She gently drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "I mean, I know seven days is a fantastic turnaround time, but I don't really want to wait that long to go back and take care of whatever is in that chamber. Still, I suppose it will take time to get everything together. There's no sense in running off before we have all the supplies we need. So, all in all, I guess we can wait long enough to get fully prepared."

"Indeed," the computer replied.

"Did you talk to them about the transporter?" Alice asked. "Is there anything that can be done to extend its range?"

"I did mention that to Starlight Enterprise. They referred me to someone at Stryker Transportation, who promised to send a technician out to look at the unit. My hardware is still state-of-the-art but they believe that installing some new software might help cut down on the interference and extend the range."

"I sure hope so," Alice said fervently. "I hate making you land

just so I can beam underground. I'd feel a lot better if we could do that from planetary orbit, far away from that awful city. Having you on the surface is a security risk I'd rather not take."

Rachel looked confused. "I would like to point out that the planet is uninhabited. I have not been able to find any signs of danger."

"Trust me on this – that planet is not safe. That's why the next time we go back I want to bring an army with me. It never hurts to err on the side of caution."

A moment later the *Raptor* dropped out of hyperspace. Alice noticed that the planet Ahmanya immediately filled the viewscreen at the front of the bridge. As tired as she was she couldn't help smiling as she gazed at the blue and green world. *It's been too long since I've been home*, she thought.

Fifty years ago that planet had been quite different. At that time it was still named Mars and was a mostly dry, barren, inhospitable place. However, that began to change after the Xenobot menace was defeated. With their ancient enemy gone the planet's original inhabitants came out of hiding and began restoring their home to its former glory. In 2170 Earth formally gave control over the planet to the Ahmanyen race. The aliens in turn gave control of the largest human settlement on the planet, Eagle City, back to mankind.

The arrangement had worked out well. Over the next thirty years the High King of Ahmanya had worked with the elected mayor of Eagle City to finish the terraformation process. Today that multi-generational project was complete. Once again vast forests and deep blue oceans dotted the planet's surface. The once-lifeless corpse had become a vibrant jewel.

"It looks so different from that other planet," Alice said aloud. "*That* place is all darkness and shadows and evil. There's nothing the least bit warm or inviting about it."

"When are you going to give it a name?" Rachel asked. "As its rightful discoverer you are authorized to name it."

"That's true," Alice said slowly. "To be honest I have been giving it some thought. What would you think about naming it

Lemura?"

"That would be from the Latin, meaning a planet of phantoms," Rachel replied. "Given your unjustified superstitions about the desert lights you discovered I think that name would be highly appropriate. Would you like me to officially register the name?"

"If you don't mind," Alice said.

"Of course. But just out of curiosity, what if I *did* mind?"

"Then I'd make you do it anyway."

"Oh," Rachel replied. "Well, that is good to know."

Alice looked out the viewscreen and watched as the *Raptor* left planetary orbit and flew toward Eagle City. The sprawling metropolis was located in a giant crater and was home to millions of people. From the air the city was a breathtaking sight. To Alice, however, it was much more than just another ultramodern city on another alien planet. It was her home.

It was not long before Rachel landed the *Raptor* in the David Foster Spaceport. After the starship had settled into its designated parking space she spoke up. "Several parties are requesting permission to come aboard."

"I'll go take care of it," Alice replied. She got up out of her chair and walked over to the airlock. After opening the doors she stepped outside.

As Rachel had reported, a small group of uniformed personnel were patiently waiting for her. At the front of the group was a tall, thin man with dark hair and a ready smile. He extended his hand. "Starman Montaine, welcome back to Eagle City. My name is Donnie McGinnis. We're from Starlight Enterprise and are here to perform the routine maintenance you requested."

Alice smiled and shook his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you! By all means, don't let me get in your way. Go right ahead and do whatever you need to do. As you can see the *Raptor* is a little worse for wear. We've had a bit of excitement over the past few years."

"So I've heard," Donnie replied, grinning. "I promise we'll take good care of your ship." He motioned to the small army that

was following him and they quickly filed into the airlock.

After they were gone Alice saw that that was still one more person left outside – a tall, red-headed person in his early 20's. He was carrying a small black briefcase. “And you are?” Alice asked.

“My name is Farmer – Ben Farmer,” he said, approaching the Starman. He took out a holographic ID card and handed it to her. “I was sent here by Stryker Transportation to see about upgrading the software on your transporter. I've been told you would like to improve its performance.”

“That would be wonderful! Please go right in – Rachel will explain what's been happening.”

“And Rachel is...?”

“Oh – sorry! She's the ship's computer.”

“Of course,” Ben replied. “My apologies. Not many ships have artificial intelligence. It's a pretty expensive upgrade.”

“True, but oh is it ever useful out in deep space! I don't know how I would get along without her.”

Ben nodded and went on inside the ship. After checking in with Rachel and making sure that everything was in order she flagged down an electric vehicle and took it to the main terminal. As she rode to the terminal she noticed that people around her were stopping what they were doing to glance in her direction. *They've probably never seen a Starman before, she thought idly. There's less than a thousand of us in the whole galaxy and we almost never come home.*

Alice stood in the terminal for a minute while she tried to decide where to go next. When she checked the time she was surprised at how early it was. *Why, it's not even nine o'clock yet! It's way too early to go to Amundsen City. I think I'll go pay my sister a visit. I've got time.*

The Starman walked downstairs and over to the nearest subway station, which she rode to the heart of Eagle City. Once there she got off at the Goddard Road station, walked back up to the surface, and briskly jogged down the street.

As the morning broadcast had predicted, today was a beautiful day. The sun shone brilliantly overhead, illuminating a deep blue



sky. The streets of the city were bustling with activity. Everywhere Alice looked she could see crowds of humans and Ahmanyans going about their business. The sight brought back many memories. Alice had been born in Eagle City and spent her whole life there before going off to become a Starman. *It's so good to be back*, she thought happily.

Alice briskly made her way down the street and was soon standing in front of a small building made out of smooth red bricks. A worn sign overhead proclaimed it to be the *Forgotten Treasures Bookstore*. Alice smiled, opened the front door, and stepped inside. Immediately she was surrounded by the sights and smells of old books. *This place is just packed with old books – exactly like I remember it!* The walls and floorspace were filled with bookshelves, and even more battered volumes were stacked on every piece of available furniture. Here and there were a few large, overstuffed chairs. *It hasn't changed a bit*, she thought to herself.

Her thoughts were interrupted by excited squeal behind her. As she turned around she saw her sister Amanda running toward her. “Oh, Alice! Alice Alice Alice. It's so good to see you! I haven't seen my little sister in ages. Ages!”

“It's good to see you too,” Alice replied, hugging her sister. Amanda Montaine was ten years older than Alice. She had no other siblings, and the two had been very close while growing up together.

“Say, is that gray hair I see?” Alice asked, teasing her sister.

Amanda simply shook her head. “Just you wait! I'm not the only person in this family getting old. Do you realize that you're almost 30? And that's a third of the way to 90! You'll be older than Richard Starlight soon.”

Alice laughed. “Thanks for making me feel better about the passage of time. It is good to see you again, though. It really is. And I can't believe you actually bought this bookstore! Whatever possessed you to abandon your career and sell old books for a living?”

“Oh, that's right!” Amanda plopped down into an overstuffed

chair and grinned. "I'd forgotten that the last time you were here I was still working at Applied Sciences. Well, sis, it's really not hard to explain. After spending fifteen years mutating yeast strains for the cause of science I decided I'd had quite enough. As nifty as that was, I figured there *had* to be more to life than bacteria cultures. I remembered all the good times we had here as young hoodlums and decided to give it a shot."

"I guess that's one way to ensure you never run out of things to read," Alice teased. She walked over to the counter and picked up a thick volume with a bookmark halfway through the book. "Is this what you're going through now?"

Amanda nodded. "Sure is! *Project Orion* is the ninth volume in the series. It's quite good. There are a lot of great stories in that series – *The Children of Neptune* and *The Door to Yesterday* are two of my favorites. With stories like these I don't have to leave Sol to explore alien planets! I can do it all from the comfort of my own home."

Alice glanced at the author's name on the spine. "You know, I don't think I've ever heard of them."

"They're very old and quite hard to find," Amanda explained. "It took me ages to track them down. I still don't have the whole series but I'm working on it."

"So how is your family doing?" Alice asked, as she handed the book back to her sister.

"They're doing great! Tory and Alex are growing up so fast. Tory is going to be starting college next year and his younger brother isn't far behind."

"I just can't believe it!" Alice replied. "It doesn't seem like it's been that long. Why, it seems like it's only been a few months since I took you guys on that trip to the Farsight colony. We spent the whole week camping in the forest."

"That was just after you had gotten the *Raptor*," Amanda replied. "Those were good times. Speaking of your starship, how is Rachel doing these days?"

"Oh, she's fine!" Alice replied. "Efficient as always – too efficient sometimes, if you ask me. That reminds me. Are we still

on for dinner tonight?"

"More or less," Amanda replied. "I'll definitely be there, but as I told you last week my husband is out of town. The Dodd Foundation has sent him to Tau Ceti and he won't be back for another week. Mom will be there, but Dad had to make an unexpected trip to Ganymede. He won't be back for three days."

"When did that happen?" Alice asked, surprised. "I talked to Mom just two days ago. She promised me Dad would be there!"

"I guess something came up," Amanda replied sadly. "You know how it is. He's a consultant, so he's at the mercy of his clients. Sometimes things happen."

Alice sighed. "I'm just tired of it, sis. Dad has *always* had somewhere else he had to be. He has never been there for us and it's always the same old story. Even when I graduated from Starlight Academy he couldn't be bothered to show up. I've tried everything to please him and it's never enough. Amanda, I just discovered a *lost planet of the First Races* and he still can't find the time to have dinner with his own daughter!"

"Alice," her sister said warningly. "C'mon. We've had this discussion before. *Your* job doesn't let you be at home much either."

"I guess," she said. "Maybe I'm just not the understanding type. But anyway, I've got to be going. I have to be on Luna soon for a meeting and I don't want to be late. I'll see you this afternoon ok?"

"All right," Amanda replied. She gave her sister a hug. "Never forget that we love you, ok?"

"I love you too," Alice replied. She left the bookstore and headed down the street.

It was only a short walk from the bookstore to the train station. Eagle City was such a popular destination that it had several train stations, but the largest one by far was the Grand Central Terminal in the heart of downtown. The maglev terminal was named after a train station that had once existed on Park Avenue in New York City, before the Collapse came and the city

was destroyed in a nuclear war. The new station was built to look exactly like its namesake, complete with vintage 20th-century art and architecture.

Alice walked up to a glowing holoscreen inside the terminal and checked the arrival and departure times. She saw that there was a high-speed maglev train departing for Amundsen City in 20 minutes. After checking the departure platform and getting her electronic ticket she headed off to wait for the train to arrive.

In the 23<sup>rd</sup> century the solar system and many of the important extrasolar colonies were linked together by a network of high-speed maglev trains. An ordinary train could never cross interplanetary distances, so a series of wormholes was used to connect the various planetary rail networks. While on a planet the trains traveled on high-speed tracks, and when they needed to jump from one planet to another they simply went through a specially-constructed wormhole to jump to the next rail line. The system was so well designed that one could travel almost anywhere in a couple hours using only trains and the local subway system. Planes still existed, but people had become accustomed to the speed and luxuriousness of modern rail travel. Besides, at a top speed of four thousand miles per hour there were few planes that could match them for speed.

Precisely on schedule the sleek maglev train pulled up to platform 9. Alice waited until its passengers disembarked and then she climbed on board. She settled down into her assigned seat and relaxed. *Another ten minutes and I'll be on Luna*, she thought to herself.

Amundsen City was located on the south pole of Earth's moon in Shackleton Crater. It was one of the oldest extraplanetary cities and until recently rivaled Eagle City for size. The sprawling metropolis was home to many of the solar system's most important corporations.

The tallest building in Amundsen City was the Starlight Tower, the headquarters of Starlight Enterprise. At one time it was the tallest building in the solar system, but over the past fifty

years it had been surpassed by structures on other planets. The enormous building was still an impressive sight, and the fact that it was almost 75 years old did nothing to dim its magnificence.

Caedmon Starlight's office was located on the 121<sup>st</sup> floor of the Tower. At one point that office had belonged to his father Richard, but after he retired he turned it over to his son. For the past thirty years Caedmon had run his father's company from that office, successfully managing the transition from an interplanetary business into an interstellar corporation. Under his wise leadership the company had maintained its position on the cutting edge of exploration and science.

His office was accessible only by two express elevators, and Alice approached them nervously. She had only met Caedmon twice before, and one of those occasions was in the ceremony where she officially became a Starman. While all Starmen worked for Starlight Enterprise and therefore reported directly to Caedmon, it was very unusual for them to pay him a personal visit in his private office.

After showing her credentials to the guards on the first floor they allowed her to board the elevator. She was soon speeding toward the top of the Tower. After the elevator doors opened she stepped into a small, luxurious waiting room.

In the waiting room was a beautiful wooden desk and a few ornate chairs. Pictures of distant colonies accented the walls, and the floor was covered by a plush red carpet. Behind the desk was Ellarine Starlight, Caedmon's daughter. Ellarine acted as her father's personal secretary and managed all of his appointments, but Alice knew that in reality she played a large role in running the company. Everyone knew that it would not be long before Caedmon retired and turned the company over to his daughter.

"Why hello, Starman Montaine," Ellarine said brightly. "My father is expecting you. He'll see you in just a moment."

Alice nodded and nervously sat down in a chair to wait. *I wonder how many other people have sat in this room through the years, she thought. I wonder if it's exciting to keep the galaxy's most important people fidgeting in your waiting room.* She

glanced over to a nearby table and saw the September and October issues of *Swift Enterprises Monthly*, a leading scientific publication. The cover story this month appeared to be about a new breed of nuclear-powered aircraft. *At least they keep their subscriptions up-to-date. I hate it when I'm waiting in a doctor's office and all they have to read are ten-year-old magazines.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by Ellarine. "Caedmon Starlight will see you now."

"Thanks," Alice said. She walked through the double-doors behind Ellarine and stepped into his office.

Alice had heard a great deal about the famous Starlight office but had never been inside it before. She was not disappointed by what she saw. *The pictures just don't do it justice*, she thought. The four walls of the spacious room were made of treated glass, impervious to the constant rain of micro-meteorites. Outside she could see the landscape of the moon stretching out for miles in all directions. In the distance she could just barely see the pass that led to the Field of Obsolescence.

Caedmon's office was far more than just a fancy suite with a big desk. The 3000 square-foot room had a modern scientific laboratory, state-of-the-art communications equipment, and a fully-stocked resource library. In one corner of the room was a huge table that appeared to be made out of mahogany but was actually constructed from an amazing artificial substance. In another part of the room were large, detailed globes of Earth, the Moon, and Mars. *Why, he's even got the globe of Mercury! Didn't a Xenobot spy hide in that very globe once?*

Alice forced her attention back to Caedmon Starlight, who was seated behind his desk. When she walked into the room the head of Starlight Enterprise stood up, walked over to her, and shook her hand. "Starman Alice Montaine! It is a pleasure to see you again. I see you've been quite busy! Please, have a seat."

Alice sat down in one of the chairs opposite the desk. She noticed that a printed copy of her report was lying on the top of the desk. *It looks like he's been reading my report*, she thought, as she noticed some handwritten notes jotted in the margin of the

page. *And he's been taking notes!*

The head of Starlight Enterprise took his seat. He looked at Alice and smiled. "So how has everything been? Has the *Raptor* met your expectations? I understand you've been exploring some very remote parts of the galaxy."

Alice nodded. "Um, yes, that's true. I've been concentrating on exploring the most distant stars in our galaxy's spiral arms. As far as I can tell no one else has ever done a detailed search of those sectors. The starship you've provided me has performed admirably. The AI unit in particular has been invaluable. I don't know what I would have done without her."

Caedmon glanced down to look at his desk. Only then did Alice realize that what she thought was a wooden desktop was actually a well-camouflaged holoscreen. Information was scrolling by in several places. From where she sat Alice couldn't read the writing but it was clear Caedmon was keeping tabs on many projects simultaneously.

"It looks like your ship is being serviced as we speak," he commented. "I'm glad you were able to find the time to get that done! Over the past five years you've done a lot of traveling. You give our hardware a good workout."

"You could certainly say that, sir," Alice agreed. "I've had a lot of ground to cover, but I think it has paid off. Lemura is exactly what I was hoping to find."

"Ah, so you *have* named the planet!" Caedmon said approvingly. "I was going to ask you about that. So tell me a little bit more about this world you've discovered."

Over the next half-hour Alice answered many questions about her most recent discovery. She described in detail the process she went through to find it, and what she had discovered beneath the city.

"I really believe this is the missing piece of history we've been looking for," Alice concluded. "This city clearly predates the war between the Lucians and the First Races. I believe this is where the Lucians conducted their initial tests of the weapon they ultimately used to destroy their enemies."

"Most historians would say that the First Races were victorious," Caedmon commented, "but you make a compelling case for believing the contrary. Your theory states that while the Lucians were devastated, they ultimately won, and the reason the First Races have never returned is because they are no longer around."

"Exactly," Alice replied.

"So do you believe this ancient weapon still resides in that chamber?" Caedmon asked.

"Yes and no," Alice replied slowly. "I don't think it's something like a gun or a missile that you just point and shoot. If the weapon was simply a piece of machinery then I think the Xenobots would have used it in their war against us. I think it's far more likely that whatever is in that chamber is a life form of some kind. It might be a mechanical life form or it could be a biological one. But I think the Lucians built a monster to destroy their enemies – and that the monster then turned on them. Rather than destroy it, they imprisoned it in the very place where it was created."

"That's a very interesting theory," Caedmon said slowly. "But haven't you been trying to open this chamber? According to what you are telling me that sounds like a very dangerous thing to do."

"I've been trying to find a way inside so I can destroy what it contains," Alice explained. "And I'm not the only person trying to get inside, either. Someone else knows what is in there. Somebody is trying to let that monster loose."

"The third scar," Caedmon said quietly.

"Exactly," Alice said. "But sir, we *cannot* let that happen. Whatever is locked away inside that room must never be allowed to escape. I believe that weapon destroyed the First Races at the height of their power. Imagine what it would do to a primitive civilization such as our own! We've got to act now, while it is still locked away."

The head of Starlight Enterprise was quiet for a few moments. "So how do you propose we deal with this situation?"

Alice did not hesitate. "Mobilize Tharsos. It is without



question the most powerful instrument of war that either us or the Ahmanyans possess. I have no doubt that it can summon enough power to vaporize the chamber. It would be a quick and simple operation.”

Caedmon smiled. “I’m afraid there is nothing quick or simple about mobilizing Tharsos, Alice. Yes, it is true that fifty years ago it was used in the war against the Xenobots. However, for decades now it has joined Phobos and Demos as moons of Ahmanya. The last time its star drive was activated was before you were born. The city within it, Olovanda, is home to almost a million people.”

The head of Starlight Enterprise paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “If we were to reactivate Tharsos we would need to temporarily relocate all of those people. It would not be wise to put their lives in danger by moving them into a war zone. If your theory is correct there is no telling what might happen when that chamber is destroyed. Moving all those people is not a trivial task, to say nothing of the effort that would be required to make sure Tharsos can still operate as a weapon of war. I would imagine there are many systems that need to be checked and reactivated.”

As Alice opened her mouth to reply Caedmon held up his hand. “There is one more thing to consider. Tharsos belongs to Ahmanya, not Starlight Enterprise. Any request to use it – and especially a request such as this – would have to be brought before the High King of that planet. I don’t know how he would respond. King Izmaka is not as young as he used to be, and I’m not either, for that matter.”

“So what are your thoughts, sir?” Alice asked.

Caedmon was silent for a few minutes. When he finally spoke he was slow and deliberate. “I think it is clear that you have made an important discovery – perhaps the most important one we’ve made since the fall of the Xenobots. You have presented some solid evidence that the First Races lost their war with the Lucians and that the weapon they used against them may still exist. If it does, that presents a compelling case to act. We must not allow

that weapon to fall into the wrong hands and be used against us.”

“Exactly,” Alice said.

“However,” Caedmon continued, “I do not think, based solely on the evidence you have provided, that I could convince the Ahmanyans to mobilize Tharsos. It is not at all clear that the contents of that chamber are hazardous. You yourself have admitted that you have only theories as to what it might contain.”

“It's impossible to see through that white metal!” Alice protested. “The only way to see what's inside is to break through it, and I haven't been able to do that. It's very well-guarded.”

“But you have only tried for three months,” Caedmon pointed out, “and on your first expedition to Lemura you did not expect to encounter this obstacle. Surely you could find a way to see what is on the other side of that wall. If you can prove that the chamber does contain something that threatens all of civilization then I believe I could justify asking King Izmaka to re-activate Tharsos.”

“But what about the third scar?” Alice asked. “Someone else is already trying to get in!”

“It is not an easy thing to ask a million people to give up their home because of a tear in a wall on a planet they have never seen,” Caedmon pointed out. “I am not trying to minimize the danger, but I believe we need a lot more evidence before we can justify moving forward. And I have no doubts that you are fully capable of obtaining that evidence.”

“Yes, sir,” Alice said softly. *I should have known this would happen, she thought to herself. I understand where he is coming from, but he hasn't been there. He hasn't seen what I've seen.*

“You don't have to do this alone, you know,” Caedmon said. “There are other Starmen that would be more than happy to lend their expertise. I've already sent a copy of your report to Joe Taylor. He's been researching the First Races for years now and I have no doubt that he will be extremely excited about what you've found.”

“You mean *the* Joe Taylor?” Alice asked, surprised. “I didn't realize he was still an active Starman. Didn't he fight with David

Foster in the war against the Xenobots?”

“That is correct,” Caedmon replied. “Of course, he was much younger back then, but he's still a very busy man. He's been spending most of his time the past few years studying the planet Larson's Folly.”

“I've heard of that place,” Alice said, shuddering. “That's one planet I hope I never visit. It sounds even worse than Lemura.”

Caedmon stood up, signaling that the meeting was over. “Please let me know if there is anything at all that I can do. The resources of Starlight Enterprise are at your disposal. All you have to do is ask.”

“Thanks,” Alice replied. She shook his hand and then headed back to the elevator. *I just hope I can find my way into that chamber before our unseen competitor*, she thought, as she rode the elevator back down to the surface. *If I lose this race against time then the High King won't have to worry about inconveniencing the residents of Olovanda. There won't be any residents left – not in Olovanda or anywhere else. The First Races fought this evil and failed. Do we really think that we can do better than they did?*



## Chapter 2: The Third Treasure

SHORTLY BEFORE sunset Starman Alice Montaine walked into a small café with her mother and older sister. The restaurant they had chosen to dine at that evening was *Freeman's*, an older establishment that was well-known for its fine cuisine. The Montaine family had been there many times over the past twenty years; the food was excellent and the establishment was only a few blocks from their apartment.

Tonight they had chosen to sit outside and enjoy the beautiful evening. The rain the weather forecaster had promised never materialized, and the evening was warm and pleasant. An Ahmanyan waitress seated the party of three and then left to get their drinks.

“So how has everything been going, Mom?” Alice asked.

“Oh, just fine, dear,” her mother replied. Isabella Montaine put her purse under her seat and then picked up her menu. “You know, I think I’ll have the shrimp scampi tonight. They do have such excellent shrimp.”

“They don’t serve shrimp here,” Amanda said. “This is Ahmanya. The only planet that has shrimp is Earth.”

“Oh, that’s right,” her mom said. “Pardon me. It’s been so long since I’ve been here that I had forgotten. We almost never go out to dinner anymore.”

“I’ve been busy,” Alice said, defending herself. “Besides, I don’t see Dad anywhere.”

Amanda kicked her sister under the table. “So, um, tell me, sis. How did your meeting go this morning?”

Her mother looked up from her menu. "You had a meeting today? How exciting! It was with one of your friends, I suppose?"

Amanda shook her head. "It was with Caedmon Starlight, mother. We talked about a planet I just discovered."

"That's nice, dear. I saw in the news just the other day where another one of your Starman friends discovered a planet. I think this one had rings or something. You Starmen do seem to stay pretty busy! Always way out there, far away, doing things."

"Somebody has to do it," Alice replied. "There are a lot of dangers out in deep space. I'd rather fight them on their home planet than let them invade Eagle City and fight them here."

"It's been a long time since Eagle City was invaded," her mother pointed out. She set her menu down and looked around for their waitress. "That Zip Foster made short work of the last guy that invaded our home. He was really something."

"You're *all* really something," Amanda said. "I for one can't believe I have a Starman as a sister! It's like being related to David Livingston. I imagine you hacking your way through the jungles with a machete, keeping an eye out for alien headhunters. That's *got* to be amazing."

Alice laughed. "Fortunately it's usually not *that* exciting. I'm very fond of my head. I hope to keep it for many years to come."

A minute later their waitress returned to their table and set down their drinks. After taking their orders she gathered up the menus and left.

"So tell me a little more about what you've been doing," Amanda said. "You told me this morning that you discovered a lost planet of the First Races. What is the significance of that?"

Amanda sighed. "It's kind of complicated. The short version is that I believe the planet contains the weapon that the Lucians used to defeat the First Races. I think that someone else is after that weapon and I'm trying to stop them from getting it. If that weapon falls into the wrong hands – "

"– then we'll be in a lot of trouble," Amanda replied. "Man. That does sound important."

"What did Caedmon Starlight have to say about it?" her

mother asked. "Is he going to send all the king's horses and all the king's men to take care of it? I suppose you would feel better then, wouldn't you, dear?"

Alice hesitated. "Well, he's not going to do anything just yet. He thinks I should do a little more research before he asks King Izmaka for permission to use Tharsos."

"You wanted to use *Tharsos*?" Amanda asked. "Wow. What did you want to use it for?"

"To battle aliens, of course," her mom replied dismissively. "Or maybe it was ghosts. But fortunately Caedmon is a wise man. I always did like him! He's just like his father Richard – he's got a good head on his shoulders. He was never one to be frightened by imaginary monsters."

Alice sighed. *Please let this dinner be over soon*, she muttered. *This was such a mistake. I've got to start coming home less often.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Late that night Alice left the restaurant and headed back to the spaceport. *This has just not been my day. But I guess there's always tomorrow. Well, unless someone comes along and eats tomorrow for breakfast. That's always a possibility.*

After taking the subway back to the spaceport she decided to walk to her starship instead of taking one of the speedy electric vehicles. Alice loved taking long walks in the warm Ahmanyen evenings and wanted to enjoy it as long as possible. When she at last made it to her ship's parking space, however, she was treated with a rude surprise.

"Rachel!" she screamed. "What have they done to you?"

A holographic figure materialized in front of Alice. "Is there a problem?" Rachel asked.

"A problem!" Alice shrieked. "I'll say there's a problem! Your hull plating has been dismantled. Your engines are lying in pieces all over the ground! What happened to you?"

"I am simply undergoing routine maintenance," Rachel

explained calmly. "My hull has received a lot of damage over the past six years and it is time for an upgrade. The plating has been removed so it can be replaced with a much stronger, more durable alloy. And I am far overdue for an engine rebuild."

"Oh my goodness," Alice said. "This is awful. Just awful! And what happens if it rains? Your top three decks are all exposed to the weather!"

"I am quite capable of taking care of myself. In the event of inclement weather I can simply extend a force field to keep out the precipitation. It is not a problem."

"But where is everybody? When I left this morning there was a small army of people here! It looks like they took you apart and then went home."

Rachel nodded. "It is quite late, Alice. They put in their day's work and went home to be with their families. You did not request a rush job so I saw no need to request overtime. I have seen their schedule and have no doubt they will be done by the first of November as promised."

"I guess," Alice said sourly. "But where are the security guards? Your parts are lying everywhere! What's to stop someone from stealing them?"

"Once again, I am quite capable of taking care of myself. My weapon systems have not been dismantled. In the event that a prowler decides to steal me or my parts he will discover that I am not as defenseless as I look. I might remind you that in the past ten years no one has successfully stolen an AI-equipped starship. We are a breed apart."

"I just don't like this," Alice said. "I can't believe how lax the spaceport's security is! I want to see some human guards out here, Rachel. What happens if all the computers get disabled? You've got enough armaments to wipe out a continent and yet apparently no one sees anything wrong with leaving you unguarded. Have we all lost our minds? Have we become senile in our old age?"

"Is there a problem?" Rachel asked. "You are not your usual jovial self. Did your meeting with Caedmon not go well?"

Alice sighed. "No, it didn't go well. In fact it was a total



disaster. No one believes that there are evil things lurking in the dark places of space. Nobody thinks that we just might be in terrible danger. No one sees any need to prepare for the worst. It's up to me to save these people from themselves and I have no idea how I'm going to do it."

"So Caedmon Starlight did not grant you permission to use Tharsos, then," Rachel replied.

"No, he did not," Alice growled. "And it looks like I won't be using you, either, for the next week. You're in no shape to go anywhere. That is great. Just great. A perfect way to end a perfect day."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Rachel asked.

Alice looked at the *Raptor* in frustration. She started to say something, but then changed her mind. "I'm sorry, Rachel. I just don't know what to do. I don't know anything right now. What I really need to do is get some sleep but my living quarters are in pieces."

"There are intact rooms on the lower decks," Rachel pointed out.

"Forget it. They'll probably be dismantled tomorrow anyway. I'll just find somewhere else to stay until you get put together again. Then we'll head out to Lemura and do whatever needs to be done."

"Very good," Rachel replied.

"No, it's not very good," Alice said. "But it's all we've got right now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice got in touch with the Ahmanyen branch of Starlight Enterprise and explained that her ship was undergoing maintenance and she had no place to live. They provided her with an apartment in downtown Eagle City and told her that she could stay there as long as she needed. For the next two days she sat in the apartment, trying to come up with a plan. On the third day she went out, borrowed some computer equipment from Starlight

Enterprise, and set up a small lab in her living room.

Two days later she was ready. Alice made her way to the capitol building in Eagle City and went up to the third floor. At precisely ten o'clock in the morning she entered mayor's office. The secretary looked up at her as she entered the room.

"May I help you?" the young man asked.

"I have an appointment to see Mayor Seaton," Alice explained.

"Of course. Your name, please?"

"Starman Alice Montaine."

The young man scanned the holoscreen in front of him. "I see you are right on time, ma'am. Please go on in! The mayor is expecting you."

Alice smiled and walked through the double-doors behind the secretary's desk. Inside was the small, comfortable office the mayor. Starman Mark Seaton had been the mayor of Eagle City for the past ten years, and was now in his third and final term. After the fall of the Xenobots Mark had dedicated his life to working with the Ahmanyans and rebuilding their shattered home. He was highly respected by everyone that knew him and had forged close ties with the Ahmanyman people. Mark was nearly eighty years old, but he was still as sharp and alert as he had ever been. Under his leadership Eagle City had flourished.

When Alice walked into the room she saw that the mayor was not seated at his desk. The back wall of his office was a solid piece of glass, and Mark was standing in front of that window gazing down upon the city below. The mayor turned around when he heard Alice enter, and his face lit up in a warm smile when he saw her uniform.

"You must be Starman Montaine!" he said. He quickly walked over and shook her hand, and then offered her a seat. "I hope you don't mind if I stand. I never was one to sit down when there was work that needed to be done."

"Um, not at all, sir," Alice said. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I know you are a busy man."

"Not at all," Mark said graciously. "I've heard a lot about you

lately, Miss Montaine. Caedmon tells me you've been doing some first-class research! I'm quite interested in this new planet you just discovered."

Alice's eyes widened. "I had no idea you were familiar with my work! I'm really not well-known, sir."

Mark laughed. "I may not explore the galaxy the way I used to, but I'm still a Starman and I try to keep tabs on what my fellow Starmen are doing. The discoveries you've made on Lemura are going to rewrite a lot of history books. I can only imagine what Joe's response is going to be when he gets your report."

Alice blushed. "Well, thank you, sir. That is partly why I wanted to see you. I'm a bit concerned about the implications of my discovery."

"You said you wanted to see me about security," Mark said slowly. "I'm guessing this has something to do with the Eight Treasures?"

"That's part of it," Alice agreed. "As you know, in the Ahmanyen Museum of Natural History are all eight of the famous Eight Treasures. Now, I understand that they are thousands of years old and are great relics of the Ahmanyen past. I also understand how generous it was for the Ahmanyens to loan them to a museum right here in Eagle City. But somebody out there is trying to break their way into that chamber on Lemura. Do you know what they could do with the knowledge hidden inside those relics?"

"You're concerned about the Third Treasure – the sum total of all Ahmanyen scientific knowledge," Mark said.

"Exactly. The *entire* wealth of Ahmanyen knowledge is contained within that small device. Do you know what kind of dangerous secrets that includes? If ever there was a tool to use to get inside that chamber that would be it. And it's laying right out in the open."

