

## **Two Sci-Fi Novellas:**

**Presto Agitato**

*A Dystopian Thriller*

**&**

**Survival Games**

*A Space Opera*

**Steven M. Moore**

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The novellas are entirely works of fiction. All plot situations and characters are purely fictional. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Settings may include existing buildings and establishments, but all are used in a fictional and futuristic context.

SAMPLE

## Preface

The novella “Presto Agitato” is about a social phenomenon that often occurs: In the fight against an autocratic regime, the “good guys” often resort to the methods of the “bad guys.” When that happens, lines become blurred. This novella has that as its major theme. This tale is not set in my usual sci-fi universe. Consider the dystopian world portrayed as a warning about what might happen.

The novella “Survival Games” is a space opera. Many sci-fi readers make light of it, but these stories almost always have some hard sci-fi elements. In particular, this story is set in the same fictional universe of many of my sci-fi stories, the ITUIP universe (that’s the “Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets”). Of course, you don’t have to have to read any of those previous stories—all my stories are independent even if I reuse the same general setting and a few characters.

Steven M. Moore  
Montclair, N.J.  
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## Presto Agitato

A Dystopian Thriller

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## Chapter One

Yuri Benavides played the last chord of Ben Yang's sonata, placed his big hands on his lap, and bowed his head as if he were meditating. The audience's applause was deafening. He'd previously played the little Mozart sonata; then Chopin's bow to Beethoven, the "Fantaisie-Impromptu"; Beethoven's "Apassionata" sonata; and finally the Yang piece, one chosen from the mid-twenty-first century master's set of monster études to challenge his audience and subsequent performers.

He smiled. Their reaction pleased him. India might be in a civil war, but the Indians in the concert hall in Mumbai were not. They demanded an encore. He gave them a Chopin mazurka from the same period as the "Fantaisie."

He finally stood, made a steeple out of his hands, and gave them his Namaste. He was a tall, slim man with flowing hair, so the bow was obvious as his hair flowed down over his forehead. He straightened, waved, and left the stage, to more calls of "Encore!"

There was a time as a student that people wouldn't have reacted that way. Others could play concert piano music, but now they tried to become better known than he was. Fame was fleeting in a world where life was too, a world strangled by the Committee. One misstep and you were either retrained or erased, no matter how famous you were. With his fame, he had a little freedom.

Others weren't so lucky.

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Marta Holguin took off the VR helmet and rubbed her eyes. She hadn't been watching videos. That wasn't her job. She was an AI guide. With VR technology, she could interact with Security's powerful AI and guide it through the terabyte seas of data. The combination of human and machine was always more powerful than any conventional search engine or data-mining software. But it took a special human to do the guiding.

*Should I even bother to report what the AI and I found?* She knew it wouldn't make much difference. Others might see it soon enough. *Let them get the kudos.* She didn't like the Committee. Never had. She knew what actions her report might lead to.

She was a plain young woman who lived a simple and plain life mostly dedicated to her work. She didn't know how or why the Committee had picked her for her job. *Maybe it was the Mumbai AI who did the picking?* It almost seemed like a person sometimes. Most big population centers had one, some two. The Committee networked them all and used them to control all human life on Earth.

She stretched and glanced at one of her coworkers, a man who sometimes brought her little treats. He was dumpy just like she was, and she felt no chemistry. He was nice enough, though.

She didn't feel any chemistry with anyone anymore. The retraining had accomplished that at least. *I'm attracted to no one; no one is attracted to me.*

She popped two aspirins and washed them down with a half bottle of vita-water. She thought a bit more and then made her decision. She tapped a small icon on one of six screens surrounding her in her cubicle and waited.

A few seconds later the icon expanded to show a bald, blue-eyed man with a blond mustache. "Yes?"

She didn't have to say it was important. No one would call Karl Roman if it wasn't important and they wanted to keep their job. "Possible assassination prediction associated with New York City case file 3B27Y8."

"Likelihood?"

"67.2%."

"Possible victim's name?"

"Anton Braun."

"Alias of suspect?"

"None. His real name is Yuri Marco Benavides."

Roman looked surprised. *He never looks surprised!*

"The pianist?"

"I don't know. I'll ask the AI."

"Don't bother. I now have the data record on my screen. This presents a problem. He's too important and well-known to erase him, and who wants to destroy his talent by retraining? Good work, though." There was a pause. "You're a smart girl. I could help you get out of that boring job if we become friends. What do you think?"

*Does he know? Of course he knows!* She hated him. She ignored the offer. *So this is the kind of man who's attracted to me!* She felt sick. "I need to get back to work." She hit the icon again.

*Too important to erase? That's a first!* Roman's reaction prompted her to examine the record. She wiped her sweaty hands on her blouse. *Interesting!* She loved classical music. *But maybe he's playing something else besides a piano?* The AI thought so.

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When Yuri returned to his dressing room, he chose the DO NOT DISTURB sign from the door's security panel, listened to the deadbolt close, and went over to the small sofa to take a power nap. At precisely 11:45 p.m. local time, the small device implanted in the side of his head woke him.

"Target: Anton Braun." A map formed before his eyes with an address in the lower right-hand corner. "2:15 a.m. is optimum."

Yuri didn't care who Braun was. If Hammer said he was a target, so be it. He didn't have to understand how the complex programming of Hammer's own AI net chose an optimum target for doing maximum damage to the Committee and its minions in order to lessen its strangling grip on the world.

He decided on his weapons, an automatic laser pistol and a thin wire made from a strong alloy, and left his hotel room. The hotel's doorman called a robotaxi for him, and it took him to a point not far from Braun's address. The Committee's security record would show a tall Nordic woman exiting the taxi, looking a bit tipsy. The high heels in the image explained his real height. He hadn't used that disguise before. *I rather like it!*

The house was a mansion surrounded by a high electrified fence. It was in the middle of a ghetto mostly filled with untouchables. *Depressing place, but maybe the land is cheaper here.* There was certainly enough of it. He eyed the manicured lawns and calculated that they alone would probably use more water than the entire ghetto.

*What a contrast!* Such contrasts existed all over the world as the Committee ensured that the haves became richer and the have-nots became poorer. In this case, they wouldn't have enough energy from the food they ate even to rebel.

He knew there would be guards. That only made the assignment more interesting.

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At 4:10 a.m., Karl Roman studied the scene the videocam was showing—Braun's house in the Mumbai suburbs was swarming with the Committee's security personnel.

*Five guards dead, plus Braun, make six victims of a masterful assassin.* He wasn't a member of the Committee, but he was a VIP in its security apparatus. The situation wouldn't help his career. After all, Holguin and her AI pet had provided a warning. *Not good!*

He turned to another monitor and watched three security guards break into Yuri Benavides's hotel room and rouse him from his sleep. Decades ago the pianist could have sued the police for doing that. Now he could only get satisfaction by swearing in seven languages. The Committee gave citizens few privileges and no rights; it held the world captive in its clenched, iron fist.

Karl knew he was just a tool of an autocratic state that had cherry-picked all the most successful ideas from the world's previous authoritarian regimes. Anyone stepping out of line was erased or retrained. The first was always the safest and helped curb population growth. Its only problem was that sometimes valuable, creative individuals like Benavides were executed—scientists, technologists, artists, and other geniuses who subscribed to the arcane belief that human beings should be free.

*Is it possible the AI made a mistake with Yuri Benavides?* Karl shut the feed for that monitor down and went back to the one showing the crime scene. *Did Holguin and the AI discover a true correlation?*

## Chapter Two

Marta waited until the security guards left the hotel. She was happy to see they didn't have Benavides in handcuffs and leg irons. *Or carrying him out in a body bag!* He must still be in his room and still in the planning stages.

That room was on the hotel's seventeenth floor. She stepped out of the stairwell that also served as a fire escape and knocked on the door. The pianist threw it open.

"I told you—" He stopped when he saw it was only her. "Who are you? And how did you get past the security fences on this floor?" He looked up and down the dark corridor. "Okay, I get it: I said to those three oafs I was going to report them, so they sent you to make me forget about the incident. Go away. I won't accept sex as a bribe, and, besides, I'm not in the mood. I played a concert yesterday, and I'm tired."

"I wasn't sent here to sleep with you."

He shrugged. "Then why the hell are you here?"

"Curiosity. They're on to you, you know."

Yuri pulled her inside and slammed the door shut. He grabbed her by the shoulders.

"They?"

She put a finger to her lips. "The room might be bugged."

"All hotel rooms are bugged. The video record will show I went back to bed after the security goons left, and the only thing the devils will hear are my snores. Committee Security is good, but not that good. Now talk, or I'll kill you."

"Like Braun?"

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Anton Braun, Deputy Secretary of Commerce, will be murdered. Our AI says there's a 67.2% likelihood you'll do it."

"You're from Committee Security, aren't you? Now I will have to kill you."

Marta backed away from him. "Don't be too hasty. I want to join the Hammer of Justice."

"The what?"

"Don't play games with me. And why would you say you're going to kill me if you weren't planning to murder Braun?"

"Don't be absurd. It's just an expression. I also killed that devilish Yang piece I played, but that just means I probably gave my best ever performance of it. I told the three security guards I'd kill them if they interrupted my sleep again. They didn't believe I'd do it, of course, because it's just an expression, and one even smiled. I can't focus on music if I don't get any sleep." He shrugged. "Oh well, this could be fun. I'm wide awake now, so let's have some of the hotel's syntho hot chocolate so I can be comfortable analyzing your personal psychoses."

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Marta followed Yuri to the little galley kitchen and sat on one of the counter's stools while he heated two cups of water in the microwave. He dumped the powdery contents from two envelopes into the nearly boiling water and stirred each cup with the same spoon. He handed her a cup but remained standing behind the counter, eying her.

"You talk about analysis. Aren't you a pianist?"

"Aren't you a psychotic?"



"I'll admit to having headaches occasionally. The retraining didn't take with me. They think it did, though."

"Committee retraining?" She nodded. He frowned. "What for?"

"My father was a scientist who spoke publicly against the Committee. They erased him. They retrained my mother and me."

"But it didn't take with you. Why?"

"I don't know. I pretended it did. My father was dead and my mother is now a vegetable who they'll probably soon euthanize. I've been waiting for the chance to get even."

"And you think this—what did you call it? Hammer of Justice?—will help you do so?" He took a sip of his chocolate. "God, this synthetic stuff sucks. I'm sorry for your losses, but I can't help you. You're crazy and obsessed. After you drink this swill you can leave. I promise to say nothing about your visit. I wouldn't want you to lose your job."

She also took a cautious sip and smiled. "Tastes okay to me, but I only know syntho products. I can't afford anything else."

"I had a concert in Rio once. The real stuff has spoiled me forever."

She eyed him over the cup's rim. "I know you'll do it."

"Do what?"

"Kill Braun."

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"I'm sorry," Yuri said. "I've heard of that despicable man, but I couldn't pick him out in a crowd. How could I kill him? And why would I want to kill him? I'd be setting myself up for an erasure or retraining. I have a good thing going. Everyone likes my concerts."

"Okay. Be that way. The Committee's Mumbai AI and I are a good team, though. My boss Karl Roman knows that. Any event we assign a likelihood above 60% usually occurs. Deviations sometimes happen when one person is really a team, but in those cases, we've always picked the leaders of the teams. Karl Roman knows all about you, and he knows our record too. It's not the Committee that's all-knowing; it's the AIs and people like me who help them sift through the terabytes of data on every man, woman, and child, tracking all of them in space and time."

He sighed. "Marta, you're a very pleasant woman, but please finish your chocolate and return to whatever Committee cave you crawled out from. I need my rest." He rose, tossed the remainder of his chocolate into the small sink, and found a notepad. "I still use these because I like the feel of paper. It's much nicer than having you add an address to your smart phone, which Committee staff can hack, I'm sure." He wrote something and handed her the paper. On it was an address. "Go there tomorrow after work."

"Who will I find at this place?"

He smiled. "Not the Hammer of Justice, that's for sure. Raj is a shrink I happen to know. Quite good at what he does, even if he has a tin ear."

She frowned. "I'm not crazy!"

"Let a pro determine that."

After she left, he returned to his bed.

## Chapter Three

Karl Roman put out a red alert on Yuri Benavides. There were no other suspects in the murder of the Deputy Secretary, and he knew the AI and Holguin were rarely incorrect. He thought it was a long shot, but the Committee's chairperson wanted action and had insisted on the alert to Karl's boss. Even with his resistance, the boss had insisted that Karl put out the alert. *The chain of command must be maintained.*

Red alerts were only put out for undesirables who were potential candidates for erasure or retraining. The Committee's statisticians estimated that hundreds were put out every second of every day. *Good thing they're mostly loners*, he thought. *If they ever get organized....* He shuddered.

The Committee's world was the only one he'd ever known. It had evolved from the great and repressive oligarchies of China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States, after the latter three had adopted China's brand of fascist capitalism. Its nine members, including the Chairperson, were executives with nine-year terms; each year, one would retire and return to her or his businesses and finances, and a new one would be appointed to the exclusive and secret group of oligarchs who ran the world. The main aim of their policies was always to preserve the status quo, maintain order, and ensure the oligarchs' wealth, no matter how much the wealth gap between rich elites and others widened.

