

ACTS OF LOVE IN FARAWAY PLACES

BOOK 1: ACTS OF LOVE IN FARAWAY PLACES

BY RICK TALBOT

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MAJOR LOCATIONS IN THE STORY

THE MOONS OF URANUS

Name	Diameter	Composition	Terraform Status	Inhabited
Miranda	471.6 KM	Ice	N/A	No
Ariel	1167.8 KM	Rock/Ice	N/A	No
Umbriel	1169.4 KM	Rock/Ice	N/A	No
Titania	1576.8 KM	Rock/Ice	Yes, within Adriana, Lucetta, and Bona colony domes.	Yes
Oberon	1522.8 KM	Rock/Ice	Yes, within Hamlet colony dome.	Yes

THE MAJOR PLANETS

Name	Diameter	Composition	Terraform Status	Inhabited
Earth		Rock	God-created	Yes
Mars		Rock	Fully	Yes
Venus		Rock	Fully	Yes
Mercury		Rock	Partial on dark-side colonies	Yes

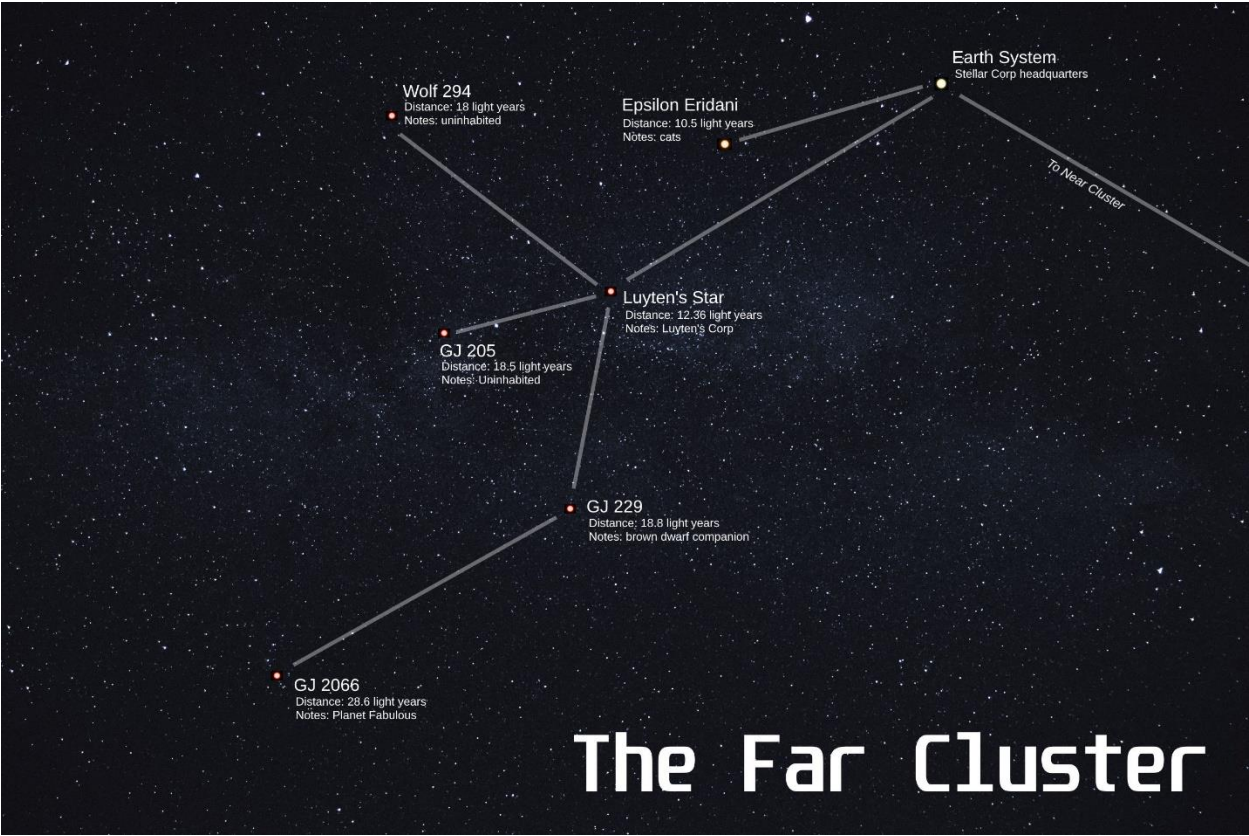
NOTABLE EXTRA-SOLAR COLONIES – NEAR CLUSTER