"You know, it has been there for more than a decade now and so far no one has even tried to take it. The Ahmanyens have put a lot of effort into guarding it. It would not be an easy thing to

steal.”

“But things are different now,” Alice pointed out. “Somebody – some shadowy being that has eluded our every attempt to locate – knows what is in that chamber. Somebody is trying to find a way in. And that Third Treasure is immensely famous. It defies belief to think that he's not going to try to steal it. It would be the perfect tool.”

“I don't disagree,” Mark said. “You make a good case. So what are you suggesting?”

“Well,” Alice said slowly, “I don't mean to nitpick, but security in Eagle City is not very tight. I had to hound the spaceport's chief of security for two days before he agreed to post armed, human guards around the *Raptor*. He just didn't see a need – he thought the electronic security systems were enough to protect her.”

“I heard about that,” Mark replied, grinning. “You were right, by the way. We've come to depend far too much on technology. It's easy to get comfortable when there are no apparent signs of danger.”

“Exactly. So what I'd like to do is perform a security audit at the museum. I'd like to make sure that the Third Treasure really *is* secure. And it might also be nice to check the rest of the infrastructure in this city – the power plants, the communication centers, and so forth.”

“You believe a war is coming and that we're not ready to fight,” Mark said.

“That's exactly what I believe,” Alice agreed. “If a threat like the Xenobots were to invade this planet today can you honestly tell me we would be ready?”

Mark said nothing as he turned around and faced the window. He looked out over the city below. Far below he saw vehicles driving in the streets, and tiny figures going about their lives. A troubled look appeared on his face. “I'll let the appropriate personnel know that you're coming,” he said at last. “As a Starman you already have all the security clearance you need, but I'll make sure you get cooperation as well. How long do you think

the audit will take?"

"Give me three days, sir. On the third day I'll come back and let you know what I have found."

"Would you be willing to come to my house and have dinner with me that evening, maybe around seven?" Mark asked. "My wife Stenafi is an excellent cook. I think I can promise you a relaxing night of fine cuisine."

Alice smiled. "It would be an honor, sir. Speaking of your family, how is your daughter doing?"

Mark smiled. "Dianda is doing well. Did you know that she is now a professor at Starlight Academy? She's teaching a class on Ahmanyen culture and language."

"She must have started teaching after I graduated!" Alice remarked. "I would have loved to have had her as a professor."

Alice said goodbye to the mayor and left his office, feeling very satisfied. *I've got three days*, she thought to herself. *I can do this!*

\* \* \* \* \*

That afternoon she made her way to the Ahmanyen Museum of Natural History, where she was quickly ushered into the security office. A middle-aged gentleman dressed in a neat black suit was there to greet her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Mountain!" the man said. "My name is Ralph Paddington. I'm the head of security here at the museum. It's quite a job, to be sure, but there's nothing else like it!"

"The name is *Montaine*," Alice said. "Not mountain. There's a big difference."

"Right – my apologies." Ralph waved his arm around, and Alice noticed that a bewildering array of holoscreens were crowded into every nook and cranny of the room. "As you can see, our quarters here are a bit tight but we've spared no expense! The mayor told me you would be by to check on things, and I can assure you that you will find everything up to par! We run a tight

ship here, Miss Mountain.”

“That's *Starman* to you,” Alice said, slightly irritated. “Do you see the red suit? And the logo printed on the sleeve? I'm not just another random security consultant. I'm here to make sure you don't inadvertently help someone destroy all of mankind.”

“Right,” Ralph said, nodding. “Good call. So let me explain what we've got going on here.”

“I have a much better idea,” Alice interrupted. “Why don't you let *me* tell *you* what is going on.” She took a small silver disc out of her pocket, walked over to a nearby computer, and slid it inside.

“What are you doing?” Ralph asked in alarm. “Is that safe? Are you sure you should be doing that? I haven't authorized that piece of equipment! I can't be held liable for this.”

Alice held up a hand and motioned for the guard to be quiet. “That disc is a little piece of hardware that I put together. It is going to analyze your systems and tell me if they're any good.”

“How can it possibly know?” Ralph asked. “Are you sure you know what you're doing?”

Alice sighed. “You do realize that Starlight Enterprise has an entire division dedicated to artificial intelligence, don't you? They are *quite* good at this sort of thing. It will take Bob just a few moments to analyze your systems and form a conclusion.”

“Who's Bob?”

“The name of the AI subprogram I'm using, of course,” Alice explained. “Now stop fidgeting. It looks like he's already started work.”

Alice motioned to one of the holoscreens, where a small window had appeared. As the information in the window changed Alice explained to Ralph what portion of their system the AI program was currently analyzing. After an hour's work Alice removed the disc and placed it back into her pocket.

Ralph was enthusiastic. “I don't know how you do it, miss, but that was fantastic! Bob proved exactly what I was telling you. Every square inch of this museum is covered! You can't beam in, sneak in, or drive in. In particular, the security around the Third

Treasure is remarkable. Just remarkable! You can't even get *near* that room without setting off a half-dozen alarms. By the time you even got close you would be caught. And when it comes to trying to get it out of that case, well, you've got your work cut out for you! That case is made of solid, transparent atomeron. It is scientifically impossible to break that substance! You've got to beam it out, and no transporter can beam anything in and out of the museum grounds. We've got a jammer that can stop anything. Anything! I guarantee it."

Alice sighed. "Atomeron is not completely impregnable, just difficult. But you're missing the point. This is the same situation I found at the spaceport. Were all of you guys trained at the same school or something? Tell me. What happens if your computer systems go down?"

"Computer systems can go down?" Ralph asked in amazement. "Are you serious? When has that ever happened?"

Alice sighed. "You are using computers to monitor your hallways, your video feeds, and your alarms. You're even using computers to call the police and immobilize the thief! If something ever happened to your computers then it's all over. Anyone could walk in here and rob you blind and you wouldn't know the difference."

"But that's impossible!" Ralph protested. "How could that happen?"

"In a million different ways," Alice said. "They could be blown up. Or hit with some sort of electromagnetic weapon that fried their circuits. Or the power could fail. Or anything. It's happened before, you know."

"Huh," Ralph said. "I never thought of that. Maybe you've got something there, Miss Mountain."

"I'll let you give it some thought," Alice said wearily. "I've got three more places to audit, and I bet I know what I'll find. I'll be in touch."

With that, she bade the guard goodbye and headed out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the next two days Alice performed the same security audit at the Eagle City power station, the city's primary communications center, and the city's military installation. At each location the AI program she had written analyzed their systems and found the same basic weakness – a total dependence upon computer hardware to provide security. The only group that would not be completely defenseless in the event of a failure was the military, and even they would be operating completely blind.

Alice spent the morning of the third day writing her report. She turned it in to the mayor's office at noon that day, and that evening she went to his residence. The Seaton family lived in a large, rambling home on the outskirts of Eagle City. The estate was a comfortable one that looked much like the others in the neighborhood. There was nothing remarkable that made it obvious a Starman lived there. As Mark personally greeted her at the door and ushered her inside she could easily believe that the house had been lived in for a generation and thoroughly enjoyed. *It just feels comfortable in here*, Alice thought, as she took a seat in the spacious den. A fire gently burned in the fireplace, bathing the room in a soft orange glow. Mark and Alice were soon deep in conversation. *I like it here. It's not at all stuffy. Mark really seems like just a regular guy.*

"I really want to thank you for putting together that report," Mark was saying. "I've done some homework of my own and can confirm that what you found is just the tip of the iceberg. We've become very dependent upon machines for just about everything. They are our weak point."

"Please don't misunderstand me," Alice said. "Technology can be a great thing. But as a society we've set ourselves up for some real problems. It wouldn't take very much for someone with skill and a little knowledge to bring everything crashing down."

"But it won't be that way for long," Mark promised. "I've already called a meeting next week. I'm going to personally see to it that we take steps to protect ourselves. History is not going to



repeat itself this time.”

Stenafi Seaton, Mark's wife, stepped into the den. She was an Ahmanyen, and had been Mark's wife for four decades. Alice had never met the tall, graceful woman before and was immediately impressed. *She has such an unusual combination of grace and strength*, she thought. *I can see why she would be a good match for Mark.*

“Yes, my love?” Mark asked.

“Dinner is ready,” she replied simply.

“Then we won't keep you waiting,” Mark said. He led Alice to the dining room, where the three of them sat at the table.

Alice was impressed at the array of food that was in front of her. She saw a variety of Ahmanyen vegetables, all tastefully prepared, and something she did not expect to see – freshly baked bread. Alice had learned from experience that baking good bread was almost impossible in the gravity and atmospheric conditions of Ahmanyen, and was impressed that Stenafi had mastered that skill. “Excuse me, ma'am, but am I to understand that you cooked all of this yourself?”

“It is something I enjoy doing,” Stenafi said quietly.

“When she's not battling aliens,” Mark teased. “You should see her in battle. She is quite formidable.”

Stenafi smiled at her husband. Alice had heard stories about the mayor's wife and had no trouble believing that she could be a formidable opponent. Alice opened her mouth to say something when she suddenly heard a noise in the distance.

Mark immediately froze. “Did anyone else hear that?”

“I did,” Alice said. “It sounded like – ”

At that moment the power went out. The room became completely dark.

“– *an explosion*,” Stenafi finished.



## Chapter 3: Chasing a Shadow

STARMAN ALICE Montaine calmly reached inside her red suit and pulled out a small, thin flashlight. She pressed a button on its side and the flashlight emitted a powerful beam of white light. The light was so bright that it illuminated the far wall with a blinding glare and forced the room's occupants to shield their eyes. After adjusting the intensity of the light she quickly scanned the room.

“Sorry about that,” Alice said. “I’m used to making my way through very large, dark rooms on alien planets, so I had the intensity turned up a bit higher than normal. Is everyone ok?”

“So far,” Mark replied. He backed away from the dining room table and walked over to his wife's side. “But I’m going to guess that someone, somewhere, is in trouble.”

“What just happened?” Stenafi asked.

“Let's go outside and see,” Mark replied.

“But how do you know it's safe?” Alice asked.

“I don't,” Mark replied simply. “But there's one way to find out.”

Alice handed him the flashlight and he led the way out of the house and into the yard. Once they were outside Alice was struck by the stillness of the Ahmanyen night. *I can't believe how dark it is*, she thought to herself. There were no lights in any of the neighboring houses, and all of the streetlights were dead. Normally the glow from Eagle City would be easy to spot but tonight there was only darkness. Overhead the stars shone brightly but there was no appreciable moonlight.

"It's too quiet," Alice said at last. "Something is definitely wrong."

"I'd say the city has lost power," Mark said thoughtfully. "There's no telling how long the blackout will last. I can't recall the last time we had a city-wide power failure. Something pretty big must have happened."

Stenafi spoke up. "Can you go downstairs and start the generator? While you're doing that I'll go to the panic room and will find out what has occurred."

"Of course, dear," Mark said calmly. "Alice, do you have another flashlight?"

"Um, yes, I do carry a spare," Alice said. "Wandering through dark places with just one light source is a terrible idea, you know." She took her backup flashlight out of another suit pocket and handed it to Mark's wife, who turned it on and walked back into the house.

After making a quick check of the grounds to make sure nothing was out of place Mark walked into the house and down to the basement. Alice followed behind him. "I don't mean to be rude, sir, but am I to understand that you have a generator?"

"Once a Starman, always a Starman!" Mark quipped. "One gets used to always being prepared for the worst. Most of the time it makes no difference, but every now and then it makes all the difference in the world."

The basement of Mark's house was filled with tools, boxes, and a lifetime's worth of clutter. Mark carefully threaded his way past stacks of old magazines to a large object tucked away in the corner. The machine was roughly the size of a large crate and was partially covered with an old white sheet. Mark removed the sheet and gazed at the dusty generator fondly. "This ought to do the trick. I just hope it starts – I haven't fired it up in a while."

Alice stared at the generator and frowned. She could see that the battered device was long past its prime and at least as old as she was. "You know, I don't think I recognize that model. Is that really a portable fusion reactor?"

Mark laughed. "Goodness no! Those are a whole lot larger –

and far more expensive. Besides, I just need to power my house, not the entire city. No, this just runs on hydrogen. It's based on something Montezuma Vly built for me many years ago. It should be able to power the house for at least a couple days. Hopefully by then the crisis will be past."

The mayor dusted a small panel on the front of a generator and pressed a grimy blue button. The panel came to life, emitting a faint green glow. Mark tapped a series of commands into the panel and the machine began humming. "Looks like it's about time to refuel!" Mark commented. "But it should last long enough."

"Long enough for what?" Alice asked.

"Long enough to see what's going on," Mark replied. "I think the machine's online now. Can you crawl over that junk and throw the fourth switch on the wall over there?"

Alice peered at it through the darkness. "You mean the one with the red tag on it?"

"That's the one!" Mark affirmed.

Alice gently crawled over the pile of junk that was stacked in the corner. She made her way over a large mattress, and then past a broken table and a girl's bicycle. When she finally reached the far wall Alice flipped the switch. Immediately the basement filled with light!

Mark smiled. "Thanks. Now let's go upstairs and see what my wife has found. Her equipment should be running now that we've got power."

Alice extracted herself from the corner and followed Mark back upstairs. "So you have an emergency response center right here at the house?"

"Not really, but you've got the right idea. As the mayor I try to keep an eye on how our fair city is doing. I'm not as young as I used to be, though, so I've put together a few tools to give me an edge. The system my wife and I designed isn't really tied into anything official, so I'm hoping whatever brought down the city will not have affected us. If nothing else we should at least be able to find out if we're being attacked."

Alice nodded and followed Mark to a small room in the back of the house. To her surprise she saw that a wooden panel in the wall of the den had slid away, revealing a small, concealed room. “Very nice,” she commented.

“I built that myself, you know. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Mark entered the room first and Alice followed. Stenafi was already seated in front of a large holoscreen. Mark walked up behind her and peered over her shoulder. “So what have you found, my dear?”

“The good news is that we do not appear to be under attack,” she said quietly. “I don't see any signs of bombing or unusual air traffic. However, it does look like much of the city has lost power. The system tells me that there was an explosion at the power plant, and the resulting damage has apparently forced it offline and taken out a large portion of the power grid. I have not been able to reach anyone at the plant so I do not know what caused the explosion.”

“That's amazing!” Alice said. “Where are you getting all of this information?”

“From orbital satellites,” Stenafi explained. “Years ago Starlight Enterprise put a constellation of defense satellites in orbit. They are still there, although they are beginning to age. They, of course, were not affected by the outage.”

“At least the city's defense shield is still up,” Mark said. “Nothing can beam in or out of the city. That's still secure, at least.”

“But how is that possible?” Alice asked. “I thought the power plant was offline!”

“The shield is actually on a separate power grid,” Mark explained. “It has its own source of energy. When King Izmaka gave that system to us we decided to isolate it in case something like this happened.”

“A wise precaution,” Stenafi commented.

“So if anyone wanted to beam out of the city without being detected they'd have to go to the spaceport and use one of the

transporters there,” Alice said thoughtfully.

“Right,” Mark replied. “The spaceport is beyond the city limits. Based on the data on this screen it doesn't look like it's lost power.”

“They could also use the trains,” Stenafi pointed out. “Grand Central Terminal has its own power supply as well, which it uses to power the tracks and the wormholes that connect it to distant planets.”

“But that is easily secured, right?” Alice asked. “I mean, I've got to think that a maglev station is far easier to lock down than a giant spaceport with thousands of aircraft constantly coming and going.”

“True,” Mark said slowly. “What are you thinking, Alice?”

“The Ahmanyen museum is located downtown,” Alice replied. “It's without power. That means that, at this very moment, nothing is guarding the Third Treasure. That is not a good thing.”

Mark turned to Stenafi. “Can you reach the police or the military base?”

“Not over the normal communication channels,” Stenafi replied, as she worked at the screen. “There appears to be something wrong with the communications links. But I am trying to route a message through our satellites. I should be able to make contact soon.”

Alice spoke up. “Maybe all of this is just a coincidence, but I have a hunch that it's not. I think it's very possible that whatever was trying to access that chamber on Lemura has followed me here. These system failures may be the result of sabotage. If that's the case then we're in big trouble.”

“What do you propose to do?” Mark asked.

“I'm going to go to the museum and see what's going on,” Alice replied. “It may already be too late to stop the theft, but I've got to find out.”

“I will remain here and coordinate the efforts,” Mark replied. “When we can reach the military I will have them send soldiers to lock down the spaceport, the train station, and the museum. According to your theory all three are likely targets.”

Stenafi spoke up. “Even if the theft has already occurred we may still have a chance to get it back if we act quickly. The Third Treasure is easy to trace. It gives off a vibrant form of energy that my people have learned to detect over long distances. The signature is almost impossible to hide. If it has been stolen the thief will have to take it off the planet quickly or else we will be able to find it.”

“Wow,” Alice said. “I didn't know that.”

“That's really good news,” Mark said. “Where can we find that detection equipment?”

“I will attempt to contact Imlah Taltahni,” Stenafi replied. “I am sure that someone in our hidden refuge will have the tools we need.”

Alice spoke up. “Not to interrupt, but may I borrow your car? I've really got to get going.”

“Of course,” Mark replied.

“One more thing,” Alice said. She hesitated. “As you know, the *Raptor* was not able to detect the alien being that was on Lemura. It appears to have a very effective cloaking device.”

“True,” Mark said. “If that creature is here then it could prove very difficult to detect.”

Alice nodded. “That's why I would like to even the playing field. My suit does come equipped with an Ahmanyen cloaking device. I realize that the cloak is to only be used in emergencies, but do you have any objection to my using it tonight?”

Mark smiled. “I am not your supervisor, Alice. Do what you think is best.”

“You are my mayor, though,” she pointed out. “Eagle City is my home.”

“You have my full support to do whatever is necessary. But you'd best be going.”

Alice nodded and raced out the door. As she disappeared Mark turned to his wife. “You know, there is one other thing to think about. I wonder if she realizes – ”

“– that she might be the real target?” Stenafi finished. “She is the only other person in the city who has been to Lemura. Yes,



that occurred to me. I just hope she is careful.”

“Me too,” Mark said softly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Ahmanyen Museum of Natural History was sprawled across several city blocks in the western part of Eagle City. The enormous building was constructed out of giant blocks of red stone, all of which had been mined from a nearby quarry. The building was designed by a team of Ahmanyen architects to demonstrate the best that their culture had to offer, and the result was a structure full of beauty and grace. Nowhere could one find a sharp corner or an ugly angle. Everything was symmetrical and elegant, full of curves and color. The building almost looked organic, as if the stone was a living thing that had simply grown out of the ground.

Outside the building that night a dark shadow walked down the street, eying the building carefully. The figure noted with satisfaction that there were no lights to be seen. A few people had left their apartments and were milling about in the streets, but there was no sign of chaos or police officers. The city appeared to be confused but not unduly alarmed. Neighbors were chatting with each other and the laughter of rowdy children could be heard in the distance.

The shadow quietly walked up the giant stairs and over to the museum's entrance. Normally the giant doors were well guarded but it knew that tonight the security systems were dead.

The shadow waited outside the doors. A minute passed, and then other. Finally it happened – a guard inside the building opened the door and stepped outside. As the door began to close behind him the shadow slipped past Ralph Paddington and stepped into the unguarded museum.

Inside the museum was completely dark. There was no one in sight. The shadow had no problem making its way through the vast lobby and to the lower level, where the Eight Treasures were on display. Taking no heed to the exhibits that were around it, the

shadow made its way to the real prize – the transparent case that held the Third Treasure.

The Third Treasure was a crystalline globe roughly three feet in diameter. The semi-transparent sphere pulsed in the darkness, giving off an ever-shifting array of vibrant colors. Through the transparent material one could see complex crystals that appeared to sub-divide into infinity. The pattern was eternally changing. The object almost appeared to be alive, as if it was a living sun.

The Treasure was enclosed in a transparent case made of thick layers of atomeron. Moving quickly, the shadow removed a thin square of metal from the pack it was carrying and unfolded it into a rectangular sheet. With the press of a button the sheet lifted rose up and hovered about two feet off the ground. The shadow then picked up the atomeron case that contained the Treasure and, groaning with effort, gently placed it onto the levitating platform. With the quick push of another button the platform and Treasure disappeared – cloaked, invisible to the eye.

Walking quietly, the shadow pushed the invisible platform toward the door. As it approached the lobby of the museum it saw that a crowd of military officers had formed a line just outside the doors, blocking the exit. It quickly realized that there was no way it could possibly get the platform, as large as it was, through that group of soldiers without being seen.

The shadow paused as it tried to decide what to do next.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside the museum Starman Alice Montaine rushed up the stairs and toward the military officers. As she approached them she turned off the cloaking device on her suit. When she suddenly appeared out of thin air everyone jumped, and soldiers quickly spun around and aimed their weapons at her.

“Oh, it's you!” one of the men said. He approached Alice. “Stand down, men. My name is Colonel Mitchell. Mayor Seaton told us you were on your way. We got here as quickly as we could.”

Ralph Paddington approached Alice with a look of wonder on his face. “Was that a genuine Ahmanyen cloak? Amazing! I've heard of them, of course, but I've never actually seen one. I'm quite impressed.”

“Later,” Alice said curtly. “What is the security situation like? Is anyone inside the museum guarding the treasure?”

“I'm not sure, ma'am – we just got here,” the colonel replied. “You're the head of security at the museum, Ralph. What's going on? Is anyone inside?”

“No, no, the building is quite empty,” Ralph explained. “I wouldn't even be here myself but I ended up working late! I had an exhibit to finish. But patrols? Oh no. We don't have anyone that actually patrols inside. We have machines for that. They're much more effective.”

“Then let's get moving!” Alice barked. “We didn't come here to stare at each other. Colonel, if you could have some of your men join me I'd like to go inside and see what is going on. I'm hoping it's not too late.”

Colonel Mitchell nodded. “Winters – Torres – McKinney – go with the Starman. The rest of us will set up a perimeter outside.”

“I think I'll stay out here,” Ralph said nervously. “You can let me know what you find. I'm allergic to hostile aliens, you know. It runs in the family.”

Alice nodded and led the team of soldiers through the front door and into the museum. It was pitch black inside. The Starman reached inside her suit and realized that she had given away both of her flashlights.

“Does anyone have a light?” she asked.

All three soldiers nodded. “What are your orders?” Winters asked.

Alice stopped to think. “The Third Treasure is in the basement. Have your lights out and be scanning in all directions. Be alert for anything unusual and suspicious. But don't do *anything* that could destroy the treasure.”

After their flashlights had been turned on Alice led the soldiers downstairs to the exhibit that housed the Eight Treasures.

Starting at the beginning of the room, the soldiers performed a thorough examination of the entire exhibit. It did not take long to verify that the Third Treasure was definitely missing.

“Are any of the other treasures taken?” Alice asked sharply. A quick search revealed that they were all intact. Alice touched a button on her suit and a small holoscreen appeared in the air. She used it to quickly established a direct line of communication to the suit radio that Colonel Mitchell was carrying.

“The Third Treasure is gone,” Alice reported. “We’re too late.”

“Then we will switch to recovery,” Colonel Mitchell replied. “There is a chance the Treasure might still be on this planet. Given its size and the difficulties involved in transporting it the thief may have hidden it somewhere else in the museum, or perhaps stashed it nearby. I’ll alert the mayor and will have my men conduct a thorough search of the grounds. If the Treasure is still here we’ll find it.”

“Excellent,” Alice said. “Since you have this area covered I’m going to head to the spaceport and see what I can do there. If the thief is trying to leave town in a hurry there’s a good chance that’s where he will go.”

“I’ll let the mayor know,” Colonel Mitchell replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alice pushed the mayor’s electric car to the limit and managed to reach the spaceport in less than five minutes. *I’m so glad the museum and the spaceport are on the same side of town*, she thought to herself. *Trying to fight through traffic in the dark would have been a nightmare.*

It did not take her long to locate the security forces that Mark Seaton had dispatched. By the time she arrived a large group of soldiers had already formed a perimeter around the spaceport. Several armored tanks were already in place at the various entrances to the spaceport, and Alice saw more of them patrolling the runways. There were even space fighters patrolling the air.

*Wow, that was fast,* she thought.

Alice walked up to the perimeter and spoke to the nearest soldier. "I'm Starman Alice Montaine. Who is charge of this group?"

"General Bradley," an officer replied. He pointed in the direction of the long runways that crisscrossed the spaceport. "He's over there."

Alice crossed the perimeter and jogged over to the general. "What's the situation?" she asked.

The general looked at her and frowned. "First, ma'am, may I see your credentials?"

"Of course," Alice replied. She removed a small piece of plastic from the inside of her suit and handed it to the general. He held it up and looked through it. The piece of plastic looked blank but a human touch immediately brought it to life, revealing the seal of Starlight Enterprise and identifying Alice as a Starman.

General Bradley nodded in satisfaction and handed the card back to her. "The mayor told me you would be coming but I had to make sure, of course. Everything has been locked down tight. We've completely shut down the spaceport. For the past five minutes no ships have landed or left and we're going to keep it that way."

"Have you seen any signs of anyone?" Alice asked.

"We have not," the general replied. "There are a lot of people here, of course, and there is a lot of ground to cover. There is also a fair amount of confusion among the passengers that are stranded in the spaceport, but that is to be expected. But we have not seen anything that looked suspicious. My men have already started searching the grounds. If the intruder escapes it will not be through this spaceport."

The general was interrupted by a loud roar. He turned around just in time to see an enormous red starship launch off the ground and soar off into the sky at a breakneck pace. By the amount of noise it was making it was clear that the ship had just made an emergency takeoff and was attempting to reach its maximum speed in a very short amount of time. The space fighters flying

overhead immediately banked to intercept the starship, but it was already moving far too fast for them to catch.

General Bradley immediately snapped to life. “Who authorized that ship to leave? No one is allowed to take off! That means *no one*! Whose ship is that?”

Alice stared at it, open-mouthed. “That's my ship, general – it's the *Raptor*. It's just been stolen!”

## Chapter 4: Lily

ALICE WAS furious. “How could my ship have *possibly* been stolen? Was nobody guarding it?”

General Bradley shook his head. “We’ve got a whole army out there, Starman. There is no way anyone could have gotten past my men. It is not possible. We would have seen them long before they reached the airfield.”

“Apparently not,” Alice snapped. By now her starship was almost out of sight. “*Somebody* is on board my ship, and I am not happy about it. And I have no doubt that the thief has the Third Treasure with him. So much for containment!”

“Our space fighters are already on her tail,” the general said. “Once they are in range they will force her down. They are probably already closing the gap.”

Alice shook her head. “I very much doubt it, sir. The *Raptor* is easily the fastest ship on the planet, and her engines had just been completely rebuilt. As soon as it gets into space I bet it’ll engage its FTL drive and be gone. Do you really think those dinky fighters can possibly catch it then? I mean, c’mon! Your ships were *already in the air* and the *Raptor* still passed them by so quickly that they might as well have been motionless. It’s already too late.”

The general frowned. “One way or another we will get back your ship. The thief has already made a critical error. Starman-class ships come equipped with extensive security measures and are easy to locate. The armed forces of Ahmanya most certainly has starships that are capable of tracking it down and overtaking

it, no matter where it might be hiding.”

“Fine,” Alice said. “And while you're filling out the paperwork to get all that done I'm going to commandeer that freighter over there and chase it myself. If I can contact the AI on board my ship then maybe I can shut the whole thing down.”

General Bradley looked at her in surprise. “You want to requisition the *Molly*? Whatever for? That oversized piece of junk is used to carry a half-million tons of lima beans between Earth and Mars. It's like sending a garbage truck to chase down a race car.”

“Depends on how you look at it,” Alice replied. “Right now it doesn't have a half-million tons of yucky vegetables on board. Do you know how fast that class of freighter can go when it's empty? All that power would be pushing an almost negligible amount of metal. I bet the result is really something.”

“That ship is fifteen hundred feet long!” the general exclaimed. “Do you know anything at all about flying cargo vessels?”

“Let's have this conversation later, shall we? Just let the Incorporated Bean Farm people know that I'll get their ship back to them as soon as possible.” With that, Alice took off running across the spaceport.

The general sighed. “Kids these days. I don't know what the world is coming to. She's actually going to give chase in an *unarmed bean freighter*. What, exactly, is she going to do when she overtakes the *Raptor* – wink at it? Charm it back home with her winsome ways?” He shook his head, and then ordered one of his men to let the IBF know what had happened to their ship. When that was done he sighed. “Enough of that. Let's get some *real* pursuit ships into space, shall we?”

Alice quickly made her way to the enormous freighter, and then climbed the long ladder that led up to the ship's airlock. Once on board she made her way to the bridge, where she found a couple crewmen lounging around. Alice told them that there was a national security emergency and that she had authorization from



the military to commandeer their vessel. The crewmen grumbled but eventually cleared out, leaving her alone on the *Molly*.

After they had left the ship Alice removed a small silver disc from one of her suit pockets and placed it into the bridge's navigation terminal. A moment later the main viewscreen came to life. On the screen a picture of a young man appeared. Alice sighed. *You're not nearly as advanced as Rachel, but you'll have to do. Let's get this over with.*

Aloud she said "Bob, get us out of here as fast as possible. Use the emergency liftoff sequence to get us into space. Once we have left the planet I want you to locate the ship that is broadcasting this signal and catch up with it. Do whatever is necessary to overtake it." As Bob fired up the massive engines Alice gave him the information he needed. The *Molly* slowly lumbered off the ground, but once it was in the air it gradually started to pick up speed.

Once they were in space and had a lock on the remote vessel Alice spoke up again. "There is one more thing. I need you to contact General Bradley on this frequency and let him know that we've got a lock on the *Raptor*. Tell him to follow us, and that if my math is correct we should be able to knock it out of hyperspace in about thirty minutes."

Alice looked at the holoscreen and saw that the gap between her and their quarry was starting to close. *I've got a bit of work to do before we catch up with you*, she thought to herself. *This is the tricky part.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The David Foster Spaceport was in a state of utter chaos.irate passengers were forming long lines in front of the ticket booths, demanding to know when they would be able to get to their destinations. Other passengers milled around, not allowed to leave the spaceport but not knowing where else to go. Little children glued themselves to the windows and watched in fascination as tanks rumbled over the runways, looking for an

intruder that had apparently just stolen one of the fastest ships in space. News cameras recorded both the chaos and the the epic chase and broadcast it live for all of civilization to see.

In the sub-basement of the spaceport, far away from the agitated masses of humanity, was a large suite reserved only for employees of Stryker Transportation. The suite was a quiet, out-of-the-way work environment for the small team of people that kept the spaceport's wormhole transporters functioning. In the heart of this sanctuary Jack Rossman was trying to calm down his wife Lily. The two of them had been married for only three weeks, and were just about to go out for the evening when the army closed down the spaceport.

"I can't believe this is happening!" Lily repeated. "I just can't believe it. I told you not to work late! And now look what's happened."

"It was only an extra half-hour!" Jack protested. "I didn't know that aliens were going to pick this evening to invade. It's not like that happens all the time."

"But the fact is if you'd left on time tonight we wouldn't be stuck here. We'd be out of this mess, having dinner at the *Lizard's Watering Hole* like civilized beings."

"Probably not, actually," Jack replied. "Didn't the news guy say that the entire city was without power? It's probably just as big a mess out there as it is in here. There just aren't any good places to be tonight, dear."

Lily sighed. "Whatever. Any place would beat being cooped up in here."

Jack smiled. The two of them were holed up in the suite's server section, which was a large room that contained the actual hardware that transported people via wormholes. The passengers themselves were received and processed at special terminals upstairs, but the actual machinery was all located in this one room. The transporters did not have to be in the same place as the passengers, a fact that was a constant source of joy to Jack. He enjoyed maintaining the complex equipment and had no desire to get involved with customer relations.

His wife had arrived at the office an hour earlier, intending to go out with Jack. Since he was tied up at work she joined him in the back room and waited impatiently for him to clock out. When the spaceport was locked down, however, there was nothing they could do but stay there and pray that the lockdown ended soon.

Lily turned her attention back to a large holoscreen that was mounted on the wall. Jack had tuned it to a local news station and the two of them had been watching events unfold.

“Do you think they’ll be able to catch the thief that stole the Third Treasure?” Lily asked.

“I doubt it,” Jack replied. “The *Molly* might be fast, but the *Raptor* is a breed apart. All Starlight Enterprise ships are fast, but that one is a Starman-class ship. It’s got features you can’t even imagine.”

“I bet,” Lily replied. “Hey, can’t we just use one of these transporters to beam ourselves out of here? I mean, why not?”

Jack looked at his wife and shook his head. “First of all, individual wormhole transportation is incredibly expensive. That’s why most people travel by trains – the cost is prohibitive for ordinary mortals like you and I. Second, we are *definitely* not allowed to use these things as our own personal toys. If we want to use them then we can buy a ticket like everybody else. That’s company policy.”