Karl would never openly state it that way, of course, although he knew that was the version of history often trumpeted by rebels who ended up erased or retrained. He was fine in his job with state security. Anyone wanting to rebel took their chances, after all. Disturbing the natural order wasn't tolerated. The Committee didn't take chances, and he benefitted from the repression. His job was to track down all those who didn't abide by the rule of law. He called all of them anarchists.

*Could Benavides be an anarchist?* He had his doubts. *But who else could be a suspect in the Braun killing?* The AI had offered no more candidates beyond the pianist.

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The psychologist knocked on Karl's door. He buzzed him in. It was unusual for Karl to see anyone in person. He generally didn't like people, especially his underlings who often seemed to be spineless, cowering dogs.

"You wanted to see me, yes?"

Karl checked out Robert Fan. The slant eyes didn't bother him. Even Committee members were a diverse bunch. After all, the Committee owed its origins to that Chinese state when it stopped pretending to be a democracy and made their president a virtual emperor. This psych's timidity and obsequiousness gave him a sour stomach, though.

"I asked for someone who will analyze the pianist Yuri Marco Benavides. I suppose I'm stuck with you. Sit down and talk to me."

"I could have just sent you a report," Robert said, glancing at the monitor on Karl's desk.

*Maybe he doesn't like people either?* "I'd rather watch your facial expression when you offload your psycho-babble shit on me. Go for it!"

Robert consulted his smart phone. "Citizen Benavides was born in Buenos Aires to a Colombian father and Russian mother. The father owned several respectable high tech companies that were taken over by World Electronics. The mother was a chemist at a branch of

Universal Pharmaceuticals. Yuri didn't follow in his parents' scientific and technological footsteps—"

Karl's fist pounded his desk. "Cut the crap! You're making his life sound like a fucking fairytale, and I could read all that as well as you can, if not better, from the computer records. Get to the psych evaluation. I want to know if he has seditious tendencies."

Robert shrugged. "He had some stormy years in music school. The Committee's Planning Subcommittee wanted him to be a composer. He insisted on becoming a concert pianist. Even so, he has composed—"

Again the fist. "Are you kidding me? Artistic preferences don't indicate seditious tendencies. Even the Committee allows some leeway there, so damn the planners."

"He was quite vocal about them. That rebellion possibly establishes a mental trend."

The psychologist was clearly giving Karl what he thought Karl wanted to hear. "What about his personal life? What do we know about his habits and so on? Give me something."

"There are a few rumors that he might be gay. That should qualify him for retraining at least."

"I wouldn't retrain him and lose his genius because he's a bit swishy. I want to know if he's capable of assassinating someone."

"The AI seems to think so. I can't see why. To all appearances, he's a gentle soul if we overlook the artistic temper tantrums."

Karl studied the ceiling. It was hard to deal with idiots. *Doesn't this fool know that we have a whole network of AIs?* The Committee ruled the world; one AI couldn't possibly consider the teeming billions of citizens, no matter how fast its quantum and semi-organic circuits could go through terabytes of data. *And that's also why people like Holguin were important as guides for the local AIs in the network.*

"Appearances don't count in my business. Have you ever heard of Gertrude Amalfi?"

"I could look her up."

"Please do so. But not now!" The psych expert had started to consult his smart phone.

"Sister Gertrude was an Italian nun, a rosy-cheeked bride of Jesus who did charity work in Rome's slums like she was Mother Theresa. No one suspected her of anything more than being a Jesus freak, something we should ban, by the way. We should ban all religions— opium of the masses and all that—but that would make us look like damned godless Communists. Besides, the Committee likes to use religion as a pacifier. Hate your life? It will be better in the afterlife. Et cetera, et cetera." He parked his chin on his hands as if he were truly praying. "Let me now pray for the good woman's soul because she's surely in Hell now. She assassinated one of my colleagues and was erased. Of course, if that Church was still in Rome, it'd probably make her into a saint."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Idiot! That's not the point. The lesson is that enemies of the state can be anyone, anywhere!"

"I suppose. But unless I can make an onsite psych eval of Citizen Benavides, the AI and I can only work with what's in the records."

"So why did the AI and Marta Holguin finger Benavides? Answer me that. They had no more information than you do."

"My specialty is psychology. I'm no data guide."

"Then ask Holguin how they came up with Benavides. You can at least tell if she's lying, right?"

“Possibly. Or we could just hook her up to a lie detector.”

“Then do it.”

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Robert Fan was cautious enough to check Holguin’s records. After reading them and admiring the woman’s work, he called Karl.

“What? You already interviewed Holguin?”

“No, sir. There’s a problem.”

“Spit it out!”

“Citizen Holguin was retrained. By law, there’s nothing available on her before the date of the retraining beyond the reason for said retraining. That law makes sense, of course. It just restates the fact that she would remember nothing before that date.”

“And what was the reason for her retraining?”

“Her father was erased for seditious speech against the Committee.”

*Shit! I should have looked that up.* “OK. So what? The lie detector will still work for recent events. I want details about how she and the AI came up with Benavides.”

“Many times there’s no single reason. The AI deals with probabilities—rather the network, as you stated. The data guide interacting with the local AI just helps find the relevant data to calculate them. It’s a very complex process.”

“Are you telling me that no one knows how the AI comes up with this shit?”

“Basically. AIs learn, so they’re continually changing, often more rapidly than a snap of our fingers. And our AI isn’t the one that Security started with years ago. It’s not even the same as it was when it went online eight years ago. And our network has many such AIs in a network that is the most sophisticated one in existence. The databanks all over the world that it accesses have grown in number too, and cover the planet.” Robert must have seen Karl’s frown. “Do you want me to connect you with a programmer?”

“No. I want you to find someone who will tell me why Holguin and the AI fingered Benavides. On second thought, never mind. I’ll interview Holguin.”

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Karl studied the woman. She looked nervous. Even on the HD screen, she had looked pale. *Logical. She’s only seen me on a small monitor, and not too many times at that.*

“Let’s get to the point, Citizen Holguin. Right now the only suspect we have for the murder of Citizen Braun is Yuri Benavides. Why did you and the AI come up with his name?”

She looked surprised...and somewhat relieved. *Hadn’t she known about Braun’s murder?* He couldn’t remember the details of their previous conversation. *Did I flirt with her?* He often flirted with female staff. He considered it part of his job. *It makes them feel good about themselves.*

“I don’t know why the AI signaled out Citizen Benavides, sir. You see, I don’t actually read the data. It’s hard to explain. My function is intuitive. I see paths of inquiry that are more likely in a gross sense and those that aren’t. I’m trained to do that. The AI can ignore me and consider other data and input from other AIs in the net if it wants to do so. My job is to provide the human intuition that it sometimes lacks.”

“And how do you do that?”

“Unknown.” She hung her head. He could see she didn’t dye her hair. *Natural brunette. Good tits. Otherwise, a wimpy, whiny broad.* He hoped he hadn’t flirted with her. She’d probably just lie like a wet rag when he tried to derive some pleasure. “I’ve been retrained. I don’t have an answer to your question for that reason. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Okay. I’m reassigning you. Your job until I say otherwise is to figure out why our AI fingered Benavides. It’s a terrible situation, you know. Suppose the AIs are accusing innocent people? We can’t have that now, can we?” She shook her head. “Get to work. Do what I say. When you have an answer, contact me. And don’t tell anyone you’re on this special assignment.”

She nodded and left.

*What a conundrum we’ll have if the Committee’s AI net is making us erase or retrain complete innocents?* Karl felt sick again.

## Chapter Four

Marta found the address Benavides had given her easily enough the next day. It was a seven-story building in Mumbai, maybe 21<sup>st</sup> century vintage—not new, not old, just a plain old nondescript building constructed at the beginning of India’s high tech era. Dr. Raj Agarwal had a practice on the fifth floor.

Outside the office door, she hesitated. *Is this a trap?* She didn’t think Benavides wanted to kill her, but these days one never could be sure. If the pianist was truly an assassin working for the Hammer of Justice, he might want to perform the murder act in a place where he could easily get rid of the body, although that hadn’t seemed to be the case with Braun. *Or maybe Agarwal works for the Committee and it knows about my visit to Benavides? Or maybe I am crazy—completely paranoid.*

She opened the door and peeked inside. The reception area was empty, so she went in.

“State your business,” said a voice.

*Probably a small office AI with one of its many functions being to serve as receptionist.* She wondered if it was netted with the Committee’s network or some other net. *Probably not.* Such office AIs were often not connected to the outside world at all. The waiting room area had been designed for a live receptionist, but they were as rare as real chocolate or coffee nowadays. The AI might even be an old model that had been there for years.

“I’m here to see Dr. Agarwal. Citizen Benavides suggested I come.”

A device glowed red in the wall opposite her. “Look into the lens. We will access records using the retina reader to confirm your ID.” *So it connects when it wants to do so—at least to somewhere.* She walked across and did as requested. “Citizen Marta Holguin, born September 22, 2153 in Medellin, Colombia. Welcome to the practice. The doctor will see you in a moment. Please take a seat.”

She sat in one of the chairs. A few minutes later, an AC unit came on. She took no notice because they were as common as flies on sacred cows. But she became sleepy. *It’s the Committee! They’re drugging me.*

She tried to fight the drugs, to no avail. She slumped unconscious to the floor.

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“So what’s the verdict?” said Yuri. Raj had called him. He had come to the doctor’s office as fast as possible, changing holographic disguises multiple times and watching if he had a tail. He already knew about the red alert and wasn’t taking any chances.

“Number one: she’s who she says she is. She works for the Committee as a data guide for their damned monster AI network, the Mumbai AI, in particular. She and her mother were retrained; her father, physicist Ernesto Holguin, was erased. Number two: Her mother is scheduled for euthanasia in three weeks; she has minimal brain stem activity. She’s been that way since retraining. Number three: The retraining didn’t take with our patient.”

“Isn’t that unusual?”

“Very rare. Our scientists are trying to analyze why it occurs. They’d probably like to analyze Citizen Holguin. Maybe take out her brain and slice it up to analyze the synaptic connections. The current theory is that it has something to do with autism, but that’s such a general diagnosis, it’s almost useless.”

“She’s autistic?”

“Yes, but highly functional. It’s what makes her such a good data guide, I suppose. It’s also what makes you such a good pianist.”

“I’m not autistic.”

Raj smiled at Yuri. “If you say so.”

Yuri thought a moment. “Here’s the important question, old boy: Can she help us?”

Raj looked at the woman lying on the gurney who was still under the anesthetic’s influence. Pulse: 62, and dropping. BP: 117 over 63...and dropping. They’d have to wake her soon.

“We don’t like to recruit anyone obsessed with revenge. They can be emotionally unstable. That’s dangerous for our movement.”

“You’re telling me everyone affiliated with Hammer only has philosophical motives? No fiery emotions? I find that surprising. In fact, I don’t believe it.”

The scientist shrugged. “At least they’re cold and calculating enough to control their emotions. Ending the Committee’s grip on our world requires cold and calculating commitment. We can’t permit out-of-control members in our organization. They’d endanger everything.”

“So what do you recommend for her?”

“I’d prefer to let her die. In lieu of that, I’d apply a mildly hypnotic memory wipe.”

“Isn’t that what retraining is?”

“Nothing mild about retraining. What I suggest is more like a magician convincing a member of an audience he’s a chicken. The audience member wants to be a chicken—becomes obsessed with the idea, for that matter. Marta didn’t want to be retrained, and she’s autistic enough that she could resist. I hope the Committee doesn’t know that, by the way. That would put you and many others in danger. But she will want to feel better. The retraining gave her headaches. My treatment will eliminate them, and then she’ll be susceptible to my suggestions and will forget she ever met you.”

“How will she explain to herself how she came to be here?”

“She won’t have to do that. She’ll wake up in her own bed at home.”

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Marta awoke, saw the bottle of syntho chardonnay and empty wineglass by her bed, and smiled. *Wow, I really hung one on last night!* She eyed the readout on the clock beside her. *Time to get up for work!*

She was surprised that she didn’t have her usual morning headache. Alcohol often exacerbated the headaches she’d had ever since retraining. *Maybe I destroyed enough brain cells yesterday that the reason for the headaches is gone?* She felt well and energetic.

She remembered she had a new assignment: Find out why their AI had keyed in on Citizen Benavides for the future murder of Citizen Braun, which had come to pass. She thought that was an impossible task. She didn’t understand AIs. Nobody did anymore, only small parts of their programming. She knew a bit about that, but not enough. The vast security network learned by itself without human intervention. *Will the AI even answer my questions?*

Her apartment was near the black pyramid that housed the Committee’s local offices, in particular, Committee Security—just one metro stop away. She found her cubicle as she’d left it. She saw the piece of paper pinned to her corkboard. *What’s that all about?* She couldn’t remember.