Name	Distance l.y.	Notes
Alpha Centauri	4.2	Nearest star to Earth
Gliese 447	11	Mount Sinai II
Gliese 832	16.1	Quarantined by order of Stellar Corp
Lacaille 8760	12.8	S.C. Protectorate
Epsilon Indi	11.8	S.C. Protectorate
Gliese 784	21.8	S.C. Protectorate
Gliese 682	16	S.C. Protectorate

NOTABLE EXTRA-SOLAR COLONIES – FAR CLUSTER

Name	Distance l.y.	Notes
Epsilon Eridani	10.5	Cats.
Luyten's Star	12.4	Luyten's Corp
GJ 2066	28.6	Planet Fabulous





ARCHIVIST'S NOTE

This document was created in part from notes provided by Stellar Corp Archivist Ashley Chung. For readers without Stellar Corp security clearance, a limited declassified collection of notes is viewable at the following address: www.ricktalbot.com/wiki/

PROLOGUE

In the year 2715 – or somewhere thereabouts – the secret of interstellar travel was finally discovered. Travel to other stars at faster-than-light speeds became common-place. This meant that interplanetary corporations could finally go interstellar. Exotic goods, such as fine quilts made with Amish silk from Mount Sinai II (which are absolute must-haves) could now be imported faster than the fifteen years it took for the robotic barges to make the trip. This alone made the expense of faster-than-light worth it – at least for those who followed the latest in interstellar fashion.

N.B. In 2775 the term *superlight* was chosen as the official ISO standard, meaning “travel at faster-than-light speeds.”

1

Adriana Colony, Titania, a moon of Uranus

Bailey shouted across the canyon, "Echo!"

(Echo, echo, echo....)

"This is awesome!"

(This is awesome, awesome, awesome....)

"You're such a baby," Shep said. He slapped her on the shoulder. "Baby."

"You're such a killjoy," Bailey replied. She stuck out her tongue.

Balraj was on the far side of the canyon, looking down into the crevice.

"I don't know guys, it's pretty deep."

"C'mon Balraj, we already did it. It's only thirty meters. Just run and jump," Shep said.

Balraj backed up a bit, then ran forward and jumped. He flew up and across the thirty meters of the canyon, passed by Shep and Bailey, and landed awkwardly on a pile of garbage. Dust filled the air.

"You okay? Balraj?" Bailey asked.

Balraj picked himself up from the garbage heap. He looked down at himself, and then looked back at his friends who were running toward him.

"I tore my jeans."

He pointed at the left pant leg, which had a rip from the knee all the way down to the ankle. It seemed that somehow he had not been hurt. "My mom is going to kill me."

2

S.C. Applegate, in orbit over Titania, a moon of Uranus

Perspective is everything when you look down at the world that you're supposed to be protecting, and you see nothing.

The three colonies on the moon Titania were nearly invisible from orbit. Adriana, Lucetta, and Bona were nestled in their namesake craters for protection from the elements: from solar radiation, from Uranus's magnetic field, and from rogue meteorites.

Aboard the S.C. Applegate, Captain Jeremy Bach sat staring out the bridge window, idly scratching his leg. The window was actually a large computer display, currently showing a view of Titania as seen from one of the ship's cameras.

"Captain, Engineering reports everything is normal," Smitty said. Smitty's civilian outfit, a jean jacket with dark jean pants, contrasted with the official Stellar Corp uniform worn by the rest of the crew: a light-pink suit in the traditional Indian pajama style. The color was meant to project strength, but not aggression, to the citizens under their protection. Stellar Corp staff wore no rank insignia as a rule, to prevent officers from being identified in the rare event that they encountered a hostile adversary.

(Scratch, scratch, scratch.)

"Captain."

"Huh?" Jeremy asked. He paused for a second. "Thank you, Smitty. Umm, okay." Jeremy looked at Smitty, nodded at him, and then returned to staring at Titania on the display.

"Everything okay Captain?" Smitty asked.