“But it’s technically *possible*,” Lily pointed out.

“So is getting fired,” Jack replied. “I’ve only been at this job for six months. It’s a good job and I’m very fond of it! I’d like to keep it a bit longer, if you don’t mind.”

“I suppose,” Lily sighed. “But I’m getting hungry. Isn’t there *something* we can do?”

Jack thought for a moment. “Come to think of it, there are some restaurants upstairs in the concourse. I bet they’re still open. If you wanted I could –”

Jack was interrupted by a flash of light. His blood ran cold. *Somebody just transported directly into this room*, he thought to himself. Jack slowly stood up. He looked around the room but he couldn’t see anyone. He and his wife appeared to be the only two

people around. "Hello? Um, is anyone out there? This area is for employees only."

Lily suddenly let out a shriek! Jack whirled around and saw that behind her an area of complete darkness was slowly materializing. It appeared to have no well-defined shape; it was simply a three-dimensional shadow. It reminded Jack of a black hole. *It's as if a part of spacetime had simply vanished*, he thought.

The shadow spoke. Its voice was very gravely, as if it was coming from far underground. "Which of you works here?"

"I do," Jack said nervously. The voice had unnerved him, and he found it hard to concentrate. "But this area is off-limits."

"Then we will pretend I was never here," the shadow replied. An ill-defined area of blackness reached out from the shadow and handed Jack a piece of paper. "I need you to transport the object at this location into this room."

Jack looked at the coordinates and frowned. He glanced up at a map hanging on the wall. "This is for a location on the west side of town. In fact —" His eyes suddenly widened. "In fact, it's a location within the Ahmanyen museum! Why, you're the thief, aren't you?"

"I would get moving if I were you," the shadow replied. "You don't have much time."

Jack shook his head. "Forget it. I'm not going to help you steal the Third Treasure."

"Then we'll do this the hard way," the shadow said. In a brilliant flash of light Lily disappeared.

Jack couldn't believe his eyes. "My wife! What have you done to her, you fiend? Where have you taken her?"

"That is not your concern. If you want her back then you will do exactly as I say. Failure to fully comply may result in... something unfortunate. And do not try to get cute with the transporter. I have abilities you are not aware of."

Jack swallowed. *This is the worst date night ever*, he thought. *I have got to get Lily back. This can't be happening. Can it? How can this be happening? Why me?*

Jack sat down at his desk and brought up the controls for one

of the wormhole transporters. After placing the unit on manual control he carefully locked onto the foreign object.

Jack frowned. "This isn't going to be easy. The shield is still in place, and that's not an easy thing to override."

"But *you* can override it," the shadow replied. "Stryker Transportation teleports people to locations within the shield all the time as a normal course of business. That is why I came here. You have the tools necessary to reach inside the shield and retrieve my prize."

Jack bit his lip. He knew this was a terrible abuse of his authority, but he felt like he had no choice. *I've got to get Lily back. I've just got to. I can't leave her in the clutches of that monster.* Taking a deep breath, Jack keyed in the necessary information to unlock the shield and allow the transport to take place. After making sure that everything was exactly right he nervously activated the transporter. There was a brilliant flash of light, but nothing appeared.

"I don't understand," Jack said, with panic in his voice. "I know I locked onto something. I know I did! But where is it?"

"It is there," the shadow replied. A moment later an object suddenly popped into view. A large, crystal sphere was sitting in a box on a platform about twenty feet off the ground. Jack couldn't see it very well from his desk but he recognized it immediately. "The Third Treasure," he whispered. "You had it cloaked!"

"Exactly," the shadow replied. "With the cloak engaged no one could see it. When I was unable to get it out of the museum I simply raised it off the floor so the guards would not bump into it and then came back for it later. It was quite simple, really. All I needed was your help. I appreciate your cooperation."

With that, the shadow and the Treasure disappeared in a white flash of light.

Jack screamed. "Wait! No! Don't leave! What about my wife?"

Working quickly, Jack pulled up some additional tools on his holoscreen. Stryker Transportation had a legendary reputation for safety, and had installed state-of-the-art equipment to monitor all

local wormhole activity. In the unlikely event that something went wrong it was able to find out where the errant passenger had accidentally been transported – even if it was not the one that had done the transporting.

Jack pulled up the logs and found the recent transports that the shadow had made. His eyes widened when he realized that it had beamed in from a location in deep space and then beamed out again. Judging by the distance between the entrance and exit points Jack realized that the ship must be in hyperspace.

“I know we can do this,” Jack muttered to himself. “Hang on there, buddy. Let’s get this done.”

As he worked at the console he suddenly noticed something. *Hey, that’s odd! Lily and the shadow beamed onto the same ship, but apparently the Treasure was transported somewhere else.* He thought a moment. *I’m going to go after my wife. The Treasure can wait. All I need to do is get on that ship. I’ll find Lily, make it to the ship’s transporter, and then beam us both back. Won’t take but a minute.*

Jack nervously locked his equipment onto the transporter on board the distant starship. He knew he had to act quickly as the ship was rapidly getting out of range. Jack swallowed. *Here goes nothing,* he thought to himself.

He pressed the button. Instantly he was enveloped in a white flash of light. A moment later he found himself in what appeared to be a large cargo bay. Crates were stacked neatly against the walls, and a large shuttlecraft sat in front of him.

As he started to turn around he suddenly felt something knock him off his feet. Jack slumped to the ground, unconscious.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We’re almost there,” Alice whispered. The Starman was on board the bridge of the *Molly*, in hot pursuit of the *Raptor*. The *Molly* had been chasing the fleeing starship for the past twenty minutes and was beginning to close the distance.

Alice glanced at the holoscreen and saw that a small fleet of

police cruisers were closing in as well. *They're at least five minutes behind me, though*, she thought to herself. Aloud she said "How's it coming, Bob?"

"I have completed the modifications," he said. Alice smiled. Like many modern starships, the *Molly* had claytronic systems – machines that were built out of programmable matter. This was done so that on-board devices could be completely reconfigured in the event that an upgrade became available. Since the very atoms that made up the devices could be changed programmatically it was possible to rebuild all the components of a machine by simply assigning it a new pattern. For ships that spent decades trekking through space this could dramatically minimize downtime and maintenance costs, saving companies enormous amounts of money.

Alice used Bob to programmatically replace some of the ship's machinery with something more useful. *Bean counters are out, and advanced weapon systems are in*, she thought to herself. *This is going to be fun.*

"We are now in range," Bob announced.

"Wonderful," Alice replied. "It's about time, too." The Starman reached over and pressed a button on the holoscreen. Immediately the *Molly* began emitting disruptor waves. Normally the disruptor shield was used to keep vessels from forming wormholes, but with a few modifications it could be turned into a directional weapon that could knock a ship right out of hyperspace.

The weapon was quite effective. Within seconds after the weapon was fired the ship dropped out of space. Alice quickly stopped the pursuit and pulled up beside it. *That ship isn't going anywhere*, she thought to herself. *I bet those engines are completely fried! That's a nasty weapon – powerful, but messy.*

A few minutes later the police cruisers dropped out of hyperspace as well. When the holoscreen said that she had an incoming call Alice accepted the communication. The head of a uniformed police officer appeared on the screen.

"I'm Captain Friday," he said. "That was a nice piece of work

back there! I don't know if we would have been able to catch up to it or not.”

“It wouldn't have mattered,” Alice said, sighing. “Do you realize what we've done?”

The captain shook his head, puzzled. On the screen Alice saw an aide come up to him and whisper something in his ear. His eyes grew large and he double-checked a nearby holoscreen. “Surely not!” he protested.

“I'm afraid so,” Alice sighed. “There's no doubt about it. We've been chasing a decoy, Captain – a small probe cleverly built to give off the same trace signal as the *Raptor*. There's no telling where the real ship is!”



## Chapter 5: Free Fall

JACK ROSSMAN awoke with a start, feeling cold and a little bit sore. He opened his eyes and was surprised that he still couldn't see anything. It took him a moment to realize that the room he was in was pitch black. Jack carefully tried to sit up, but the entire room suddenly shook and he felt himself falling. A moment later he smacked into the tiled floor.

"Ow!" he yelled. "Somebody could have told me I was lying on a table, you know!"

"Is that you, Jack?" a feminine voice called out.

"Lily?" Jack replied.

A moment later the room was flooded with a dim red light. As Jack looked at the machinery that furnished the room he realized where they were. "This is a stasis chamber, Lily! Someone put us in suspended animation."

"Where are you?" she called out. Jack carefully tried to stand up as the room continued to pitch and shake. He finally spotted his wife, who was lying on a stasis table near the end of the room, clutching the sides of the table for dear life. Jack hurried over to the table and gently helped his wife get up.

"Jack!" she exclaimed, hugging him. The room pitched again and Lily held on to him tighter. "What's going on?"

"I think we're on a ship," Jack said uncertainly. "My guess is that something bad is happening. The ship must have lost power, and when the power went out we were released from stasis."

"So where are we?" Lily asked.

"Let's find out," Jack suggested. With his wife holding onto

his arm he carefully made his way toward the only door in the room.

"I have a better idea," Lily said. "Let's try to find a way off this ship. I don't care where we are as long as it's not here."

"That works too," Jack replied.

The two of them made it to the door. Jack carefully opened it and looked around. A long hallway extended to his left and right, but there were no people in sight. Aside from the dim red emergency lights he could see nothing of interest.

"Which way do we go?" Lily whispered.

"I have no idea," Jack said. "So let's just pick a direction and see how it turns out."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Lily replied, as the two of them carefully stepped out into the hallway.

"Me too," Jack answered. "But at least the ship has stopped moving. Maybe our luck is improving."

"It can't get much worse," Lily replied.

As the two walked down the hallway Jack suddenly noticed a dim holoscreen embedded in one of the walls. He walked up to the screen and waved his hand in front of it. The screen feebly came to life. When Jack read the glowing columns of information his eyes widened.

"Look at that," he whispered. "We're on board the *Raptor*!"

"Let's talk about that later," Lily said. "How do we get off?"

Jack frowned. "Let me see if I can pull up a map." He gingerly pressed a button. Immediately the entire ship shook, and they heard a horrible grinding noise coming from somewhere below them. The noise sounded like two massive pieces of metal being forcefully ripped apart. An emergency siren began to sound and a voice spoke over the ship's intercom system. "*There has been a hull breach on decks one and two. Please evacuate the lower decks. There has been a hull breach on decks...*"

Jack immediately jumped back from the panel. "I did not do that! I had *nothing* to do with that. That was totally a coincidence."

"Sure you didn't," Lily replied.

"But it's impossible! I just pushed the button labeled 'Schematics'. How could that *possibly* result in a hull breach?"

"Isn't a hull breach where the ship starts venting air into space?" Lily asked.

"I think so," Jack replied.

"Aren't we on the lower decks?"

"I don't know," Jack said thoughtfully. "We might be."

"Doesn't that seem bad?" Lily asked.

Jack glanced back at the holoscreen. To his relief it was displaying a map of the starship. He studied it, frowning.

"Well?" his wife asked.

"It doesn't have a 'you are here' flag," Jack complained. "Do you have any idea how big this ship is? Trying to find our location –"

He was interrupted by the sound of metal forcefully striking metal. The horrible shriek made them both cover their ears.

"– is getting more important by the second!" Lily screamed. "What is happening?"

"I don't think we want to know," Jack said nervously. He pointed at the screen. "The stasis chamber is right there, so we must be about here. My guess is we're on deck three."

"You mean we're only one deck up from the two levels that are now a vacuum?" Lily shrieked.

"I think so," Jack said.

"So the hull breach could spread and we could die at any moment."

"I don't think hull breaches are contagious," Jack replied.

Lily shook her head and looked at the map. "There. Do you see that? The third door down the hall from us is a stairwell. We can take it up two flights and then down this hallway to a shuttle bay. The map claims there's a shuttlecraft there."

Jack snapped his fingers. "You're right! Now that you mention it I do remember seeing a shuttle. That could work!"

As the two started running down the hallway Lily turned to Jack. "How could you possibly have seen the shuttlecraft? And how did you get here, anyway? And how did *I* get here?"

"Can we talk about that later?" Jack puffed. He yanked open the stairwell door and the two began running upstairs.

"I want answers *now*," Lily replied. "You can talk and run at the same time."

"Ok," Jack shouted. The intercom system overhead was still blaring a warning about a hull breach. "Here's what happened. The black shadow thing kidnapped you and told me that it would kill you if I didn't help it steal the Third Treasure from the museum. However, after I did what it asked the shadow thing disappeared with the Treasure and didn't give you back to me. So I followed it here and was knocked out the moment I got here. I woke up when you did. That's all I know."

"You *stole the Third Treasure*?" Lily shrieked. "Are you totally out of your mind? Do you know what they're going to do to you when we get back home?"

Jack yanked open the stairwell door and the two ran out onto the fifth floor. "Everything that goes on in that room is recorded, Lily. I'm sure the authorities will review the tapes and realize that I had no choice. Surely they won't press charges."

"You hope," Lily replied.

"Which door was it again?" Jack asked.

"Follow me," Lily said. She took Jack's hand and the two ran down one hallway and then another. Lily stopped in front of a door with a sign on it that read 'Shuttle Bay Two'.

"Very nice," Jack replied. He looked at the door and frowned. "Hmmm. I don't see a doorknob anywhere. This looks like some sort of electric airlock door." He tried pressing the airlock controls beside the door but nothing happened.

"Figures," Jack said. "With no power I guess the ship can't open doors."

"Let's be thankful that it's protecting us from our own stupidity," Lily replied. She was standing a few feet away from Jack, looking out a window. "Come take a look at this."

Jack walked over to his wife and peered out. The window offered a beautiful view into the shuttle bay, and Jack gasped when he saw what was on the other side of that door. Half of the

room was simply not there anymore. The entire rear wall and most of the floor was now open to the vacuum of space. Jack could even see part of a planet in the distance. The room was empty.

"Oh boy," Jack said weakly. "This is so not good."

"I'd call that a hull breach on deck five," Lily said.

A moment later the hallway filled with light! The holoscreens embedded in the walls all came to life at once, and a gentle hum could be heard in the distance. The ship's intercom changed its message. *"Normal power has been restored. The ship's computer is now online."*

"Well that's good," Jack replied.

*"This ship is under attack,"* the voice continued. *"Damage reports are being assessed. An emergency alert is still in progress. Please stay in your cabins while I continue to engage the enemy."*

"Ok, so maybe that's not good," Jack said weakly.

Lily grabbed his arm. "Look!" she hissed.

Out the window Jack saw that the scene was starting to change. The planet that they could see through the enormous gashes in the hull was starting to move out of sight. "The ship must be turning," he said.

"I know that, you lunkhead," Lily replied. His wife pointed to the far right and Jack saw that there was another ship in space. He immediately recognized it. "Isn't that the *Molly*?"

"Looks like it," Lily replied. "That must be the ship that we're fighting."

"Oh boy," Jack said. "That's terrible! The news guy said that the *Molly* was an unarmed bean freighter. This ship is going to tear it apart! The Starman doesn't stand a chance."

"You mean there's actually somebody *piloting* the ship out there that is trying to kill us?"

"Alice probably has no idea we're on board," Jack said quickly. "I bet she thinks she's only fighting the evil shadow of doom."

"So who am I supposed to root for?" Lily asked. "Do I want

her ship to get blown up, or ours?”

Jack swallowed nervously. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and the shadow will surrender. That’s always a possibility.”

As they watched they suddenly noticed that a small projectile from the *Molly* was rapidly approaching them. Jack was horrified. “Missiles! That’s not fair. Where did she get missiles? Bean freighters don’t come equipped with missiles!”

“We could have been in stasis for weeks or months,” Lily pointed out. “We have no idea what’s been going on.”

“Oh, we have *some* idea,” Jack replied. “My guess is the evil shadow being is somewhere on board this ship and Alice is engaging it in battle so she can recover the Third Treasure.”

Lily grabbed her husband. “We’re about to be blown to pieces by a warhead, Jack. Can’t you think of anything better to ponder over in the last few moments of your life?”

“Maybe she’ll miss,” Jack said weakly.

As it became clear that they had only seconds left Jack suddenly saw something out of the corner of his eye. “Look!” In an instant something crashed into the *Molly*, causing it to violently explode. They heard no sound but saw a brief flash of fire and then the vessel simply wasn’t there. Pieces of debris were scattered in all directions and began drifting apart in the expanse of space.

Jack freaked out. “Alice was on board that ship! Did you see what just happened?”

At that moment the missile struck the *Raptor*. There was a thunderous explosion and the couple was knocked off their feet. Metal could be heard tearing apart and the entire ship shook from the blast. Within seconds the hallway went dark and the red emergency lights came back on.

When the explosion had subsided Jack looked at his wife. “At least we’re still alive,” he said.

He was interrupted by a voice over the intercom system. “*There have been critical system failures on all decks. Evacuate the ship immediately. Free fall to Lemura is imminent. The ship must be evacuated. There have been critical systems failures...*”

"We're alive *for now*, you mean," Lily said. "Where's Lemura? I've never heard of it."

"My guess is it's a planet we're about to become very familiar with," her husband replied.

Jack ran over to the holoscreen and waved his hand in front of it. When the screen weakly glowed to life he brought up the map again. "Maybe we can stay alive for a bit longer. Look. This is shuttle bay two, right? So surely there's a shuttle bay one somewhere."

"There sure is!" Lily said. "It's right there, on deck one. Or what used to be deck one, before there was a hull breach."

Jack grimaced. "Ok, let's switch to plan B. Do you see the emergency escape pods there on deck five? Maybe they're still intact, and maybe we can take them to the surface."

Lily nodded. "It looks like they're right down the hall from us. Let's go!"

The couple raced down the hall toward the escape pods. "Jack?" Lily said.

"Yes?" her husband replied. He was panting heavily as he tried to keep up with his wife.

"Do you think that evil shadow thing is still on board the ship?"

"I sure hope not," Jack said fervently.

"But if he is, wouldn't he be going to these same escape pods?"

"There are pods on other levels, dear."

"But the bridge is on this level," Lily pointed out. "If I was an evil space being in battle with a Starman that's where I would be headed."

"We'll cross the evil space being bridge when we come to it," Jack replied. They quickly whipped around a corner. "The pods are just down there."

Jack and Lily raced to the spot the map had indicated. To their immense relief they saw five two-man escape pods embedded in the wall. Jack relaxed a bit. "Looks like they're all intact."

Lily opened the door to the first pod and the couple rushed in.

After Lily closed the door behind them Jack powered up the pod. Without hesitating he pressed the Launch button.

With a quick jolt the pod was blasted away from the ship. Through the window Jack could suddenly see a planet loom far below them. He felt the pod begin to turn.

"This is awfully cramped," Lily complained. "I've seen closets bigger than this."

"It's not meant to be a luxury cruiser," Jack said. "All it needs to do is get us from the ship to that planet down there."

"What?" Lily screamed. "You didn't tell me anything about landing on an alien planet! Are you out of your mind?"

"It can't be helped," Jack protested. "These pods don't have a big life support system. There's only enough air in here for a couple hours. We've got to land on the planet. There isn't anything else we can do."

"Look at that thing! Are you sure you want to land on Lemura, or whatever it's called?"

Jack looked on the planet. A horrible feeling crept over him. The planet looked like something out of a nightmare. Deep gray clouds obscured part of the surface, but the part that was exposed was chilling. The ground appeared to be solid black, with patches that glowed an evil blue hue. It was the least inviting world Jack had ever seen. Even looking at Lemura from orbit gave him a bad feeling – and the planet was rapidly drawing closer.

"How do we know we can breathe in that atmosphere?" Lily demanded.

"We don't," Jack said.

"And what happens if it is as toxic as it looks?" she asked.

"Then we die, I guess," he replied.

"This is the worst date night *ever*," she complained. "You are not *ever* going to work late again."

"I think we've got other things to worry about right now," Jack commented.

As the pod continued to fall toward the planet below Jack suddenly caught sight of the *Raptor*. The giant red starship was plummeting toward the planet, but at a much faster rate than their



pod. As it passed by they both got a good look at it.

Jack whistled. "Please don't tell me we were on that ship."

"I'm pretty sure we were," Lily replied.

"I asked you not to tell me!"

The *Raptor* was badly damaged. Much of the hull plating for the lower decks was simply gone, and the plates that were still there had large gashes in them. The ship's wings were mauled and had long scars and gaping holes. *I can't believe we got out of that alive*, Jack thought. *It's a complete ruin now. The insurance company is definitely going to declare that vessel a total loss.*

"What do we do now?" Lily said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Wait, I guess," Jack replied. "Just wait and see what happens next."

"If our luck doesn't start improving I don't *want* to know what happens next."

Jack sighed. "It could be worse, dear. At least we're still alive! And we haven't seen that evil shadow being. That's something."

"I guess you're right," Lily replied. "I just wasn't planning on spending the evening dying on an alien planet."

"Let's just see what happens," Jack said. "One crisis at a time."

For the next hour the couple sat in silence, exchanging only an occasional word. Lemura continued to grow larger. When they at last entered the gray atmosphere and began their landing approach Jack suddenly pointed to a tiny object far below them. "Look at that – and that!"

"What?" Lily asked, squinting.

"The *Raptor* just moved! I mean, it shifted its position. It's falling, but it's controlling its fall. I think it might be trying to land!"

"Do we care?" his wife asked.

"You bet we do. That ship has got all kinds of long-range communications equipment on board. If it lands intact we might be able to call for help."

Lily was aghast. "You mean to tell me that we *can't* call for help using this pod?"

"Well, sure, but only to other people on the planet. The pod doesn't support long-distance calls. It's just a last-ditch we're-all-going-to-die escape pod. But the *Raptor* is different."

"So where is our last, best hope landing?" Lily asked.

"It looks like it's headed for that city over there," Jack said.

"What city?"

"That one," Jack said, pointing to a small area on the planet's surface.

Lily frowned. "That's a ruin, Jack. It hasn't been a city since before time began – if then."

"Fine. But that's where it's going."

The conversation was interrupted when the pod started shaking. Lily grabbed Jack's arm. "What's that?"

"Atmospheric turbulence," Jack replied. "It's ok. It's all part of the plan."

"Then let's find a new plan," Lily said.

Jack glanced down at the control panel. "It's almost over, dear. Just another ten minutes and we'll touch down."

By now the *Raptor* had disappeared, lost in the thick atmosphere of the planet. The city was out of sight as well.

"We're not landing near the *Raptor*, are we?" Lily asked.

Jack shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I've tried to change the course but the computer won't let me. I must be doing something wrong."

Lily sighed but said nothing.

As they got closer to the ground the shaking slowly stopped. Jack closely monitored their fall and was pleased to see that the pod was gently breaking their descent. A few minutes later the pod touched down onto the surface.

Jack breathed an enormous sigh of relief. "I can't believe it! Look at that, dear. We made it! And check out these readings – the atmosphere isn't toxic!"

Lily squinted out the window. The rough, black surface of the rocky planet extended in all directions as far as she could see. Veins of some blue mineral glowed eerily among an endless stretch of gray, gritty sand. A white fog clung to pits in the alien

surface. Overhead gray clouds slowly drifted through the sky, occasionally blocking the light from a small, weak sun.

“Do you really mean to tell me that it's *safe* out there?” Lily asked.

“It looks ok to me,” Jack said. “We've got oxygen, carbon dioxide – all the good stuff we need. And the gravity is more or less what we're used to.”

“So what do we do now?” Lily asked.

“Hike to the *Raptor*, I guess.”

Lily's eyes widened. “You mean leave the pod? And go out *there*? Are you out of your mind?”



## Chapter 6: Gathering Gloom

THERE WAS a moment of silence inside the escape pod. Jack looked at his wife tenderly. *Poor girl. I don't blame her at all for not wanting to go out there.* Even inside the pod he could hear the wind whistling. He knew it was going to be cold outside, and on top of that the landscape was the most unwelcoming sight he had ever seen.

Jack sighed. "Look, Lily. I know this isn't exactly a vacation paradise. I realize that luxurious resorts are few and far between out here. But we don't have a lot of options. If we want to get off this planet we've got to get to the *Raptor* – and since there doesn't seem to be a subway station nearby I think we're going to have to walk."

"I guess," Lily replied grumpily. "Does this miserable excuse for a spaceship have any supplies we can bring with us?"

Jack looked around. Secured under his seat were two small bundles labeled "Emergency Supplies". Jack grabbed one and opened it. "Hmmm. Here we go! Looks like we've got water, some rations of some sort, a compass, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, and a couple flares. That's about it."

"That's not much. How long do you think the food will last?"

Jack removed a small sheet of paper from the kit and glanced at it. "Two days, it looks like."

"Two days?" Lily exclaimed. "You mean they give us two days to get rescued? What are we supposed to do in two days?"

Jack shrugged. "Keep in mind it takes a while to starve after you run out of food and water. We have a little bit more than two

days, I think. Maybe five.”

“Oh, well that makes all the difference in the world, then!”

Jack laughed. “It’s not so bad. I have some idea where the *Raptor* went down and it shouldn’t take us anywhere near five days to get there. If the ship is still intact we may be in luck – I bet it’s got all kinds of supplies! Those starships are designed to spend years exploring planets like this. It’ll have everything we need.”

“What else do those instructions say?” Lily asked. “Does it explain how to survive on alien planets?”

“I’m afraid not, dear. I imagine whoever wrote this thinks that if you own a Starman-class starship you probably already have more survival skills than you could ever need. The only thing this guide explains is how to use the escape pod in the event of an emergency.”

“That’s kind of useless! What does it say?”

Jack read the page and then turned it over and read the back. “It says you push the big yellow Launch button and the pod will do the rest.”

Lily shook her head. “And they had to print instructions to tell you that? Isn’t it kind of obvious?”

“Well, you never know. For all we knew the Launch button could have launched missiles or something. We just got lucky.”

“I wouldn’t call being stranded here *lucky*, exactly,” his wife replied. “But I guess we’d better get moving. It’s probably getting late.”

Jack opened the door in the back of the pod and the two carefully stepped outside. “You know, that’s a really good question. What time it is here?”

“Who knows?” Lily said. “The sun is not near the horizon, so I’m guessing we’ve got at least a little bit of daylight left.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jack said. He made sure that they were both carrying their wilderness survival kits and had not left anything important in the pod. He then removed the compass from his kit and consulted it.

“Well, it looks like we’re in luck,” Jack announced. “This

planet has a magnetic field so we can use this to guide us. The compass claims that north is that way,” he said, pointing.

“Which way is the city?” Lily asked. “You said the ship went down near the city, right? That’s something we should be able to see from quite a distance.”

“It’s northwest of here, more or less. If we head in that direction we should be ok.”

“Let’s hope it’s more, and not less,” Lily replied.

Jack smiled. The two of them began hiking over the desert landscape. As Jack had feared the sun provided very little warmth and the atmosphere was cold. A gentle wind occasionally blew, stealing the warmth from their bones. Black, gritty dust covered the rocky ground like sand. When the wind blew it stirred up the dust and formed little black clouds that slowly settled back onto the surface.

The couple was able to cross the desert at a fairly rapid pace. Jack was badly out of shape and had to ask Lily to slow down after the first hour. “I just can’t take this,” he complained.

“I told you you needed to start exercising!” Lily replied primly. “If you’d taken my advice you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“I wasn’t planning on launching a career hiking across alien deserts, dear. That never crossed my mind.”

“But it never hurts to be prepared.”

A bank of gray clouds leisurely floated overhead. *I wonder if it ever rains here*, Jack thought. Neither of them had seen any signs of water or plant life. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but rough, broken terrain that was scarred by giant, cracked rocks.

After the second hour Lily started getting tired as well. “This black dirt is getting all over me,” she complained. “It’s in my shoes, it’s on my skirt – it’s awful. I’m never going to be able to get it out of my clothing! I was dressed for a night out on the town, not a hiking trip.”

“I think we’re making progress, though,” Jack said. “I bet we’ve covered at least a couple miles, if not more. I can’t even see the pod anymore.”

“Are you sure we’re not going in circles?” his wife asked. “These broken black rocks all look the same to me.”

“Positive,” Jack replied, with more assurance than he felt.

Lily looked up at the sky. “The sun is getting a lot lower. I’d say we only have a couple hours of daylight left.”

“I noticed that,” her husband replied. “Either the days are really short or we got here late in the afternoon. I’m still hoping we’ll make it to the city before nightfall. I’d feel better if we were in a building of some kind instead of out here in the open. It’s just creepy out here. What’s with all these little bits of broken metal on the ground?”

“Beats me,” Lily said. “What gets me are the lights, though. I hate them. It’s like they’re looking at me or something.”

“What lights?” Jack asked. “You’ve been seeing lights?”

Lily turned to her husband in surprise. “You mean you haven’t noticed the little blue lights that are all around us? How could you possibly have missed them? Look over there in that pit. Do you see them now?”

Jack looked where his wife was pointing and gasped. Inside the dark hole he could see little blue sparks appearing in midair and then vanishing in an instant. The sparks were no bigger than a pinhead. Sometimes they would persist for a few moments and gently float in the air before they faded back into nothingness.

“I’ve been watching them for the past hour,” Lily explained. “They’re easiest to see in the shadows but they’re actually all around us. They’re just so faint that it’s hard to see in the daylight.”

“If you can call this daylight,” Jack muttered. “That’s the lousiest excuse for a sun I’ve ever seen. I bet there are moons that give off more light than that.”

“Probably,” Lily said.

Now that his wife had brought the blue lights to his attention Jack started noticing them everywhere. They were hard to see at first – just little sparks that appeared and vanished. But as time went on he began to see entire clouds of them here and there, hidden in the countless shadows that covered the ground.



"Where do you think the lights are coming from?" Lily asked.

"It's probably just alien swamp gas, or something," Jack replied breezily.

"Don't you need a swamp to have alien swamp gas?"

Her husband shrugged. "I don't know. Apparently not! The lights have got to be coming from somewhere."

"But wouldn't it require a lot of energy to generate all of those lights?" Lily asked.

"Probably," Jack said.

"Then where is that energy coming from? The only things I see out here are rocks, black sand, bits of broken metal, and gloom. Lots and lots of gloom. But nothing that looks like an energy source."

"I don't know, dear. If my high school geography teacher ever lectured on Lemura I completely missed it. That might have been one of the lectures I slept through. Geography was never my strong point."

Lily laughed. "No, it sure wasn't. You have many fine qualities, my husband, but that is not one of them."

"Does it seem to you that the lights are moving in some kind of pattern? It's almost like –" Jack paused, searching for the right words. "It's almost like they're trying to form shapes, or maybe letters. Do you get the idea there is some sort of *meaning* in the lights?"

Lily shook her head. "They just freak me out, Jack. That's all I can say. There is something unnatural about them and I don't like them and I want to go home. Right now."

"Me too," Jack agreed.

They continued hiking for another hour. By this point the pod was three hours behind them.

Lily was the first to speak up. "Is it just me or is it getting colder?"

"It's getting darker too," Jack said. "I think the sun is about to go down."

Lily nodded. "I'm starting to see more lights now. As the shadows get longer the lights seem to multiply. They almost look

like little insects now. It's as if they grow stronger when the sun goes down."

"Just like vampires!" Jack quipped.

"That's a comforting thought!" Lily replied. "This planet could be a vampire paradise, couldn't it? You've got it all – darkness, rocks, cold, and a lifetime supply of depressing gloom. What more could an up-and-coming vampire want?"

"But you don't have any victims!" Jack pointed out. "Any vampires that lived here would starve to death."

"Unless all the life forms on this planet are invisible," Lily teased. "Or at least, invisible to us. Or maybe they're made of pure energy, like the monsters in the movies."

Jack frowned. "What does that even mean – 'pure energy'? How could something possibly be made out of energy? Energy is just the potential to accomplish work. I could understand a being made out of electrical batteries, maybe, but –"

"Look!" Lily exclaimed. The couple had just climbed over a small ridge. To their surprise the ridge was actually on the cusp of a deep valley. Far below them, in the valley, was the city they had been seeking. It was nestled in the heart of a long chain of hills and was apparently built in some sort of natural indentation.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. "And none too soon. I bet if we hurry we've got just enough time to scamper down there and enter the city before it gets dark."

Lily looked at the city and frowned. "I hate to bring this up, but now that we're here I can't say the city looks very inviting. All I see are skeletons of ruined buildings. It looks pretty old and rickety to me."

"Would you rather spend the night out here in the open?" Jack asked.

"I'd rather spend the night at home in my own bed, if it's all the same to you! But seriously. How do we know the city is safer than the countryside? Have *you* ever been there before?"

"Not exactly," Jack said. "Honestly, I have no idea what I'm doing. I studied electronics and wormhole mechanics in college, not survival strategies. But my gut feeling is that in the city we'd

at least have some shelter. Out here we're pretty vulnerable to whatever comes along."