The only other adornment in the cubicle, if it could be called that, was the picture of her parents she'd printed out after getting the job at Committee Security. They were both smiling.  
*Someday I will avenge you both, she thought. Someone has to pay!*

SAMPLE



## Chapter Five

Yuri left the secret Hammer lab with mixed emotions. He was sorry that Marta would forget all about visiting him, but her history strengthened his resolve to fight the Committee. *Its authoritarian grip on the world must end!*

Like many classical musicians, he was a student of musical history. That history was intertwined with historical upheavals on the planet. Beethoven wrote the “Eroica” symphony and the “Emperor” concerto only to become disillusioned when Napoleon became an autocratic figure and captured Vienna. The little corporal’s downfall occurred when he invaded the land of the czars, but they in turn succumbed to the Bolsheviks, and that revolution had only replaced one group of despots with another. Even the US, land of the free and home of the brave, had rotted from within and followed the model of China’s fascist capitalism and Russia’s evil oligarchy. *Are human beings doomed to become enchanted periodically with an autocratic form of government?*

Technology had made that process increasingly easier and worldwide. The Committee gripped the world in its iron hand because of high tech. The spying on citizens was sophisticated and now run mostly by AIs and sophisticated sensors with little human intervention. Domination of the news media outlets and internet campaigns directed at bending the wills of different blocs of citizens as a function of their gender, sexual proclivities, entertainment choices, and purchasing habits trumped any ad campaign a multinational corporation could ever invent. When the bending wasn’t successful, technology also provided swift and sure ways to eliminate malcontents via the erasure program; it also allowed for the efficient adjustment of minds by retraining.

Those painful thoughts were old ones that often percolated through his mind; they were only buried when he started a performance and became lost in his music. They were like a low sea state of gentle waves that sometimes roiled under the stress of an assassination. *I’m also an artist in that activity.* Hammer’s theory was that enough assassinations of key figures in the corrupt government would destabilize it and hasten its downfall.

The waves weren’t high enough now to make him careless. He still worried about the red alert, though. As he walked to the metro, he noticed in his peripheral vision that videocams swiveled to follow him.

He didn’t worry much about Hammer. *Should I?* All the cameras in the area were controlled by his organization and sent innocuous scenes to Committee Security. The control was invisible to the state’s agents. *We can fight technology with better technology.*

But Hammer’s subterfuge wasn’t generalized. It couldn’t be without making Committee Security suspicious. *No, they were surveilling him!* He remembered Marta saying they were onto him. The red alert might go farther than that—they were looking to arrest him! That meant that retraining or erasure would be in his future.

Their AI must have put a lot of data together to make the Committee become suspicious. For them, it wouldn’t matter that he was a famous and popular concert pianist. Their erasure and retraining programs had eliminated geniuses and creative people all over the world. The Committee didn’t care. He supposed they justified it all by saying there would always be enough smart people left who wouldn’t give a damn what kind of government they had as long as they were coddled and lived a comfortable life. That had even been true before the Committee.

His immediate concern now was to do something about the surveillance. He could no longer do Hammer’s bidding if he was under suspicion, which he seemed to be.

Because he had just left the lab, Yuri didn't trust Raj or even Hammer completely. And he needed to find someone with access to the Committee's AI, someone local. Who did he know who had insight into the inner workings of Committee Security? Marta Holguin was now useless for that purpose. He smiled. She'd mentioned a name: Karl Roman.

Breaking into the local Committee Security building would be easy. He would make sure Marta Holguin slept late the next morning. He would then become Marta Holguin. Finding Karl Roman might be tricky, though.

He knew Hammer wouldn't like his plan. Even Raj would disapprove. *Tough shit!* They weren't taking the risks; he was. He had to eliminate all suspicion of the concert pianist Yuri Benavides. Roman would point him to programmer or programmers who could do it.

If he didn't act, his days of being an assassin would be over. Worse, he'd never see the day when the world was free from the Committee's control!

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"Citizen Holguin, do you have anything for me yet?"

Yuri eyed the screen and thought a second. "I'm still working on it."

Thank goodness she had a contralto voice. The answer seemed to satisfy the boss. *And now I won't have to hack into the system to find out where Karl Roman's office is. Why didn't Marta know that?* That last question bothered him. But he was dealing with a person who'd suffered through a major retraining with the Committee and a minimum one with Raj and still survived. *Sleep well, Marta. Your dreams will help humanity win its freedom!*

The hologram unit only had a finite range, but he stayed away from the rows and rows of cubicles, found an elevator, and ascended to the floor where Roman's office was. Even the AI would think that he was Marta Holguin.

The unit he wore projected a mask around him where Marta's image would imitate all the motions of his own body. It was an advanced unit with no detectable shimmer, a descendant of the complicated hardware and software that brought old actors and entertainers back to life. *An Elvis impersonator can really become Elvis!*

He didn't understand any of that tech, of course. Few people did. *We're just technological savages who have no idea about how things work. That's what happens when technology becomes so complicated.*

Everyone felt safe in that Committee building too. They thought any intruder would be caught and either erased or retrained. Complacency breeds carelessness. *And they have no idea Hammer even exists!*

Roman seemed surprised when Yuri Tased him. He studied the man slumped over the desk, his twitching hand still reaching for an alarm. *Had he guessed?* Probably not many people ever came to his office. *And he had just talked to me—rather, Marta Holguin.*

*Now we'll see what we can do about making Yuri Benavides into a saint!*

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Yuri pushed Roman out of his desk chair and sat down. He didn't even have to use the print of Roman's index finger or put an eye up to the retina scan. Roman's computer was on. He took the time to adjust the hologram unit to make him appear like Roman and then searched employee records. He found David Chan.

“Roman here. Can you do me a favor, Chan? We’ve detected some major errors in case file 3B27Y8 that have made the AI falsely accuse the famous concert pianist Yuri Marco Benavides of being an assassin who’s plotting a murder. There was a murder committed, and the case is still open, but Citizen Benavides has no connection to the case. Can you erase that projection made by the AI and Citizen Holguin?”

“Yes, I see the projection. Normally I would have to confer with Citizen Holguin, but you’re her boss. Hold on a second.” There was a pause. “Okay. The projection has been eliminated from the database. Anything else?”

“Yes. Will there be a record of this conversation?”

“I have to log it, so the answer is yes. It will automatically appear in your log too.”

“Good. That will satisfy anyone who’s curious, I’m sure. I mean, that I ordered this.”

“That’s the idea. The blame will rest on your shoulders.” Chan smiled. “Anything else I can help you with?”

“How about a few stock market tips?”

“I can’t ask the AI to make projections about that.”

*Of course you can’t. Not for me, at least.* Benavides wondered if the AI net did it for Committee members—or other jerks among the oligarchs favored by the Committee. *It’s a safe bet they’re all crooks!*

He rummaged around in Roman’s desk drawers. *It’s also a safe bet there’s liquor here somewhere.* He found a bottle of vodka and a glass in the large bottom file drawer. He slopped a little over Roman, filled the glass part way, and then dropped it. He then injected Roman with a fluid that would simulate a heart attack. Not enough to kill him, but enough to seem real and put him out of commission for a while.

As Benavides left the office as Marta Holguin again, he wondered if Roman would just think it was all an inebriated dream. The medics certainly would.

## Chapter Six

Yuri returned to New York City two days later. He had a concert to prepare for at Lincoln Center with the New York Philharmonic; it featured the Rachmaninoff Concerto. It was a devilishly difficult piece that had been the bane for many classical pianists; he'd won a contest in Moscow with it years ago and that had jumpstarted his career. That was where Hammer had recruited him too, so his affinity with the piece was doubled.

His apartment on the Westside across from the Park was exactly as he had left it, and his security traps, some Hammer's and some his own, designed by an old friend who was a software guru, hadn't been triggered. Upon entering, he patted his grand piano but sat down at his desk where he accessed his laptop for messages. The laptop was typical and not that new. It was only a sleek monitor with a few buttons along its lower edge. The guts were in the apartment's AI, which was in many ways his personal butler and another gift from his software friend.

"Any messages, Alfred?"

"Three. The most important one is from the manager of Symphony Hall. He wants to know if you want to ship your piano from Julliard to the concert venue."

"Tell him no. I'm not a prima donna. What he has should be good enough. If it isn't, I'll have him fired. What else?"

"The second is from an unknown source. I haven't labeled it as spam because of the contents."

"What are the contents?"

"Your little gambit was noted and approved after the fact. Congrats."

*Of course. Hammer figured out that Roman's heart attack was no accident. Is the man dead?* "Erase that message completely."

"Done. The third message is from someone named Holguin."

*Shit! Does she remember something?* "Play the message."

"Hello. Hello. I'm trying to call a Mr. Yuri Benavides. I guess this is a wrong number."

He thought a moment and then broke into a cold sweat. *Was Raj's hypnosis treatment enough to erase memories of her visit to his hotel suite?* It should have been. *But why would she be calling otherwise?*

He decided to put Marta Holguin out of his mind and go have lunch at P. J. Clark's. The old restaurant was across from Lincoln Center and still served an excellent shepherd's pie. He would meet with the Philharmonic conductor afterwards.

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When Yuri left the conductor's office, he found a seat in the lobby and checked his calls and text messages using his smart phone. There was a text message from Holguin. He read it: *I must talk to you. You're in danger. So am I.*

That was what started his whole involvement with the woman, except for the last sentence. *But why is she in danger? Do they think she did something to Roman?* He frowned. He had needed to use that disguise, but he didn't want her to get in trouble.

*Where are you now?* he typed.

*In Tel Aviv. I'm catching the scramjet for New York City. We need to meet.*

*Bryant Park. 6 p.m. Come alone.*

He'd added the last because he smelled a trap.

After Hammer recruited him, he'd thought often about the Committee catching him. He was prepared for that. He'd read enough old spy stories to know about a false tooth filled with cyanide. He had one implanted by a Hammer dentist. His handlers had objected, but he wasn't about to succumb to either retraining or erasure.

*Is this the end? If Holguin's the Committee's agent, wouldn't Raj have determined that? And is Roman or his cohorts mounting a complete search and destroy mission against me?*

He looked at his watch. *Not much time to plan an escape if it is a trap!*

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Yuri ate a quick and early dinner at Café Fiorello and headed for Bryant Park. He spotted her. She was underdressed for autumn in the city, hugging herself and shivering as she looked for him. *She's really quite charming*, he thought. He started to move toward her, but stopped when he spotted a man and woman also watching her.

He didn't know them. They could be the Committee's agents. *Or could they be Hammer's?* He remembered Raj's words: *I'd prefer to let her die*. Perhaps the Hammer psychologist had learned about the text message exchange and now considered Holguin a threat. *Does he also consider me one?*

The Hammer of Justice was no different from Committee Security in their policy of considering agents and assassins expendables.

Yuri moved toward Marta and the other two, maneuvering so he arrived behind them. He saw the woman take a needle gun out of her purse and aim at Marta.

*Act!* He went into automatic mode, taking his own laser pistol out of his pocket and killing first the woman and then the man. *Done!*

The cold sweat hit him afterwards. Whether they were Committee or Hammer, there'd been no reason to kill Marta. Even as the two agents fell, he beckoned to Marta to come toward him.

"Who-who are they?" she said in a whisper he could barely make out over the sounds of traffic and crowds. "She was going to kill me!"

"And he would have done so if she failed. He was backup. SOP for the Committee and Hammer. I don't use backups." He grabbed her shoulders. "Are you okay?" She nodded. "Follow me then."

He led her down into the subway station where they took the Sixth Avenue Line to Brooklyn. Once she started to speak, but he put a finger to his lips to silence her. In Brooklyn, he found a small café near Prospect Park, Le P'tit Paris Bistro, and they settled into a booth in the back.

"Now can you tell me what's going on? I remembered seeing you in Mumbai at your hotel."

"Yes, I figured as much. Your autism must have affected Raj's procedure as well as your retraining."

"What's that mean? What procedure?"

"What do you remember about our hotel conversation?"

"I think I accused you of being an assassin who was planning a murder."

"You also asked me about Hammer. Why?"

She turned white. "You're an assassin for the Committee?"

“Marta, I’m just a concert pianist. I returned to New York because I have a function with the Philharmonic coming up. Where did you get the idea that I’m an assassin?”

“My work, I suppose. And didn’t you just kill that man and woman? Don’t tell me they were from Hammer!” She shuddered and looked around the rest of the café.

“Possibly. Or the Committee. Assassinations are an extracurricular activity and common enough, the uncivilized part of the Committee’s control compared to erasure and retraining. And I don’t work for the Committee; I work for Hammer. Or did. Will you be okay here for a few moments? I’m going to step into the men’s room and check-in with my personal security system.”

Benavides went into a stall and dialed his personal AI unit using the unbreakable encryption he himself had designed based on Beethoven’s “Appassionata” Sonata. He had the AI play back the last two hours of security recording in scan mode, and watched in horror as the same man and woman he’d killed tossed his apartment.

He cut the connection and thought, *They used me to get at Marta*. He still didn’t know whether they were Committee or Hammer. Right now, that didn’t matter. They were probably both in danger. *What went wrong?*

When he returned to their booth, she was gone.