"Fine."

The two sat for a while in silence. Jeremy stared out at space as Smitty stared at Jeremy, wondering what his captain was preoccupied with. The pilot, Jerry Mulligan, who sat nearby, busied himself with data on his console.

"You know Smitty," Jeremy said, as he tapped his fingers on his chair. "Hmm..."

"What, uhh, what is it Captain?"

"Smitty, I'm really fucking bored."

Smitty said nothing for a moment.

“Oh...”

Jeremy Bach: captain of the least interesting patrol in the history of the universe. In the window, the drab gray surface of Titania lay revealed before them, surrounded by the endless dark void, just as it had been every day for years now.

3

Hamlet Colony, on Oberon, a moon of Uranus

Steven Wang, president of Hamlet Customs Brokers, was enjoying a glass of Scotch whiskey when a flash of light brightened his office for an instant.

He activated the intercom on his desk.

“Did you see that?” he asked.

“Yes, Steven. *What was it?*” Carol replied.

“I have no idea. I thought I was imagining it.”

He rushed to the window to see if he could spot anything out of the ordinary. His view of Hamlet was substantial – he could see all two-hundred kilometers of the colony from end to end – and it all looked normal. He sighed in relief. Then he looked up. A dull red glow, something resembling a coal ember, was moving across the sky. Steven ran back to the intercom.

“Carol, something in orbit just blew up. See if you can get hold of Stellar Corp for some info.”

“Shit, Steven, okay. *I hope it’s not one of ours.*”

Steven poured another glass. His hand trembled slightly, and a splash of the rare vintage drink spilled onto his desk.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

This was not good news. There were too many safety protocols; ships did not explode, ever.

4

Horatio Station, Stellar Corp, in orbit over Oberon.

Commander Tajiki watched the bright fireball as it moved across the orbit of Oberon.

"Is this a threat to us?" she asked.

"No, we're safe. It's moving away."

"Okay. How about the colony?"

"Hold on," Wayland Hauer said. He brought up a map on the main display. He calculated the trajectory of the fireball and overlaid it on the display. "Oh, oh no. There's a very high chance that it will land on the colony."

"Are you sure about that?" Lauressa asked as she walked toward the display.

"Commander, look at those projections. If the remains of that ship don't break apart, then the whole thing will land on Hamlet. If it does break apart, then there's a chance it could overshoot."

"Thanks Wayland. Could you call up the nearest ship please? We need to destroy that wreckage."

Wayland hit a few buttons. The nearest Stellar Corp ship was located, and communications were established.

"S.C. Johnson here. Go ahead Horatio Station."

"S.C. Johnson, this is Commander Tajiki. I need a firing solution for that wreckage."

"We're already following it."

"Our projection of its path shows it landing on Hamlet if we do nothing. S.C. Johnson, you have permission to fire on the wreckage. Obliterate it."

"Acknowledged, Horatio Station."

The ship accelerated toward the smoldering hulk and opened fire with all lasers. Eight nearly invisible beams – just barely observable because they fried any bits of dust that crossed their paths – dashed instantly forward with a dull blue glow. The beams converged on the center of the wreckage. The red-ember wreckage turned white-hot under the laser barrage. Then it blew apart into thousands of tiny fragments.

Commander Tajiki jumped. “Woo! That was sudden!”

Wayland calculated the trajectories of all the new tiny bits of ship.

“It looks like none of it will hit Hamlet.”

“Good. Good. Now we need to find out how that ship blew up in the first place. It’s been a long time since there’s been an accident like this,” Commander Tajiki rubbed her stomach. “It’s going to be a long night. I’m going to get a quick bite to eat, and then I’ll get to work on this. Can I get you anything?”

“I’m fine,” Wayland replied. Commander Tajiki had started for the door when a message notification chimed at Wayland’s console.

“Commander, it’s the president of Hamlet Customs Brokers.”

Commander Tajiki sighed.

“Fine. Patch him in.”

Wayland hit a button. “This is Horatio Station. I have the Commander here. Go ahead.”

“Lauressa? It’s Steven. What’s happening up there?”

“Hello Wang, I’m kind of busy,” Commander Tajiki said.

“I just want to know what’s going on. Is it one of ours?”