"What if that evil shadow being lives in the city?" Lily asked.

"Do you think it's from this planet?" Jack asked.

"It would certainly fit in here! I bet it would be right at home. For all we know that city could be filled with a whole army of shadow beings."

Jack nodded. "True. Very true. But it's also possible that there is food and water in that city. There's even a chance that Starman Alice is down there. The doubt and uncertainty cuts both ways."

His wife looked surprised. "You think the Starman might still be alive?"

"Could be! After all, the *Raptor* had a transporter on board – I saw it on the map. It's entirely possible that the *Molly* had one too. She might have beamed off just before the ship exploded. If I was her and I was still alive I would definitely head for that city."

Lily laughed. "You've never had a day of Starman training in your whole life, Jack! How do you know what she would do?"

"Call it a hunch. After all, if your starship was stolen wouldn't you want to get it back? Wouldn't you make a beeline for it the moment your feet touched the ground?"

"Makes sense to me," Lily said. "So what are we going to do? Are we going to avoid the city or go down into it?"

"I say we head for the city," Jack said firmly. "I have a good feeling about it."

"All right," his wife replied. "I'm right behind you."

It took them the better part of an hour to reach the outskirts of the city. By the time they finally climbed down the mountain it was pitch black. The planet had no moon, and the only light was from a handful of stars that shown in the sky. Jack was no expert in astronomy but the relative emptiness of the night sky gave him the feeling he was very far from home.

"I hope these flashlights hold out," Jack said aloud. "I have a feeling it's going to be tough to find new batteries for them."

"Didn't they say on the news that the *Raptor* had just been

overhauled? Surely that would include checking the escape pods as well.”

“Would *you* think to replace batteries in flashlights?” Jack asked.

“No, but I'm not a Starman. Thinking of things like that is part of their job.”

Jack frowned. “That brings up another great question. How old is this food in our packs? You don't suppose it's already gone bad, do you?”

“I doubt it,” Lily replied. “I didn't see any dates on the packaging, but it looks like it's some kind of awful sealed food that will last until the stars burn out. I bet someone has written a scientific paper proving that our rations can never go bad under any circumstances.”

Jack laughed. “That's a comforting thought! Say, have you noticed that the blue lights are gone?”

Lily nodded. “As soon as we started down into this valley they disappeared. I haven't seen any of them since, even in the deepest shadows. But have you noticed that the buildings are glowing?”

“Yeah, I have. But sadly, they're not glowing bright enough to replace our flashlights. The metal is just glowing here and there, in little fits. It's acting like an engine that can't quite get started. It is the weirdest thing.”

“I guess it matches the rest of the planet then! I've seen nothing but weirdness ever since we arrived. But where are we going, anyway?”

Jack stopped. The two of them had been walking down a street that was paved with some sort of unknown black substance. The street was filled with cracks and gashes but there were no plants or weeds to be seen. Around them were giant skyscrapers that had been reduced to nothing but their blue metal frames. The city was clearly extremely old. *It's been a very long time since anyone has lived here*, Jack thought to himself. *I get the feeling they weren't expecting any visitors.*

Aloud he said, “Do any of these buildings actually have

roofs? Maybe we can find a somewhat intact one and stay there.”

Jack and Lily walked down a few more blocks, searching for a structure that had weathered the passage of time reasonably well. They at last settled on a short building three stories tall that still had its blue steel walls, floors, and ceilings intact. The couple carefully walked inside.

“I suppose we'd better explore the whole building before settling down for the night,” Jack said.

“That would be a great idea,” Lily replied. “Not that I would feel any safer, really, considering where we're at. But at least we'd know something about the hotel we've picked.”

Jack located a battered stairwell in the rear of the building. The couple used it to access and explore all three levels and the roof. After a half-hour of searching they realized that the structure was entirely empty. There was nothing inside – not even so much as writing on the walls.

“Where do you want to make camp?” Jack asked.

“The first floor,” Lily said without hesitation. “If something goes wrong in the middle of the night I don't want to have to run down a flight of stairs.”

“Works for me,” Jack replied. “I don't know about you, but I'm tired. It's been a long day.”

“Or a long week, or month, or however long it's been,” Lily said. “We've kind of lost track of time.”

“True. Say, do you want to eat something before turning in?”

“I'm not really hungry,” Lily replied. “Something about darkness and unending gloom has taken away my appetite.”

Jack smiled. “Things will get better, dear. We'll find a way home. Just give it time. Tomorrow will be another day.”

Lily yawned. “Are you sure there aren't any sleeping bags in those emergency kits?”

“Positive,” Jack said. “There's not even a blanket.”

“I am *definitely* writing a strong letter to whoever designs those kits the moment I get home,” his wife grumbled. “That kit is totally useless! There's no sleeping bags, no soap, no shampoo, no source of running water –”

Jack leaned over and kissed his wife. “Goodnight, dear.”  
Lily sighed. “Goodnight.”

## Chapter 7: The Desolate City

THE NEXT morning Jack was the first one to wake up. As he slowly came to his senses he opened his eyes and yawned. He had spent the night trying to sleep on the cold, metal floor of a ruined building and had little to show for it. The night had not been a comfortable one. He felt tired.

“Oh, the pain, the pain of it all,” Jack muttered. Nearly every muscle in his body was aching. He stiffly stood up and attempted to stretch. “That’ll teach you to go on a four-hour hike! I was definitely not prepared for that much exercise.”

Jack glanced around the room. Their flashlights and emergency survival kits were lying a few feet away from them, right where they’d left them the night before. Jack noticed that his wife Lily was still asleep. She was usually an early riser but the previous day’s activities had exhausted her. *I’m afraid we’ve got another long day ahead of us*, Jack thought to himself. *Let’s hope the Raptor is nearby. I don’t know how much more of these long hikes we can take.*

After deciding to let his wife sleep a little longer he stepped outside and looked around. The weak sun had risen and filled the city with a tired gray light. All around him for miles were giant skyscrapers of all shapes and sizes. The buildings were in various states of disrepair. Many of the structures on the outskirts of the city were little more than a battered frame, but towards the city center there appeared to be structures that had fared much better. *I wonder if these are any supplies in this strange town*, Jack thought. *We’ll have to do a little looking around as we hike*

*through the city. At least it appears to be deserted! I don't see any evil monsters lurking in the shadows.*

Jack walked back into the building and saw that his wife was still asleep. He walked over to her and gently shook her awake. "Honey? I think it's time to get up. We need to be going."

His wife slowly stirred. "Must we? Can't I stay in bed a little longer?"

"You're not in bed," Jack pointed out. "You're lying on the floor on an alien planet."

Lily's eyes flew open. She sat up and then grimaced. "Oh. I remember now. No wonder I'm so sore. Why didn't you bring a sleeping bag or something? Even a pillow would have been nice."

Jack smiled. "The next time this happens I'll be sure to bring adequate supplies. It's not all bad, though. If we can make it to the *Raptor* we might be able to find all the supplies we could ever want. I bet they've got real beds there."

"And working showers, I hope," Lily grumbled. "I feel awful. That gritty black dirt is all over me and I feel like I haven't showered in a month. And my hair is an absolute mess! Do you realize I don't even have a comb?"

"The sooner we get going, the sooner we'll reach civilization," Jack said. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"That would be wonderful," Lily said dreamily. She stood up and stretched. "I think I'll take some homemade wheat pancakes, with lots of syrup and butter. Don't forget to add a side of bacon, a fried egg, a piece of cinnamon toast, and a nice tall glass of orange juice. That would hit the spot!"

"Boy, it sure would," Jack replied. He opened his emergency survival kit and rummaged through it. "Unfortunately, all we've got are these ration things. Unless there's a restaurant nearby I doubt either of us are going to be seeing pancakes today."

Jack removed two rations from his kit. He gave one to his wife and took the other for himself. His wife opened the vacuum-sealed bag and removed a small square of a black substance. She sighed. "Are you sure there's nothing else to eat?"

"I'm afraid not," Jack said. He removed his ration from its bag



and bit into it. He chewed it for a while and then swallowed. "It's not so bad, really. There's probably lots of vitamins and nutrition in it. It'll keep us from starving."

"If you say so," Lily replied. The two of them finished their meal and then shared a bottle of water. After they were done with breakfast they left the building and started hiking down the street.

The hike was much easier than it had been the day before. The roads that led through the city had cracks in them, but no deep pits like they had encountered in the desert. To Lily's relief there was very little black sand and no sign of the eerie blue lights. The only sound was the wind whistling through the giant buildings.

"Which way do we need to go?" Lily asked.

Jack consulted his compass. "I think if we stay on this street and keep going in that general direction we should pass through the city and come out on the other side. The *Raptor* shouldn't be too far from that."

"Do you think we'll have trouble finding it?"

Jack shook his head. "I doubt it. I bet when it landed it made a huge gash in the ground. There's probably a trail of debris out there that will lead us right to her."

"That doesn't sound good."

"What do you mean?"

Lily paused before replying. "Well, I was kind of hoping we could use her to get off of this planet. As in flying her back into space and to the nearest spaceport."

Jack laughed. "Honey, her flying days are over. Did you see what she looked like as she fell to the surface? There's no way she could ever reach space! That's just not going to happen."

"Then what are we going to do?" Lily asked. "I don't see any other spaceships lying around! As I recall the *Molly* didn't survive either."

"We're going to call for help," Jack replied. "All we have to do is make it to the ship and use it to send out a distress call. Somebody will then come and rescue us. It'll be fine."

"I hope so," Lily replied.

The couple continued walking down the long, wide road. Jack

noticed that the buildings were growing larger as they approached the center of the city. *There's a lot of skyscrapers here for such a tiny place*, he thought. *The city can't be more than fifteen or twenty miles wide. We should easily be able to cross it before it gets dark again – even if we're still sore from yesterday's hike.*

Lily suddenly spoke up, interrupting his thoughts. “Who is feeding our dogs?”

“What?” Jack asked, startled.

“Our dogs! We left them at home, Jack. Who is taking care of them?”

“Um, your parents, probably,” Jack replied. “I’m sure our disappearance is all over the news. I bet the next day they found out that we were missing and have taken care of everything for us. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I can’t help it,” Lily said. “They’re going to be so worried! They’re not going to understand.”

“We’ll get in touch with your parents as soon as we can and let them know we’re safe and sound,” Jack promised.

“Oh. I guess they’ll be worried too,” Lily said. “But what about your job?”

Jack sighed. “We can think about that when we get back to Eagle City. Right now we kind of need to focus on our own survival. One thing at a time, dear. One thing at a time.”

For the next hour the couple continued to walk down the city streets. Eventually the hike became too much for Jack and he came to a stop. “I am worn out. Can we stop for a minute? I need a break.”

“Me too,” his wife replied. “All of my joints are killing me.”

Jack looked around. “There’s a building over there. Want to go inside and get out of this cold wind?”

“Sure,” Lily replied wearily. The two walked into the massive structure. As they walked inside Jack looked up at it. The building towered high above them. *It looks at least a hundred stories tall!* Jack thought. *I wonder what it was used for.*

Once they were inside they entered what appeared to be a lobby of some sort. The ceiling was easily forty feet high. There

was no furniture anywhere to be seen.

Lily plopped onto the ground and groaned. "Would it kill them to provide a chair or something?"

Jack shrugged. "There could have been chairs here a long time ago. Maybe they just disintegrated over time, and all that survived was that blue steel."

"That doesn't help us very much," his wife replied.

"Is that an elevator shaft?" Jack asked, pointing. He walked over and took a closer look at it. The elevator doors had long since disappeared, but Jack could see a dark shaft stretching high above him and down below him. What he saw at the bottom of the shaft excited him the most. "Come look at this!" he exclaimed.

Lily wearily stood up and walked over to her husband. She gingerly stuck her head into the shaft and looked down. Her eyes widened. "Is that light down there?"

"Looks like it!" Jack said excitedly. "I wonder if there's a way to get down there?"

"I don't recall seeing any rope in that useless survival kit," Lily commented.

"No, but don't most buildings have a stairwell beside their elevators?"

"Sure, back home they do. But what do we know about alien planets? Maybe they didn't believe in climbing stairs."

Jack scanned the room. He spotted a door to the left a few feet away. He rushed over to it and pulled it open, only to be disappointed. "It's just a closet," he said, sighing.

"But what about that door?" Lily asked, pointing. To the right of the elevator was a door with a small opening for a window in it. Jack walked over and pulled it open. "Eureka!" he shouted. "I see stairs!"

Lily walked over to him and the two entered the stairwell. Sure enough, a flight of stairs led up to higher levels and down to lower levels. Jack leaned over the railing and looked up. "It looks like they go up forever," he commented.

"Probably. But do they go down?"

Jack turned his head and checked. "Wow. I see at least five or six flights below us! It looks like there is some kind of light on the lowest level."

Lily frowned. "Are you sure that we should be checking this out? Aren't we supposed to be on our way to the *Raptor*?"

"This won't take long," Jack promised. "I just want to see what's down there. We might find something that's actually helpful."

Lily sighed but said nothing as her husband started walking downstairs. After a moment she followed him. The two walked all the way down to the lowest level. There, just as Jack had predicted, they saw a faint white light.

"It's coming through the window in that door," Jack said, pointing. At the bottom of the stairwell was a door that looked like a functional airlock. Beside it was a small control panel. The panel appeared to be on and functional.

"That's quite a door," Lily said. "Looks like it's closed pretty tight."

"Maybe it's preserved whatever is on the other side," Jack said thoughtfully. He walked over and pressed one of the buttons on the panel. When it did nothing he pressed another button. All at once the airlock made a hissing noise. The doors parted, revealing a small room just beyond them. At the far end of the room was another set of airlock doors.

"Cool!" Jack said. He walked into the room.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" Lily asked dubiously.

"I don't see why not," her husband answered. "Don't you want to see what's on the other side of that door?"

"Not really," Lily replied. "But I guess I'm about to find out anyway." She walked into the room and stood just behind Jack. After she was safely inside he pressed a button on the inner airlock, and the door behind them slid shut. After a moment the door in front of them slid open.

Jack gasped. The doors had opened into a large, well-furnished room. A white light seemed to permeate the room,

coming from no obvious source. Holograms dotted the walls, and there were a few desks and chairs tastefully positioned around the room. The floor was covered in some sort of carpet material and the walls were a gentle white color.

Jack was the first one to step into the room. "I don't believe this," he said.

His wife followed him when something caught her attention. She went over to a nearby screen and looked at it carefully. "Hey, Jack, come here! This one has got some kind of writing on it."

Jack walked over to her and stared at it. "Boy, it sure does! Only that's not any language I've ever seen. Do you even recognize those symbols?"

"Nope. Can't say that I do."

As Jack studied the screen he noticed that it had evidently sustained some damage at some point. Occasionally the screen would flicker and there were parts of it where the picture had faded. Jack reached over to touch one of the buttons on the screen but his wife grabbed his hand.

"Don't even think about it," she hissed. "You are *not* going to start randomly pressing buttons on an alien planet. You have no idea what is going to happen."

"I guess you're right," Jack conceded.

They suddenly heard a noise behind them. It sounded almost like a series of chimes. Jack whirled around but saw nothing. "Is anyone there?" he asked nervously.

Lily grabbed his hand and pointed to the floor. "What is casting that shadow?" she asked.

Jack stared in the direction she was pointing. On the floor was a long, black shadow – but there were no nearby objects that could be casting it. As they watched the shadow began to move in their direction.

"Ok, it's time to go now!" Jack shouted. He and his wife ran toward the airlock. Jack slammed his hand on the close button but nothing happened.

"Oh, this is bad, this is very bad," Jack said. The shadow continued to approach them!

"I told you we shouldn't have come down here!" Lily hissed. Jack began randomly pressing all of the buttons on the control panel. None of them did anything.

When the shadow got ten feet away from them it stopped. All at once a noise filled the room.

"What is that?" Lily asked.

"It almost sounds like a language," Jack said. "I don't think it's Ahmanyen, though."

"I don't like it," Lily said. "It sounds like somebody is breaking glass. Or dropping plates onto the ground. The sounds are all sharp and pointy."

All at once the lights in the room went dead. The shadow was lost in darkness, and the airlock doors slid shut. Jack slammed another button and the doors that led to the stairwell opened. Jack grabbed his wife's hand and the two of them raced up the stairs, out of the building, and onto the street.

Once they were outside Jack stopped for a minute, panting. "Let's not do that again," he said weakly.

"You know, if you had listened to me in the first place --"

A noise suddenly drowned her out. Something that sounded like wind chimes began to ring in the distance. The noise appeared to be coming from everywhere but had no obvious source.

"Oh boy," Jack said. "We've done it now! We've got to get out of here."

Jack and Lily began running down the street. They both panted heavily. "We're never going to make it," Lily complained. "We're at least an hour from the other side the city! We won't be able to keep this pace up for long."

"Look at the buildings!" Jack hissed. "They're glowing!"

Sure enough, the blue steel of the buildings had started to glow in the daylight. The glow was an uneven flicker, but it was noticeable.

"I thought it only did that at night," Lily panted.

As suddenly as it started the sound of chimes stopped. The city became completely silent and the glow disappeared.

Jack stopped and tried to catch his breath. Lily caught up to him and stopped as well. "What are we going to do?" she asked.

"We could panic," Jack said, as he struggled to breathe. "Or maybe just try to get out of this city of nightmares as soon as possible."

"That works for me," Lily replied.

After a moment's rest the two of them resumed jogging toward the outskirts of the city. Over the next several hours they continued to intermittently hear strange noises in the distance. Occasionally Lily thought she saw a shadow, but whenever they looked there was nothing there. By the time they made it to the other side of the city their nerves were completely frayed.

"Our imaginations are killing us," Jack panted as he stopped again to rest. "Everywhere I look I think I see something."

"Unless it's *not* your imagination," Lily replied. "We don't know what's out there. I'm sure that the shadow being brought the Third Treasure to this planet for a reason. I doubt it was just for entertainment purposes."

Jack groaned. "I am so sore. When we get home I'm going to settle down in a chair and not move for a week. I have had it."

"Then let's keep going," Lily said. "The *Raptor* has to be somewhere nearby. Right?"

Jack struggled to his feet. "Right. It shouldn't be far from here. Once we get there we'll be home free."

After an exhausting walk the couple finally made their way out of the city. The natural depression in which it was located extended for some distance beyond the city limits, making room for a large tract of smooth land before the ground gave way to the black desert.. Fifteen minutes after passing the last building Jack began to notice bits of debris on the ground. He reached over and picked up a torn piece of metal. It had red paint on it. Jack smiled despite his weariness. "This doesn't look like anything I've seen on this planet so far! The ship must be somewhere nearby."

They continued walking. A bit further on Lily noticed a long scar in the ground about a hundred feet to their right. The gash continued on toward the north and was almost twenty feet deep.

When she saw it she pointed it out to her husband. "You don't think that was made by the *Raptor*, do you?"

"Why not?" Jack asked. "I can't think of anything else it could be."

Lily frowned. "That's a pretty deep gash, Jack! I thought starships had landing gear. It looks like whatever made that hole just plowed into the ground out of control. Are you sure there's going to be a ship left to find?"

"Something must have made that scar. Let's follow it and see what it is."

To Jack's surprise the scar extended for almost half a mile. As they approached the end of it they could make out a red starship that had embedded itself in the ground. From a distance the ship looked mangled, but as they approached it they saw that it was a complete wreck. The *Raptor* was almost unrecognizable. The wings were gone and the body was badly battered. If they had not already known that it was a starship they would not have been able to tell what its original form was.

Jack and Lily walked up to the wreck. Jack saw the look of dismay on his wife's face and tried to think of something encouraging to say. "At least it's not a total loss, dear. The outside looks pretty rough but the interior might not be so bad. I say we try to find a way to get on board and see what we can find."

"Are you sure it's safe?" Lily asked.

"Do we have a choice?" Jack replied. "Do you know of any other way off this planet?"

"Ok," Lily sighed. "After you."

Jack climbed over the dirt and debris that surrounded the ship. The hull plating had been ripped away from much of the vessel, allowing fairly easy passage inside. Jack eyed the ship before they entered it. "It looks like the lower two levels are buried in the dirt, if they still exist at all. The other three levels look ok, though. My guess is that the top level is the most intact."

"Isn't that the level with the bridge?" Lily asked.

Jack nodded. "It is. The only problem is that the bridge is at the front of the ship. I don't think that part of the ship exists



anymore.”

“How encouraging,” Lily replied. “There goes any hope of sending out a distress call! Do you have any other bits of good news?”

Jack bit his lip. He didn't quite know what to say. The loss of the bridge was devastating but he couldn't bring himself to give up. “I know it's a setback, dear, but let's not panic. We're still alive and that's a blessing right there. Let's take this one step at a time.”

Lily grabbed her husband. “No, seriously. Listen to me, Jack. That ship is a total loss and you know it. If the bridge is gone then how are we going to call for help? And even if by some miracle we can find other communications equipment on board, how are you going to get power to it? That ship was the only hope we had and it's now scattered in pieces all over the ground. What are we going to do?”

“I'll tell you one thing – we're not going to despair. Losing hope is not an option. And we're not going to give up either. I say we get on board, see what the situation is, and go from there. The *Raptor* is a Starman-class starship, after all. You never know what you might find tucked away in a corner. The game's not over yet.”



## Chapter 8: From The Ashes

JACK AND LILY Rossman stepped into the ruined hulk of the *Raptor*. The missing hull plates allowed large amounts of light to enter the ship's third floor. What the light revealed, however, was not encouraging. The rooms immediately next to the hull were trashed. Much of the floor was missing, making walking treacherous as a single slip could send one plummeting down to the second floor. The walls were bent out of shape and the rooms were empty. It was a depressing sight.

The couple managed to pick their way through the debris and shattered metal and make it into the inner hallway. There was still some natural light that managed to enter this part of the ship, but much of the area was cloaked in darkness. Lily removed her flashlight from her emergency kit and turned it on.

“Good idea,” Jack said.

“This is awful,” Lily commented as they surveyed the damage. The holoscreens that dotted the walls were cracked and broken. Large portions of the ceiling were ripped apart, exposing duct work and wires. The floor was bent out of shape. Pieces of doors were strewn about the hall, as if a hurricane had ripped through the hallway and yanked the doors off their hinges.

“Let's find that stairwell and go up to the top,” Jack suggested. “That's probably the most intact area of the ship.”

Lily shook her head. “I disagree. I say we search the ship thoroughly, starting here and working our way up. There's no sense in skipping areas just because they don't look promising. You never know what you might find.”

Jack shrugged. "Sounds good to me. Lead the way, dear!"

Lily turned and looked at him. "How did I become the leader of this expedition?"

"You've got the flashlight."

"Ah," Lily sighed. "Silly me." She began carefully making her way down the hall.

The third floor had a surprising number of rooms, but nearly all of them were trashed. The room where they had been held in hibernation was a complete wreck. The stasis tables had been ripped off of the floor and thrown into the wall. Jack could not find a single piece of intact equipment in the entire room. Many of the other rooms were in the same condition. Whatever important equipment they might have held was now damaged beyond recognition.

After deciding that the third floor was a total loss they made their way to the stairwell and climbed up to the fourth floor. That floor proved to be more intact. The third door that Jack forced open led into a spacious bedroom.

Lily cheered when she saw that the room was largely intact. The bed had been turned over and slammed into one of the walls, but it was largely undamaged. By working together they were able to put it back into position.

"That's sure going to beat sleeping on a metal floor!" Lily exclaimed. "And there are sheets! I'm so excited."

Jack was surprised. "You want to stay in the ship tonight?"

"You'd better believe it! Where, exactly, did *you* expect us to make our camp? Back in the city of horrors? Out in the countryside? As you said yourself, our options are kind of slim."

Jack shrugged. "Suits me." He walked over to an overturned dresser and tried to set it up again as Lily attempted to pry open the closet door. When the closet door suddenly gave way Lily cheered again. "Clothes!" Lily exclaimed. Her face beamed. "And they're women's clothes, too."

Jack glanced over to his wife. "But they're all crumpled on the floor! They must have gotten knocked around when the ship crashed. Aren't they wrinkled?"

“At this point I don't care how wrinkled they are. They're clean and are about my size. I can live with that! I can finally put on something that is a little more suited for hiking in cold, dimly-lit deserts.”

“Looks like we've got more clothing in here,” Jack grunted. He had managed to set the dresser back up. He sat down on the bed and rested a minute as Lily went through its contents.

“Alice has pretty good taste,” Lily said thoughtfully. “Pretty rich tastes, too. These are expensive, high-quality brands.”

“Do you think she'll mind you borrowing her clothes?” Jack asked.

Lily shook her head. “I'm not going to worry about that right now. If we run into her I'll ask. Otherwise I'm going to assume she doesn't mind.”

Jack smiled. “You don't see anything there that I could wear, do you? Did she have any pants or anything?”

His wife laughed. “You're at least ten sizes and a hundred pounds larger than her! I bet you'd even have trouble putting on her socks. Don't even think about it.”

“Shall we keep looking?” Jack asked.

“You keep looking,” Lily said. “You've got a flashlight. I'm going to stay in here, straighten the room, and change.”

“Don't you want to get cleaned up first?” Jack asked. “There's probably a shower here somewhere. You've been complaining all day about wanting one.”

Lily shook her head. “You can't seriously believe that it would still work.”

Jack shrugged. “Maybe not. But what if we find water and soap? Are you really going to turn that down? Or what if there's a comb somewhere?”

His wife paused for a moment as her eye caught sight of something on the floor. A strange look came across her face. “I don't know, Jack. Maybe we're looking at this all wrong. Maybe we're too caught up in ourselves.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked, surprised.

“Think about it. We are stranded on an alien planet that is

probably thousands and thousands of light-years from home. There's a good chance that nobody knows we are here. We're almost certainly the only human beings on this world. There's also a good chance that an evil being lives here that just stole one of the galaxy's most prized secrets, for a reason we don't know. And what are we doing, Jack? Are we trying to save civilization? Are we trying to defeat the forces of evil and save the day? No, we're not. We're looking for soap and water and better breakfast food."

Jack looked at his wife in surprise. "You've been complaining all day about how miserable you are and how badly you want to get home! It wasn't ten minutes ago that you were freaking out because you thought we would be stuck here forever. What happened? Did I miss something?"

Lily walked to a corner of the room and carefully picked a picture frame off the floor. The glass in it had shattered but the picture was still intact. Lily held up the picture so Jack could get a good look at it. "Do you see that?" she asked.

Jack nodded. "Sure do. It looks like Starman Alice, standing next to some girl."

"That's not some girl – that's her sister! Don't you see the family resemblance? You might be a good leader, honey, but you are *awful* when it comes to noticing things."

Jack blushed. "I guess. But that's what I have you for, dear. We're a team you know."

Lily continued. "Look. Here's the point. This girl Alice had a family. A sister. And probably other relatives too. But she risked her life to come here and fight that evil monster. I don't know if she succeeded or not. Maybe she managed to escape before the *Molly* was destroyed. I don't know. But I do know she thought it was important enough to leave her family behind and put her life on the line."

Lily looked her husband in the eye. "If she's dead, Jack, that means that the only people left to finish her mission are the two of us. We may be the only hope that humanity has! If that's true then we'd better get moving."

"But we have no idea what she was doing here!" Jack

protested. "We're completely clueless. We're not trained for this and we're definitely not heroes. I'm just a technician and you're an accountant. I've taken exactly zero hours of combat training. This mission is way beyond our skill level."

"Sure. I guess. But who else is there? Maybe we're not Starmen. Maybe we're not Kathryn and Joe Taylor. But we may be all there is."

Jack sighed. "I guess you're right. Maybe we do need to do something about whatever it is that needs something done. Tell you what. Let's finish exploring the ship and see what our options are. Once we know what tools we have available we'll go from there."

"That'll work!" Lily replied. "Let's do it."

It took the rest of the day to finish going over the upper three decks. Jack was pleased to discover that there was actually a great deal that was salvageable. The rooms that housed the ship's food supplies were largely intact, and the ship had a great deal of water on board as well. Lily was happy to discover that the ship did have soap and other toiletries.

In one closet Jack found a whole variety of wilderness survival tools. "Look at this! I see rope, climbing gear, electric lanterns, batteries, canteens, portable stoves, the works. Alice could have lived for months on this planet. She had everything she needed – even tents!"

Lily removed one of the lanterns and turned it on. When she saw that it emitted a bright, warm light she turned off her flashlight and put it back into her emergency kit. "This will certainly keep us going for a while," she agreed.

Jack yawned. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting tired. What would you say about having dinner, getting cleaned up, and going to bed? We can always search the bottom two decks tomorrow. They're not going to go anywhere."

"Ok," Lily said. The two walked to the ship's pantry, which was connected to a small dining room. Lily looked at the supplies thoughtfully. "The galley might not be working, but I bet we can

use that portable camping stove to cook with. Why don't you go get cleaned up while I cook dinner?"

"But I don't have anything to change into!" Jack complained. "What am I supposed to do?"

Lily shook her head. "You could at least wash your face, dear. And shave. And maybe comb your hair. And wash your hands. Do you want me to make a complete list?"

"I get the picture," Jack grumbled. "I'll be back."

A half-hour later he returned, feeling much better. When he entered the ship's dining room he was surprised by what he saw. Lily had set a table with plates, silverware, glasses, and a portable lantern. Sitting on the table were plates stacked high with food. Lily was just pouring water into the glasses when Jack walked up.

Lily finished filling the glasses and set the pitcher down. Her husband walked over to her and kissed her. "I can't believe you actually fixed pancakes!"

"And bacon!" Lily pointed out. "And cinnamon toast, too. I couldn't find any orange juice, though, so we'll have to make due with water."

"That'll work fine!" Jack said. "Thank you so much. This looks wonderful."

The two sat down to eat. Jack was surprised at how hungry he was. "I guess those ration things aren't as filling as I thought."

"Maybe they're actually meant for aliens," Lily suggested. "By the way, what are your thoughts about the *Raptor*? Do you think you'll be able to get any of her working again?"

Jack leaned back in his chair and relaxed. Now that his stomach was full he felt much better. "The bridge is a total loss, of course. The engines are largely intact, but given the ship's massive structural damage it would be foolish to even attempt flight. So I don't think there's a point in trying to repair them."

"What about communications?" Lily asked.

"I'm getting to that," Jack replied. "The problem is I'm not very familiar with how interstellar communication works. For all I know that machinery might be largely intact and I just haven't recognized it. There are so many wires and machines on board



this ship that it boggles the mind. So my idea is to try to get the computer up and running. Maybe it could help us out.”

“Do you think that's even possible?” Lily asked.

“I'm going to try and find out!” Jack said. “The computer core is housed in the center of the ship. It's extremely well protected. The room was damaged in the crash but computers are something I know how to fix. I think I might be able to patch it back together again – enough to get by, anyway. The real problem, though, is going to be power. From what I could see the room that houses the power plant was totally destroyed. There's nothing in there that can be salvaged.”

“So what are you going to do?” Lily asked. “Can you use the energy cells from flashlights?”

Jack laughed. “I'm afraid not, dear. I have a feeling we're going to have to find a power supply somewhere in the city, and then somehow tie it into the ship.”

Lily paled. “I don't like the sound of that.”

“It's got to be done!” Jack replied. “But we can cross that bridge tomorrow. Right now I just want to get some sleep.”

Lily nodded. After they were done eating Jack washed the dishes while his wife got cleaned up and changed. The couple then went to bed. *Tomorrow's another day*, Jack thought as he drifted off to sleep. *Perhaps things are finally starting to look up for us.*

Jack and Lily slept in the next morning. The sun was high in the sky before the two finally got out of bed. When they saw the time they ate a quick meal and then headed to the stairwell.

“This isn't going to be easy,” Jack cautioned his wife. “There can't be much left of the first two floors of this ship. We may have a very difficult time trying to work our way through.”

The couple entered the stairwell and walked down a flight of stairs. When they got to the second level Jack suddenly froze. The stairwell door leading to the second floor had been forced off its hinges and was carefully laid against a wall. From the stairwell he could see that the second floor was filled with debris, but

someone had already cleared a pathway through it. The floor was covered in footprints – footprints that had clearly been made by someone after the ship crashed.

“Were you down here last night?” Jack asked his wife.

“Of course not!” she replied. “Were you?”

“Nope. But somebody was.”

Gathering up all his nerve, Jack grabbed the flashlight and stepped through the doorway onto the second floor. He flashed the light up and down the hallway. Sure enough, someone had cleared a path through the debris. At one point the visitor had used a weapon of some kind to cut a hole through a wall that had collapsed into the hallway. The trail ended at an open door.

Jack began walking down the path. His wife grabbed his arm. “Are you sure about this?” she asked.

“No,” he replied. “I’m not.” He resumed walking down the hallway, following the path that had already been cut. When he got to the end of the path he found himself standing in front of an open door. Jack shone his light inside the room. He gasped when he saw its contents.