## Chapter Seven

Yuri Benavides dashed out of the café and spotted two men carrying an unconscious Marta Holguin. When he attacked them, passersby started screaming. He ignored them and made short work of the agents. This time he searched them. Both had Committee shields.

He picked Holguin up and carried her back into the café. “She’s a bit disoriented,” he told the robot-waiter. “Possibly low blood pressure. Get me a glass of water, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

The waiter rolled away. When it returned, Benavides used the water to splash Holguin’s face.

“Wake up, damn you! I can’t carry you all over Brooklyn.”

In five minutes she was able to stand on her own, if a bit wobbly. “What-what happened?”

“I’ll fill you in on the road.”

A Sheraton was close by, and they rented a car. Yuri picked out an economy model, the least noticeable on the roads, shoved Marta into the passenger’s seat, and swiped his debit card—it was a fake one from Hammer. He frowned after that. If Hammer was after them, the fake debit card would trigger an alarm. But he wasn’t about to use his real one because then it was guaranteed that no matter whoever was after them, they would know he’d just rented a car. At least he had a 50% chance of that going unnoticed.

He headed south and took the old Verrazzano Bridge across the Hudson into Staten Island and then on into New Jersey. *We need a hideout!*

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Yuri’s concert career had made him a lot of money. He’d used some of it to buy various residences in different parts of the world. He’d used only a small part, though, to buy a fishing cabin on a lake in upper New York State. That was their destination.

“Are we in trouble?” said Marta.

She seemed more awake now. “Big trouble. I need to stop somewhere and check these creds. I’m not sure those men were really from the Committee.”

“Why would Hammer want to kill me? Or you, for that matter?”

“They might think you represent a danger to the movement. And they know I do, if they cross me, because I killed the other agents at the park. If the last two were really from the Committee, then there are two possible conclusions: if the park agents were Hammer, both Committee and Hammer are after us. If they were Committee, that’s a good thing, believe it or not, because we only have to worry about the real bad guys from the Committee.”

“That’s confusing. And if everyone’s Hammer?”

“Then everyone’s a bad guy, and we’re royally screwed. Ah, rest stop coming up.”

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At the rest stop, Benavides used a fake code, one of many used by Hammer’s field agents, to get into the Committee’s security network and check on the badges the last two agents had been carrying. *No longer active*, said the system. He frowned. The agents at the café could only be Hammer. It didn’t matter who the ones at the park called master. The Committee was

never a friend. Now Hammer wasn't either. *Did Raj suspect he would go rogue? Enamored with Holguin? A double agent for the Committee?* He had just realized how little he knew about the inner workings of Hammer. *They want to keep it that way for many reasons!*

He returned to the car and gestured for Holguin to lower the passenger's side window.

"We need to ditch this car. I'm going to steal one from those parked here. Take five, hit the restroom, and meet me around back."

"Don't leave me!"

"I won't if I can help it. If I'm not there in five minutes, don't wait. Escape anyway you can. Understand?"

"What's happening?"

"We're in a mess. I know a place where we can relax and recover a bit. I need a quiet place to think and plan."

"I'll see you in back then."

*Optimist*, he thought. It wasn't a criticism. He liked her that way. After all she'd been through, and now this, she was still optimistic. He felt obligated to reward that optimism.



## Chapter Eight

“Are we going to break an axle?” said Marta.

The old car Yuri had stolen at the rest stop—it still ran on increasingly scarce and expensive gasoline—struggled down the rough gravel road toward the lake.

“If we do, we’ll push the car into the trees and walk the rest of the way. Same thing if we run out of fuel. The gas gauge no longer works.”

“Walking? Riding? But where to? We seem to be in the middle of nowhere.”

“Right now, that’s the best place to be. No one knows about this cabin except me. The person who sold it to me is dead.” She saw her shocked face. “Don’t worry. I didn’t kill him. Old Albert was ninety-two when he died. I hope we can make it to that ripe old age. Probabilities right now aren’t high during the next few days.” He thought a moment. “It’s possible that the Committee now knows your retraining didn’t take. They want to erase you.”

“And Hammer?”

“Probably a less drastic opinion. They just think you’re a danger to the movement, like I said.”

“And here I wanted to help them bring down the Committee.”

“Old Albert was a wise man. He once told me that any organization fighting a police state will end up using the same tactics as that police state. He had a lot of perspective because he’d seen a lot in his life and had some interesting ancestors. His great-grandfather was a Bolshevik who had supported Trotsky.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“Like I said, when we get to the lake, we can just relax and recover a bit. Let the adrenalin subside. *Comprende?*”

“Do you speak Spanish? The Committee tries to make everyone speak Standard.”

Standard was the universal language of the world, a hodge-podge of Chinese, English, and Russian and maybe a few other languages and dialects, all without the hard parts from the contributing languages. *Not a bad creation from a logical point of view, but I can’t stand operas now because they are sung in Standard. Choral music’s also affected.*

“I’m sorry. Last names tell us nothing these days, but my last name is Benavides. In my business, it’s convenient to communicate in languages that no one knows except an AI. There’s no AI at the cabin, by the way. That has some negatives. It also has many positives.”

“*Luego hablemos castellano,*” she said, meaning “Then let’s speak Spanish.”

He was still smiling even after he hit his head when the car went over a pothole.

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“Refrigerator’s empty,” Holguin said during her tour of the kitchen.

“There’s bread and other stuff in the freezer. Powdered eggs and cereal in the cupboard. Paper plates and cups. Consider it military rations.”

“Are we in a war?”

“Maybe. Our personal war against the Committee and Hammer.”

“And there’s no other side to choose. Our world comes down to those two opposing forces. We can’t survive here forever.”

“What happened to my optimist?” Yuri said. “And you just suggested to me a plan of attack. We end our world.”

“That doesn’t sound like a viable solution. I’ve always been taught that suicide isn’t any kind of solution.”

“You’re right on that. My favorite poem is by Dylan Thomas, but I don’t think it’s just about his father dying. My interpretation is different. It was my motivation to fight the Committee. Now it’s also my motivation for fighting Hammer.”

“Rage, rage, against the dying of the light”? How does that apply in our case?”

“For one, the Committee and Hammer are trying to kill us. I’d rather die of old age, thank you. For two, I’m raging about our situation; you should be too. We need to focus that rage against our enemies.”

“You’re talking about a different ending for our world then.”

“Correct. By returning to a simpler one. I know how to bring both the Committee and Hammer to their knees. They’ll wither and die without technology. It’s as simple as that.”

“Doesn’t sound so simple. And won’t we also wither and die without technology?”

He pointed to the window. “What’s out there?”

“Scary woods and God knows what creatures.”

“Do you think anything from Mother Nature is as scary as the Committee or Hammer?”

She thought a moment. “No, I guess not. I already know the Committee is plenty scary, and if Hammer wants to kill us, they’re just as scary.”

“And here’s some more motivation for you. You’ll avenge your parents. The Committee killed your father and they might as well have killed your mother.”

“And where’s your motivation?”

“It’s a more philosophical one. I’ve concluded that I suffocate artistically in a world run by technocratic oligarchs, whether they’re from the Committee or Hammer. Our present situation reaffirms that belief. I don’t need technology to play a piano.”

“Pianos are technological inventions too, just earlier ones. And where will you get your audiences?”

Yuri shrugged. “Art and artists will exist without technology. And audiences will still appreciate art without technology. Just not streaming video, computer games, and things like that, things that can’t really be called art.”

“That’s a bit myopic. But I understand your feelings. So you want an end to technology. How are you going to accomplish that?” She waved her hand, indicating the cabin. “We’re lucky to have electricity and running water here. Both might end if you get your wish.”

“No. Many things don’t need software. I’ll destroy the ones that do.”

“You’re not a software engineer. The whole world is linked and controlled by the Committee.”

“Except for the part controlled by Hammer. There are other software networks. In the old days they called it the Dark Web. But it has become a web with a thousand shades of gray. I know how to play in that domain. It’s another extracurricular activity of mine. And I know a few experts who are even better at it than I am.”

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Yuri spent the next few days planning his attack. Marta had surprisingly good suggestions he incorporated into the plan. They came up with a general outline, but needed help to flesh out the details.

On the third day in the woods, he left her to go find Xerxes. The hacker lived in New York and ran multiple porn sites for the Committee. They even sold videos of retrainings and erasures. Some viewers—far too many!—loved to watch them, so big money came into Xerxes's pocket and the coffers of the Committee. Xerxes called it a "sin tax." The oligarchs tried to make money off anything, even illegal things. The oligarchs had no morals or scruples.

Yuri found his friend's work odious, but they'd been friends since childhood. Much of his specialized software had been designed by Xerxes with inputs from Yuri. His friend lived in a loft in SoHo. Yuri found him in bed.

"There was a U.S. president who once blamed political hacking on some fat guy in bed," said Yuri with a laugh, helping his friend up, who was barefoot but still dressed in a T and Bermudas. His bushy eyebrows, shaggy black beard, and unkempt hair, all peppered with some premature gray, was better than any disguise.

"You know too much history. I don't care about moronic presidents and their blatherings."

"I want to make history. I want to destroy technology."

Xerxes frowned and eyed Yuri warily. "My life is tech. You'd be destroying me."

"You have to clean up your act, my old friend. You sell dirt to perverts and make perverted oligarchs even richer."

"I skim a little off the top, you know, to make a living. How could I buy food otherwise?"

"Maybe you'd have to go on a diet?"

"Like forever, *hombre*. I can't do that. What's gotten into you? Haven't we been buddies, also like forever, bro?"

"Yes. I seem to remember a fourteen-year-old once saying that the world would be better off without the Committee."

"Sure, I said that way back then. Kids are idealists. Times have changed." He patted his bank of servers. "I work for the Committee now."

"No, you work for Xerxes." Yuri sat down on a stool. "They're after me."

"You? You're a famous pianist. Untouchable. Me they'd retrain or erase in a minute."

"I work for Hammer." Xerxes frowned again. "But they're after me too. I need your help. I think my solution is the only one."

"What did you do to piss so many oligarchs off?"

Yuri told him his story. It took a while. He started from when he won the competition in Moscow that launched his musical career, when Hammer had approached him.

## Chapter Nine

"No wonder you wanted all that illegal software," said Xerxes. "You used me, bro! Here I'm working for the Committee, and all the time you were working against it!"

"Don't you think the Committee has used you too? They don't give a rat's ass about you, you know."

Xerxes thought a moment. "I guess not. But your plan is so anarchistic and anti-tech. It's beautiful, and I see its merits, but I'll be out of a job."

"Try to look beyond our jobs. This battle between the Committee and Hammer is like a vise squeezing the life out of human beings and human civilization. It's going to end badly anyway...for everyone."

"Says the guy who'd be happy tickling the ivory of any old piano. I might as well volunteer for retraining." He smiled. "Maybe I could become a clown in a circus."

"There aren't any circuses anymore. Besides, clowns frightened you when you were a kid." Yuri glanced at Xerxes bare midriff hanging over the top of his Bermudas. *Definitely clown potential, though.* "No reason you can't keep all your whiz-bang tech gadgets. You and others who you trust could set up your own personal networks with your servers. Someone might have to string some cable here and there."

"I don't trust anyone. You just don't know anymore. Look at you. A Hammer assassin all this time. What if I say no? Are you going to kill me?"

"No, I would have to go to plan B."

"What's plan B?"

Yuri shrugged again. "I'd have to invent one. My last recourse is to go after the entire Committee and Hammer's leadership. A true test of my assassin's skills. That would be hard and probably ensure my premature death."

"Thanks for excluding me from that assassination plan. You're a true friend."

"Don't get me wrong. If you betray me, you'll pay the price. I'm desperate."

Xerxes thought another bit. "Okay, if we can do this in a way where I can keep some of my toys, I'm with you. But let's plan all the minute details. Neither you nor I can afford any mistakes."

"Thanks. Let's set some links up to a little hideaway I have up north. Then we'll take a ride up there with all the equipment you'll need to launch the worst cyberattack this world has ever seen!"

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When Xerxes and Yuri entered the cabin, the latter became alarmed. *Where's Marta?* He found her on the back deck reading an old sci-fi classic that had been on his bookshelf.

"Marta, Xerxes. He's part of the team now."

"Reluctantly," said the big man, holding out a large paw to shake Marta's hand. "A pleasure, Marta." He winked at her. "You and the pianist an item?"

She turned a bit red. "What did you tell him, Yuri?"

"Even though he looks like a hairy ape, he's a big romantic, so he's jumping to conclusions. We have a plan. We need to set things up fast and act soon. Lots of set up, some coding, and off we go."

She stood. "I'd better make some coffee then. Can I help?"

“How gifted are you in hacking?” said Xerxes.

“I know computers, I write and understand code, but my last job was to team up with an AI and help in data searches.”

“That’s all useful. For all I know, you’re a lot better than piano man here. Coffee, yes. Any cookies?”

“Some Oreos. They’re a little stale.”

“*Amigos*, let’s get to work!”

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They worked for nine days straight. There were times when, under stress, one of them would stomp out of the cabin in a rage, but they finally became an integrated and focused team. In the process, they hacked into both the Committee’s and Hammer’s networks, bouncing through various Dark Web sites and servers around the world so they couldn’t be traced. All the time Yuri was mindful of the power usage, but a lot of what they did started in SoHo at Xerxes hangout, and his setup stole power from all over the Manhattan power grid.