“We don’t know yet. Have any of your ships missed a check-in?”

“Not yet, but the way they’re staggered, it could take a week before they all check-in with us.”

“Okay, send me your itineraries. I’ll compare your schedules against the station’s sensor records.”

“Lauressa, this isn’t good. It’s been... I’ve been on Hamlet for almost two hundred years. The last time anyone lost a ship was – it’s been so long that I can’t be sure exactly – I think it was a hundred and twenty years ago.”

“At least a hundred years for sure. These things are not supposed to happen. I’ve got to get back to work. I’ll let you know if it’s one of yours.”

“Alright Lauressa, thanks.”

“It’s Commander Tajiki during office hours, Wang. Bye.”

Lauressa Tajiki walked out of the command center. Steven Wang was still talking; drawing out his goodbye. Wayland cut the connection as soon as the Commander had left the room, and the room fell pleasantly silent.

Outside the station, thousands of glowing embers spread out in orbit over Oberon. They were like sparks from a campfire, reaching up toward the heavens.

5

Aboard Horatio Station

Lauressa Tajiki closed the door to her quarters and let out a long sigh. Steven Wang had always managed to get under her skin; to insinuate himself into her life in some way. It was bad enough that she had made the mistake of spending that drunken weekend with him (decades ago!), but did she have to pay for it for the rest of her life?

Wang just seemed like he'd never moved on. She was endlessly mean to him, so terribly mean, but he wouldn't let go. Lauressa wondered if the people who had cured disease and aging – the people who had turned humans into demi-gods five-hundred years ago – had ever taken into account the misery of having one lost weekend follow you forever? If they had, then maybe they would have put in some kind of self-destruct mechanism, instead of dooming us to wait for war or disaster to finally do the job.

Lauressa let her hair out from the tight bun that it had been pinned into. She poured a glass of wine. *No drinking on duty – fuck, under the circumstances, who cares?* She took a drink – it was dry and dark – and she let out another long sigh. Her order to open fire was the first given in seventy-five years. There'd be hell to pay. *So much paperwork! I'll be doing paperwork for months because of this shit.* But as long as she was investigating the accident then she wouldn't need to file any forms. *Oh well, back to work.*

Lauressa grabbed some bread and headed out of her room toward the Research Center.

* * *

Lauressa entered the access code, and the doors to the Research Centre opened. The room was dark. Rows of lights flickered on overhead as soon as she stepped over the threshold. Someone was hunched over a desk on the far end of the room.

"Are you okay?" Lauressa asked. The person didn't move. She walked closer, placed a hand on the woman's shoulder, and gave it a shake.

"What?" the woman asked. "Oh..." she said as she put a hand to her head.

"Are you okay?"

"I, uh, I must have fallen asleep." She turned to look at Lauressa. "Oh, Commander!" She tried to stand and got about a quarter of the way up before sitting back down. "Oh, my head."

"You don't look so good," Lauressa said. "I don't think we've met."

"I'm Ashley Chung. I just arrived two days ago. I'm a research archivist."

"Okay, Ashley. Why are you in here sleeping?"

"I was, uh..." Ashley stopped and rubbed her temples. "I feel sick. My head is pounding."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No. I wouldn't do that at work. But I feel hung-over. I don't understand why."

"Okay, let's get you to the infirmary."

Ashley stood up and took a few steps. She fell to her knees, mumbled, "Oh my god," and vomited all over the floor.

"Sure you haven't been drinking?"

"I'm sure." She wiped her sleeve across her mouth. "I don't know if I can get up on my own."

Lauressa reached down and took a firm grip on Ashley's arm.

"Ready? Here we go. Let's go get you checked out." They walked carefully out of the Research Centre, then down the hall to the elevator. Ashley vomited against the elevator door as they waited. The door slid open and the vomit squished up against the doorframe.

"Well, now I'm quite concerned." Lauressa watched a glob of vomit drip down to the ground. Lauressa entered the elevator, carefully avoiding the vomit. Ashley followed, barely able to stand. They were relieved to reach the infirmary without further incident.

The doctor examined Ashley. He went through the list of symptoms: found passed out, headache, vomiting, difficulty walking, and a general 'hangover' feeling.