“Weapons,” Lily said aloud. His wife was standing behind him. “I see lots and lots of weapons.”

Jack whistled. “You’re not kidding.” The walls of the room were lined with shelves, crates, and gun racks. He saw everything from a small laser pistol to crates of explosives to giant, menacing rifles.

After shining the light around and making sure that no one was hiding in the room the couple walked inside. “It looks like someone has cleaned the place up,” Lily remarked.

Jack had to agree. The weapons had obviously been banged up in the crash and covered in dirt, but someone had neatly put them all back into boxes and onto shelves. On a few weapons Jack could see fingerprints that had been left behind.

Lily pointed to a gun rack on the wall. “I see what they came for.”

Jack nodded. The rack had room for ten large rifles, but only nine were there. One of them was missing. Jack walked over and

removed one of the weapons from the rack. It was a large, black rifle with a huge barrel and a shoulder strap. "What do you suppose this is?" he asked.

Lily looked at it. "It kind of looks like a laser rifle but it's much too big. I've never seen anything quite like it before."

"It's got the Starlight Enterprise symbol on it," Jack remarked. "Maybe it's a special weapon only for Starmen."

"I didn't think Starmen carried weapons," Lily said.

Jack shrugged. "I have no idea. Maybe they do when they're on dangerous missions." Jack slung the weapon over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked.

"Let me put it this way," Jack said. "We need energy to start the ship's computer, right?"

"Right."

"So we're going to have to make a trip into the city, right?"

Lily paused. "Yeah. We are."

"Do you really want to go back there unarmed?"

"Not really. But neither of us have even seen that weapon before! We have no idea how to use it. Why not take one of these laser pistols? They look a lot easier to figure out."

Jack shook his head. "Whoever was in here left the smaller guns behind and took the biggest weapon in here. I'm guessing there was a good reason for that."

"Who do you think was in here?" his wife asked.

"I'm hoping it was Alice Montaine," Jack replied. "If not then we may have a problem. A really big problem."



## Chapter 9: The Powers That Be

JACK AND LILY were in the weapons room of the *Raptor*, searching it for clues that might reveal the identity of the being that had recently visited it. Their search was interrupted by a noise in the distance. The sound began as a whisper but it quickly rose in volume until the ship itself began to shake. After a hair-raising minute it gradually faded away until it had entirely disappeared.

Jack turned to his wife. “Did you hear *that*?”

“Are you kidding?” his wife replied. “Do you think I’m deaf? How could I have missed it?”

“What did it sound like to you?”

“It sounded kind of like energy,” Lily replied slowly. “I know that doesn’t make any sense, but that’s what it sounded like to me. If energy had a sound that would be it.”

Jack nodded thoughtfully. “That’s what I thought too. It kind of sounded like some big machine suddenly roared to life. I could be wrong, but I bet something was just turned on – and since this room is still dark I’m pretty sure it wasn’t this ship. My guess is –”

“The city,” his wife finished.

“Right.” Jack swung the rifle over his shoulder and looked around. “Well, I think we’re done here. My bones tell me we have work to do elsewhere. Are you sure you don’t want one of these portable cannon-like things? It might come in handy.”

Lily shook her head. She picked up one of the small laser guns and a holster, and tied it around her waist. “No thanks. I’ll stick with something that looks reasonable and sane.”

Jack smiled. "All right. So shall we be going? I'd like to find out what caused that noise."

"Sure," his wife replied. "I'm right behind you." The two of them left the weapons room and headed back to the stairwell. They then walked up to the third floor and carefully made their way out of the ship. Once they had reached the planet's surface they started hiking toward the city. The city could not be seen from the crash site of the *Raptor*, so there was no immediate way to tell if their theory was right. All they could do is keep walking.

Lily spoke up. "You know, dear, most reasonable people would want to run away from strange noises on alien planets."

Jack shrugged. "I suppose. And I bet those reasonable people would go on to lead long and happy lives. But we need a power source to get the *Raptor*'s computers going again, and as it turns out I am fresh out of power sources. My bones tell me that somewhere a really big machine just got turned on, and I have a feeling that a really big machine would probably have a power source of some kind. All we need to do is find out what it is and we're in business."

"Right," Lily agreed. "Because it can't possibly be difficult to connect an alien power source to modern electronics. Why, you can probably get a converter cable at your local convenience store."

"One step at a time," her husband said, grinning. "First let's find that power source. *Then* we'll worry about finding a way to use it. No sense in borrowing trouble."

The couple walked to the crest of a small hill. When they reached the top they froze in their tracks. In front of them, past the hill, they could see the city they had fled from the day before. Today, however, the city had changed dramatically. The formerly desolate city was now encased in a glowing blue field of some kind. Through the semi-transparent field they could see that the buildings themselves were emitting a brilliant blue light that could easily be discerned in the daylight.

Jack whistled. "It certainly didn't look like that yesterday! What do you think happened?"

“There are three options that I can think of,” Lily said. “Either we’re responsible, or someone else is responsible, or it just happened on its own and is a wild coincidence.”

Jack nodded thoughtfully. “Personally, I’m going to go with the wild coincidence. That’s the one that makes me feel the most confident about what we’re about to do. C’mon, let’s go down and check it out.”

Jack grabbed his wife’s hand and the two of them started walking toward the city. When they were right in front of the field his wife grabbed him. “Hold on a minute. Did you see that?”

“See what?” he asked.

“Look!” his wife said, pointing. A breeze was blowing along the ground, stirring up little clouds of gritty black dust. Once the clouds were formed the wind gently pushed them along the ground. When the dust came into contact with the blue field, however, it simply vanished.

Jack’s eyes widened. “Now that is unusual. You don’t suppose that would happen to us if we walked into it, do you?”

“It’s possible, don’t you think?” his wife asked. “I mean, isn’t that the whole point of force fields? To keep out unwanted things? And don’t you think we just might fall into the category of ‘unwanted things’?”

Her husband thought a moment. He then bent down to the ground, picked up a small rock, and threw it at the city. When the rock came into contact with the transparent blue shield it simply vanished in a flash of light. Jack then removed one of the tasteless food rations from his pocket and hurled it at the shield. It passed through effortlessly.

“So it doesn’t just destroy everything that it comes into contact with,” Jack remarked. He slowly extended his hand toward the field.

Lily grabbed it and pulled him back. “Are you crazy? Do you want to lose your entire arm?”

“Do you have any other ideas?” Jack asked. “I’ll touch it slowly and gently. If anything goes wrong I’ll stop. It will be fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

"Uh-huh," his wife said. "Unless when you touch the field it vaporizes your entire body. Then I'll have to save the planet by myself. Plus, I'm pretty sure your life insurance doesn't cover 'death by alien force field'."

"You're probably right. But I think my accidental death and dismemberment insurance would cover it. I seem to remember asking my employer about that when I signed up for benefits."

"Fine!" his wife said, stepping back. "Have it your way. But if it kills you don't come and complain to me! I warned you."

Jack smiled. He then slowly reached his hand out and touched the blue field. To his enormous relief his hand easily passed through it without harm. Gathering courage, Jack walked into the field and effortlessly breezed right through. After he had safely reached the other side he turned and looked at his wife. "See? I told you it would be fine! It didn't even damage my weapon. Come on! It's a long hike to the city center."

Lily cautiously walked through the shield. Once she was safely on the other side she shuddered. "That was terrifying! How do we get into these situations?"

Jack laughed. "It comes from leading an exciting life on the frontiers of space, exploring places where saner people would never go. This is high adventure, dear!"

Lily smiled. "Just don't let it go to your head, dear. When we get home you've got a desk job to go back to. Don't get any crazy ideas about changing careers."

"We can talk about that when we get home," Jack agreed. "Right now I think we're still trying to save civilization."

The couple began jogging toward the center of the city, where the tallest buildings were located. They were still sore from their exertions over the past several days, but much of the initial pain had dissipated. Having a few good meals and a good night's sleep had worked wonders for both of them.

After a while Jack started noticing that the city was actually almost unchanged from the day before. Aside from the glowing buildings and the protective blue shield nothing else was different. The city was still empty and the buildings were still



ruined shells of their former selves. Jack was about to point this out to his observant wife when suddenly a person materialized in front of them.

Jack immediately stopped. His wife grabbed him. “Do you see that?” she hissed.

Her husband nodded but said nothing. The man that was standing in front of them was almost a foot taller than Jack. He looked very much like a human and was dressed in a long, flowing white robe and appeared to be an elderly gentleman with short white hair. What drew Jack's attention the most, though, was that the man had six fingers on each hand – four normal fingers and two opposable thumbs.

The man smiled at them and started speaking in an alien language. Jack frowned. “Excuse me, sir, but I'm afraid I'm not getting any of that. Do you speak any other languages?”

The figure's expression did not change. He continued talking as if nothing had happened.

“Do you realize what that sounds like?” his wife whispered.

Jack shook his head. He waved a hand in front of the stranger's face but the man did not respond. “Nope, I don't. It sure doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard before.”

“Nonsense!” his wife replied in a low voice. “You heard that same language yesterday, in the basement of that building. Remember? It's the same thing – words that sound like breaking glass!”

“Wow! I'd forgotten. You know, I think you're right.” Jack picked up a small piece of metal from the ground and threw it at the man. It passed effortlessly through him.

Lily put her face in her hands. “Jack! Are you out of your mind? What if he *hadn't* been a hologram? Whatever possessed you to throw a rock at an alien on a hostile planet?”

“It wasn't a rock, it was a piece of metal,” her husband pointed out. “And besides, the guy wasn't responding at all. I had a feeling he wasn't actually real. I think he's a recording of some kind.”

Lily sighed. “So what do we do now?”

Jack looked around. The center of the city was still an hour's hike ahead of them, but there were sizable buildings on either side. "Why not explore one of the towers right here? Maybe we'll get lucky."

"But what about the alien?"

Jack shrugged. "For all we know he might stand there and babble on for hours. We can't understand what he's saying and standing here listening to him isn't going to change that. There's no point in hanging around."

"But don't you want to know what he's saying?"

"I suppose, but as it turns out I don't speak many unknown alien languages. It's a lost cause. We'd be better off moving on to something that is *not* a lost cause – like locating a power source."

Jack held onto his wife's hand and the two of them walked into the nearest skyscraper. After they entered the building they searched the ground floor. Sure enough, at the rear of the building was an elevator shaft, and not far from the elevator was an old stairwell.

"Look at this!" Jack exclaimed, as they opened the door and walked into the stairwell. "It goes down into a basement. Are we in luck or what?"

"Don't most tall buildings have basements?" Lily asked.

"Probably, come to think of it. Isn't there some structural reason for it? Maybe tall buildings have to have a large basement to stay balanced."

"Aren't you confusing a basement with a foundation?" his wife asked.

"Maybe. I forget. I guess taking that engineering class in school wouldn't have been such a waste of time after all. Oh well." The couple quickly descended the staircase. When they got to the lowest level Jack spotted an airlock door with a glowing control panel beside it. After thinking back on his experience with the airlock yesterday he walked up to it and pressed a button. The door opened.

"Are you sure we should do this?" Lily asked, as she followed her husband into the airlock. "You remember what happened last

time!”

“Do you have an alternate plan?”

Lily shook her head. Jack pressed a button on the inner control panel, and the door they had just stepped through slid shut. The inner door then opened.

To their surprise the inner door did not open into a room filled with holoscreens. Instead, through the opening they could see a balcony that overlooked a giant plaza that stretched for hundreds of feet. The balcony extended like a catwalk around the entire open area, circling it.

Jack walked over to the balcony and looked down. The opening extended for eight stories below them and four stories above them. Each floor had its own balcony and a series of crisscrossing staircases connected the floors to each other. The entire room was lit with a white light that appeared to have no obvious source.

“It looks like a giant mall,” Lily said. “It’s beautiful.”

“Or at least it used to be,” her husband commented. “I bet at one time there used to be fountains and trees and other things in here. Now it’s just a big empty room. There aren’t even any decorations!”

“Not entirely,” his wife corrected. She pointed to the level below them at a giant glowing holoscreen.

Jack looked at it and squinted, trying to see what it was displaying. He frowned. “Why doesn’t this planet have anything other than holoscreens, Lily? Where are the filing cabinets? Where are the ping pong tables? Where is the fine cuisine? What kind of giant city only has computer screens, of all things?”

Lily shook her head. “Maybe that’s all that survived. Or maybe the city is just a giant computer. Or maybe aliens just have poor interior decorating skills. Regardless, I think if you want to read that display you’re going to have to actually go down there and look at it.”

Jack laughed. The couple made their way to the nearest staircase and walked down it to the lower level. They then made their way along the balcony to the giant holoscreen.

Jack studied it for a moment. "It's clearly a map. I can't make out any of the writing, but it's definitely a map of this area. Do you see anything that looks like a power source?"

Lily studied the map closely. She glanced over the balcony to the floor below, and then looked back at the map. Lily then reached up and touched one of the buttons on the screen.

Jack's eyes widened in shock. "Hey there! You told me we weren't supposed to be pushing buttons."

"But I knew what that one was going to do," Lily explained. "This screen is now showing a map of the lowest level of the plaza. These buttons tell the map to show a different floor. My guess is that if there's a power source nearby it's probably at some protected location, like a lower level. So I pressed the last button. As you can see, the map has changed."

Jack nodded. "It does look like there's something below this area. But how do we get there?"

Lily pointed to a stairwell on the display. "That's our ticket! Let's head there and see what we find."

As Jack and Lily turned to go they saw the alien materialize in front of them. It began talking to them in the same tone that it had before. Jack waved his hand in front of it but it did not respond.

"There's still nobody home," Jack remarked. "Nothing to see here. Let's go!"

The couple made their way down flight after flight of stairs and finally reached the ground floor. Jack followed his wife as she led him to the staircase she had found on the map. They then walked down the stairs to the basement.

At the bottom of the stairwell was a large door made out of blue metal. Jack look at the symbols surrounding the door and smiled. "I don't need a crash-course in alien languages to know what *that* says. That door has 'danger' written all over it."

As Jack walked up to the door the alien appeared directly in front of him for a third time. This time the alien appeared agitated.

"I don't think he wants you to go in there," Lily said.

Jack once again waved his hand in front of the alien's face.

The alien did not respond. "It's still just a recording. Until we're connected to a live person I think ignoring him is all we can do." Jack walked up to the door and tried to open it but it did not budge. The giant metal door was locked.

"I guess we'll have to do this the hard way," Jack sighed. He took a step back and aimed his rifle at it.

Lily grabbed his arm. "Don't even think about it, Jack! For all we know that could destroy the entire building. Let me open it with my pistol."

Jack nodded and stepped out of the way. Lily aimed her hand-held laser pistol at the edge of the door. She pulled the trigger and in a swift move she sliced the door open. After releasing the trigger Lily walked up to the door and pushed on it. The door fell over onto the ground with a loud clang. As soon as the door hit the ground the holographic person disappeared.

Jack smiled. "Nice work!" Lily nodded and placed her weapon back in its holster.

On the other side of the door was a long, wide hallway with a metal floor, a metal ceiling, and frosted glass walls. Every hundred feet the glass walls were interrupted by a glass door. The hallway continued on far into the distance.

Lily spoke up. "I may be wrong, but I think this parallels the street above us."

"Could be," Jack said. "Maybe this is some kind of corridor that runs under all of the buildings."

As they walked down the endless corridor they peered through the frosted glass. The glass was difficult to see through but they could tell that on the other side of the glass were rows and rows of giant machines. The machines appeared to emit a blue light.

Jack walked up to one of the glass doors and opened it. After stepping through to the other side of the frosted glass he walked up to the nearest machine to get a closer look. The giant machines were a maze of complicated tubes, wiring, and readouts, all of which were covered in alien symbols. All of the machines appeared to be slightly different; a few were only ten feet long

while others were several times that size. What most struck Jack, however, were the glowing blue cylinders that each machine was centered around. Each cylinder was approximately three feet long and was made of some type of transparent material. Within it was a bright blue fire.

“What do you think all of this is for?” his wife asked.

“Beats me,” he replied. “If I was a Starman I could wave some magical gadget in front of it and find out that it replicates snack foods, or something. All I know is that it's big, it's complicated, it's alien, and it seems to draw power from those blue cylinder things.”

“That blue is *everywhere*,” Lily commented. “This city has blue walls, blue buildings, and a blue force field. Whoever built this city must have really liked that particular color.”

“Maybe there's a reason for that,” Jack said thoughtfully. “Would you have any objections if I tried to remove that glowing blue cylinder and took it back to the *Raptor*?”

Lily shook her head. “Go for it. That looks like the only removable piece of the entire machine. If it's as light as it looks you should be able to carry it. But what do you think is going to happen when you remove it? What if someone complains?”

Jack laughed. “I'm not really frightened by ancient holographic recordings. I think we'll be fine.”

Jack carefully studied the machine for a moment. He then reached over and opened some clamps. “I like this! Easily removable. Now *that's* what I'm talking about.”

Jack placed his hands on the cylinder, grabbed it, and pulled. After a brief struggle it popped out of the machine. To his relief the cylinder continued to glow after it had been removed. Jack turned to his wife, smiling in triumph. “Well, that went —”

He was interrupted by a warning siren. The white lights went out and a pulsing orange light filled the room. The siren continued to wail.

Lily suddenly screamed and pointed. About three hundred feet away there was a metal door embedded in the wall behind one of the machines. This door had just opened and a giant robot was in

the process of stepping out of it. The robot was vaguely humanoid, but what most struck Jack was that it was at least eight feet tall and was carrying what looked like a large, dangerous weapon. As they watched the robot's head swiveled in their direction. When Jack saw what was about to happen he grabbed his wife and yanked her back behind the machine. A moment later the robot fired!

The blue bolt from the robot's gun just barely missed them. It struck the glass wall behind them, shattering it into a thousand dangerous shards. The entire hundred-foot pane of frosted glass fell to the ground, scattering pieces everywhere.

Jack quickly handed his wife the blue cylinder he was carrying. He then unslung the rifle from his shoulder, jumped out from behind the machine, and fired it in the robot's general direction. To his surprise the rifle did not send out a searing laser bolt. Instead, a brilliant white projectile shot out of the gun. The projectile missed the robot by about two feet and smashed into the wall behind it.

When the projectile struck the wall there was a fantastic roar and a brilliant flash of white light. The entire area erupted in flame and smoke. Since Lily was behind a machine she was protected from the blast, but the shockwave caught Jack and launched him across the room. He flew through the broken glass wall and was thrown down the hallway. His laser gun went flying and he crashed painfully onto the ground.

As the smoke cleared Lily ran to her husband's side and helped him off the ground. Once he was on his feet she picked up his rifle and gave it back to him. Jack stood up and took a look at the damage. He could not believe what he saw. The entire area where the robot used to be was simply gone. The wall was gone. The door was gone. Even the machines that had been near the robot were gone. There was simply nothing left. The surrounding ceiling and floor were badly charred.

Jack looked at the devastation in disbelief. "What on earth was *that*?"

"I don't think we want to know what your gun fired," Lily

said. Overhead a warning siren continued to wail.

“Let's get out of here,” Jack urged. He nodded toward another metal door in the far side of the hallway. “I don't know about you, but I don't think this city likes us anymore. Let's take that door topside and get out of here.”

Lily grabbed the blue cylinder and nodded. “I'm right behind you!”



## Chapter 10: Answers

A FEW minutes later Jack and Lily emerged from the underground plaza and made their way back onto the street. The explosion had temporarily dazed Jack, but with the help of his wife he was able to make it up the stairs and to the surface without incident. So far they had not been followed, but neither of them let their guard down. Lily continued to hold onto the glowing blue cylinder and Jack gripped his rifle, ready to shoot at anything that moved.

“That could have gone a lot better,” Lily remarked.

Jack nodded. “Sure. But at least we got what we came for! At least, I hope we did. If it turns out that cylinder is not an energy cell then we get to do that all over again.”

He took a moment to survey the area before they moved on. All around them were towering skyscrapers, ruined from extreme age. There was not a sound to be heard anywhere. The metal frames of the buildings that surrounded them emitted a blue light that matched the rays coming from the cylinder that Lily was holding. Overhead the weak sun was hidden by a bank of gray clouds. Jack saw nothing that looked dangerous.

“Let's head back —” he began, and then he heard a whistling noise in the distance. Jack grabbed his wife and they dove for cover in a nearby building. As soon as they got inside a large shadow appeared in the street behind them, completely blocking out the sun.

Jack peered out the door of the building they were hiding in and looked up. Overhead was a large vessel of some kind. The

underside of it was made of a smooth, blue metal. "I can't believe it," Jack muttered to himself. "That ship is at least the size of four city blocks! Where does this planet hide all this stuff? First robots, now ships..."

Jack aimed his rifle at it and fired. The white bolt shot harmlessly through the ship and struck a skyscraper on the other side. With an enormous *pow* the massive building exploded! There was a brilliant flash of white light, followed by a shockwave that rattled the entire block. Pieces of metal flew everywhere.

Lily's eyes widened. "Jack!" she screamed. He followed her gaze and saw that the explosion had carved an enormous hole out of the building about five hundred feet off the ground. The hole had damaged the skyscraper's structural integrity and the top half of it was beginning to collapse. With an enormous groan Jack saw girders begin to snap like toothpicks. The upper portion of the building then leaned over and crashed into a neighboring structure. Both buildings then tumbled to the ground in a mighty roar. A huge cloud of dust appeared, pushing shards of metal down the street at high speeds.

By the time the dust settled down the ship could no longer be seen. It had simply vanished. Jack shook his head. "I can't believe it! It was just an illusion – like that annoying alien that keeps popping up everywhere. It wasn't real! Who do they think they are?"

"*Please* stop firing that weapon," Lily pleaded. "Suppose the top of that building had fallen on us instead of its neighbor. Where would we be?"

Jack shook his head. "I know, dear, I know. But you can hardly expect to destroy an alien mothership with a hand-held laser pistol!"

"But the ship wasn't real," Lily pointed out. "There was nothing there to destroy!"

"That robot was real, though," Jack replied. "The ship could have been real. How was I to know?"

Lily sighed. "Let's just get out of here. Nothing good ever

comes of being in this city.”

Jack and Lily stepped out onto the street. The way forward was blocked by debris from the fallen building, so the couple took a series of side-streets to go around the obstruction. After they were on the other side they began the long hike back to the desert.

After ten minutes had gone by and nothing else had happened Jack breathed a sigh of relief. “I guess they’ve had enough,” he said quietly. “Maybe they’ll leave us in peace now.”

At that moment Jack heard a crunching noise behind them. He whirled around in time to see a huge cloud of dust and debris form a few blocks behind them, not far from where they used to be. Jack frowned. “How many buildings did we destroy, anyway? Did I miss something?”

“Maybe the collapse of those first two weakened the foundation of another structure,” Lily suggested. “None of these buildings look very safe. It might not take much to knock them over.”

As the dust settled there was suddenly a blue flash of light, followed by a loud *crack*. Before the echoes from the sound had even died down the the city suddenly went dark. All of the buildings simultaneously stopped glowing and the shield that protected the city vanished.

Jack grimaced. “Please tell me that wasn’t my fault.”

“I’m pretty sure it actually was, dear. After all, you were the one that decided to start shooting at everything in sight!”

“I didn’t quite mean to destroy the city’s power grid,” Jack said ruefully. “But maybe something good will come out of this. It’s just possible that the city will leave us alone now and stop sending giant killer robots after us.”

“Let’s not stick around and find out,” his wife suggested.

“Agreed,” Jack replied.

The couple resumed their hike. The sun was directly overhead by the time they reached the *Raptor*. “At least the ship is still here!” he said cheerfully. The two of them boarded the ruined starship. When Lily began walking toward the stairwell, however, Jack stopped her. “I know it’s lunchtime, but would you mind if I

went ahead to the computer room and got things going? I'm not very hungry and I'd like to get a start on things. Connecting that blue cylinder to the ship's computers is not going to be easy."

Lily shrugged. "Go right ahead. Is there anything I can help with?"

Jack shook his head. "Sorry, dear. I mean, I love you and all but without a degree in electronics there's just not much you can do."

"What if I keep a lookout?" Lily asked. "It might be nice to have some advance notice that we're about to be attacked. So far we've just assumed that nothing on this planet means us any harm, but I'm not sure that's a valid assumption anymore. Not after you blew up their city, anyway."

"True," Jack said thoughtfully. "They may get a little testy about that. Do you want to borrow my rifle?"

Lily shook her head vigorously. "I don't even want to *touch* that thing. I wish you'd get rid of it, Jack. It's dangerous."

Jack laughed. "That's the whole idea behind weapons, dear! They're *supposed* to be dangerous. But I get your point." Jack took the blue cylinder from his wife and headed into the rear of the ship, while his wife dusted off a chair and sat near a gash in the ship's hull. From where she was sitting she had a clear view of the surrounding desert, but it would be difficult for anyone outside to see her.

Jack made his way to the room that housed the ship's computers and scoured the area for tools. After he found everything he needed he started working. An hour later he was interrupted by his wife.

"How's it going?" she asked.

Jack looked up from the computer that he had just dismantled. Parts lay strewn all over the ground, and the blue cylinder was now connected to a maze of wires. "Kind of slow, actually," he replied. "I'm pretty sure this thing is producing power but I'm having a terrible time extracting it. And that's just the easy part! After I find a way to get the energy out I've still got to convert it into something that won't fry every piece of machinery in this

room. It's not very easy."

"You'll get it," his wife said confidently. "No intruders have approached us, by the way, so we're good there. Are you getting hungry?"

"Come to think of it, I am," Jack said thoughtfully. "Do you think you could fix me a sandwich or something?"

"Sure," she replied. "I'll be right back."

Jack watched his wife disappear and then turned his attention back to the job at hand. Twenty minutes later Lily returned bearing sandwiches and a drink. Jack thanked his wife, ate the meal, and then returned to work.

After lunch Lily resumed her guard duty. Three hours later, however, she walked back into the energy room. This time she found Jack staring intently at the blue cylinder.

"Any luck?" she asked.

Jack sighed. "I'm not sure. So far this afternoon I've ruined almost a half-dozen power transformers. Apparently I've found a *great* way to destroy perfectly-good machinery. This thing excels at that."

"Well, that's progress!" Lily said encouragingly. She found a chair in the corner of the room and sat down. "Mind if I watch the fun? It's kind of boring outside."

Jack sighed. "Guard duty is *supposed* to be boring, dear. If it's not boring then that means aliens are invading, and that's a bad thing. The more boring it is the better."

Lily shook her head. "That's easy for you to say – at least you have something to do! I just have *rocks* to look at. Do you know how exciting it is to stare at rocks for hours on end? And it's not like these are pretty rocks, either. They're black. They're ugly. They're not the least bit exciting. They don't even have anything interesting to say."

"I don't know that this is going to be much better," Jack replied. "I've yet to meet a power transformer that was a good conversationalist. But you're welcome to stay and watch if you want! I won't make the love of my life leave the room and go do something else."

"Thanks," she said, smiling. "So what are you doing now?"

"I'm about to plug in the cylinder again and watch it burn out another transformer," Jack said. "Are you ready?"

Lily nodded. Jack gritted his teeth and carefully set the blue cylinder down inside his makeshift connector. Instantly the transformer hummed to life!

Jack looked at a power meter that he had connected to the circuit. "Ok, wait for it..."

Without warning the room suddenly came to life! The handful of unbroken lights that dangled from the room's ceiling began glowing. Many of the computers in the room were damaged, but the undamaged ones powered up and started to boot. Rows and rows of tiny orange and green lights began blinking.

"Wow!" Jack exclaimed. "I can't believe it. It actually worked! This must be my lucky day. But how long will it hold, I wonder?"

Lily stuck her head out into the hallway. "It looks like the lights are on in a few other rooms too! At least, the lights that are still intact."

Jack nodded. "So that's good. The next question is —"

He was interrupted when a holographic figure appeared in the room. The figure was of a woman slightly shorter than him, with short red hair, green eyes, and a stylish orange uniform.

Jack groaned. "Please tell me it's not another hologram! I am so tired of dealing with holograms today."

The woman's eyes widened. "I apologize for your inconvenience, Jack Rossman. Is there any way I can help?"

Jack gasped. "It *talks*!"

"Of course," the woman replied. "My name is Rachel. I am the computer for the starship *Raptor*. Or, perhaps, the former starship. The few sensors I have left indicate extensive damage."

"It's nice to meet you," Lily replied. "My name is Lily."

Rachel nodded. "I know. I apologize for the role I played in abducting both of you. I did not realize what was going on until we reached Lemura. I then attempted to remedy my mistake but by then it was tragically too late."

“Too late for what?” Lily asked.

Rachel looked at her sadly. “Too late for many things, I am afraid. Too late to stop Alice Montaine from stealing the Third Treasure. Too late to return you to Eagle City. Too late to contact the authorities and let them know that they have a dangerous problem.”

“Wait a minute!” Jack exclaimed. “Hold on. *Who* stole the Third Treasure?”

“Alice Montaine did,” Rachel replied. “You see, some time ago she came to believe that the weapon that was used to destroy the First Races is hidden inside a secret chamber on this planet. She also came to believe that someone was trying to break into that chamber and steal the weapon – presumably so they could use it against mankind.”

“Who are the First Races?” Lily whispered.

“I’ll explain later,” Jack replied. “Let her finish.”

Rachel continued. “Alice brought this information to Caedmon Starlight, but instead of acting on her recommendation he told her to study the problem further. All of this I knew. What I did not realize until too late, however, was that after Caedmon rejected her advice Alice decided to take matters into her own hands. She tricked Mayor Seaton into giving her access to the computer systems that guarded the Third Treasure, and she used that access to plant a virus in each system. That virus brought Eagle City to its knees, shutting down its defenses and allowing her to steal the Third Treasure.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense!” Jack said. “Everyone in town saw Alice board the *Molly* and chase the thief that had stolen the *Raptor*. Besides, the creature that forced me to transport the Third Treasure out of the museum was a black alien shadow, not a human.”

Rachel shook her head. “That creature was Alice in an Ahmanyen invisibility cloak. She had adjusted it to give off the appearance of a shadow in order to conceal her true identity. Disguising her voice was not hard. It is true that she boarded the *Molly*, but like many ships of its class the freighter had a

wormhole transporter. It was a simple matter for her to transport herself into your work environment and then transport back to the *Molly*.”

“But someone stole the *Raptor*!” Jack protested. “We all saw it happen.”

“Nobody stole me,” Rachel replied. “I did not even realize I had been reported stolen. Alice simply contacted me and told me to leave immediately for Lemura. She said something had come up and she would meet me there. When your wife appeared on board she claimed that she was a spy and asked me to keep her in stasis, so I did. When you came after her I assumed you were a spy as well and placed you in stasis with her. I am deeply sorry for this misunderstanding. I take full responsibility for it. I should not have been as trusting.”

“I just can't believe it,” Jack repeated. “When did you find out the truth?”

“It was when the *Molly* entered orbit. I immediately detected the Third Treasure on board her ship and realized what had happened. I contacted Alice and told her that I was going to report her to the authorities. Instead of surrendering, however, she opened fire on me. I returned fire in hope of disabling her ship and recovering the stolen artifact. When I saw that Alice had transported off the ship I destroyed it so she would be trapped on the planet and unable to escape. Sadly, her last salvo destroyed me as well. I was not able to call for help.”

“So what do we do now?” Lily asked.

“Panic,” Jack said. “I think this would be the perfect time to panic.”

Rachel looked at Jack curiously. “Why is that?”

“Lots of reasons! Let's see.” He started ticking reasons off on his fingers. “We're trapped on an alien planet. The planet is trying to kill us. The only other human being on this planet is a rogue Starman that kidnapped both of us. And there's no way to call for help. Do you want me to continue?”

“You have to stop her,” Rachel said. “You must recover the Third Treasure. That artifact contains some very dangerous



information. Alice may be planning to use that knowledge to destroy this entire planet.”

“But Alice is alone here, right?” Jack asked. “Surely she needs more than just a crystal ball to do some real damage.”

“She may be alone but she is not without supplies. On her previous trip here she established a base camp deep below the planet’s surface that she stocked liberally with supplies. She has enough claytronic material with her to produce almost any of the machines that are recorded within the Treasure.”

Jack whistled. “Oh boy. And just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse! Do you have any other wonderful bits of news to add to this conversation?”

Rachel nodded. “I do. Someone on this planet has noticed that I am now operational again and has fired a guided missile at us. It will strike us in less than thirty seconds.”

Jack’s mouth fell open. “Are you serious?”

“Run!” Rachel shouted.

Before Jack could respond Lily was already out the door and down the hall. Jack raced after her but to his surprise he could not overtake her. It took them less than ten seconds to leave the ship. Once outside Lily ran out into the desert, as far away from the vessel as possible. Jack followed after her as fast as he could go. He had almost caught up with her when he heard a whistling noise behind him. “Hit the ground!” he shouted.