In the afternoon of the ninth day, Xerxes leaned back in his chair. “I think we’re ready, *amigos*. We can even blast the Pentagon and the Committee using backdoor communications. They don’t have a firewall that can stop me.”

“Too bad we can’t test all that,” said Marta. Her hand was sitting on top of Yuri’s. He didn’t mind.

“I’d like to test that I can save my installation too,” said Xerxes. “Suggestion: let me take another day to go over everything, especially the code. We’ve written a lot of it, a lot more than I’d anticipated.”

“Modified suggestion: let’s take two days, with the first one dedicated to a bit of celebration,” Yuri said. “After all, we might fail, and all of us will be someone else after retraining.”

“I’d rather die,” said Xerxes.

“And they’ll erase me once they figure out I’m not retrainable,” said Marta.

“In any case, we need some R&R,” said Yuri. “I’m shot.”

“Hot dogs, potato chips, and plenty of beer,” said Xerxes. “What more could we want? The perfect feast for a party!”

## Chapter Ten

Two days later, in the early evening, Xerxes sat down at his improvised computer installation; Marta and Yuri stood behind him.

“Kids, a new age is dawning. Who wants to give the green light?”

“Are we truly ready?” said Marta.

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever—wait! IR images of bulky black SUVs on the dirt road to the cabin.”

“Are they past the IEDs?”

“Nope.”

“Blast away, then!”

They watched as part of the road lit up and turned into dust and rubble. When it cleared, there was a yawning black chasm four meters deep and twenty meters wide. Both ends backed up to the thick forest. Some trees from the forest’s edge had collapsed. It would take bulldozers to clear it all out and make the road safe again.

The SUVs had stopped, and their occupants were examining the chasm now lit by their headlights.

“Shiny new hydrogen models. Committee’s SWAT, I’d bet.”

“That gives me an idea,” said Yuri. He grabbed a high-powered rifle with a laser sight. “Give me fifteen. If I’m not back, hit the kill switch anyway.”

“What are you going to do?” said Marta.

“You’ll see. Just watch the security cameras’ video.”

He ran out the door.

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Yuri knew the area around the cabin. Old Albert and he had gone fishing many times in the lake and the streams that fed it. Besides the road, it was crisscrossed with game trails.

Even in the twilight, he found a familiar path through the forest, ran up a hill to where he was above the Committee men and their SUVs, and took a sniper’s pose. He didn’t aim at the men in the SWAT group. He focused on where he knew the hydrogen tanks of the SUVs would be. One, two, three. The explosions from each tank took out half the men. Others dove for cover and fired in his general direction.

The advantage was his. He grew focused and cold. He always did. He had been an assassin for a long time. They were just targets who would kill him if he didn’t kill them.

One by one he took them out, sometimes changing his position slightly to get a better angle. He counted as he went. When they were all down, he realized one man wasn’t accounted for.

He heard a twig snap behind him and turned to face his clever adversary. He switched the rifle’s dial to “Spray” and caught the Committee man before he could take good aim and fire his automatic pistol. The high-powered laser pulses traced a cross over the man’s body. There was no surprise on his face. He had no face left. He collapsed like a rag doll that had been torn to bits. There wasn’t much of him left, in fact.

*A Hammer killer takes out Committee killers, he thought. I’m glad this is all over!*

He headed back the way he had come from the cabin, running as fast as he could.

Marta greeted him at the door. "Are you all right?"

Yuri looked at his watch. "I took only ten minutes." He jerked a thumb toward the sky. "Helicopters!" They entered the cabin. "Xerxes, are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Starting the countdown, bro. Ten, nine...."

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Yuri mentally continued the countdown while thinking that Marta's knowing smile made her look a little bit like the Mona Lisa. Xerxes crossed the fingers of his left hand and raised it high, his right hand on the kill switch. As Yuri neared zero, he decided to hold Marta's hands and say the numbers aloud. They all chanted them in unison.

"Two, one, zero!"

At zero, the lights dimmed and then went off. That part of the world in nighttime became completely dark. In the part in daytime, everything stopped too. The technological world was dead, at least anything networked to the Committee or Hammer, which was a lot.

The generator came on, and Xerxes's equipment recovered its weak glow that looked brighter now in the darkened cabin. The generator only had enough juice for the equipment and a few essentials, like the fridge.

But the area not far from the cabin lit up as bright as day as the helicopters fell from the sky, crashed, and exploded. Then all became dark again except for the green glow from the equipment with its hums making a chorus that accompanied the refrigerator's.

"The human race prevails, my dear," Yuri said. "Somewhere nearby I hope I can find a grand piano to play."

She nodded with a smile. "And I'll have to find a new job."

"How would you like to be the mother of my children?"

Again the nod. "That might keep me busy for a while. We might have to do some home schooling"

"Oh, cut the crap," said Xerxes. "Yuri, you said we were going fishing like when we were kids."

"Yes, we will," said Yuri. "Old Albert loved to fish. We'll all go tomorrow. Right now we need another celebration."

## Survival Games

### A Space Opera

SAMPLE



## Chapter One

Executive Officer Juno Talis felt her captain's hand on her shoulder. "Easy, Juno. Let the AI do its thing."

"They're closing fast, Marcus!"

Captain Marcus Boonton nodded. He was just as nervous as his XO, but he had to try to calm her. "We'll be in orbit before them. Our security people can fight off the boarders." The old man took his seat beside her and opened a com link. "Doc, are you and all your staff on standby? We might have some wounded if they board us."

Just beyond the edges of the Interstellar Trade Union of Independent Planets (ITUIP), where the Union often explored for new worlds with colony potential, explorer starships sometimes ran into pirates who made a living off raiding less armored ships like their ship, *Copernicus*. Any starship carried valuable supplies; some also carried powerful weapons. Their ship's security contingent had handled pirates before and gone FTL before the pirate vessel knew about it and could fire on them in revenge.

Medical Officer Mike Pitakis answered the captain's query. "On standby, sir. I have the general ship status com link open."

"Good man."

*Doc sounds nervous*, Boonton thought. He sighed. *When will the Union learn that explorer ships working in uncharted regions should have seasoned crews?* Both the XO and Doc were a third his age. *Good, but not seasoned.*

"Entering orbit," said Juno, reading the AI's course display. Two more blips joined them in the same orbit, one ahead and the other behind them, about E-8793, an Earth-like planet on their scheduled exploratory run. "I guess they're going to board us, like you said, captain."

"No!" said Boonton, seeing another screen's display. "They're firing on us! Incoming missiles. Rotate the ship, Juno."

She took manual control and turned the ship, knowing that put a thicker hull in the way of the incoming missiles. But she also knew it wouldn't make any difference.

"Why are they firing? I don't under—"

There were two successive explosions and the bridge went dark.

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From afar the League's two warships had detected the invader into their space. The lead ship's commander tried to warn the intruder off. This was League space. Their warships protected that region of space from all invaders. Their xenophobic leaders wanted nothing to do with intelligent lifeforms from the galaxy's other regions.

The commander was taller and stronger than his crewmembers. He was a member of an important and ancient warrior clan whose male members now became ship commanders. He watched his screens.

"They might not know our language," said his navigator.

"Of course they don't, you idiot! But they must know we're a threat. They might fire on us at any time."

"I don't see any heavy armament, sir," said the XO of one of the ships. "They might not be a threat to the League."

“Any alien lifeform is a threat. They must be exterminated. Navigators, enter orbit ahead and behind them.”

“They’re not firing on us, sir,” said the other XO. “We should wait and see what they do.”

The commander’s pale green skin turned darker, signifying rage. *I’ll deal with this insubordinate fool later.* “Calculate firing solutions. Fire when ready.”

The commander watched with satisfaction as missiles sped toward the intruder.

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Mike Pitakis awoke in sickbay, looked around, and saw that it was a shambles with his two orderlies floating in the micro-g environment. Emergency lights had come on, their dull red glow a far cry from what would be needed for emergency surgeries.

“Ensign Das? Ensign Hiller?”

No answer. He managed to right himself and maneuver toward the orderlies; he checked their carotids for pulses. Nothing.

He had a head wound—a pat on his scalp covered his hand with sticky blood—so he thought he might have a concussion. He laughed. SOP was bed rest for that. *I don’t have the time!*

He and his orderlies had bounced around sickbay and been hit by flying objects. He had won that lottery of death.

He left sickbay and maneuvered through the ship, all corridors lit with the same colors as the blood on his hand. That dim light didn’t slow him down, though; the starship had been his home for the last six standard months, so he knew it well.

The bridge was also a shambles, but Captain Boonton and XO Talis were still alive, but just barely. He checked the control panel’s readouts—he didn’t understand most of them—and confirmed the AI was down. He noticed a red light blinking off the lower right-hand corner of the XO’s screen. There was no label for that readout, so understanding its significance was impossible. He did notice that *Copernicus* was leaking air.

He carried the captain and XO to sickbay, one by one, and searched the remainder of the ship. Four crewmembers were also still alive. He also carried them to sickbay, leaving the dead floating where they were. None of that was easy. They weighed next to nothing in the micro-gravity environment, but they still had inertia—getting motion started, turning corners, and stopping weren’t easy.

He scrubbed down and did the best he could to try to save the wounded. After hours of surgery and shoving the wounded into the portadoc, he only managed to save the captain, XO, and chief engineer. Bridge and engineering had been more protected; all the others had been in more vulnerable places, including his orderlies.

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“Shall we board and see if anyone is still alive?” said the League’s commander.

He stood and showed his teeth to the subordinate. “Do you want to save the vermin?”

“I’m just thinking you might as well make a complete job of it. Who knows? They might be carrying technology we can use. Even supplies.”

The commander thought a moment. “You’re right. Organize a boarding party and search that ship. If anything, it’s important to know who our enemy is.”

The captains and XOs of the two League ships organized boarding parties. They took weapons as well as torches, the latter because they might have to cut their way into the aliens’ ship. The captains stayed behind, but each XO led a boarding party.

Orbital maneuvers were always tricky. It took them some time before their shuttles clung to the intruder’s hull.

The commander became bored watching the landing parties’ progress. They had orders to kill all lifeforms remaining in the ship. They also had an order to bring back two bodies, one male and one female, if any of the latter were on board. League ships only had males on board. The females were considered weak and only functioned as breeders.

## Chapter Two

XO Juno Talis awoke in a sickbay full of bodies. Medical Officer Mike Pitakis was curled up in a fetal position, floating about three meters from her. Bloodstains covered his smock. *His blood? Or patients'?* She realized that someone must have brought her to sickbay. *Maybe Mike?*

"Are there more survivors?" she said.

Mike turned to her. "You, me, Chief Ortiz, and Captain Boonton. I did my best. It wasn't good enough for most of the crew."

"Plato? What about the AI?"

"All systems are down, and we might be losing air. And possibly other things aren't working right. I don't understand all the instrument labels on the bridge."

"We need to get to an escape pod." She unstrapped and pushed off the gurney. "Help me get Chief Ortiz and Captain Boonton up."

"Before I disturb them, which pod is likely to be more functional? I'm not sure where the missiles hit."

"We want one of the aft pods, just forward of the engines. Galley level."

"Should we take supplies?"

"No time, and the pods have emergency supplies for thirty standard days and four crewmembers. Let's go, Doc."

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The XOs couldn't figure out how to enter the alien ship. The main airlock had a pad at its side with strange symbols. One XO punched the keys. They lit, but there was no telling what the correct order to gain entry would be.

"We'll need to cut through with torches," said the second XO.

The first XO gave the order to their underlings.

As the workers tried to gain entry into the strange ship, the XOs admired its construction.

"It's small but bulky. Like ours, it probably doesn't land on planets. They must have shuttles aboard. Or escape pods."

"We didn't see anyone escaping the ship. It could be run by machines, for all you know."

"I think it's some kind of exploratory vessel. We have those. They don't have heavy armor, but they have some. These aliens are stupid. They're completely defenseless."

"Any aliens that can build a starship can't be stupid. I think they came in peace and our commander overreacted. It will be interesting to study the bodies."

"And if there are live ones inside?"

"We have our orders. They entered our space, after all."

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As Juno strapped herself in at the controls of the escape pod, she remembered something she needed to ask Doc.

"On the bridge, did you happen to notice if there was a red light blinking at the bottom right edge of my command screen?"

Doc thought a moment. He was tired after hours of surgery and caring for wounded. “Yeah. What does it mean? There was no label.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not important at the moment. We’re off to explore this planet, Doc, in most unusual circumstances. I just hope it turns out to be truly E-type.”

“We have spacesuits.”

“They’ll solve any air contamination for a while, and any loss of air here. It won’t solve our orbital decay. Without orbital corrections adjusted by the AI, this ship’s orbit will decay and it will burn up in the atmosphere, whatever its composition.”

“What if these hostiles are still around? We might want to stay here and play dead.”