"And you're sure you haven't been drinking?" Doctor Poisson asked as he shone a light into one eye, then the other.

Ashley held up a hand to block the light. "Oh! That hurts! No, I haven't been drinking."

The doctor shook his head.

"Okay, it could be anything. Toxic shock from food poisoning, a stroke, an aneurysm." Ashley's mouth opened slightly. "Don't worry, it's probably none of that. Most likely, you drank so much that you can't remember it. But I'll run some tests anyways." He took a quick blood sample from Ashley's arm and placed it into the Analyzer. The machine whirled for a few seconds, began a countdown on its screen, and then chimed when it was done.

“Oh, this is strange. Have you been using drugs?” Doctor Poisson asked.

“No. Why?”

“You’ve got phenobarbital in your system.” He passed the analyzer to Lauressa. “Look at the chart.”

Lauressa looked at the display: a graph at the top and a series of numbers below.

“I don’t see it.”

“The spike there on the graph. That’s the phenobarbital. Ashley, do you take this for seizures?”

Ashley shook her head.

“I don’t take any drugs. I’m not on any medication.”

“And I wouldn’t expect you to. It’s not frequently used now, and it’s never been a recreational drug. Hmm, this doesn’t make sense. You said you found her passed out at a desk in the Research Centre?”

“That’s right, about twenty minutes ago.”

“Ashley, what’s the last thing you remember?” Doctor Poisson asked.

“I went into the Research Centre to start reviewing the last twenty-four hours of orbital sensor data and prepare it for the archives. That’s it,” Ashley replied.

“That’s it?”

“I don’t even remember sitting down at my desk.”

“Do you remember what time it was?” the doctor asked.

“I think it was five o’clock.”

“That’s over six hours ago. You’re lucky the dose wasn’t higher. But you’ll have to stay here overnight until it leaves your system completely.” The Doctor walked over to a small room with glass walls and opened the door. “Go ahead and sleep it off in here. You’ll feel a lot better in the morning.”

Ashley nodded and walked a little drunkenly into the room. He closed the door behind her.

“What do you think?” Lauressa asked.

“I think that she either uses drugs recreationally, or she was drugged on purpose.”

“On purpose?”

“This isn’t the most common drug to run across. She either brought it onto the station, or someone else did.”

“You don’t have any?”

“I don’t stock it. There are better alternatives available. Sure, you’ll find it in some of the smaller colony hospitals, because it’s cheap to manufacture and it works. But if you’ve got the resources you’ll stock the newer drugs. Less risk of overdose.”

“She’ll be okay?” Laressa asked.

“She’ll be fine. She’ll sleep it off. I’ll advise her to take it easy for the next twenty-four hours.”

“Okay, good.”

“Laressa, we’ve got to figure out how those drugs got on the ship.”

Laressa nodded. This was just what she needed. An exploding ship wasn’t enough – now she had a drugged civilian crew member to worry about.

“Doctor, can you look into it?”

“I have to report this to Stellar Corp anyways, so I’ll see what I can find.”

“Thanks Doctor. I’ll be in the Research Centre.”

6

Adriana Colony, Titania

"Let's go to the Arcade," Shep said.

Balraj shook his head.

"Your pants are really not torn that bad."

"No way, I'm already in trouble. I need to go home."

"You're already boned, so just come with us to the Arcade."

"Fine," Balraj replied. He shrugged his shoulders and let out a deep breath. "I guess you're right. Let's go."

"Guys, this is going to be so fun," Bailey said. She hopped in excitement.

Shep laughed, pointed at her, and said, "You're like a dumb floppy puppet. Bouncing up and down."

"Suck it, Shep." Bailey turned and ran in the direction of the Arcade.

"You're such a dick," Balraj exclaimed with a sigh. He started off after Bailey.

"Whatever...."

Shep watched as the two of them kept running.

"Hey guys, wait for me!"

They made their way past the colony garbage dump. Flies and other insects, attracted by their body heat, buzzed around, trying to make themselves at home on their clothes and in their hair. The three of them walked a while longer until they got to the industrial area. Rows of prefab buildings lined both sides of the street. Trucks headed both ways, delivering or picking up whatever it was that the factories made.