His wife dove onto the desert floor and Jack followed suit. Seconds later he heard an enormous explosion. His head was buried in the ground but he could feel a searing heat behind him and knew that a huge fireball had just gone up. The sound from the blast temporarily deafened him.

Jack rolled over and looked at the ship. What he saw did not surprise him. “It’s gone,” he said softly. A giant crater now sat where the battered hull of the *Raptor* used to be. The blast had tore the starship into shrapnel and scattered its tiny pieces all over the desert. There was nothing left of the once mighty vessel but small shards of metal.



## Chapter 11: In The Lion's Den

WHEN THE debris from the *Raptor* finally stopped raining down from the sky Jack stood to his feet and looked around. What he saw was enormously disheartening. All of his hopes of escape had been pinned on the *Raptor* and that vessel had been completely destroyed. There was nothing left but an endless black desert, a gray sky, and thousands of small bits of shrapnel.

Lily stood up and put her arm around her husband. “So what do we do now?”

Jack shrugged. “I don't know, dear. At this point I am all out of ideas. All of our food and water was on that ship, and you can see what's left of it. There's no point in staying out here in the desert but at the same time the city hasn't exactly been welcoming us with open arms. I think we're just out of luck.”

“Maybe we shouldn't have left all of our supplies on board,” Lily said thoughtfully. “Now that I think about it I guess we did put all of our eggs in one basket. It just never occurred to me that someone might want to attack a starship that had already been ruined beyond repair.”

“That's probably one of the first things they teach you in Starlight Academy,” Jack quipped. “But it's too late now, and honestly I don't ever see us being in this situation again. Things like this rarely happen to people who mind their own business. The fact is, we're out of supplies – and on top of that we're out of weapons too. My rifle was in the ship when it exploded.”

“I've still got my laser pistol, though,” Lily said. She patted the holster that was strapped to her waist. “So that's something!”

Jack managed a weak smile. "If only we could eat photons for breakfast we'd be home free!"

Lily kissed her husband. "So what do we do now?"

"Well —" Jack began. A moment later the couple was enveloped in white light. They felt a vague sensation of being transported somewhere. When the light cleared they found themselves in a large room with blue metal walls. The room was filled with bits of machinery and crates of supplies. Standing directly in front of them, however, was a tall, blond girl with amber eyes. She was wearing a red Starman uniform.

Jack looked around, startled. "What just happened?"

"I am so sorry!" the Starman said. "I really am. When I fired that missile I had *no idea* that you and your wife were on board. I am so glad you got out of there before it hit. I feel *terrible* about it. You could have been killed!"

Lily looked at the Starman in surprise. "Are you Alice Montaine?"

The girl nodded. "I'm afraid so. I have a bad feeling the two of you don't think very highly of me right now. I know I haven't treated you very well, but I honestly never meant for any of this to happen. Things just kind of spiraled out of control."

"Where are we?" Jack asked.

"You're in a maze of twisty passages that are deep beneath the planet's surface," Alice explained. "This particular room is about a mile underground. The only way down here is by transporter, and even then it isn't easy. When I saw the two of you run out of the *Raptor* I realized I had just destroyed all of your supplies and almost killed you in the bargain. So I immediately transported both of you down here. It was the least I could do."

Lily turned to her husband. "How could she see us from way down here?"

"She's got Starman equipment," Jack whispered. "She can probably do all kinds of magical things."

"Oh," Lily replied.

Jack spoke up. "So why exactly did you fire on the *Raptor*?"

"Did you repair the ship?" Alice asked.

Jack nodded. "I sure did. Spent all afternoon doing it, too, just to watch all of my work go up in flames. Literally."

Alice winced. "I'm sorry. You see, the *Raptor* has self-healing capabilities. I thought maybe the ship had repaired itself and was about to contact the authorities. I couldn't let that happen."

"Rachel explained that to us," Jack said. "She kind of filled us in on what's been going on."

"Ah," Alice said. She paused. "Rachel probably isn't too happy with me right now. I can imagine what she told you."

"I doubt she cares very much anymore!" Lily replied tartly. "You just blew her up. There's nothing of her left."

"She was just a machine," Alice said dismissively. "That's all. She became a hindrance to the mission and so she had to go. But you do realize I had no choice, right? I didn't want to destroy my own starship but what else could I do?"

"What about *not* destroy it?" Jack asked. "I hear that has been known to work wonders."

Alice glanced at the equipment that was scattered around the room. She then looked back at Jack. "Do you have *any idea* what I'm trying to do down here or how important all of this is?"

"Why don't you tell us?" Jack replied. "I've got all day."

"Look. There is something evil in that chamber down the hall. I have *got* to destroy it before it gets loose. Someone out there is trying to free it, and I just don't have the time to mind my manners and be civilized about this. There just isn't time! When Caedmon Starlight wouldn't loan me Tharsos I *had* to steal the Third Treasure. There is nothing else that could possibly crack the protective barrier."

Lily gasped. "You wanted to borrow *Tharsos*?"

"Exactly," Alice said. "That is exactly what he said. Nobody understands! Mankind hasn't been attacked for so long that they've forgotten all about security. We think everything is going to be fine and dandy just because it's *always* been fine and dandy. We can't imagine that somewhere out there somebody is trying to kill us all. Since nobody was willing to take the threat seriously I had to do what was necessary. I had to save you people from

yourselves.”

“You tried to kill us!” Jack exclaimed. “Twice, in fact!”

Alice shook her head. “You don't understand. I had no choice! I really thought the wormhole barrier would go down when Eagle City lost power and allow me to transport the Treasure out of the museum. I didn't plan on involving any innocent bystanders! When the shield didn't fail, though, I had to get some help and that's where you came in. And when you wouldn't cooperate I had to twist your arm. I didn't like doing it but I didn't have a lot of time.”

“You took my wife hostage!” Jack screamed.

“But I didn't hurt her. I just had Rachel put her in stasis. My plan was to return her to you after I finished my work here on Lemura. I was going to keep my word but you didn't give me a chance! Then when you showed up I had to put you in stasis as well. I didn't mean you any harm.”

“Do you know how many times we almost died?” Jack shouted. “Thanks to you we were on that starship of yours when you tried to blow it to pieces. We would have died right then and there if it hadn't been for that escape pod.”

“I couldn't help it! It wasn't my fault. Rachel was about to contact the authorities and put an end to the mission. I had to stop her! I wanted to save you but in the heat of battle there was no way I could transport you off the ship. It was just a bad situation.”

Jack started to reply but his wife silenced him. “So what happens now?” she asked.

“I've got to finish the mission,” Alice said. “I came here to destroy that chamber and that is exactly what I am going to do. If they want to arrest me for it afterward then so be it, but I'm *not* going to stand idly by and watch the planet I love destroy itself. The reason I transported you two down here is so I could apologize for what's been going on and give you some supplies.”

Lily nodded. “We appreciate it. You did kind of destroy everything we had.”

“I know,” Alice said. “And after all this is over I promise I will take you both home. But for now I've got to get back to work.”

I've transported a few crates of supplies to a building in the city above. It has everything you need to survive for another week. By then I'll be done and will pick you up and head home."

"You have a ship?" Jack replied, surprised.

"Of course. The last time I was here I left a shuttlecraft behind. It has a wormhole drive and can easily get all three of us back to Ahmanya."

"Wait a minute," Lily interrupted. "You want to beam us back into the city?"

Alice smiled. "I know in the past it's given you some trouble, but with its power supply destroyed I don't think it will try anything else. It's not a bad place to be, really."

"Ok," Jack said slowly. "But –"

Alice pressed a small button on the arm of her suit. Immediately Jack and Lily were encased in white light. They felt a strange sense of motion. When the light dissipated they found themselves on the ground floor of a small building on the outskirts of the city. In one corner of the room were a few crates.

Jack froze, and then shook his head. "Wow. Well, that was interesting."

"I don't trust her," Lily said flatly. "I just don't like this at all."

"In her defense, she did just give us supplies. She could have left us in the desert to starve. But I know what you mean. She does seem a little unhinged."

"What really bothered me is that she kept saying she didn't have a choice! Everything that happened wasn't her fault. That doesn't give me a good feeling about the future. What if she just 'doesn't have a choice' but to leave us here? What if she decides we are interfering with the mission? After all, we're the only ones that know she stole the Third Treasure! She could always blame the whole thing on us."

Jack's blood ran cold. "I didn't think of that."

"Maybe she hasn't thought of it yet either. But what happens when she does? Do you really trust someone who tried to kill us twice?"

Jack sighed. "One thing at a time. Let's see what's in these

crates she gave us. We can then go from there.”

The couple began prying the tops off of the six crates that were in the building. After the crates were open they made a complete inventory of everything they contained. A half-hour later they had their answer.

“I see food, and water, and more food, and more water,” Jack announced. “And that’s about it. No soap, no climbing gear, no weapons, no lawn ornaments – not even a change of clothing.”

“And no way to call for help,” Lily finished. “We won’t starve, but she’s pretty much forcing us to sit tight and let her finish her work.”

“Yup,” Jack replied.

“Rachel seemed pretty convinced we shouldn’t let her do that. She seemed to think that destroying the planet was a bad idea.”

“True. But honey, what are we going to do about it? Offhand I don’t see how we can use salted pork and kidney beans to bring Alice Montaine to her knees. At the moment she seems to have the upper hand. I think we’re just going to have to wait and see if anything develops. Maybe this city will come back to life and do something we can use to our advantage.”

Since it was almost nightfall Lily went ahead and fixed ham sandwiches for dinner. As Alice had not provided a portable stove they were forced to eat them cold. “I don’t see any more pancakes in our future,” Lily replied, sighing.

“Or another good night’s sleep,” Jack pointed out. “We have no bed, no sheets, and no sleeping bag. Just the nice, hard ground to keep us company.”

“I wish we could call for room service,” Lily grumbled.

Jack laughed. A few hours later the couple drifted off to sleep. Neither of them slept well on the hard steel floor, however, and both awoke early the next day.

The day proved to be uneventful. Lily was not too keen on doing any more exploring and Jack agreed that it was probably best to just stay put. A thorough search of the building revealed that it was a simple, small one-story structure in fairly good repair. The building was located on the extreme outskirts of the



city. To the north of the building was the rest of the town and to the south was nothing but unending desert.

The day dragged on. With nothing to occupy their time each hour seemed like an eternity. After lunch Lily had finally had enough. “We have *got* to find something to do, Jack! I don't care what it is but I just can't sit here any longer. I'm going to go crazy!”

“I hear you, dear. But what do you have in mind? I'm all out of suggestions.”

Lily sighed. “I don't know. I wish I could think of something.”

An hour later, just before sunset, the couple heard a noise in the distance. Jack and Lily both rushed outside to see what it was. The noise gradually grew louder and they soon realized that a small spacecraft was approaching the city from the west. After a minute the ship had come close enough for them to see it high overhead.

“Do you think that's Alice?” Lily asked.

“Could be, I guess. But what would she be doing? I wasn't expecting her for a few more days.”

As they stared up in the sky they noticed that the ship had started losing altitude. At the same time it changed its flight path and appeared to be heading in their direction.

“I think it's going to land right next to us!” Jack exclaimed.

“Wonderful! All we have to do is attack Alice, grab the ship, and leave. She won't know what hit her.”

“That easy, huh? Do *you* know how to pilot a spaceship?”

Lily looked at her husband. “You mean you don't?”

“Of course not! I repair transporters for a living. I don't know the first thing about flying! Do you know how expensive flying lessons are?”

The conversation was cut short when the ship came in for a landing. As Jack had predicted, the vessel came to a stop about a hundred feet away from them. The ship was a very small craft that was obviously intended to transport just one person. Given the size of its engines, however, Jack had no doubt that it was capable of wormhole travel. *As shuttles go, that's definitely a top-*

*of-the-line model*, he thought.

In the side of the craft a door opened and a person in a red Starman uniform stepped out. To their surprise, however, it was not Alice Montaine. Instead it was a tall, elderly gentleman with thinning white hair.

The man approached them, smiling. He extended his hand. “Hello there! It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Joe Taylor.”

## Chapter 12: Negotiations

JACK LOOKED at the elderly man in wonder. “You’re *the* Joe Taylor?”

“That’s what they tell me!” he replied cheerfully. “But who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“Wow. Um, my name is Jack Rossman, and this is my wife Lily.”

Lily stepped forward and shook Joe’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Joe replied. “Pardon me if I’m wrong, but are either of you Starmen?”

Jack shook his head. “Oh no. We’re just two innocent bystanders who made the fatal mistake of working late one evening. Are you looking for Alice Montaine?”

“As a matter of fact I am,” Joe replied. “I thought one of you might be her but I see I’m very much mistaken. When I got here I scanned the planet for life signs and the two of you were the only people I found.”

“Alice is about a mile underground,” Lily replied. “She probably just didn’t show up on your scanners.”

“That makes sense,” Joe said slowly. “I can see how I might have missed her. I was looking for a campsite on the surface.”

Jack spoke up. “If you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing here? We really weren’t expecting visitors.”

“It’s pretty simple, actually! I’ve spent many years trying to figure out where the First Races disappeared to. I was over at Larson’s Folly when I got a call from Caedmon, who told me that

Alice had made a fascinating discovery. When I heard the details of what she had found I got over here as quickly as possible. It was really quite exciting!”

“We’re very glad you came,” Lily said fervently. “Is there any chance you could get us off this planet and take us back to Ahmanya?”

Joe looked puzzled. “Well, of course, ma’am. But if you don’t mind my asking – exactly how did you get here? This planet isn’t exactly a tourist destination. Are you two explorers or something?”

“We’re actually hostages,” Jack explained. “Alice kidnapped us as a part of her evil scheme to steal the Third Treasure and blow up this planet.”

Joe’s eyes widened. “You can’t be serious! Do you mean to tell me that Alice Montaine kidnapped you?”

“Among other things,” Lily replied. “On two separate occasions she nearly killed us both.”

“That’s horrible – simply horrible! I had no idea that was going on. What happened?”

“It’s actually pretty straightforward,” Jack said. “From what I understand Alice believes there’s something very dangerous on this planet that’s going to kill us all if it gets let loose. However, when Caedmon wouldn’t let her borrow Tharsos she decided her only option was to steal the Third Treasure, bring it here, and use it to blow up the planet. I wasn’t willing to help her do that so she kidnapped me and my wife.”

Joe shook his head. “I can’t believe how out of touch I am. I didn’t even realize the Third Treasure had been stolen! Caedmon did tell me that Alice thought she had found a weapon of some kind, but Caedmon and I were under the impression that she had returned here to gather more data. I actually came here to her help research the matter.”

Lily looked surprised. “How could you *not* know the Third Treasure was stolen? Hasn’t it been all over the news?”

“I don’t really pay much attention to the news,” Joe said apologetically. “I spend most of my time in places that have few

creature comforts. Space Station Zane is the exception, though. It's actually extremely nice there. Ingrid has excellent taste."

Lily looked at Joe's shuttlecraft. "I hate to push you, but do you think we could get out of here? Like *right now*? I'd like to get as far away from this place as possible. It's not safe here."

Joe frowned. "I'd really like to talk to Alice before we do anything else. If she has done everything you've told me then she is in a lot of trouble. Where is her starship?"

"She blew it up," Jack said. "While we were on board, actually. We got out just in time."

Joe looked at Jack in shock. "She *blew up* her starship? Why would she do such a thing?"

"Because it turned on her," Jack replied. "When Rachel – that's the AI that was on her ship – found out what Alice had done it tried to stop her. So Alice decided that Rachel had to be eliminated. In her first attempt to destroy it all she managed to do was knock the *Raptor* out of orbit."

"While we were still on board," Lily added.

"Right. Anyway, after it was on the ground I managed to repair it, and when Alice saw what I had done she sent a missile our way and blew it into tiny pieces. She told us she couldn't risk having her ship compromise the mission."

Joe shook his head. "And you were on board both times?"

"Yup!" Jack replied. "We survived the first time because we managed to find an escape pod and bail. We survived the second time because Rachel warned us to run for our lives just before the missile hit. If it hadn't been for her we'd both be dead."

"Did Alice know you were on board?" Joe asked.

"She did the first time," Lily replied. "But she said she didn't have a choice. The mission was too important."

Joe was silent for a minute. "That's terrible. I can't believe it. Taking hostages, stealing priceless artifacts, and recklessly endangering the lives of others are all staggering violations of the Starmen's code. No Starman has done anything like that since the days of Ronald Mortimer."

"Can we talk about this later?" Lily pleaded. "We've got to get

off of this planet immediately. Remember, Alice blew up her own ship. Why do you think she won't blow up yours?"

"Maybe if I just talked to her," Joe said slowly. "She is a Starman after all, and Starmen are chosen to represent the best and brightest of each generation. Alice is a very intelligent person and will surely listen to reason. Maybe she just doesn't realize that Starlight Enterprise is taking her discovery very seriously. She may just be doing what she thinks is right."

"Oh, she definitely thinks she's right," Lily replied. "And she's completely unhinged. We've already tried talking to her and got nowhere. I'm telling you that she's out of her mind."

"Did she *deliberately* try to kill you?" Joe asked.

Lily reluctantly shook her head. "No, she didn't. But she knew we were on board when she attacked her ship. She just said she wasn't able to take the time to beam us off. The mission was too important, or something."

"So she knew you were on board and yet attacked anyway," Joe said seriously. "That is really bad. She deliberately endangered your lives."

Lily nodded. "She claimed she had to do it in order to save civilization. She told us we were too stupid to understand."

"That's not quite the way she said it," Jack replied.

"But that's what she meant," Lily shot back. "She was just too polite to come right out and say what she was thinking."

Joe shook his head sadly. "So Alice has started endangering the lives of others in order to save them. That is a dangerous road to go down. Once you have decided that the end justifies the means there is no telling what else you might do. Any action becomes justifiable. Based on what you've told me this is much too serious to simply wait for the authorities. We're going to have to go down there and arrest her before she puts someone else's life at risk."

"We?" Lily exclaimed. "Why we? Why can't you do it without us?"

"Two reasons," Joe said. "First, Alice knows the two of you but she doesn't know me. You may be able to help me talk her

into giving herself up.”

Lily shook her head. “Don't be ridiculous. *Everybody* knows who you are. You're one of the most famous Starmen of all time. That's like saying no one knows who the Starlight family is.”

Joe tried to suppress a smile. “Point taken. But when it comes to negotiating her surrender you may be more effective than I.”

“What's the second reason?” Jack asked.

“I'm an old man,” Joe confessed. “I don't get around quite as well as I used to. If she decides to do things the hard way I may need a little help. You look like a strong, healthy young man.”

Lily giggled. “I think you mean he's a young, overweight couch potato that would fall over dead if he had to run a mile. But since he's all that you've got he'll have to do.”

“Lily!” Jack said in an admonishing tone. “Where did *that* come from?”

“It's true!” she replied.

Joe held up a hand, grinning. “I see the two of you really are married. But seriously. If Alice is about to blow up this planet we need to stop her, and I don't think we have the time to wait for backup to arrive. Will you help me?”

Lily shook her head. “Absolutely not. I mean no disrespect, but I think you're out of your mind.”

“I'll go,” Jack said. “If you think it will do some good.”

“It won't,” Lily replied.

Joe spoke up. “Here's the plan, then. Jack and I will go underground, confront Alice, and bring her to the surface. Then all four of us will cram into my tiny starship and we'll go to the nearest outpost. There's a space station about a day's journey from here. I can contact the authorities after we get into space and have them take her into custody once we arrive.”

Lily sighed. “If you want to shoot yourselves in the foot then go right ahead. Don't let me stop you! Have it your way.”

“We'll be right back,” Jack promised.

“Sure you will,” Lily replied.

Joe looked at Lily. “I promise I will return your husband to you safe and sound. This won't take long.”

"Just hurry back," she sighed. "I love you, Jack."

"I love you too," he told her.

Joe turned to Jack. "Come with me. We'll need to use my ship to pinpoint Alice underground."

The two men waved farewell and then walked to Joe's ship and boarded it. Joe sat down in front of a computer console and brought up a map of the area. He worked at the desk for a few minutes while Jack stood behind him, watching. "I see what you mean," Joe said at last. "About a mile underground is a large network of tunnels."

Jack nodded. "Alice said the only way to get there was by transporter. She claimed that none of the tunnels led to the surface."

"She's right. And according to my computer she is standing right *there*," Joe said, pointing. Jack saw a small, white dot on the holoscreen.

"Can we beam down there?" Jack asked.

"I think so," Joe replied. "It would be impossible to do this from orbit, but as long as the ship remains on the surface I think we'll manage. Are you ready?"

"Do you have any weapons?" Jack asked.

Joe looked thoughtful. "It's been a long time since I've needed to carry a weapon. But you are right. This situation does warrant that precaution." Joe stood up and walked to the back of the ship, where he opened a small panel in the wall. He took out two holsters. Joe put one around his waist and then offered the second one to Jack. "Do you feel up to it?"

"Absolutely," Jack replied.

While he was securing his holster in place Joe reached into the back of the compartment and took out two laser pistols. He checked them briefly. "They're both fully charged," he said with satisfaction. He put one in his holster and gave the second to Jack, who did the same thing with his.

"Ready now?" Joe asked.

"Ready," Jack agreed.

"Then let's go!" Joe reached over to the arm of his suit and



pressed a small button that activated his ship's wormhole transporter. The two men were suddenly engulfed in a brilliant white light. When the light faded they found themselves deep underground, in a large room with blue metal walls. The room was filled with crates and partially-assembled equipment. Jack immediately recognized it as the same room where he and his wife had encountered Alice the day before.

Starman Alice was sitting on the floor in front of a computer terminal, hard at work. When the two men appeared she jumped to her feet. "What's going on?" she demanded.

"I've come to talk to you," Joe said quietly. "There's no reason to be alarmed."

Alice looked at him closely. When she realized who he was she took a step back. "You're Joe Taylor! What are you doing here? How did you get here? You're supposed to be on the other side of the galaxy!"

"Didn't Caedmon tell you that he was going to send me a copy of your report?" Joe asked.

"I think so," Alice said uncertainly.

"Well, at any rate, he did. I read the report and was fascinated by what you had discovered. I immediately came right here. I landed just a few minutes ago."

"Ok," Alice said slowly. The computer at her feet made a small chirping sound. She glanced down at it nervously and then looked back at Joe. "But why did you come here? I didn't ask for help."

"This planet is one of the most important discoveries of the past fifty years!" Joe replied. "How could I *not* come and see this place? Why, the implications are staggering. This has the potential to completely rewrite our history books."

"You mean this has the potential to kill us all," Alice replied. "This planet has got to be destroyed. We can't allow the evil in that chamber to get out. In the few days I've been here someone has already tried to break in twice. My equipment has been sabotaged. I'm not the only one that knows about this and we are rapidly running out of time."

Joe nodded. "Believe me, I understand your concern. I will personally make sure that after we leave Lemura the best minds in the galaxy will be sent here to continue your research."

"What do you mean, *after we leave*?" Alice asked. She glanced down at the computer again. "What's going on?"

Joe paused for a moment. "Alice, Jack and his wife have briefed me on what you've been doing lately. You have committed a series of gross violations of the Starmen's code and put many lives in danger. I have no choice but to place you under arrest. I want you to come with me."

Alice shook her head. "You don't understand! I *had* to do those things. This mission is too important! Don't you get it? If that attacker breaks into the chamber then we're all dead! We're not going to get a second chance at this. We can't just sit idly by this time and let Zip Foster save our skins."

Joe looked Alice in the eye. Jack was surprised at how angry he looked. "You are way out of line, Starman. You have stolen one of the most prized artifacts of the Ahmanyen people. You took hostages. You knowingly endangered the lives of innocent civilians. There is a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things, and you have really, really blown it. Your Starman days are over."

Alice glanced at the holsters that both men were wearing. "You plan to take me by force," she said slowly.

"I would rather you surrendered willingly," Joe replied. "That's why I came down here to talk with you. Things will go much better for you if I can tell the authorities that you cooperated with us."

"Don't give me that!" Alice snarled. "Only a moron would have come down here before talking to the police and making a full report. I bet your friends will arrive in orbit any minute now. And while they are arresting me the shadow is going to break into that chamber and set loose something horrible, and then we're all going to die. I'm sorry but I can't allow that to happen."

Joe swiftly drew his laser pistol and aimed it at Alice. "You don't have a choice."

“Oh, but I do,” Alice said eagerly. She nodded toward the computer console at her feet. “You were fools to come here. I saw you land, you know. I knew what was going to happen.”

With his pistol aimed squarely at Alice, Joe slowly circled her. When he was ten feet behind her he looked at the holoscreen that was at her feet. What he saw frightened him. “What did you do?”

“I did what any intelligent person would do! As you can see, I destroyed your ship. But that’s only part of it. I also reactivated the city.”

“I don’t understand,” Joe said.

“The city is hostile,” Jack explained. “It’s tried to kill us before.”

“The city was built to protect what is in the chamber,” Alice explained. “It took me a while to realize that. As soon as I saw your ship enter orbit I realized what was going to happen and I turned the city back on. It is now in full combat mode. When your police force arrives it is going to be blown out of the sky. And while the city is defending itself I will have time to finish the mission.”

“But that’s impossible!” Jack exclaimed. “We blew up the city’s power plant yesterday.”

“You are such a fool!” Alice replied. “Do you really think that was the only generator in the entire city? Yes, given the city’s weakened condition that was enough to take the power grid offline. But I’ve spent the past twenty-four hours repairing the breach in case something stupid like this happened. And the city is back online now, as dangerous as ever.”

“But my wife is up there!” Jack screamed.

Alice smiled. “Not anymore. The city has already reached her. She’s put my mission in danger for the last time – and the two of you are next.”



## Chapter 13: Darkness

IN AN INSTANT Jack whipped out his laser pistol and pointed it at Alice. An anger surged through him that was more intense than anything he had ever felt before. "Tell me you did not just kill my wife," he said in a very dangerous and cold voice. *"I want you to tell me that she is still alive."*

"All you care about is your precious wife, isn't it?" Alice snarled. "You are all fools! Maybe I'm wasting my time trying to save civilization. Maybe it would be better if I let you all die."

The rage inside Jack reached the boiling point. He pulled the trigger and fired. The laser hit Alice squarely in the chest. Her red suit absorbed much of the energy but the suit's breastplate was badly damaged and the blackened suit began smoldering. A look of panic appeared on Alice's face as she belatedly realized that she had pushed Jack too far.

Jack coolly surveyed the damage he had done to her suit. He kept his pistol aimed squarely at her. "Let's try this again. *What have you done to my wife?"*

"I haven't done anything!" she pleaded. "I've been standing right here the whole time."

Jack shook his head angrily. "Stop it, Alice! Don't play games with me. That suit isn't going to protect you the next time I fire. *I want you to tell me what you have done to my wife."*

"I don't know!" Alice said, with genuine panic in her voice. "The city attacked her and she's gone. It might have just taken her prisoner but I don't know. You've got to believe me! It's not my fault. You can't blame me for this."

Jack looked at her with an expression of intense anger. He desperately fought to regain control of his temper and not shoot her again. He couldn't remember the last time he was filled with such rage. "You are murderer, Alice. A murderer and a thief. I have no doubt that if you had a gun in your hands right now both Joe and I would already be dead. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you before you kill us both."

Joe interrupted him. "I'll give you one. You're not an executioner, Jack. Alice will answer for her crimes. But this is not the time or the place."

The computer at Alice's feet beeped, and she glanced down at it. "I'll give you another reason," she replied.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

Alice smiled. "It's too late."

Before she even finished her sentence the room was plunged into darkness. Alice immediately somersaulted behind her and kicked Joe squarely in the chest. The attack caught him off guard and he went sprawling across the room. The elderly man slammed heavily into a crate and fell to the ground, unmoving.

Jack was still holding the laser pistol but the room was completely dark. *I can't see her*, he panicked. *She's getting away!*

He stopped moving and stood perfectly still. He could hear nothing. *She's probably trained for combat in the dark*, he thought ruefully. *I bet she has all kinds of black-belt karate skills. This is so unfair.*

Then Jack heard something – the sound of metal crunching against metal. Jack slowly turned around and strained to look in the general direction of the noise. In the utter blackness of the room Jack saw a single red light in the distance, about eight feet off the ground. When the light moved he realized that there were actually two red lights beside each other. His blood ran cold. *Those aren't lights – those are eyes!*

Without making a sound Jack slowly crouched behind a crate and waited. He gripped his pistol tightly. At first he heard nothing, but then he could hear the sound of metal footsteps. As they drew closer Jack found himself holding his breath. Large

drops of sweat poured off his brow. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so scared. *Please, please go away!*

His mind wandered to Joe Taylor. *What happened to him? Is he all right? I haven't heard him move. Is he dead? Is he injured? Well, he's not moving, so of course he's injured! Why do these things have to happen to me? Why didn't I listen to my wife? Oh Lily, where are you?*

Jack suddenly realized that he no longer heard anything. He waited a moment longer but the metal footsteps never resumed. Gathering up all his courage, Jack slowly stood up.

Two glowing red eyes were staring right at him from an inch away.

Jack panicked. He staggered back into a crate and knocked something over. He quickly pulled up his laser pistol and fired repeatedly at the eyes. There was a flash of sparks on the other side of the room and then a *whoosh*. Something in the distance caught fire. As the object started burning Jack used the light from the fire to look around the room. He was completely alone.

*It was just an illusion!* he thought to himself. *There was no robot here at all. I hate this place! It's impossible to tell reality from mirages.*

Before Jack put out the fire he quickly surveyed the room and found a small lantern. Jack turned it on and set it aside, and then used a nearby blanket to smother the flames that were consuming a wooden crate. Inside the now-burned crate was a pile of blackened machinery. *I hope there was nothing important in there*, Jack thought to himself.

"Joe?" Jack called out. There was no response. Jack walked over to where he had last seen Joe and found the fallen Starman still lying on the ground. He was not moving and his eyes were closed.

*I guess this is where my ten minutes of first-aid training comes to play*, Jack thought. After holstering his pistol he grabbed Joe's wrist and attempted to take his pulse. *When my boss sent me to that first aid class I was convinced he was wasting his time. I'm a technician, for crying out loud! But I guess emergencies do*

*happen. I'll have to send him a thank-you card or something.*

Joe still had a pulse, and that made Jack feel a little bit better. He then performed a quick examination of the Starman. *He's got a nasty cut on his head, and it looks like his leg is broken. I'd better do something about that.*

Jack searched the room for a first-aid kit. He located one in a crate of supplies and used its contents to dress Joe's injuries. As he finished tying a splint to Joe's leg the Starman slowly returned to consciousness.

"Take it easy," Jack said as the Starman opened his eyes. "You're not as young as you used to be."

"You're telling me," Joe replied weakly. He looked at Jack and then down at his leg. He winced. "So that's where all the pain is coming from."

"You've got a nasty bump on your head too," Jack commented. "You've probably sustained a concussion but I'm no expert."

Joe smiled. "It wouldn't be the first time. Thanks for helping me out. What's been going on?"

"Way too much, I'm afraid! The lights went out, Alice escaped, the city almost scared me to death, and you went down for the count. I have no idea where Alice went but I have a feeling she is up to no good."

Joe sighed. "I'm sorry about all this, Jack, I really am. When I asked you to come with me to talk to her I really thought she was just a misguided person and would give herself up. I never dreamed she was capable of murder. My respect for the title of Starman blinded me to who she really was."

"So you think Lily is really –"

"I don't know," Joe interrupted. "And I don't think Alice knows either. All she knows is that the city did something. I have a hunch that Alice knows far less than she thinks she does. She is so convinced she knows what is going on that she can't even see the facts anymore. All she sees is what she wants to see."

Jack finished dressing Joe's injuries and then looked at the elderly man. "So what do we do now?"



Joe sat up, wincing in pain. "Scoot that computer console over to me. I want to see what Alice has been up to. If she could spot me as I was landing then maybe I can use that thing to spot her."

Jack grabbed the computer and hauled it over to Joe. The Starman gingerly set it on his lap and worked at the console for a few minutes, carefully examining the holoscreen. He frowned.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked.

"Well, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that I've found Alice. The bad news is that she's several miles away from here. That doesn't make any sense to me. How could she have possibly crossed so much distance in just a few minutes?"

Jack snapped his fingers. "She's got access to a wormhole transporter! I forgot to mention that."

Joe looked puzzled. "But how is that possible? Didn't you tell me that she blew up her ship?"

"Yes, but she also told me that she has a shuttlecraft hidden somewhere. I bet it's just like yours."

"That would explain it. I'm sure her suit is connected to that shuttle, and she's using it to get around. That also means it's going to be almost impossible to catch her. Our first order of business is going to be to find that shuttlecraft and disable it."

Jack looked at the Starman in disbelief. "You want us to destroy our only way off of this planet?"

Joe laughed. "Not exactly! But I do want you to turn it off. If it's not running then she can't use it to escape."