“They probably won’t be. I don’t know why they’re hostile either. Or where they’ve come from. We might never know. I do know they’re not from ITUIP. No intelligent beings in the Union would fire missiles at a helpless exploratory ship. Even this crew is integrated.”

“Was, you mean. All our non-Human friends are dead.” He made a face. “Okay, down we go.” He looked at Captain Boonton and Chief Garcia. “You’re the boss as long as the captain’s unconscious. I’m just along for the ride.”

Juno frowned. “Check them and make sure they’re comfortable. The ride down might be a little bit rough.”

## Chapter Three

The alien XOs and their crew were almost into the invaders' ship when one of them spotted an escape pod deorbiting.

"We'll need to go after them!"

The other XO conferred with the captains. The commander was resting.

"Finish what you're doing," said one captain. "We need to know what we're facing before going to the surface after them. Unless they're tiny vermin, that pod can't hold too many of them. It should be easy to kill those survivors, but let's do our reconnoitering on their ship first."

They were soon inside. They found lots of bodies and chose two, one male and one female, for dissection aboard their ships. The crew stowed the aliens into body bags to get them ready for the autopsies. The two XOs found the bridge.

"Good layout," said one XO. "Only two to three could be in here. The whole ship can't hold any more than a dozen or so of the vermin."

"Fascinating, though. I wonder what all the instruments are for. There are so many. They must have been monitoring everything imaginable. What do you think that red light means?"

"They're probably losing air," said the first XO.

"It doesn't have a label like the other dials and lights. Say, it just stopped blinking."

The light was now a steady red. The XOs never had the chance to figure out what it meant as explosions began to rock the ship.

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Juno and Mike were on the surface. He handed Captain Boonton out to her and saw the huge flash of light halfway to the horizon.

"What the hell was that?"

"Many explosive charges. I set a trap for our hostiles. Call it payback."

"You sacrificed *Copernicus*?"

"The orbital decay would have destroyed it anyway. The booby trap could only go off if they invaded the ship. SOP with hostiles, Doc. We don't want them to have access to our technology."

"Wow! That seems so final."

They had dropped from *Copernicus* and soon were into foreboding clouds. Juno made good on her promise of a rough ride as they screamed through thunderheads at Mach 2. Mike gripped the armrests of his chair until his knuckles turned white, thinking all the while that the g-forces of Juno's maneuvers might kill his patients.

But they were soon past the storm and flying at a more reasonable rate over plains covered with herds of grazing animals. She put the ship down near some hills at the edge of one plain far away from the herds.

"Looks like we have some fresh protein available," she said with a laugh. "And here I am, mostly a vegetarian."

Mike decided to get with the survival program. "We don't know if we can eat anything here. The biochemistry can be completely alien. And we're a bit unprotected too, don't you think?"

"I know," said Juno. "This is a temporary camp until we can explore the area a bit. I can still move the pod to a better place. And don't worry about the biochemistry yet. One problem at a time. Tend to your patients. I'm going to explore."

Mike watched her head off to the hills with a laser pistol and rifle. *She's a bit impetuous.* He decided he needed to get Captain Boonton healthy so he could take charge.

But the captain seemed fine. Chief Garcia wasn't, though. When Juno returned, Mike was digging a grave for the Chief Engineer—the g-forces had finished the job the ETs' missiles had started.

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The commander's skin had turned dark green; he was in a rage after listening to various underlings blather on about what had happened.

"Both our ships have sustained some damage," one said.

"It could have been worse. The alien ship's position was such that most of the explosive force went into space away from our orbits," another said.

"They must be very patriotic," said another. "They committed suicide and destroyed their ship rather than turn it over to us."

"They might have all been dead. The explosions could have gone off automatically, or set off by an AI system. Still suicide, I guess."

"Quiet!" Every face turned to the commander. His skin was a bit lighter now. "I want a video playback of everything that occurred from the time our shuttles snuggled up to the skin of that ship." He bared his teeth to the group in the meeting room of the lead ship to emphasize his command.

An underling jumped to do his bidding. The group assembled around the tall table watched the video carefully, preferring to stare at the large screen and avoid any more of the commander's wrath.

"There! Stop. Back it up and hold. The vermin in that escape pod set a trap for us!"

"Clever devils, aren't they," said one of the newly appointed XOs. "Let them die on the planet."

The commander's fist slammed the surface of the table. "That's too good for them. Organize a landing party. I want them captured and brought back to the ship. We'll carve them up to see what they're made of, and we'll do it while they're still alive."

## Chapter Four

“Did Garcia have a religion?” said Juno when they finished burying the Chief Engineer.

“He followed the Way,” said Mike. “Generally followers of the Way are cremated without any ceremony. Or set adrift among the stars, if that’s where they died. I didn’t happen to have a cremation oven, and we didn’t happen to be in orbit.”

Juno looked at the sky. “I hope those bastards got what they deserved, whoever they are.”

“Seems like they did.”

“I don’t know. The charges are meant only to guarantee the destruction of *Copernicus*. The ETs’ ships might have been too far away. Some of them must have been inside to trigger the detonations, though. We got those bastards for sure.”

“Back to survival mode,” said Mike. “Anything to report from your exploring trip?”

She took a lotus position in the tall grass, hands atop thighs. *Does she also follow the Way?* She almost seemed to be in a trance. *Strange woman, this XO.*

“The planet’s very earthlike,” Juno said. “The flora and fauna, while strange, are hearty. I’m not sure about magnetic fields, so we’d better be careful with solar flares. Air seems to be fine, but I sense that the oxygen level is a bit high. I could see exposed veins of ore in some of the cliffs. The planet could make a good colony, but we’re going to have to do some testing.”

Mike plopped down in front of her, scooped a bit of the rich soil, and let it dribble from his fingers. *Good farm land!* He smiled at her.

“I’ll do an inventory and see what we have aboard the pod.”

“I guess we’re lucky. I also saw a better place for us to make a more permanent camp.” She pointed off in the distance. “There’s a natural overhang fronted by a small shelf over that way. We can scrunch the pod up to the overhang to make our first habitation. Off to the side, there’s running water.”

“You hiked all that distance?”

She opened her backpack and showed him the binoculars. “Getting up and down to the plain from that little shelf might be a bit problematic, but I like the height. I’ll feel safer there.”

“What’s wrong with here?”

“Too exposed. Where there are natural herds, there are predators. Maybe big ones. Besides, the herds might stampede. If they head toward us, they’d turn us and the pod into ground up metal, plastic, and meat.”

“That’s all a bit pessimistic.”

“I’m a realist, not a pessimist. How’s the head, by the way?”

“You noticed?”

“If you didn’t test for a concussion, you should now.”

“I don’t have the time.”

“Do it now. We probably have all the time in the world. In this new world.”

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Fourteen standard days later, the three of them were settled in their new makeshift home. The escape pod was wedged in under the overhang. The front room was the shuttle, their sleeping area was under the shelf of rock, and their bathroom was comprised of several pools and



small falls associated with the running water streaming down from atop the hill and the mountains behind.

Captain Boonton wasn't too cooperative, but he allowed Mike to help him bathe. He could stand for a little while, but each day he was getting stronger.

Juno and Mike traded off hunting and food gathering. They had tested and were continuing to test everything they ate or drank, but they already had a large menu. They planned to augment that with vitamins and minerals from the pod as long as they lasted. But a copse of trees not far down the creek before it plunged to the plain had fruit-bearing trees. The fruit's insides was filled with large seeds surrounded by sweet pulp. They learned to suck the seeds clean.

"Rain," Boonton said, pointing to the sky. "As if this wasn't boring enough, we're going to have to stay inside the pod or under the shelf."

Mike nodded. "Hunting and gathering reprieve for one day at least. I wonder if there are more games beyond the two packs of cards we found."

"Maybe in that little onboard computer," said Juno. "I just thought about that. But we need tablets."

"All games used to be like playing cards," said Boonton. "No one used tablets. Many of the computer games were based on physical games—chess, checkers, mahjong, dominoes, and so forth. You people probably only know the tablet versions."

"I guess we could try to make some," said Juno. "I don't think I'd have the patience, though."

"If you and Mike find the materials, I can take a crack at that. There's not much more I can do for now."

"You're getting better every day," said Mike. He winked at Juno. "That takes patience too."

\*\*\*

It rained for three days, the downpour changing their little creek into a raging river. But the air became clear and less humid. Using the binoculars, Juno decided to look across the plain in the moonlight and at the sky now full of the band of stars from their galaxy.

Mike joined her. "Anything of interest beyond prehistoric beauty?"

"The moon here isn't as big as Earth's, but it's a bit closer, which compensates. The herd has males who act as sentinels. Do you remember those remains I told you about?"

"Yes. I've seen more of them when I hunt."

"You never told me."

"I didn't want to alarm anyone. I didn't tell the captain either. You said yourself there have to be predators. There's no reason for sentinels if there weren't any."

"I spotted one just now. Huge, muscular creature with lots of teeth. Front ones are fangs, like a tiger's. I saw a video of a Sumatran tiger once. This guy seemed bigger and stealthier, crawling through the grass."

"Just part of the ecosystem," said Mike. "Let me take a look."

He swept the horizon with the binoculars. "Say, what's that?" He handed the glasses to Juno and pointed.

"Damn! It's a low-flying shuttle running a search pattern."

“With a searchlight. That’s what looked so strange. You don’t think our hostiles have returned to make a clean sweep, do you?”

“It’s possible their two ships are in orbit. I should have looked.”

“Don’t punish yourself. We should have both thought of it. We’re getting too complacent in our bucolic life here.”

“They’ll probably search these hills and mountains last. There are ten continents. They must have searched the other nine first. Ours is the largest. If they covered all that area that fast, we might not have much time. But we’ll have a little.”

“What are we going to do?”

“First, we’re going to take inventory of our weaponry. I’ll be damned if I’ll go down without a fight.”

Mike thought a moment. “You set a trap for them in orbit. Maybe we should set one for them here?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Let’s wake up Boonton and get his input too. A firefight is a last resort. A bit of deception and planning might work better.”

## Chapter Five

The new XO radioed the old commander and gave him a situation report.

“They might be all dead because they have crashed somewhere you haven’t searched,” said the commander. “I still want to confirm that. Cover all the area of that new continent too. I’d prefer to find those vermin alive, but it would almost be as much revenge to find only their bones. By the way, from all your reports, this planet looks like it could be a new colony for us. Our colonists would just love all that fresh meat on the hoof. And all those deposits of rare and radioactive minerals. We could turn this planet into a bustling agribusiness and industrial powerhouse.”

“Yes sir,” said the other new XO. “I’ll keep you posted. We’re camping right now, but when we finish searching this plain and the hills and mountains, the only area left is the seashore and coastal desert on the other side of the mountains.”

“Don’t discount that land. The whole ocean might be home to our new fishing fleet. I hate fish, but there’s good protein to be had there too. Keep me informed.”

The XO wagged his ears at his counterpart, a sign of perceived humor. “He’ll never change. I’m fine with making this planet a new colony, but I don’t ever want to return. It’s boring, the search is boring, and I think we’re wasting our time.”

“You think all the vermin are dead? He’s right. We should confirm that.”

The first XO looked toward the hills. “I have a problem with calling them vermin. They’re intelligent beings who can build starships. And they were smart enough to lay a trap for us.”

“We received promotions. It wasn’t all bad.”

“No, but I’m taking the long view. We tend to eliminate our competition. What happens when we meet beings who can fight back?”

The second’s cheeks puffed out, the equivalent of a human shrug. “War, I guess. We can’t enslave these vermin. They’ve obviously gone far beyond their home solar system. Too bad they’re not all right here. We would have slave labor to exploit when we colonize the planet.”

The first XO glanced at his companion. “We might pay for those policies in the future.”

\*\*\*

The next morning they continued the search of the grassy plain that extended farther than the eye could see. When they camped for the night, the hills and low mountains seemed just as far away.

“This might be the biggest plain yet,” said one XO, toweling off after an orderly had helped him take a quick bath.

The other, sipping a strong broth before helping himself to a sizzling steak, eyed his equal. “Don’t be so negative. We covered a large area today.”

“We could go a lot faster if the commander didn’t require us to look for bones or any other remains the dead vermin might have left. We have to complement the scanning SAR too much with our own eyes. If the local food weren’t so good, I’d go crazy.”

The companion wagged his ears. “I’d rather be here than up there at our captains’ beck and call. Not to mention the commander who thinks he’s lord of creation.”

“Wait! What’s that noise?”

Both XOs were hearing a low rumble. One picked up a radio. "Sentries! Report."

"The herd has become crazed. They're heading for the camp!"

"Same here!" said another sentry from the other side of the camp.

"Into the shuttle. We need to get above them!"

Panic broke out in the group as everyone tried to enter the shuttle at once. One XO and five security personnel were left behind as the shuttle ascended just in time to hover above the two desperate parts of the herd that clashed and milled around. The XO in the shuttle turned his head away from the scene. The six on the ground had been turned into pulp.

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"What caused the herd to stampede?" said the shuttle pilot to the remaining XO.