"That's Titania Carbonics over there," Shep said. The Carbonics buildings were all the same – five stories tall with a series of smoke stacks on each roof. The stacks alternated between sucking in the air – capturing the carbon dioxide in flexible polymer lungs – and letting out the by-products, which were oxygen, water, and some ozone. The polymer lungs sat on top of the buildings. They looked like the kind of bellows that were used back in those archaic times when homes were heated with fireplaces. The lungs inflated and deflated every

few minutes. The Carbonics factory produced multiple carbon-based products – reinforced cables, plastics, filters, concrete, inks – anything that could be made with carbon. Other industries in the colony were allowed to vent their carbon dioxide directly into the colony atmosphere. Levels were maintained so that the overall carbon dioxide produced was equal to the amount consumed. Excess carbon dioxide could be vented outside the dome, but this was something to be avoided, since shipping in fresh atmosphere was expensive.

The kids walked a few blocks further, until they stopped at a local store for a drink. It was a run-down place. A layer of dust seemed to cover every item on the shelves. An old, wrinkly, and sickly-gaunt Martian expatriate sat slumped in a chair behind the counter. A faded flag hung on the wall behind him.

“Hey kids, welcome to Tom’s Place.”

“Hi. That’s a flag from Mars.”

“That there is the Free Martian States. Those stars along the top of the flag are all the colonies on Mars. The four stripes along the bottom are the orbits of the first four planets. The black line across the third stripe is the symbol for our independence from Earth.”

They’d studied it in history class. The Free Martian States had been overrun by Earth almost five-hundred years earlier.

“Were you there?” Balraj asked.

“Was I there? Was I.... Wait, how old do you think I am?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Well I was there. Not only was I there, but I was one of the poor ones. The ones who didn’t have the benefit of all that anti-aging technology stuff to keep us all supple and soft and young looking.” He stared off into the distance. “There’s not many of us left now. A lot of us died in that war. And those that were left, without the medicine when we were young, we just don’t live as long, most of us.” He rubbed his chin. White stubble peeked out from between the wrinkles. “Five hundred and, uh, twenty years. Good genes I guess.” The trio just stood there, looking at him – a relic. “Alright, are you gonna stand there or do you want something?”

“Oh, just some drinks,” Balraj replied.

“Well tap your hands on the scanner so you can register. Then take whatever you like and it’ll get billed to you when you carry it out. Pretty high-tech for an old guy, eh?”

They tapped their fingers against the console on the counter. It read their biometrics and displayed their basic info for the shop-keeper – name and credit balance. They picked out some drinks and some snacks. Balraj got a Titania Cola and some chips. Shep got an imported Coke, which was an Earth luxury item. Bailey grabbed an ice-pop and a pack of cookies. As they left the store the system detected what they carried out and took the money from their personal credit accounts.

A little ways down the road, the three kids found a hill to sit on. From that hill they could see most of the buildings up to a few kilometers away.

Balraj sipped on his Titania Cola. “I’m so glad I came.”

“I told you. You could be at home, or you could be here, looking down at half the colony,” Shep said. He took a drink of his Coke. “I don’t know why you bought a Titania.”

“Umm, your Coke is like triple the price, Shep. How can you afford it?”

“I save up for it.”

Bailey shook her head. “You two are too much. You know there’s really no difference between the two. It’s all the same company.”

“I know, but the recipes are different.”

“Sure.”

They settled in and relaxed. Overhead, the stars were slightly visible through the colony dome and the rings around Uranus glowed faintly in the sky. They sat, looking up, munching on their snacks, and enjoying their drinks. They noticed a faint red light stretching from the ground up to the sky.

“Guys do you see that?” Bailey asked.

“What?” Balraj asked.

Bailey pointed at the sky. “I’m talking about that red light, over there.”

Balraj looked to where Shep was pointing.

“Oh, I see it. Is that a laser?”

“That’s what it looks like to me.”

“Looks like it’s coming from the weather observatory.”

“Maybe they’re doing some sort of Uranus weather experiment with the laser.”

Shep jumped up. “Oh, I almost forgot, I have my binoculars with me.” He pulled them out from his shoulder bag and peered through them, pausing on a faint red beam in the sky. He followed it downward, until he reached the ground. “Hey, yeah, it’s the weather observatory.” He adjusted the focus. “I think I see someone.” He zoomed in more. “Yeah, I have a clear view. There’s someone there with a tripod.”