"You want *me* to turn it off?" Jack asked.

"I'm afraid so! Look at me, Jack. I'm not exactly able to move around right now. This is all in your hands now. I need you to find that ship and take care of it for me."

"Can't we use the ship to radio for help instead?"

Joe shook his head. "We don't have time for that. Alice has been busy, Jack. I think she's almost done assembling her bomb."

"Ok, then here's another plan. Why not use her shuttlecraft to get off of this planet and back into space? Alice will be stranded here with no way to escape and she'll have to bide her time until the police arrive and pick her up. It's foolproof."

“Not quite, I'm afraid. There is still the small matter of the city's defenses. But aside from that not-insignificant problem, what happens if Alice detonates her bomb while we're gone? She could easily blow up the entire city. Your wife could still be out there, you know. If we allow Alice to destroy this place then the chances of you ever seeing your wife again become very, very small.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” Jack said. “But the city is huge. How could Alice possibly blow the whole thing up?”

Joe paused before answering. “This is not the only camp that Alice has established. I've seen a couple other places on this map where it looks like equipment has been stored. There is one reading in particular that I am almost convinced is the Third Treasure. It gives off a very peculiar type of radiation that is easy to detect.”

“Ok,” Jack said. “So?”

“I'm familiar with some Ahmanyen weapons that could easily destroy this entire planet. For example, the Ahmanyens found a way to destabilize normal matter. When this technique is activated all of the normal, stable matter within the weapon's sphere of influence starts collapsing and turning to energy. If Alice recreated that device and gave it a one-foot radius she could easily destroy this entire underground bunker, and possibly the city as well. But if she gave it a ten-foot effective radius she would have a good chance of destroying the entire planet.”

“You've got to be kidding! I had no idea the Ahmanyens had weapons like that. I've never even heard of such a thing.”

Joe smiled. “There are reasons for that. As far as I know the last time the device was used was in the first Ahmanyen-Xenobot war, which was a very long time ago. But if I were an insane Starman bent on destroying a planet that's what I would do.”

Jack nodded. “Ok, I think I've got it. You want me to disable Alice's shuttle so she can't escape. We'll then capture her somehow and use her ship to leave.”

“That's the plan,” Joe agreed. “Think you're up to it?”

“Not really. But what choice do I have?”

Joe smiled. "You'll do fine! But can you do me one favor before you go?"

"Sure – anything."

Joe pointed to an object lying on the ground, out of his reach. "Can you hand me my laser pistol?"

Jack reached over, grabbed the gun, and handed it to the Starman. Joe checked it for damage and then put it back in his holster.

"So where do I go?" Jack asked.

"First things first," Joe said. He removed a small metal strap from the arm of his suit and handed it to Jack. "This is a communications device. Strap it onto your arm and press the button whenever you want to talk. I'll stay here and keep an eye on things and will let you know what's going on."

"Thanks," Jack replied. After securing the strap he glanced at the holoscreen. "So where am I going?"

Joe pointed at a small area on the map. "I'm pretty sure that is her shuttlecraft right there."

Jack frowned. "But that location is underground! How could she possibly have gotten the ship a mile below the planet's surface?"

"The wormhole transporter is quite capable of transporting the ship itself," Joe pointed out. "After all, the transporter works by opening a wormhole. It's not hard to open a wormhole and then shove the ship through it. I've done it myself. And you have to admit that if the ship was underground it would be out of reach of any prying eyes on the surface."

"I guess I see your point. You did tell me you didn't find any sign of her when you entered orbit. That's why you came to us."

"Right!" Joe agreed. "And out of all the readings I see on this screen that dot looks the most promising."

"How far away is it?" Jack asked.

"About a mile," Joe replied. "But it's not hard to reach." Joe used the map to explain the route through the underground passages. After a few minutes of discussion Jack nodded. "I think I've got it."

“Remember, I’ll be right here watching you. I’ll let you know if you make a wrong turn.”

“Thanks,” Jack replied. He stood up and looked around. “Is there anything I can get you before I go?”

Joe shook his head. “Just hurry back safely. And I am sorry about all this.”

Jack nodded. “I’ll see you later.” He waved goodbye, grabbed a lantern, and then started walking down the long, dark, metal hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

*It's the darkness that bothers me the most,* Jack thought to himself. He had been walking for almost half an hour now. The lantern he was holding did a decent job of illuminating the surrounding area, but in the distance the light faded away into darkness. *I can't see what's behind me or what's ahead of me. I don't like it.*

Jack made his way to another intersection. He pressed a button on his wrist communicator. “Do I go left here?”

“Yes,” Joe replied. The voice was a little crackly but it was easy to understand. “You're almost there! At the end of that hallway is a flight of stairs. Go up three floors and then make a right. The ship should be right there.”

“Thanks,” Jack replied. He resumed walking. His body was aching from all the exercise he had experienced over the past week but he ignored the pain. All he could think about was the darkness that surrounded him.

In the distance he heard the noise of metal striking metal. He shuddered. *These noises are going to make me lose my mind. I keep hearing things but I never see anything. Am I really alone down here?*

Jack shook his head to clear his thoughts. He pressed on down the hallway, quickening his pace a little. As he neared the end of the passage he heard footsteps behind him. Jack whirled around, lifting his lantern a little higher to see what was behind him. The

noise stopped and he could see nothing.

Jack placed his hand on his laser pistol and then slowly took his hand off of it. "I'm not going to play your little game!" he shouted into the air. "There's nothing out there, do you hear me? Nothing! I am not going to panic."

*Sure you're not*, Jack thought to himself. He opened the door to the stairwell and started climbing the stairs. *You're a mile underground on an alien planet. Something terrible just happened to your wife, and that same evil is still out there and it's after you. You're alone, it's dark, and you would give your right arm to be in Eagle City right now. How could you not panic?*

Jack swallowed. *Keep it together! You're almost there. Three flights of stairs – that's what he said.*

When Jack reached the third flight he looked around. In front of him was an airlock. The stairs continued up into the darkness.

Jack's communicator crackled to life. "That's it! You made it. Now go through the door."

Jack frowned. "There's an airlock here, Joe. Are you sure you want me to do this?"

"It's either go through or come back," Joe replied.

Jack sighed. He pressed a button on the control panel beside the airlock and the door opened. Beyond the door he could see nothing. The room was pitch black. There was not a single light to be seen.

*That's odd*, Jack thought to himself. *Don't airlocks normally have two sets of doors? Maybe that was a security door or something. I don't like this.*

Jack gathered up all his nerve and walked into the dark room. As soon as he had crossed the threshold the door slid shut behind him. Jack walked further inside and looked around. He soon realized that he was in a small, empty metal room. The only thing the room contained was darkness.

Jack touched his communicator. "Got bad news, Joe. There's nothing here."

The surprise in Joe's voice was impossible to miss. "Are you sure? Have you looked everywhere?"

“It's a tiny room! There's nowhere near enough space to park a starship in here. I'm telling you it's totally empty.”

“Wait a minute,” Joe said. There was a slight pause. “The readings just changed. Now all I see in that room is you.”

Jack clenched his fist. “It was an illusion! I've seen the city do this before. It was nothing but a trick.”

“Didn't you say you went through an airlock door?” Joe asked, with concern in his voice.

Jack ran to the door and pressed the button to open it. Nothing happened. He pounded the door, screaming. “I'm trapped!”

## Chapter 14: Courage

JOE SPOKE sharply through Jack's communicator. "Calm down! You have got to remain calm."

"That's easy for you to say!" Jack shouted back. "You're not the one locked in a small dark room."

"I might as well be! My leg is broken, remember? I can't exactly go anywhere. Are you sure you want to trade places with me?"

Jack fought to calm down, but as he thought about his situation his fears only grew worse. "What should I do?"

"Just stand there a minute," Joe replied. "Let me think. There must be a way out of there."

Jack was silent. The room was completely dark save for the light from his lantern. From where he stood he could see that the panel that opened the door was completely dark. The city had definitely disabled it, locking him inside. *How do I get myself into these messes?*

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Jack nervously stepped back. Then to his horror he heard *bang, bang, bang*. Something was pounding against the airlock door!

Jack screamed. "Joe! Get me out of here! Something is trying to break in!"

"What? You're kidding! That doesn't make any sense!"

Jack stopped screaming. "What are you talking about? What doesn't make sense?"

"Well, the city controls the door, right?"

"I suppose," Jack said slowly. He kept eying the door nervously, afraid that whatever was on the other side might break through at any moment.

"Well, if the city really did send something to attack you then why doesn't it open the door and let it in? It's not like the city has your best interests at heart! Do you really think it's smart enough to lure you into that room but so incredibly stupid that it forgets to unlock the door to let the attacker in?"

Jack's eyes widened. "I never thought of that. So what does that mean?"

"I think it's just another illusion," Joe said at last. "I think this planet is a master of shadows. It's using fear to terrify you and trick you into doing stupid things. It doesn't actually have any power to hurt you."

"But that's crazy! What about the robots on the surface? Those *definitely* had the power to hurt me! And what about Lily?"

"But that was on the surface," Joe pointed out. "Given that Alice's starship is now in a million pieces I can easily believe that the city still has offensive capability. But down here in the tunnels it may be a different story. If the city really does have the ability to kill you then why doesn't it? Why does it chase you with noises and then lock you in a room and pound on the door? What's the point of that?"

"I don't really know," Jack said slowly. He looked at the door curiously. The pounding continued but much of his fear had dissipated. "So what do I do?"

"Do you see any exits in the room?"

Jack glanced around. Using his lantern he performed a thorough search of the entire room. "Nope! There's not even an air vent in here. It's just a small, empty room."

"Why would a small, empty room have a big door like that?"

"Beats me. Say, I've got an idea! Let me try something." Jack removed his laser pistol from his holster, pointed it at the door, and fired. The laser passed through the door easily, slicing a nice, round hole in it. "Well what do you know! The doors aren't laser-



proof.”

“Really?” Joe commented. “That’s surprising.”

“Not really. The buildings in the city couldn’t stand up against those little white bullets either. So far all of your Starman weapons have been very effective.”

“What little white bullets?” Joe asked, with concern in his voice.

“You know,” Jack said distractedly, as he used his laser pistol to slice apart the airlock door. “You guys have these great big rifle-type guns that shoot little white bullets. And man, do those bullets ever pack a punch! I accidentally destroyed three skyscrapers with them the other day.”

Joe gasped. “Do you mean to tell me that you got your hands on a Mark IV Xon cannon? Where on earth did you get such a thing?”

“From the *Raptor*.” Jack made another neat slice in the door. “When we made it to the weapons room we saw that Alice had taken one off the rack, so I took one as well.”

“She had a *rack* of Xon cannons?” Joe exclaimed. “You’ve got to be kidding! And you *took* one of them?”

“Well, yeah. Keep in mind at the time I didn’t know Alice had taken the other one. I thought we were fighting an evil monster from outer space and I just wanted to fight it on even footing.”

Joe sighed. “Given Alice’s recent behavior I think she might qualify as an evil monster from outer space. But what happened to that gun? Do you still have it?”

“Nah. It got destroyed when Alice blew up the ship. As far as I know Alice still has hers, though.”

“And you said her ship had a weapons room of some kind?”

“Oh yeah! She had enough armaments in there to outfit a regiment. I had no idea you guys carried so many guns.”

“We don’t,” Joe said. “I’ve never even heard of a Starman with a weapons cache. We’re not a part of the military, you know. Our ships are armed, but aside from a laser pistol we don’t carry hand weapons. Especially not illegal, top-secret, black-market Xon cannons. I’d really like to know where Alice got that weapon. I’ve

never even heard of one in civilian hands before.”

Jack made a final cut in the door and the whole airlock fell apart. With a swift kick he sent the pieces flying. After the door had collapsed he realized the pounding noise had stopped. “Will you look at that! The door is down and there is nothing on the other side. Looks like you're right, Joe! We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

“And Starman Alice,” Joe said wryly. “I'm a bit concerned about someone whose stated goal is to blow up a planet. Especially if I happen to be trapped on the planet that is scheduled to be blown up. Do you think you can make it back to camp?”

“I'm going down the stairs now!”

\* \* \* \* \*

It took Jack about a half-hour to make it back to camp. As before he heard many eerie noises on his return journey, but they no longer frightened him. *They're just shadows*, he told himself cheerfully. *If the city had the power to harm you it would. There is nothing actually out there.* The thought filled him with immense relief. What terrified him an hour ago now almost seemed comical.

When Jack returned he saw that Joe was still lying on the floor where he had left him. The computer was in his lap and the Starman was hard at work. When Jack walked into the room Joe looked up and smiled. “It's good to see you again! How are you feeling now?”

“Much better,” Jack said sheepishly. “Knowing that none of it is real changes everything.”

“Then you're way ahead of Alice! I don't think she's figured it out yet.”

“What do you mean?”

Joe drummed his fingers on the computer console and looked thoughtfully at Jack. “I can easily believe that somewhere in these tunnels is a secure chamber that Alice can't enter. But I am not so

sure that there is an evil space alien that is trying to break its way in. Given what we've just experienced it is quite possible that the city is manipulating Alice for its own purposes. It has probably discovered that she is very susceptible to fear and will do anything if given the right motivation."

"So you think that whatever is in the chamber is probably harmless?"

"Not quite. I think that the city is using Alice to accomplish its own goals. It could be that the city *wants* that chamber to be destroyed and is using Alice to accomplish that."

"But didn't Alice say that there was something dangerous inside that chamber?"

Joe shook his head. "How could she possibly know what is inside a room that she can't enter? According to her own report she can't see through it, transport objects inside it, or break into it. There could be anything in there! All Alice knows is what the city told her and it is not exactly known for its honesty. Alice may be about to destroy something that is very precious. Given the extreme efforts that went into guarding it I find that to be a very likely possibility."

"So what do we do?"

"We stop her," Joe said firmly.

"Don't we need to find her first?"

Joe smiled. "That's not going to be hard. I have a pretty good idea where she is."

"But how could you? I mean, there are miles of tunnels down here! We both know your map can't be trusted. She could be anywhere!"

Joe shook his head. "Not really. Think about it. What one thing does she want to do more than anything else? What matters to her so much that she's willing to kill anyone that stands in her way?"

Jack gasped. "She wants to destroy that chamber. So —"

"— that's where she will be," Joe finished.

Jack snapped his fingers. "And I know where the chamber is! She told me it was right down that hall."

"I can believe it," Joe said. "She would want her camp to be as close to the chamber as possible. I do see strange readings on the map that correspond to a room just down the hallway there. They could be forged, but in this case I think they're accurate. That is where we need to go."

"Then let's go get her!" Jack exclaimed.

Joe raised an eyebrow. "How are you going to do that? You are going to be fighting a dangerous fugitive that is armed with an illegal Xon cannon. Do you really think that you are going to be able to take her down with that laser pistol of yours?"

Jack winced. "I guess not."

"Then let's try something else. We both know that Alice is vulnerable to fear, so let's use that against her. In my opinion the first step to doing that is building a wormhole transporter."

Jack's eyes grew wide. "You want to build a *wormhole transporter*? With what? Stone knives and bearskins? I mean, I know a thing or two about transporters. My job is servicing them, you know! You need some really special equipment to build one and I don't see any supply depots nearby."

Joe smiled and pointed toward a stack of crates that was stacked against the wall. "Do you see what is written on those boxes?"

Jack squinted. "Claytronic mass." His eyes grew wide, and Joe nodded. "Exactly. We're going to turn those crates of raw, claytronic material into a working transporter."

"Do you have a pattern for one?" Jack asked.

Joe gently raised the computer console that was sitting on his lap. "It just so happens that Alice downloaded many patterns from the Third Treasure onto this machine, one of which is a wormhole transporter. The design is very old and outdated but it should do the job."

Jack frowned. "That's not a pattern for a tachyon transporter, it is? I mean, I don't want to be critical or anything but I remember what happened the last time you and your friends attempted to use one. You guys messed up the timestream, and –"

Joe laughed. "No no no no no! This is just an ordinary

transporter. Nothing to worry about.”

“So how do we do this?”

Over the next hour Joe taught Jack how to transform claytronic mass into other substances. Jack first opened the crates and carefully removed a collection of metal boxes that contained the highly volatile material. “It looks like white putty,” Jack commented.

“Don't touch it!” Joe warned. “Right now it doesn't have a pattern applied. Once a pattern is in place it will be easier to work with, but for now you've got to be careful. It wouldn't take much to destroy it and cause the unstable matrix to collapse.”

Jack looked at the material in horror. “You mean if I drop this case it's going to explode and kill us all?”

Joe shook his head. “Oh no, it's not explosive. But if you drop it the stuff will essentially break and become useless. It's kind of like glass – you've got to handle it with care.”

Jack nodded. Under Joe's guidance he found some molds that Alice had used and poured controlled amounts of the material into the molds. Joe then uploaded the pattern to the mold and sealed it carefully. “Are you sure it doesn't have to be full? There's a lot of empty space in there.”

“Positive,” Joe replied. “Remember, the components we are making are of different sizes. If we use too much material we're going to run out. I only want to put in enough mass to create the part we need. Anything left over is just wasted.”

“Got it!”

It took an hour to create the base station of the transporter. After that first part had been made, however, Jack understood how the process worked. Three hours later the last part was cast and put into place.

“I am so tired,” Jack said wearily. “I have been up way too long today. How do you guys keep such long hours and stay functional?”

Joe smiled sympathetically. “Years of training and hard work, I'm afraid. There aren't any shortcuts to becoming a Starman.

Don't cut yourself short, though, Jack. You have held up extremely well under very trying circumstances. You don't have anything to be ashamed of. Most people would have had a nervous breakdown by now."

"Thanks," Jack said. He stepped back and took a good look at his handiwork. The transporter was about the size of a small electric car. Its parts and pieces were scattered haphazardly all over the floor, connected by large electrical cables. The entire apparatus was connected to a powerful portable fusion generator that Alice had set up in her base camp.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Jack asked dubiously. "It looks kind of ugly, especially for a piece of Ahmanyen equipment. Normally their gizmos look like works of art. This looks like something the cat dragged in after a rainstorm."

Joe smiled. "In normal circumstances all of those parts would have been placed into a housing container that would add a touch of elegance and grace. I had to cut out all of those niceties in order to make sure we wouldn't run out of material. As it is we have very little claytronic mass left. But you tell me, Jack! You're the highly trained professional here. Is that going to work?"

Jack frowned. "Well, the design is odd but I think I understand what it's doing. I can't say I'm happy about it – we're violating all kinds of safety protocols here – but it could work. Just please tell me you're not going to use that thing to transport *people*. It has no safety backup of any kind."

"Don't worry. That's not the plan. All I want to do is get Alice's attention. Then when she comes running up the hallway you can take her down."

"And how am I going to do that?" Jack asked.

"You've got a laser pistol, don't you?"

Jack's eyes grew wide. "You want me to *shoot her*? But earlier –"

"Of course not! You do realize – oh, wait. That's a Starman-issue pistol. No wonder you're not familiar with it. Look. That gun can fire more than just lasers. It has an ultrasonic setting that can induce temporarily paralysis. You can use that to stun her and

then tie her up. There's some rope lying over there."

Jack looked at the pistol critically. "This thing has *settings*?"

Joe brought out his laser pistol and explained how to switch firing modes. After Jack understood what to do he switched his pistol to ultrasonics. "There we go! I'm all set."

"Just don't point that thing at me," Joe pleaded. "You can hide over there behind that crate. It should give you a good view of the entire hallway. If we're lucky Alice will come running down the hall in such a panic that she won't know what hit her."

Jack nodded. He turned on power to the transporter and then crouched behind a crate that was on the edge of the hallway. *Joe is right – from here I have a terrific view!* From that vantage point he could see far down the corridor. The light faded before it reached the chamber at the end of the passage, but he knew from the map that the hallway ended about a half-mile away. He had no doubt that he would see Alice long before she saw him.

Jack removed his laser pistol and gripped it tightly. "I'm ready!" he whispered.

Joe nodded. He worked at the console for a minute and then pressed a button. Immediately the room was filled with a white flash of light!





## Chapter 15: Desperation

WHEN THE brilliant white light finally dissipated Jack looked around the room to see what Joe had done. He noticed a new object sitting in one corner of the room and gasped. “You mean to tell me you used that contraption to transport the *Third Treasure*?”

Joe nodded. “You bet! Think about it. It's easy to spot on the map, and its disappearance is guaranteed to give Alice heartburn. Remember, she has no idea we have a functional transporter. She's going to assume it was the work of the city and will hopefully panic.”

“But what if it had failed? I mean, one wrong wiring connection and a valuable relic would have been lost forever!”

Joe grinned. “I have faith in you, Jack! You said you thought it would work, so I ran with it.”

Jack shook his head and looked back down the hallway. To his surprise he saw nothing. He listened carefully but despite his best efforts he could not hear the sound of approaching footsteps. Time passed but no figure came running down the hall. After a few minutes of silence Jack was about ready to call the experiment a failure when something suddenly caught his attention.

“Hey!” Jack hissed. “I just saw a tiny flash of light at the end of the hall. It only lasted for a moment but it was definitely there.”

Joe frowned. “That almost sounds like Alice transported out of the room. If she did that might give us the opportunity we need! How would you like to go and investigate?”

Jack started to object but then stopped himself. "All right. I'll go see what happened. I'll be in touch."

Joe nodded. Jack stood up and started sprinting down the hallway. The chamber was about a half-mile away, and Jack soon discovered that he didn't have the stamina to run the whole way. After a few minutes he was forced to slow down.

Jack glanced behind him and saw that he could no longer see any light. The darkness had completely hidden the camp where Joe was resting. Ahead of him he could only see shadows. As he continued walking down the hallway he became more and more nervous but he kept going. *I'll just press on as quietly as I can*, he thought to himself. *Maybe if I'm lucky she won't shoot me on sight.*

When Jack started noticing faint rays of light coming from the end of the hallway he slowed down and tried to walk more quietly. He knew he had little chance of surprising Alice but he wanted to at least try to catch her off-guard.

Treading carefully, Jack slowly crept up to the doorway. To his dismay he could not see or hear anyone. He walked over to the edge of the doorway and took a quick glance. The room appeared to be empty. He stood beside the doorway for a moment, listening, but could hear nothing.

Jack risked another quick peek but still could not see anyone. The room was large and spacious. The far wall appeared to be made out of some kind of white translucent substance. There were a pair of double doors embedded in it but they were closed. In front of the doors was a machine of some kind. There was very little else in the room.

Jack drew his laser pistol and quietly stepped inside. *Where has she gone? What am I missing? Is there some hiding place or side chamber I'm overlooking?* The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made of the same blue steel that Jack had seen all over the planet. As Jack slowly walked around the room he realized that, aside from a few bits of trash, the only object present was a machine that had been set right in front of the sealed white doors. *Those must be the doors to the chamber!* he thought. As he

studied the chamber he realized that it had once been protected by the blue metal but something had ripped it away, exposing the white material underneath.

When Jack was finally satisfied that the room was empty he pressed a button on his communicator. "There's nothing in here, Joe. Alice is gone. I think we've struck out."

"I thought that might be the case, but are you sure? Are you completely positive that she is not hiding somewhere out of sight?"

"Positive! She is *definitely* not here. Even if she wanted to hide there just aren't any hiding places. It looks like she's packed up all her stuff and moved out."

"What do you see? Is the room completely empty?"

Jack looked around a second time to make sure he hadn't missed anything. "It looks pretty empty to me. I see the chamber. It looks like Alice tried to get inside but failed. However, there is a machine of some kind sitting in front of the chamber doors. I'm not quite sure what it is."

"Can you describe it to me? How big is it?"

Jack walked up to it and examined it critically. "It's roughly a rectangle, four feet high and two feet wide. It doesn't appear to have any type of interface – I don't see any screens or anything on it. It's pretty weird, actually. I've never seen anything quite like it."

"Are you positive there is no way to interact with it?"

"I'm quite sure, Joe. What do you think it is? Some kind of complicated electronic door opener?" A horrible thought suddenly crossed Jack's mind. "Say, is this something I should be concerned about? You don't think this is a bomb, do you?"

"What else would it be? I can't think of anything else Alice would set in front of the doors and then leave. Are you sure it doesn't have a timer on it?"

Jack shook his head. "Nope. Nothing! No timer."

Joe thought for a moment. "It's possible that the bomb isn't on a timer. She might have a remote detonator on it that she is planning on setting off once she gets far away from the planet."

"But doesn't the city cause some kind of interference? Isn't that why you had to land on the planet before you could see these underground passages?"

"You're right! Good point. There's probably too much interference to risk detonating it remotely. So let's assume it is a bomb and that the bomb is on a timer. Given how long it took you to reach that room I think we can also assume it will go off at any moment. We probably only have a few seconds left."

Jack looked at the machine in horror. "What do I do? How do I turn it off?"

"Don't touch it!" Joe said sharply. "It's probably rigged to go off immediately if anyone attempts to disarm it. If I was a lunatic that's what I would do."

"She *left us here!*" Jack screamed. "She set a planet-destroying bomb right next to us and then flew off and left us stranded here. How could she do that?"

Joe interrupted him. "Later, Jack! Right now we've got to come up with a plan."

"You mean we've got to get rid of that bomb!" Jack shouted. "We've got a transporter, right? Can't we move it?"

"What good would that do?" Joe asked. "There's no way we could move it into space from this far underground. We could probably transport it to the surface, but if that bomb is what I think it is it would still blow up the planet. We would be just as dead. It doesn't even matter what part of the surface we transport it to!"

Jack snapped his fingers. "Ok, then can we transport the *transporter* to the surface? Then we could transport the bomb to the surface, and from then into space."

"Won't work! The transporter isn't all contained in a single unit, remember? Its pieces are strung all over the room. You have giant cables twenty feet long that connect it to a power supply. We would have to transport half the room at once and that is just not possible. And even if it was possible it would move out of range of this computer and I wouldn't be able to control it anymore."

“Ok, then can we transport the bomb into a solid rock?” Jack asked.

“It would probably blow up immediately.”

“Then what about liquid rock?” Jack asked. “This planet has a magnetic field. That means it's got a molten core, right? Don't molten cores somehow create magnetic fields? So if we beamed it into the magma below wouldn't the pressure and temperature instantly vaporize the machine?”

“I don't know,” Joe said. “It seems like a bad idea to me.”

“We're about to die!” Jack exclaimed. “This thing can go off any minute. What other option do we have? Do you want me to attack it with my laser pistol?”

Joe hesitated. “All right. Hold on. I'll give it a try. Sit tight.”

A moment later the machine disappeared in a white burst of light. Jack froze, waiting to see what happened next. Seconds ticked by and then Jack heard a rumble beneath his feet. The room gently shook and then the miniature earthquake died down. “What was that?” Jack asked.

“I think that was the bomb,” Joe replied. “Evidently it went off before the magma could destroy it. I was afraid that might happen.”

“Then why aren't we dead?” Jack asked.

“We would be if we hadn't moved the bomb. The blast was only gentle because it happened far, far away from us, in an environment of intense pressure. My guess is Alice made a smaller weapon. Maybe she didn't want to destroy the entire planet, or maybe she only had enough material to make a low-yield device. But that almost certainly means –”

There was a burst of white light in the chamber room. Jack instinctively drew his pistol and fired at it. When the light cleared Jack saw that Alice was lying on the floor, unconscious.

“– that Alice will be back to see what happened,” Joe finished.

“Got her!” Jack announced. “Anything else?”

Joe sighed in relief. “Good work. Let's go home, Jack.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack was able to tie up Alice and drag her back to camp. Joe offered to transport them both and save him the long walk but Jack declined. Once they both made it back Joe was able to tap into Alice's suit and use its communication system to contact to her shuttlecraft. After he had established a direct link with it he contacted the authorities.

When that was done he relaxed. "They'll be here in about twenty-four hours. Once they arrive we'll turn Alice over to them. So that gives us some time to find out where your wife is."

"How do we do that?" Jack asked.

"I've used the sensors on the shuttlecraft to scan the planet's surface, but I haven't seen any sign of her. That doesn't really mean anything, of course. It's almost impossible to get any kind of accurate readings on this planet."

"Hey – what about the city?"

"What about it?" Joe asked.

"Well, isn't it still armed and dangerous? How is the space fleet going to handle it?"

"It won't be a problem," Joe replied confidently. "I've turned it off."

"You *turned it off*? How did you do that?"

"Don't you remember Alice saying that she found a way to repair the city?"

Jack nodded and Joe continued. "Well, what she actually did was tie in this computer to the city's network and simply reroute power. All I had to do was undo the work. With the power grid shut down the city won't be able to do much of anything."

"So what do we do now?"

"Alice downloaded a great deal of information from the city's computer network into this machine. She was really been quite thorough! What I propose is that I go through the research and you sit there and sleep."

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Jack pleaded.

"Can you read the languages of the First Races?" Joe asked.

“Not really,” Jack replied.

“Then get some sleep. You're tired. I'll let you know what I've found in the morning.”

Jack nodded. “Do you think there's any hope? I mean, honestly?”

“There is always hope,” Joe replied.

Jack yawned. He found a sleeping bag, unrolled it, and set it on the ground. As he stretched out and relaxed a thought suddenly hit him. “Hey! What about Alice?”

“She'll be out for hours,” Joe replied. “I'll keep an eye on her. Don't worry about it.”

Jack nodded, and moments later he was fast asleep. Joe smiled. “Sleep well, Jack. I'll see you in the morning.”





## Chapter 16: Once Upon A Time

IT WAS quite some time before Jack finally woke up. The combined stress and physical exertion of the previous week had taken a far greater toll on him than he knew, and when he finally had a chance to rest his body took advantage of it. Jack slept through that night and the next day and did not wake up until the following evening. When he finally opened his eyes and stretched he was surprised to see how much had changed.

“Hey – where did everything go?” he asked, yawning. “Didn't there used to be stuff in this room?”

Joe looked at him and smiled. The Starman was sitting on a chair in front of a crate, staring at a holoscreen. His leg was in a cast. “You've been asleep for fourteen hours! A lot has happened since then.”

Jack blinked and then yawned. “Has it really been that long? Man! I am so hungry. Do we have anything to eat around here?”

Joe nodded in the direction of one of the crates. “There's some food over there, and I've got a pot of steaming coffee right here. Help yourself!”

Jack nodded. He walked over to the crate, grabbed an apple, and started eating it. He then helped himself to a cup of coffee. As he gradually woke up he realized that a great deal had changed. Nearly all of the equipment in the room was gone. The makeshift transporter was gone. The Third Treasure was gone. What surprised him most was that their prisoner was gone as well.

“Where did Alice go?” Jack asked, as he sipped his coffee.

“The authorities have taken her,” Joe replied. “A ship got here

about four hours ago. I was sure it would take them a full day to reach us, but evidently they were in a really big hurry to get here. The police took her into custody and removed most of her equipment as evidence. She's got a lot to answer for. They've also taken the Third Treasure, which is now en-route to Ahmanya."

Jack nodded. "It sounds like I missed all the fun! Everyone came and went while I was asleep. Is there anyone left on the planet besides the two of us?"

Joe shook his head. "Not right now, but that is about to change. In about a month this lonely planet is going to be the center of one of the biggest operations of my lifetime. It's going to be *big*. Tharsos is coming, along with the best minds that Starlight Enterprise has at its disposal. Caedmon Starlight is pulling out all the stops."

"You're kidding!" Jack said, astonished. "Tharsos hasn't gone anywhere since before I was born. Why is it coming here?"

"Because we need it," Joe said simply. "I've uncovered the *real* history of this place. It was all right here in the files. Alice could have discovered it but her mind was too clouded by fear."

A thought suddenly occurred to Jack. "Hey, what about my wife? Have you found her?"

"I think I have. That's why we need Tharsos – to get her back."

Jack looked puzzled. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

Joe paused for a moment. A thoughtful look appeared on his face. "Let me tell you a story, Jack. Once upon a time this galaxy was home to just four sentient races. All four of these races lived at the heart of our galaxy. Of these four races, the greatest and mightiest of them were the Lucians."

"You're talking about the First Races," Jack said.

"Right. Well, for a long time there was harmony among the four races. However, one day the Lucians decided that it was no longer enough to simply be the greatest of the four races. They wanted to rule over the other races. They wanted to dominate them and make them their slaves. So they ambushed them. It was

a terrible war, Jack. The destructive powers they unleashed were truly frightening.”

“But they lost!” Jack exclaimed. “Everyone knows that the Lucians lost.”

Joe shook his head. “I’m afraid not. They won the war, but they did it by trickery. Toward the end of the war the Lucians realized that the combined might of the other three races was simply too great. When they saw their foes amassing their armies for an attack on Luxa they realized that they were about to be defeated. That is when the Lucians tried a desperate gamble. When the fleet attacked they didn’t fight them. Instead they suspended them in time.”