"There are predators. Where there are herds, there are always predators. It's nature's way of keeping the herd's numbers in check." He watched as the herd became docile again, thinned out, and went back to grazing and sleeping. "See that clear space nestled between those two berms." The pilot focused the spotlight toward where the XO was pointing. "Go there and hover a bit to ensure the herd stays quiet, and then land."

The next morning the huge herd still seemed to be docile, as if nothing had happened the night before. The XO had lain awake most of the night wondering why predators would attack both sides of the herd and drive them toward their camp. That was puzzling.

He blew his cheeks and wrote it all off as mysteries of an alien planet.

## Chapter Six

Juno, Mike, and Captain Boonton had come up with a series of defensive plans. The first required the most energy. Late in the afternoon, Juno and Mike headed out into the plain. By the time night fell, they were close to the enemy's camp. Because the ETs had searched more of the plain, they were even closer to the hills.

They split up, one going to each side of the herd. It wasn't hard to spook the ungulates. Like most herd animals, flight was the first line of defense, not fight. And the fear was contagious.

They made their way back to Boonton, arriving a few hours before dawn.

The old man stirred out of his sleep, rising on one elbow. "How did plan A go?"

"Marvelous," said Juno.

"We didn't get all of them," said Mike. "Most made it into the shuttle."

"That's too bad," said the captain. "But that's also why we have a variety of plans. Try to get some sleep. I'll wake you two when breakfast is ready."

Neither Juno nor Mike objected. They now shared a sleeping bag. Juno entered before Mike and the two spooned and were soon asleep.

*Good kids, thought Boonton. They've become seasoned explorers without a starship. We're a good team. I wonder if we're good enough to survive.*

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Juno awoke first, the odor of sizzling meat filling her nostrils. They didn't worry about smoke. There were fissures spewing smoke and geysers steam all through the hills and mountains because the area was volcanic. Juno had even thought that one day they might have hot water if they set up a new camp in the right place. *But will the food odors reach the ETs?*

She decided not to worry about that as she went through the escape pod and over to the river that was their bathing area. She took what was left of her uniform with her to wash it. Crawling through grass and mud had turned the Union's tan uniform into a gray mess.

Mike joined her. "Plan B will be trickier," he said, splashing a bit of water in her direction. "And the ETs will perhaps be more on guard."

She wrung out her panties and slipped them on, leaving the uniform on rocks to dry. She put hands on hips and watched him bathe. *Not bad, she thought. If we have to stay here, we could start our own colony. Will I be bored?*

Mike's skin was now a golden tan. He was small and wiry, but he had put some muscle on. He needed a haircut. His piercing blue eyes met hers. She smiled.

"But Plan B is less strenuous." She pointed to one side and up. "And we've already climbed up there."

The captain interrupted their planning session. "Get up here, you two lovebirds. Breakfast is ready, and I'm not reheating anything."

They ate steaks and a local tuber that passed as potato and finished with fruit in tins from the escape pod's rations.

"I'm a bit worried about Plan B," said the captain after finishing and smacking his lips. "The action will take place near our camp. I'm still not very nimble, you know."

“They will be following us, captain,” said Juno. “We’ll drag some camouflage over the pod and you can wait under the overhang armed to the teeth. Besides, we made that other ledge look like our hideaway. They won’t even think about looking elsewhere.”

Mike looked along the ridge to his left and right. “Unless they fly along the ridge before they go back to the plains.”

Juno laughed. “You’re assuming they’ll be able to go back.”

Boonton shrugged and smoothed his beard. His blistering scalp showed through his thinning hair. “It’s a good plan. Did you ever hear about an explorer named Murphy?”

“You mean that ship captain who had all kinds of bad luck?” said Mike with a smile.

“Maybe not so much bad luck. But all of his plans went wrong. ITUIP explorers have a saying.”

“If anything can go wrong, it will,” said Juno. “They call it Murphy’s Law. Mike probably thinks it’s a law of nature, like quantum gravity. He’s a born pessimist.”

“I’m sitting next to you, you know.”

“Maybe your optimism cancels Mike’s pessimism,” said Captain Boonton with a smile. “Let’s just do our best. That’s all we can do. If I die, I’d rather go down putting up a fight.”

\*\*\*

They watched the ETs shuttle continue on its surveillance runs for two days. At the end, the ETs were camped just on the edge of the hills a bit past where Juno had pointed. Ops for plan B would begin the next morning.

Juno and Mike pretended they were returning from a hunting trip. When the sentry spotted them, they began their climb. Most of the ETs security personnel were soon after them while the remainder moved their shuttle to just under where they were climbing.

Some ETs tried to shoot at them, but Juno and Mike were too far above them. Juno turned and tossed the body of a herd animal at the group far below as if she were getting rid of it so as not to slow them down. They could climb faster, and soon were outdistancing the ETs, who were heavier and not so nimble at climbing.

By the time Juno and Mike climbed onto the ledge where the fake camp was set up, a good five hundred meters separated the two groups. The ETs could no longer fire because they needed both hands for climbing. The humans prepared for their attack.

Large boulders lined the edge of the ledge. Juno and Mike waited until the climbing ETs were in the worst possible spot. They used stout branches as levers to push the boulders off the ledge. On the way down, five boulders created a landslide.

The ETs who had been climbing were buried alive by tons of boulders and rubble. Part of the ETs’ shuttle was even covered by sand, rocks, and boulders. Juno and Mike waited for signs of life.

Soon they heard the sounds of motors and servos straining as the shuttle first maneuvered toward the plain and then rose.

“So much for Plan B,” said Mike.

“We have to get back to the captain. That means a climb up and over.”

## Chapter Seven

"I want you to blast that ledge!" said the commander over the two-way. "And any other ledges nearby."

The pilot repeated the order to his fire control officer. They started from the landslide and moved parallel to the hills in one direction, and then they returned to the landslide and continued on in the other direction. The strafing created other landslides, and a stiff breeze carried dust clouds to the prairie lowlands.

"Mission completed," the pilot said to the commander.

"Any signs of the vermin? Have we exterminated them all?"

"We'll set down and do a reconnaissance if you wish, sir."

"Yes, but get some altitude and make a few passes with the SAR before you land. You'll repeat that tomorrow morning and then rejoin us in orbit."

"Yes sir." The pilot glanced at his fire control officer. "Tonight we'll drink to the XO's."

"Yes sir," said the officer.

They did as ordered and then landed a few kilometers into the prairie lands.

The pilot now had the duty of cheering up the security personnel. They'd lost more colleagues that day.

\*\*\*

"Are we trapped?" said Mike.

Juno flashed a light in the direction she thought was toward the prairie. "It can't be much rubble. They blasted below us. We've only got debris dislodged by shock waves."

"We need to get back to Captain Boonton."

"Agreed. Let's begin digging."

It didn't take them long. They were soon scampering over the recently changed hillsides towards their camp. They found Captain Boonton half-buried in rubble from the waist up. They uncovered him.

"He's dead," said Mike.

"He has a laser rifle. He was ready to start shooting." Juno shed tears. Mike remained silent until she composed herself. "He was a lot like my father, you know. An authority figure, yes, but also with the best interests of *Copernicus's* crew always in mind. I learned a lot from him."

"I can't say I did," said Mike, "but we didn't interact much. He expected me to do my job, and he always seemed fair about what he requested." He looked around the camp. The escape pod was completely buried. "We can't stay here, but I don't feel like going down. Who knows where those ETs are?"

"We have to find them. Plan C, remember?"

"That plan assumes the captain would be able to help us. Now we can only bury him like the Chief."

"I think Plan C is still a good one. And it's our only chance to get off this planet."

"I don't have much military training," said Mike.

"You're doing fine so far. Damn, if the captain had stayed under the overhang, the pod would have protected him."

“And he would have died of asphyxiation or starvation. We couldn’t have reached him in time. We couldn’t even get through to the other side of the pod.”

“You’re right, of course. I just wish he could have shot a few of the bastards. He would have died feeling good about contributing.”

“That was certainly his intention. But he contributed to designing our plans.” Mike looked around. “Where shall we bury him?”

\*\*\*

The commander joined his two captains for dinner. They waited to speak until he was seated and the orderlies served them the first course.

“We need to divide our efforts,” said the commander. “We will be famous if we can report back to HQ with all the information we’ve gathered about this planet. It’s perfect for a new colony.”

“How would you suggest doing that?”

“Your colleague will replace the security personnel he’s lost with some of yours, and your ship will head back to our home world. We’ll stay and make sure the vermin have been eradicated. I won’t rest until I see some dead bodies or bleached bones.” The commander noticed the other captain fidgeting. “Don’t worry. We won’t dawdle. I just want to make sure the information gets back as soon as possible. That’s the highest priority right now. Revenge is important, but it’s a secondary priority.” He sliced off a bite and chewed slowly. “I think the people on the surface are eating better than we are.”



## Chapter Eight

Mike spotted the ETs' shuttle first, pulling Juno down. The moonlight created long shadows, but in the open they were too visible. They both knew the ETs could have an IR fence as well as sentries.

"I need to get near enough to put a flare right through their airlock," said Juno. "How am I going to do that in this damn moonlight? It's almost as bright as day."

"Still darker than day." He was studying the situation with the binoculars. "There's something like a dry stream bed over there. You're smaller than I am. You can get near enough with a belly crawl. I'm going to become a sniper."

"I thought you had no military training."

"I meant hand-to-hand combat and the like. But I grew up on a farm. I originally wanted to be a veterinarian."

"And that means you can shoot?"

"I didn't say where the farm was. Ever heard of Priscilla's Planet?"

"Yeah, once or twice in reports. It's mostly a jungle with a lot of nasty predators."

"Even the prey are nasty because they've evolved many defensive mechanisms against the predators. In fact, the two groups aren't well defined. This planet is paradise in comparison."

She looked dubious. He thought they made a good pair, but he wasn't sure she thought the same way. Her hair was a bit scraggly now, and, like him, she was covered with cuts and bruises.

She was taller than he was. With hard muscle and small breasts, she could be mistaken for a Human male. He knew better. He smiled at her.

"I'll have to find a position a bit nearer to you to protect you."

"Such a gentleman." She glanced skyward. "Some clouds rolling in. That will help. Let's do this before I lose my resolve."

\*\*\*

"I see some movement," the surveillance officer in the ETs' shuttle told the sentries. "Might be just animals. They're too far away for a positive ID. You'd better check."

"Location?" said one sentry. The officer gave him coordinates. "You're nearer, S2," he radioed to the other sentry. "I'll head there as your backup."

S2 moved toward the reported location. "I'm not getting anything. Maybe a false alarm?"

"Or some nocturnal beast? There's a dry stream bed where you're heading. Maybe a predator is stalking us."

"With all the herd to choose from?"

"We might have a more delicious odor. Who knows? Be careful."

S2 thought he heard something in the high rocks to his left. A bit of fear gripped him. Whether predator or the vermin they were searching for, the planet had become extremely dangerous. But his training kicked in, and he continued.

"See anything?" said S1.

"I can't see into that dry stream bed. Wait until I get there. Cut across between me and the shuttle. We'll trap whatever is there."

"Good idea. Base, you still seeing something?"

“Two faint images. One near the location I gave you, another one in the rocks above your location. Maybe the herd’s predators are going to trap you.”

“Trying to be funny?” said S1. “You should be out here.”

“I am. With my sensors.”

“All safe and sound in the shuttle,” said S1.

“Officers!” said S2.

He was almost at the bank of the dry stream when a high-powered laser beam bored through his head.

\*\*\*

Mike had spotted the sentries moving toward Juno. *Do I shoot the one nearest her?* He decided to do just that and then move away from where he was because either an IR sensor or the other sentry might spot the flash from his laser rifle.

It was a clean shot. He moved left. Three laser pulses zipped through the air where he’d set up his sniper nest. Now he was able to look down into the streambed and see Juno slithering toward the shuttle. *Almost in range!*

He aimed at the other sentry and pulled the trigger. This time he wasn’t sure about the hit, but the ET went down. He moved forward, running in a crouch to lower his target cross section. He was soon in the streambed behind Juno, and he was able to see her stand and launch the flare into the ship. It wouldn’t do much more than lay down a smokescreen, but it should get them inside.

He followed her into the ship and slid behind her after she hit the metal floor to reconnoiter. She looked at him and jerked a thumb toward outside while raising her eyebrows. He nodded; she smiled. She pointed toward a stairway that was almost a ladder. He shrugged, so she made the decision to go for it.

He was right behind her when he felt the heat of a laser beam, but he also saw the flashes from her rifle. She hung onto the railing with her left hand and fired from the hip with her right. There were grunts and crashes as bodies fell.

They continued up the steps.

## Chapter Nine

Juno and Mike stepped over the ETs' bodies. He spotted a room with equipment ahead on the right, pushing Juno aside just in time. His shoulder received the beam; she shot the ET who had just fired.

"Com room or surveillance," said Juno. "These people are all military."

They entered the room just in time as three ETs started firing toward them.

"What now?" said Mike.

"Cover me. I need some time."

She moved around the room, studying all the equipment. She sat in a chair two sizes too big for her, and started throwing switches. The lights went out, leaving only equipment readouts and dials to bathe the room in a dull red glow.