“Hey, let me look,” Balraj said. Shep passed the binoculars to Balraj. He traced the laser down to the ground, focused, and zoomed in. “Yeah I see him.” Balraj zoomed in more. “He’s wearing all black. I think he has a beard.”

Shep took the binoculars back from Balraj and looked again.

“Yeah, it looks like a beard. I guess he works at the observatory.”

“Let me see,” Bailey said. She snatched the binoculars from Shep. “Oh, I see him. Yeah, he probably just works there.”

“Yeah, probably. I just never knew that they used lasers at the observatory.”

“Another thing you don’t know, Shep.”

“Wow, thanks Bailey.”

They got tired of watching the man with his laser and started talking about other things – like who was the best ballplayer in the colony. They sat for a while longer, until they had finished their snacks. Then they packed up their garbage and continued on their adventure.

“In another fifteen minutes we’ll be at the Arcade,” Bailey said.

Balraj smiled. “Oh, I love the Arcade.”

“I’m going to play poker,” Shep said.

“Do you even know how to play poker?”

“A little. I’ve tried some online games.”

“How much is the starting bet?”

“Not sure. But I think there’s a free table at the Arcade, for beginners.”

“That sounds like a smart way to start,” Bailey said.

“Yeah. I don’t want to just waste my money.”

“At least not at first.”

“Gee Bailey. You’re always so sarcastic.”

“Not always. Just around you.”

Shep headed straight for the free tables as soon as they arrived at the Arcade.

“You guys know where to find me.”

Bailey and Balraj wandered around together. There were all the old classics – fishing games, mole hitting games, shooting games – and a few newer games specific to the colonies, like Colony Raider, Independence Fighter, Astro Chicken, and low-G bowling. There were rows of stalls with merchants selling imported goods like Amish silk from Mount Sinai II, furniture from Earth, and cats from Epsilon Eridani.

They had just finished browsing the stalls and were heading back toward the games area, when the building started shaking. A few seconds later, a loud thundering sound arose and then quickly subsided. Bailey and Balraj took off running to find Shep. There was no weather on the colony, so thunder never happened. Something was seriously wrong.

7

Aboard S.C. Applegate, in orbit over Titania

ARCHIVIST'S NOTE: The Ojibway word 'miigwech' is recorded as being used with some frequency among English speakers beginning in the early twenty-first century. The practice began in Canada when that nation grappled with its genocidal past and had begun a long process of embracing its Indigenous peoples and cultures. Miigwech, which means 'thank you', became used by non-Ojibway in the same way that non-Italians use 'ciao' – as a drop-in replacement for a word. The practice is more widespread among Canadians, who have adopted dozens of Indigenous words into every-day English.

--Ashley Chung, Archivist

"Fuck! Come about!" Jeremy Bach screamed. The pilot turned the ship toward an unknown vessel that had just launched a missile at Adriana colony. It had just come in from the far side of Titania less than a minute before. They were in the process of attempting to open communications with the ship when it had fired on the colony.

They had just finished their turn when Smitty yelled, "Incoming chaff! Hard to port!"

The pilot spun the Applegate to the left as quickly as he could and fired the engines to start it moving away from the chaff. About five seconds later the barrage of chaff passed behind the rear of the ship. A few pieces impacted the ship's armor plating, but most of it sped by harmlessly.

"We're hit!" Smitty yelled. "Wait. We're okay."

The pilot fired thrusters, steadying the ship after the impact as it spun slightly on its axis.

"Turn and fire lasers," Jeremy said.

The pilot spun the ship back, keeping it on-course.

"Ready now, Captain."

"Fire!" Captain Bach yelled. The beam launched toward its target. Suddenly they all realized that the target had vanished. "What the fuck! Where did it go? Did they flash?"

“Captain, it’s gone.” Smitty brought up an x-ray spectrum view on the screen. “Look at that trail. They went superlight just as we fired.”

“Well that’s fucking great.”

“The chaff was a delay tactic to give them a few seconds to flash away. Hold on... we’re receiving multiple messages from Adriana colony. They’ve got fires.”

“Mister Mulligan, put us in low orbit right over the colony. Keep the lasers powered up in case they return.”