“How is that possible?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know. Even the Janitor doesn’t know how it was done. But that is why the First Races disappeared. They are still out there but they are held captive in time. To them no time is passing. They do not realize anything has happened. But they will remain prisoners forever until time itself comes to an end.”

“So they’re trapped somewhere near Luxa?” Jack asked.

“They’re trapped beyond space itself, out of reach of anyone. But the machinery responsible for keeping them trapped is not found on Luxa. It was placed on Larson’s Folly. Somewhere in that endless swamp, beyond the field of flickering lights, is the device that is keeping them imprisoned.”

“Hey! This planet has flickering lights too. Lily and I saw them when we were hiking through the desert.”

Joe nodded. “They are a by-product of the time displacement field. The machine they built does horrible things to spacetime. It cracks and distorts it and causes space itself to break down. It was an awful thing to do but the Lucians did not care.”

“I guess it worked for them,” Jack replied. “Apparently they won.”

Joe looked at Jack sadly. “Yes, they won the war. But they died all the same. With nothing left but their own greed and hatred they devolved into a pathetic half-machine, half-monster race that was only a faint shadow of their former selves. It took a

long time, but now that entire race is gone. There is nothing left of them. Their greed consumed them until they were finally destroyed.”

“But what does that have to do with this planet?” Jack asked.

“Before the Lucians launched their time weapon against the First Races they wanted to test it to make sure it would work. So they built this city and placed a copy of the weapon on this planet. They then lured a small portion of the enemy fleet to this world and activated it in the heat of the battle. The attack against the planet was so intense that the Lucian outpost was almost defeated before they had a chance to turn it on, but they managed. The weapon worked, and ever since then the machinery inside that sealed chamber has kept the fleet suspended in time.”

“So that's what's in there!” Jack replied. “I thought Alice said there was something evil inside.”

Joe smiled. “From the viewpoint of the city there *is* something evil inside – a mighty army of its sworn enemies.”

“So why is the city trying to destroy it?” Jack asked. “Wouldn't that set them free?”

“The city is starting to fall apart. It's very old, Jack. All of this happened long before human history began. The city realizes that the machinery inside the chamber is going to fail at some point. It is hoping that if we destroy the chamber it will cause the time field to collapse and destroy everything that it contains.”

“Is that why we need Tharsos?” Jack asked.

Joe nodded. “Tharsos has the power to drill a hole through the chamber walls and force open the door. We can then get inside and examine the equipment. I am sure the Janitor will help us. We can then see if there is a way to bring down the field and get your wife back.”

Jack's eyes widened. “You mean *my wife* is trapped in time?”

Joe nodded. “That is what the city was built to do – take people prisoner by suspending them in time. Your wife is not harmed, but no time is passing for her.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Jack asked. “I can't leave her there, Joe! All of this is my fault.”

Joe shook his head. “No, Jack, it's not your fault. Alice is responsible for all of this. And I believe there is much we can do. We are going to do everything we possibly can – and that starts with Tharsos. The Ahmanyans have already begun evacuating Olovanda.”

“What about the Lucians?” Jack asked. “There are still some survivors left, aren't there? Do you think they could help?”

“The Lucians are gone,” Joe replied. “After they sent the black hole against Luxa they simply disappeared. The Janitor has not seen them since. He thinks that after they passed sentence against the rest of their race that they decided to pass on as well. I don't know if that is true or not. All I know is that they have vanished.”

Jack nodded. “I understand. So what happens now? Is this where I get sent back to Eagle City?”

“You're more than welcome to stay,” Joe replied. “We're going to need all the help we can get, and your expertise is appreciated. I wouldn't even be alive today if it wasn't for you.”

Jack smiled. “I'm no Starman, Joe. I have been out of my league since I set foot on this planet. But if you're offering me an invitation I'm not going to turn it down! We've got a job to do. My wife is out there, somewhere, and she would kill me if she found out I went home and left her trapped in this awful place!”

“Then let's get started!” Joe exclaimed. “Pass me a donut, will you?”



## Chapter 17: Decision

TWO MONTHS later Jack found himself in a conference room deep in the heart of Olovanda, the hidden city of Tharsos. As Joe had promised, the third moon of Ahmanyra had been emptied of all civilian personnel and converted back into an active warship. Its giant power plant was brought back online, and for the first time in a generation the moon left orbit around its home world and entered hyperspace. For the past six weeks it had been orbiting Lemura, acting as a home base for teams of scientists and engineers. The most distant and obscure planet in the galaxy had suddenly become the focus of intense scrutiny by two civilizations – human and Ahmanyra. Lemura's days of hiding in the shadows had come to an end.

To everyone's relief Tharsos was able to drill a hole into the chamber that was buried beneath the city. The hard part had come afterward, when the best minds of Starlight Enterprise examined the machinery the chamber contained and tried to figure out what it all meant. After six weeks of intense research a meeting was held to discuss their findings. Present in the meeting was Jack Rossman, Joe Taylor, Caedmon Starlight, the Janitor, King Izmaka, and Governor Mark Seaton. Caedmon offered to let King Izmaka chair the meeting, but he had deferred, saying that the mission belong to Starlight Enterprise and Caedmon should preside as its rightful head.

“The meeting will now come to order,” Caedmon announced. The various parties took their designated seats at the table. Jack found himself sitting at the end of the table beside Joe Taylor.

“Are there any questions before we delve into the subject at hand?”

“I have a question,” Jack said nervously. “I don't mean to interrupt, but why was I invited? I'm not exactly a head of state or anything like that. I'm not sure this is where I belong.”

The Janitor spoke up. As was his custom, the ancient being spoke directly into the minds of those around him. “On the contrary, your presence is most vital. At this meeting we will decide the fate of those poor souls who are locked away in time. That includes both my friends and your wife. It would not be right for a committee of strangers to decide the fate of Lily Rossman. You must agree to this as well, for you have a large stake in the matter.”

Jack nodded and said nothing more. The presence of the Janitor unnerved him. Jack was used to aliens, for he had grown up on Ahmanya, but the Janitor was unlike anyone he had ever known. Not only was he the galaxy's oldest surviving being and an eyewitness to the long fall of the Lucians, but his appearance was very alien. The being was only about five feet tall but his presence was far greater than that. There was something about him that made one pause. As the normal temperature on his home planet was 600 degrees, he wore a space suit when among humans. The suit he wore was made of finely-meshed wafers and radiated heat. His head was encased in a clear globe, but the heat waves made it difficult to see his features.

The Janitor smiled at him. “I know you feel out of place, Jack. You see all of us as great men and yourself as a small and unimportant person. But if it had not been for you Alice Montaine would have escaped, the Third Treasure would have been destroyed, and much damage and loss of life would have resulted. It is because of you that we are here now. Do not downplay your own contribution.”

Caedmon nodded. “Is there anything else?” When no one else spoke up he nodded toward Joe Taylor, who stood to his feet. Joe walked to the front of the room and activated a holoscreen, on which were displayed columns of data.



“As you all know, at first we had a bit of trouble attempting to penetrate the barrier that protected the chamber. The material used in that protective wall was unlike anything known to science. In the end we had to use a plasma beam to pierce it, and it took nearly all the power of Tharsos in order to get the job done. Without access to the energy produced by this moon it is unlikely we would ever have found a way inside.”

King Izmarka nodded. “The Ahmanyen people were glad to be of service. We, too, wish to see the First Races set free.”

Joe continued. “After we had vaporized the doors we were able to get inside. As expected, the room did not contain monsters or life forms of any kind. Instead we found this machinery.” A picture of the chamber's interior appeared on the holoscreen, with different sections clearly labeled. “The machinery we found inside confirmed much of our previous guesses. The technology is clearly Lucian and is quite ancient. The chamber dates back to the period of the First War. It was definitely built as a weapon, and as best we can tell it does modify time in some way. Everything we have found verifies the hypothesis that the machine is actively working to keep something trapped in time.”

Caedmon interrupted. “I know this is slightly off-topic, but have you been able to correlate this discovery to the activity on Larson's Folly?”

“Yes and no,” Joe replied. “What we see on Larson's Folly is far more intense. It does appear to be the same type of technology, but the chamber down below only controls the time field on Lemura. I would guess that there is a similar chamber on Larson's Folly, but so far we have found no sign of one.”

“Nor are you the only ones that have failed,” the Janitor replied. “There were some Lucians that did not join with their brothers in the fight against the First Races. A few of those brave beings survived the war and spent much time afterward searching that hostile planet in hopes of undoing the damage. They, too, discovered nothing.”

Caedmon nodded. “So just to be clear, whatever we do to the chamber on the planet below will only impact that chamber. It

will not free anyone on Larson's Folly.”

Joe frowned. “That is only partly correct, sir. It is true that if we are able to shut down the machine it will only free those trapped on this planet. It will not free anyone on any other planet. However, we don't know what kind of safeguards are built into the machine. It could be that the machine has some type of failsafe built into it that will cause the immediate destruction of the entire planet, or perhaps the entire star system. It's impossible to tell.”

Mark Seaton spoke up. “Is there any evidence that there is a connection between Larson's Folly and Lemura? That is, if this planet senses that it is being tampered with is there a chance it might somehow alert Larson's Folly and trigger its fail-safe as well?”

“I don't think so,” Joe replied. “We did consider that possibility and have checked it out. This weapon seems to have been built with the mindset that it was the only one of its kind. There are no references to another planet somewhere else, and there is no evidence that any type of interstellar communication is happening. The two planets appear to be operating independently of each other.”

“Thanks,” Mark replied.

Joe turned his attention back to the holoscreen. “We believe we understand what the chamber is doing – it is holding things suspended in time. All evidence indicates that it is the First Races that have been suspended, and they were most likely on the planet's surface when the weapon was engaged. What we don't know is how it is being done or how to safely turn it off.”

The Janitor spoke up. “The machinery in the chamber is unlike any devices I have previously encountered. It represents the Lucians at the height of their power and cunning. I have offered what help I could on how the devices function, but beyond that there is little more I can do. The interface is very complex and has been purposely locked by a very sophisticated security system. The Lucians realized that someone might gain access to the chamber and went through great pains to secure

what they had done.”

Caedmon nodded. “Have you been able to penetrate any of the security?”

“We have not,” the Janitor replied. “The entire system refuses to allow us to use it. I am aware of methods to pry into the machines by force, but in this case I suspect the Lucians knew we might resort to that. There is every reason to believe that the machines are designed to retaliate if they detect any unauthorized intrusion.”

Jack spoke up. “I don’t mean to interrupt anything here, but this whole time suspension thing seems bizarre. I mean, if the Lucians already had their enemies trapped then why not go ahead and collapse the field and kill all of them? Why keep them suspended forever? After all, their enemies were trapped in time! It’s not like they could fight back.”

Joe spoke up. “That is exactly the question I asked, and that is actually why we are having this meeting. I believe it is because they *couldn’t* use the time field to kill them outright. There is a real possibility that they were forced to maintain the time field forever because if it ever collapsed the First Races would simply be set free.”

“But wait a minute!” Jack protested. “Wasn’t the city trying to destroy the chamber? Why would it want to do that if it would result in letting the First Races go? I find it very hard to believe that the city had seen the error of its ways and wanted to set the poor guys free!”

“There is one possibility,” the Janitor replied. “The Lucians must have known that their weapon would not last forever. One day it would lose power and the time field would collapse. The logical thing to do would be to rig a bomb when the field collapsed that would destroy the prisoners before they had a chance to defend themselves. It would be used only as a last resort, as there was always a chance that something might survive the blast. But in their own twisted minds it would be better than letting them walk away unharmed.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Jack said. “What kind of weapon

are we talking about?"

Joe spoke up. "I believe we can use history as a guide. When we attacked Luxa at the end of the Ahmanyen-Xenobot war the surviving unfallen Lucians stepped in to pronounce the 'last word' against the degenerate Xenobot race. Do you remember what they used as a weapon?"

Jack's eyes widened. "Oh boy. Didn't they use a black hole to swallow the planet?"

Mark nodded. "They did. Joe and I were there when it happened. It was almost fifty years ago but it is one of those things you never forget. As awful as the Xenobots were it was horrible to watch their entire planet be consumed."

"I remember," Joe said quietly. "There was nothing the Xenobots could do about it. There is simply no way to defend against a black hole."

Caedmon spoke up. "It certainly appears to be their weapon of choice. Our scientists believe that a security system breach or a machinery failure will result in the creation of a black hole that will swallow Lemura and everything around it."

"It would be very rapid," the Janitor replied. "Anything on the planet would be consumed within seconds. Once it is engaged you would not be able to stop it or save anyone in the area."

Jack spoke up. "Couldn't we just find the machine that generates the black hole and unplug it?"

Joe smiled. "I wish it were that simple. Since the black hole was designed to be a failsafe we believe that the collapse of the time field will automatically bring it into existence. In a sense they don't need a machine to generate it. The black hole is already there – it's just prevented from coalescing by the time field. If the time field dies then the black hole appears and it's all over."

Caedmon nodded. "That is the essence of the problem. The question is, what do we do?"

"Waiting seems useless," King Izma replied. "The Janitor has stated that the few unfallen Lucians that survived the First War spent the remainder of their existence trying to undo the time field on Larson's Folly. Even though their race created it they

were not able to undo it. It is madness to think that we could do better if given more time.”

“Agreed,” Caedmon said. “If they could not manage it in all those long ages then it is foolish to think we could do what they could not. We only have two choices, then. We can either destroy the machine and take our chances, or we can allow the machines to run and leave them forever trapped in time.”

“We really only have one choice,” Joe said. “The machinery is already beginning to fail. It may last for another decade or it may last for another millennia. But it will fail. All we have to decide is whether we want it to fail now or in the course of time.”

“That's not much of a choice,” Jack remarked.

“It is the choice we are faced with,” the Janitor replied softly.

Caedmon looked directly at Jack. “What do you think we should do?”

Jack sighed. “If those are really our only two options then I say we go ahead and get it over with. Put a bomb or something in the chamber, get really far away from the planet, and then detonate it. Whatever happens happens.”

“What if a black hole destroys the planet and everyone dies?” Caedmon asked.

“At least they won't be trapped anymore,” Jack replied. “They can finally die and move on. That's more than they have now. I think Lily would rather have it over with than be forever locked in time. That's a pretty horrible state to be in – you're neither alive or dead.”

“There is wisdom in that,” King Izmaka said. “My people are not trapped so I will not venture to agree or disagree. However, should you wish to destroy the chamber Tharsos is at your disposal. We will not oppose your decision.”

Joe nodded. “I have no objection to destroying the chamber. What do you think, Mark?”

Mark looked thoughtfully at Joe. “Who would detonate the bomb? Given the risks involved, who would be willing to shoulder that responsibility? If this goes wrong you would be killing perhaps thousands of beings.”

“I would be willing,” the Janitor replied. “As the caretaker of the inheritance of the First Races the responsibility should be mine. If it goes ill then let the blame rest with me.”

Caedmon spoke up. “It sounds like we have agreed to destroy the chamber and take our chances. Are there any who disagree with this course of action?”

No one said a word. Caedmon nodded. “Very well! Then let it be done. Joe, can you assemble the weapon and put it in place?”

“I can,” Joe replied simply. “I will have it in place by tomorrow evening.”

“I will be ready,” the Janitor replied.

## Chapter 18: The End of Shadows

THE FOLLOWING afternoon Jack returned to the underground chamber. He was surprised to find that the room was deserted. The only person in sight was Joe Taylor, who was bent over a long cylindrical device that was lying on the floor. A metal plate had been removed from its side to allow access to the intricate machinery within. The Starman appeared to be calibrating it.

“Hey, where did everyone go?” Jack asked.

“They’ve been evacuated to Tharsos,” Joe replied. “You and I are once again the only people on this planet. I just need one more minute to finish setting up this remote link and then we’ll be able to join them. We don’t want to be anywhere near this thing when it goes off.”

Jack nodded. As he waited for the Starman to finish his work he took a last look around the room. The chamber was actually fairly spacious and neatly organized. Rows of machines lined the walls and operated in perfect silence. He had been in the room several times over the past month but had mostly tried to stay out of the way. As much as he was curious about what was going on, he knew the engineers that had been sent to Lemura would have an easier time understanding the room’s mysteries without him being underfoot.

Jack walked over to the cylinder and crouched down beside it. The gray cylinder had a series of black letters painted on its side. “VXQN197-AV. Does that mean something?”

“Not really,” Joe replied. “It was just picked at random to

sound ominous.”

“It was?” Jack said, astonished. “Are you serious?”

Joe laughed. “No, I'm afraid not. The letters actually do have a meaning but it escapes me right now. What I do know is that when this bomb goes off there's going to be nothing left of this room. The walls might be tough but this little baby is tougher.”

“It is a nuclear bomb?” Jack asked.

Joe shook his head. “Nope. Nor is it an antimatter bomb. It's just a conventional chemical explosive. Still, you'd be surprised at how much energy the Ahmanyans can get out of a chemical reaction! It will get the job done without destroying the entire planet.”

The Starman finished his work and then slid the panel shut. “Ready to go?”

“I guess,” Jack replied. “I just wish we had better options.”

“It will all be over soon,” Joe promised.

“That's what I'm afraid of,” Jack said.

Jack and Joe were the last people to return to Tharsos. Unlike Alice's shuttlecraft, the giant ship was able to transport them directly on board without having to first land on the planet's surface. Since Tharsos was actually a 45-mile-long asteroid this was a blessing, for it was not capable of landing. Once they appeared on the bridge Joe walked over to a nearby terminal. He sat down and worked at it for a minute, and then stood up.

“We have a connection to the bomb,” Joe announced. “There is no noticeable interference in attempting to communicate with it. The detonation can proceed.”

“Then let us depart,” King Izmaka replied. The King of Ahmanya was acting as the captain of the great Ahmanyan ship. “Alert Caedmon Starlight that the time has come. I believe he wishes to be present when the bomb is detonated.”

“What about the Janitor?” Jack whispered.

“He'll be here,” Joe replied. “He has a way of finding out what's going on. We've never found it necessary to tell him that he was needed. Somehow he always knew.”



"That's kind of spooky," Jack replied.

Joe shrugged. "It's part of his job, I think. His purpose is to take care of things that need taking care of."

On the giant holoscreen at the front of the bridge was projected a picture of Lemura. The planet looked every bit as foreboding and evil as Jack had remembered. He could see the rugged terrain, the dark clouds, the black surface, and the evil blue glow that flickered in the darkness. "I hate that planet," he grumbled.

Joe heard him and smiled. "I think that was the whole idea. This was the first planet of shadows that the Lucians created. Their second attempt was far more destructive."

A moment later Caedmon Starlight stepped onto the bridge. Governor Mark Seaton followed behind him. Both of them quietly took seats and directed their attention to the forward viewscreen. The mood on the bridge was somber. Everyone was aware of the great risk that they were taking. Even now no one really knew what would happen when the chamber was destroyed.

An Ahmanyman pilot spoke up. "Sir, we are now at the edge of the star system."

The king nodded. "Very good. Caedmon, the time has come."

Before he finished the sentence there was a gentle swirl of light in one corner of the bridge. When the light faded the Janitor emerged. A thought suddenly appeared in the minds of everyone on the bridge. "I am ready."

Joe motioned to a terminal. "I have this linked to the bomb. You may use it to detonate the weapon."

"I appreciate your kindness, Starman, but I do not require the use of your terminal. I have my own means of detonating your explosive. Are you ready for me to do so?"

King Izmaka looked at Caedmon Starlight. Caedmon, in turn, looked at Jack. Jack simply nodded. "Sure. I mean, there's no sense in waiting, is there?"

"Then let it be done!" the Janitor replied. Immediately a light began flashing on the terminal. "The bomb has been detonated!"

Joe exclaimed. "We've lost contact with it."

Everyone's attention turned to the planet that was floating on the viewscreen. At first nothing happened. Then Jack noticed a shadow begin to creep over the surface of Lemura. The planet's features began disappearing and the cloud cover evaporated. In less than a minute the planet was no longer there. It had been replaced by nothingness.

"What just happened?" Jack asked nervously.

"I am confirming the presence of a black hole," an Ahmanyan announced.

King Izmaka spoke up. "Is there anything left of the planet?"

"No, sir," she replied. "Nothing has survived. The planet is gone."

There was silence on the bridge. No one said anything. Jack simply stared at the darkness, struggling with his emotions. He had realized this was a possibility but found it hard to fully grasp what had just happened. He thought of his wife, Lily. *I'll miss you*, he thought to himself. *I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't think it would end this way.*

His thoughts were interrupted when an Ahmanyan spoke up. "Sir, we are being hailed."

The king looked surprised. "I was not aware that there were any ships in this area. Where is the hail coming from?"

"It appears to be coming from within the Lemurian system," the communications officer replied. "The ship is of an unknown design. Our computers cannot identify its make or the race that built it."

"Put it on screen," the king commanded.

The image on the viewscreen was replaced by a picture of a creature sitting in what appeared to be a captain's chair. In the background they could see other bridge personnel working at their stations. The alien's features were difficult to see because the being emitted a brilliant white light. It reminded Jack of some deep sea creature, with a giant head and many appendages that vaguely resembled arms.

A deep, vibrant voice thundered into their minds. "Greetings, strangers! Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

Jack was the first to speak up. "No one that you've ever heard of, I'm sure."

King Izmaka looked at Jack curiously. Joe attempted to stifle grin. The being on the screen simply laughed. "But I have heard of you now, Jack Rossman. I am deeply indebted to all of you! I am the commander of the starship *Ithleen*. You may call me Elden."

"It is a pleasure to see you again," the Janitor said warmly. "I had feared that our attempt to rescue you was in vain."

Commander Elden looked at the Janitor in surprise. "Virgilio! Can it be that you are still alive after all these long years?"

"Alive and well!" the Janitor replied. "Much has happened since your imprisonment. The Lucians are gone, Elden. They were defeated by the people you see here – the race of Earth and the race of Ahmanya. I have much to tell you."

"I will enjoy hearing it," the commander replied. "I am very interested to hear tales of the race that defeated the mighty Lucians. When I saw the time field approaching our ship I had no hope of ever being released from it. I thought we would be trapped until the universe itself was brought to an end."

Caedmon spoke up. "How did you manage to escape? When we saw that black hole form we thought for sure that everyone had died."

"The Lucians are not the only ones with the power to control the flow of time," Commander Elden replied. "The *Ithleen* was in orbit around the world you call Lemura when the time field was activated. When it began to engulf our army I took some countermeasures of my own. The moment the time field collapsed this ship automatically changed the flow of time. It gave us the moments we needed to transport our soldiers off the planet and leave orbit before the black hole engulfed us."

"What about my wife?" Jack asked. "You didn't happen to see her, did you?"

The commander turned to one of his bridge offers and spoke

something in a language Jack did not understand. A moment later he turned his attention back to the screen. "I have been informed that there is a being like yourselves on board this vessel. She appears to be very distraught. Would you like for us to transport her aboard your ship?"

"If you don't mind," Jack replied.

"Let it be done," King Izmake agreed. "We thank you for saving her."

"We thank you for saving us," Commander Elden said. A moment later there was a brilliant flash of light on the bridge of Tharsos. When it dissipated Jack saw his wife standing on the bridge. She was clearly very upset.

"Lily!" he cried, running over to her. He threw his arms around her and held her.

"Oh Jack," she whimpered. "What happened? How did I get on board a ship full of aliens?"

"I'll tell you all about it," Jack promised. He bid farewell to the crew on the bridge and then led his wife to their quarters.

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Jack and Lily had a late dinner with Joe Taylor. The party of three ate in a private dining room on board Tharsos. The Ahmanyans had used tricks of lighting and holography to give the appearance that the dining area was outdoors, on the rim of an enormous canyon. The time of day was set to early evening. As they ate they were able to watch the sun set over Ahmanya and the stars come out.

"That is so cool," Jack commented. "I had no idea they could do this. We are still indoors, right?"

Joe nodded. "Yup. This ship can do all kinds of amazing things! The Ahmanyans are masters of light. If you liked this you should really visit *Imlah Taltahni* sometime. It's even more astonishing."

"I didn't think the Ahmanyans let people visit their secret refuge," Jack replied thoughtfully.

Joe smiled. "A few hours ago King Izmarka allowed you to take control of his bridge and introduce mankind to Commander Elden. He even let you grant permission for Lily to come back aboard. I think he'll let you come over and visit his house."

Jack blushed. "Sorry about that. I wasn't really thinking about proper bridge protocol. My mind was on my wife."

"And I appreciate that," Lily replied. "One moment I was sitting on Lemura waiting for you two fools to get back from talking with Alice, and the next thing I knew I was in a ship filled with strange aliens. Not just any aliens, I'll have you know, but aliens that could speak directly into my mind! It was *not* a good thing. I had no idea what had just happened but I didn't think it was a positive development."

"So you had no sense of the passage of time at all," Joe remarked.

"None," Lily said. "I didn't realize I had been gone for weeks until my husband explained everything to me. It sounds like you guys have been busy!"

"We have indeed," Joe replied. "But things are easing off now. Tharsos is on its way back to Ahmnya and should arrive sometime tomorrow evening. Once we reach orbit you'll be transported down to Eagle City."

"Finally!" Lily exclaimed. "I never thought I'd see home again. My parents must be so worried."

"Jack has been in touch with them," Joe replied. "They're aware of what is going on. I'm sure they'll be on hand to greet you tomorrow."

Lily looked at her husband in surprise. "You actually called my parents?"

"I figured they'd kill me if I didn't," Jack said sheepishly. "This whole Lemura thing has kind of been in the news a lot lately."

"I'll bet it has," Lily replied. "Have you talked to your employer?"

"I have," Jack said. "They're not real happy with everything that has been going on."

"How 'not happy' are we talking?" Lily asked.

"Um, well, it seems that I've been fired. Apparently being kidnapped and stranded on an alien planet is not a valid reason for missing work. My job was given to someone else several weeks ago."

"That's not fair!" Lily said angrily. "Who do they think they are?"

"It's their choice," Jack said. "I'm sure I'll be able to find another job. Stryker Transportation is not the only employer in Eagle City."

"But it's the principle of the thing! They have no right to fire you. It's not like you chose to be kidnapped by a rogue Starman." Lily turned to Joe. "Isn't there something you can do to get his job back?"

Joe shook his head. "I wish there were. Caedmon Starlight even made a personal call to Thomas Stryker and explained what happened, but it was already too late. Jack has been replaced and they don't have any other openings."

"I can't believe it!" Lily fumed. "After all that Jack did for you guys this is what he gets in return! That's gratitude for you."

"Don't worry about it," Jack replied. "Really. Caedmon has promised to help me look for work. I'm sure he has contacts. It'll be fine."

Joe attempted to change the subject. "You'll be happy to know that Alice Montaine is in prison in Eagle City, awaiting trial. There is a long list of charges against her."

Jack shook his head. "That is such a sad story. What do you think will become of her?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "I know Lemura deceived her, but she still made a lot of poor decisions and put other people's lives in jeopardy. She will never be a Starman again."

"She put *our* lives in jeopardy," Lily complained. "More than once, as a matter of fact!"

"I don't think she'll ever do that again," Joe replied. "I have a feeling there is a long prison sentence ahead of her."

"She must be devastated," Jack said.

Joe shook his head. "Not really. She thinks we're fools for opening that chamber. She still hasn't accepted the fact that she was wrong about pretty much everything, and she refuses to believe that she exercised poor judgment."

"Poor judgment!" Lily exclaimed. "She tried to kill us!"

"You wouldn't call that poor judgment?" Joe asked.

"I'd call that *evil*," she retorted.

Joe nodded. "I won't disagree with that. But anyway, Alice refuses to admit she did anything wrong. Until she understands what she did there isn't any hope for her."

"I take it the Third Treasure has been returned?" Jack asked.

Joe nodded. "It and its companion treasures are now hidden in a secure vault deep within *Imlah Taltahni*. After what just happened the Ahmanyans realized that they were too easy to steal. Duplicates have been put in the museum and the real items have been put out of harm's reach. It is very unlikely that anyone will be able to steal them again."

"What about the First Races?" Lily asked.

"They have returned to their home worlds with the Janitor," Joe explained. "I am sure that we will see them again."

"And what about you?" Jack asked.

Joe smiled. "For me it's back to Larson's Folly! The trip to Lemura has been very enlightening. I now have hope that it will be possible to free the rest of the First Races. It may be a long road and it may not happen in my lifetime, but at least we know what we're looking for."

Jack looked surprised. "So after everything that just happened you're still not thinking about retirement?"

Joe laughed. "I'll never retire as long as there are adventures to be had! Starmen never retire, you know. They just move on to the next adventure."

The three people looked out over the rim of the canyon. The sun had just set and the canyon was hidden in shadows. Overhead brilliant stars lit up the night sky – a thousand points of light, shining in the darkness.





## Epilogue: Job Hunting

JACK ROSSMAN and his wife Lily stepped out of the taxi. After Jack paid the driver the electric cab drove off, leaving the couple on the sidewalk. In front of them was a large, walled compound. A sign on the wall read STARLIGHT ENTERPRISE. Beside the sign was a large gate that was connected to a small guard post. Inside the post a uniformed officer sat and waited.

"I guess this is it!" Jack exclaimed.

"This place sure is out in the middle of nowhere," Lily commented. "Why not put the facility closer to Eagle City? There aren't even any towns nearby!"

"Beats me," Jack replied. "Maybe they do experiments here and they don't want to blow up a town if something goes wrong. Or maybe they got a really good deal on the property. At any rate, this is where Joe told us to go."

"Then we'd better get going," Lily said. "We've been back home for a month now and you still don't have a job. If someone here has a lead on a position then we don't want to keep them waiting."

"Relax, dear! We've still got five minutes. There's no rush."

Jack walked over to the guard and introduced themselves. The guard asked to see their identification. After he was satisfied he opened the gate and called for transportation. A sleek, black electric convertible drove itself to the gate. The couple got inside and rode it to the main building.

The ride down the driveway was a short but pleasant one. The road was wide and lined with tall evergreen trees. All around

them they could see rolling green hills, lush grass, and beauty. In the distance was a private spaceport of some kind. The compound appeared to have several impressive buildings, but the one the car brought them to was by far the largest. It was a wide structure, easily twenty stories tall, and appeared to be made of blue glass. The glass caught the light and refracted it, causing rainbows and shifting patterns to play out over the surface of the building.

The car stopped in front of the structure. To their surprise Joe Taylor was waiting for them outside. The elderly explorer was wearing his red Starman uniform. As soon as the car pulled up he got into the back seat. "It's great to see you again!" he said warmly. "How have you been doing?"

"Pretty well," Jack said in surprise, as the car began driving itself down the road. "I wasn't expecting to see you here! I thought you had left for Larson's Folly."

"I will soon, but I had some business to attend to," Joe explained. "I heard a rumor that you've been looking for work."

"We appreciate your help," Lily replied earnestly. "We weren't expecting you to get involved. After all, you're a Starman! You surely have better things to do with your time."

Joe smiled. "It is a pleasure, ma'am. I'm always glad to help a friend."

The car smoothly made its way down a road and took a turn to the right. Jack soon realized that the vehicle was headed toward the spaceport he had seen earlier. "Are we going somewhere?" he asked.

"You'll see," Joe replied.

A few moments later the car made it to the spaceport. Jack was surprised at how large it was. There were dozens of starships present, of all shapes and sizes. As he watched the activity that was going on around him the car drove over to a starship and parked in front of it.

Joe got out of the car. "What do you think?" he asked proudly.

Jack and Lily stepped out of the vehicle as well. "She's beautiful," Jack replied softly. The vessel in front of them was a massive red starship, easily 300 feet long. Jack recognized the

style as a Starman-class ship.

Lily spoke up. "Is it just me or does that ship look just like the *Raptor*?"

"It is exactly like her," Joe affirmed. "Right down to the name." Joe nodded toward the vessel and Jack saw that the name *Raptor II* was neatly written on its side.

"I'm very impressed!" Jack said. "Is that your ship?"

Joe shook his head. "Nope, Jack. It's yours."

Jack looked at him in astonishment. "What do you mean, it's *mine*?"

Joe smiled. "The folks at Starlight Enterprise are looking for good people. People who are honest and brave. People who will look fear in the eye and overcome it with courage. People that have what it takes to triumph over the most intense darkness. People like you and your wife. We'd like you to come and work for us."

Jack looked at his wife in astonishment. Lily was equally surprised. "But we're not Starmen!" she said.

"You don't have to be," Joe replied. "There's a lot of work that needs to be done out there among the stars, and there are too few people like you to do it. Come and join us."

"What do you think?" Jack asked his wife.

"I think it's completely insane," Lily replied. "It is crazy. But I have a feeling you're not going to be happy spending the rest of your life dusting equipment in the basement of the David Foster Spaceport. If you turn this down you will regret it for the rest of your life."

"You think so?" Jack asked, smiling.

"I would see to it personally," Lily replied.

Jack grinned. He turned back to Joe. "Then I think it's settled! When do we leave?"