"Think that darkened the entire shuttle? That would help." She had pulled out her night vision goggles. He followed suit. "This isn't the command center, right?"

"No" she said, "but that's where we're going. Follow me. Don't get caught with goggles on if they turn on emergency lights. You won't be able to see much."

They moved down the corridor.

\*\*\*

The pilot was in the command center cursing. He had been listening to the firefight outside and in the shuttle. He knew his copilot and he were the only combatants left. There were a few scientists on the shuttle; they couldn't fight. Some of them were even lowly females. They were probably all cowering in their special area of the shuttle. *No help there!*

"Maybe we should just take off?" said the copilot. "We could return to the ship where there's security backup. Maybe the g-forces would even kill the vermin?"

"And maybe they wouldn't, and we'd be letting the vermin loose on our ship. Don't worry. We can hold them off here. No one can get through that door."

For security purposes, all their military shuttles had command centers with blast-proof doors.

"Time to give the commander a situation report," said the pilot.

"He'll skewer you and offer you up as an offering to Skree," said the copilot. "No one dares interrupt his sleep."

"I'm not going to take responsibility for this fiasco. He's the one who ordered us to stay here another night."

"Who'd guess that the vermin would survive our strafing?"

"I have a new respect for these vermin. They're resourceful. Let's see what his highness the commander has to say."

It took a while for the commander's fury to abate. None of his ranting was constructive.

"Sir, with all due respect, I need a plan of action, not rants." The pilot waited.

"Understood," the commander finally said. "Here's what you have to do."

\*\*\*

"Hey, did you hear that?"

Mike had stopped Juno in the middle of a corridor as they searched for the command center. She'd been cursing. *How could such a small ship have a command center so hard to find?*

Juno tilted her head as if to hear better. "They shut the outside doors. They're taking off!"

"What good will that do them?"

"Unless they pressurize the shuttle, we'll lack oxygen as they climb. They might have oxygen masks or even spacesuits."

"We need to find that command center!"

"Agreed. Any ideas?"

"We came up those stairs. Maybe the command center's down, not up."

"You're right. Good thinking. Let's try to find a way down."

They found a way down around the corner from the bottom of the first stairway. At the bottom of the second flight of stairs, they ran into a group of ETs. Juno and Mike waved their laser rifles and they all cowered.

"I think some of them are females," said Mike.

"Kind of flat-chested, but I think you're right," said Juno. "They're like Earth mammals, I guess. Parallel evolution. When Mother Nature has a good solution, she uses it again."

They pushed past the group; none of the ETs tried to stop them. They moved out of the way, some of them showing empty hands as sign language for their lack of weaponry.

Juno and Mike soon arrived at a large door. It was sealed shut.

"Whoever's flying this boat is in there," said Juno.

"What's the plan?" said Mike.

"I've always wanted to see what happens when you discharge all a rifle's power pack at once."

"Blowing up the ship doesn't seem like a practical solution."

"We'll try to direct the energy blast toward that door."

"And what if that's not enough? What if you need a nuke to get through?"

"Then it's been nice knowing you."

## Chapter Ten

"I guess that's why he's commander," the pilot said to his copilot as he hit the switch to shut the outside doors. He didn't hit the one that would maintain standard air pressure as they rose to join their ship. "Let's get into our spacesuits."

"All the scientists will die," said the copilot.

"That's on the commander," said the pilot. "Not my problem. Move!"

They were soon suited up and enjoying the ride as the autopilot took the shuttle up in a gentle arc that would eventually match orbits with their ship. By that time, the vermin would be dead. So would the scientists.

"This is a lot to go through just to claim a colony world," said the copilot.

"It all started as a purge of our region of space. We needed to get rid of the intruders. No one wants vermin around to make our lives difficult." The pilot made a small manual adjustment to the flight plan. "That's SOP. Has been for centuries. We either enslave vermin or exterminate them. If we can take away a colony world from them, all the better."

"I suppose that makes sense. They're all inferior to us. I just hate to see our scientists die."

"There will always be scientists. As long as we let them make their toys, they will be happy."

\*\*\*

Outside the door to the command center, Juno and Mike worked against time. They'd decided to combine the two laser rifles' output. It wouldn't be as powerful as a nuke-driven X-ray laser like warships sometimes used in space battles to slice through enemy ships, but it was the only thing they dared to use within the ship, and it was the only weapon on hand.

"Air's getting thin," said Mike.

"Shut up and focus." Thirty seconds later, she said, "Ready as we'll ever be. Move as far back in the corridor as you can."

"You have it on a timer. Come with me."

"I have to start the timer. Go!"

Mike retreated and crouched low as if that would protect him. Juno was soon running toward him. The blast wave propelled her into his arms and shook the ship.

"I have to get in there and figure out how to pilot this ET craft. Get out your knife. They're our only weapons now."

One ET in the command center was dead. The other was writhing in pain. Mike checked him out because he was qualified as a ship's medic to care for most of ITUIPs citizens, Human or otherwise.

Juno was examining the controls.

"Why not ask him?" Mike said, jerking a thumb toward the ET he was attending to.

"Go ahead if you know their language."

"Right. I think he's dying."

"Tough." Juno flipped a switch. The air quality started improving. "I think they're on automatic pilot. That will get us into orbit and allow me some time to figure out how to dock this thing."

“He’s dead.” He looked over his shoulder. “I hope those other ETs don’t become brave. Our knives wouldn’t do much good against a mob.”

“Don’t worry about that until we need to. They’re not in uniform, so they might have no desire to fight. See if you can figure out how to use the weapons those two have. I’m guessing a lot here, but all pilot controls have to have the same functionality. Be ready to grab onto something while I experiment a bit.”

\*\*\*

The commander watched the screen displaying the path of their shuttle.

“They’re flying on automatic pilot,” said the captain of the ship that had not returned home. “Lazy bastards.”

“I don’t care as long as they get here with the shuttle. And all the vermin are dead.”

“Our security personnel could probably have handled that better down there,” said the captain.

“We underestimated the vermin. That usually doesn’t happen.”

The captain resisted showing any humor. He knew the commander had underestimated the vermin. His arrogance was a characteristic many of their leaders shared.

“What’s done is done,” said the captain. “And we have a new colony planet. That news will silence the critics, don’t you think?”

“It should. There’s always the danger that these vermin have billions back home. They could overrun us and avenge their fellows.”

Three bells interrupted their discussion. The commander hit a button on his armrest, and one of the crew appeared on another screen. “What do you want, doctor?”

“We’ve finished analyzing the data beamed aboard before the vermin blew up their ship.”

“So?”

“The vermin ship’s crew was mixed. There were different species of vermin on board.”

The commander glanced at his captain. “Different species? How can that be?”

“Some sort of collaboration, I guess. We have some records. If our scientists can figure out the language, we might know more. It’s as if we started treating our slaves as equals, for example. I can’t get my head around it.”

“Okay. Carry on. We’re in a bit of an emergency here. I’ll talk with you and the others later.”

“That’s a surprise,” said the captain. “Vermin are usually primitive. These are special.”

## Chapter Eleven

"They're coming in a bit erratically," said the captain's new XO.

"With what they've gone through, that might be understandable," said his captain.

"Try to hail them," said the commander.

The XO sent out an encrypted message to the approaching shuttle. There was no response.

"I don't like that," said the commander. "Just in case, send a small group from security to the shuttle deck where they'll dock."

"Maybe they forgot to patch their spacesuits into the general com," said the captain.

"Could be," said the commander. "That's sloppy, but like I said, they've been through a lot."

*I said that,* thought the captain. *Can't this asshole think for himself?*

The XO ordered a small group of security to go welcome the two pilots.

\*\*\*

"Nice maneuvering," Mike said to Juno.

"Not me. I could never figure out their damn controls. Let's hope that hold where we're going to dock has doors that open automatically too."

"I figured out their weapons." He showed her. "This lever all the way forward is the safety setting. The middle setting is single burst. I don't know what the back setting is."

"Maybe multiple bursts. Because we don't know what it is, don't use it. We need to make every shot count anyway."

"Any more details to your plan?"

"I'm open to suggestions."

"How about letting any of the bashful ETs we met leave first. Most of them should still be alive because we blew the door early enough. We can go out behind them. Use them as shields."

"I'm sure they'd appreciate that. Let's modify your idea. You go right at the exit and I'll go left. We can catch any bad guys in a crossfire and hopefully miss the ETs we met. I don't think they're bad guys. And they're definitely non-combatants."

"And after that?"

"If we have any success, we move through the rest of the ship."

"Thank goodness the other ship is gone. They won't be able to fire on this one."

"Yeah, this is going to be easy."

Mike knew she was being sardonic.

\*\*\*

The commander watched as the group of scientists disembarked first from the shuttle.

The security personnel vetted them one by one and sent them into the main part of the ship.

"Where are the pilot and copilot?" Security personnel started dropping as laser beams took them out one by one. "The vermin are loose on our ship! Send more security immediately!"

By the time backup personnel arrived at the hold, the invaders were gone, and they only found their dead companions' bodies.

"Search the ship for them!" said the ship's captain.

"I want them all dead!" said the commander.

He knew that would take time. The ship was large and many crewmembers had died on the planet.

Two members of his elite guard examined the shuttle now berthed in the hold.

"All our fellows you sent before are now dead, sir."

"Even the pilot and copilot are dead, sir. It looks like your scheme didn't work. The vermin blew out the door and restored air pressure."

"Join the search. I want those vermin dead!"

The commander no more than said that when the door to the command center whooshed open. Two shots took out him and the captain; another took out the XO.

"This ship is now ours!" said Mike, raising his left fist.



## Chapter Twelve

“Are the prisoners comfortable?” Mike said to the head of ITUIP security on the colony planet Angel Dust when she came into the conference room and took her seat.

Juno looked at him and raised her eyebrows.

“Comfortable enough.” Delia Maas looked from one ITUIP hero to the other. “I’ll ask you two the same question.”

“For us, this is just planetary leave,” said Juno. Mike nodded. “In the service, we couldn’t get enough of those brief tastes of civilization. I think Mike is more worried about the ET non-combatants.”

“We’ll keep them separated from the few remaining military types. We’ve implanted com units in the heads of some of them, and the AI is busy learning their language. Fortunately one of them was already working on learning Standard and could explain their ship’s controls. We’ll soon be able to communicate better with all of them.”

“I guess the assumption is that the non-combatants will give a less biased view of their culture.” He eyed Juno and then turned back to Delia. “What’s the purpose of this meeting?”

“First, as representative of ITUIP on this colony planet, I want to say that the Union commends you and thanks you for your efforts. As young crewmembers of an exploratory ship, your performance was remarkable.”

“Captain Boonton ran a tight ship,” said Juno. “We couldn’t have done it without him.”

“Possibly. But your actions were remarkable even after Captain Boonton was killed. But there’s something else on my mind.”

“Go ahead,” said Mike.

Delia stood and paced a moment between the table’s end and the wall. She stopped at her chair and leaned on its back. “From your reports, we’re worried about war—that one ship had already left orbit. Angel Dust and other planets on the edge of our territory near these xenophobic devils could be the first targets. Are you familiar with history? These beings remind me of the Tali at their worst.” Juno and Mike looked at each other and then nodded. “We’ve sent messages via starship to the Union’s central worlds. There are decisions to be made that go far beyond my pay grade.”

“Maybe we should come up with some plans too,” said Mike, “and not wait for ITUIP bureaucrats to propose something.”

“I hoped you’d say that.”

\*\*\*

Working with Delia and her staff, and the governor of the planet and his staff, was a new experience for Juno and Mike. The governor was an able chairperson and didn’t seem to mind all the comparisons with his people, the Tali. That was ancient history, after all.

At the end of twenty standard days, they had two suggestions. In the hope of avoiding war with the belligerent ETs, they would extend the ITUIP protocol to them, quarantine their entire empire, and ban any trade and commerce with them. The second suggestion was Mike’s: prepare for war anyway. e was a doctor, and he understood preventative medicine.

Delia and the governor sent their plan on the next starship to New Haven, the current seat of the ITUIP government.

\*\*\*

Juno and Mike met Delia in a pub in the capital of Angel Dust.

Delia eyed the two, whom she now considered friends, over the brim of her stein filled with local ale. “Have you made your decision? That exploratory ship will take off in forty standard hours.”

The *Argos* waited in orbit, its crew on planetary leave. There was a position for a medical intern and captain’s aide available, both representing a demotion compared to *Copernicus*, but they’d be on a bigger ship.

“It’s a way to stay together,” said Juno. “We’ve talked it over. We became close while fighting for our lives. Mike and I want to see if we’re compatible when things are more peaceful.”

“Nothing permanent for now, but we want to keep that option open,” said Mike, smiling at Juno.

“I understand. You of course know *Argos* has more Talis and Rangers than Humans. That could make things interesting.”

“It’s a lot nicer to have friendlier ETs than unfriendly ones,” said Mike.

Delia laughed...and they made a toast to the future.

Note from Steve: You have just finished two sci-fi novellas, the dystopian thriller “Presto Agitato” and the space opera “Survival Games.” I hope you liked them.

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Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas

## About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.