The Applegate turned and its engines throttled up, sending it toward the colony. Once it got to the correct altitude, it spun around so that the main guns were pointed out into space.

“I’m running a trace on the x-ray field,” Smitty said. The computers scanned the space in front of them for x-ray remnants and began to run different scenarios. “If we’re lucky we’ll be able to tell what direction the ship was headed when it flashed away.”

“Good thinking.”

Jeremy scanned through the messages originating from Adriana colony. Most of them were meant for the other colonies, Lucetta and Bona. Among the jumble of messages was a distress call from the Governor of Adriana Colony:

This is the Adriana colony on Titania. We’ve been attacked from space. There are multiple fires in the city. We request help from anybody who is able to assist. We need firefighters, doctors, and medical equipment. If you’re able to assist, contact Adriana port traffic control for landing clearance.

Jeremy put the main radio display on the screen. He typed in the contact details for Adriana’s traffic control. After a few seconds a voice came through on the loudspeakers.

“This is Adriana port traffic control. Go ahead.”

“This is S.C. Applegate – Captain Bach here. We’re in low orbit over the colony now, in case the attacker returns.”

“We see you on our scanners S.C. Applegate.”

“I can send down a shuttle with supplies and personnel. We can be down there in twenty minutes.”

“Miigwech. We really appreciate it, thank you so much,” the traffic controller said. The line went silent for a moment, except for some background murmuring. *“Captain Bach, I’m holding bay twenty-nine open for you for the next hour. Land as soon as you’re ready.”*

“Roger that, traffic control. S.C Applegate out.”

“Smitty, I’m taking a team down to the surface. You’re in charge while I’m gone.”

“Right, Captain.”

“Smitty, do you think I can take twenty people with me?”

“Half the crew? I don’t think we need all hands. They won’t be back.”

“If they do come back, do you think you can handle them?” Jeremy asked.

Smitty nodded. “Sure, we’re combat certified for as few as 10 personnel. So yeah. But I really don’t think they’ll be back.”

“You seem pretty sure of that.”

“Chaff isn’t the kind of thing used by someone who wants a fight. They did what they came for – whatever it was – and now they’re gone.”

“That makes sense. You’ve got more experience than I do in these areas.”

“That’s why I’m here. Now go get your shuttle loaded up. Hopefully by the time you get back I’ll have finished figuring out where they were headed.”

“Okay, let me know when you have something. I’ll let you know when we’re unloaded on the surface.”

Jeremy pressed the elevator button. A few seconds later the doors opened and he walked off the bridge. Smitty went back to work. He brought up a tactical interface on one of the screens beside him, just in case.

* * *

“Captain, this is our entire supply of adrenaline. And morphine. And burn patches,” Doctor Smith explained. He pointed at the two crates of medical supplies that sat on a sled on the hangar floor behind him. “If something happens up here we won’t have anything for the crew.”

“When was the last time something like this happened? Five hundred years ago, right?”

“More or less,” Doctor Smith replied.

“Okay, so let’s do what we can to help out.”

“Fine. I suppose you’ll want me to go down there too.” The doctor folded his arms and his biceps pressed against his shirt sleeves. Most men from Eridani had thicker than usual muscles and bones because of the higher gravity on their colony.

“Yes, but you won’t be alone. I’m going with you, and I’ve got another fifteen volunteers on the way.”

“Volunteers. Right.”

“Something bothering you, Doctor? This is what we do.”

“No, no, it’s fine. It’s just that...” Doctor Smith paused and rubbed his hand through his hair. “We’re emptying out the ship for people we don’t know, which is fine, except we’re putting ourselves at risk.”

“I know that. But we’re the closest thing to real emergency help that’s out here. So we’re going down and we’ll do our best.”

“Okay, Captain. Alright. I’ll finish packing and load up the shuttle.”

Jeremy nodded and Doctor Smith went back to work.

Several of the crew walked into the hangar Jeremy looked at the entire team – Doctor Smith, two medics, an engineer, a Mechanic, and ten marines – a total of seventeen including himself.

“Okay, now that we’re all here, let me just take a minute to reiterate our job. Adriana has been attacked. A single missile was launched at them by an adversary who then fled. We don’t know the full extent of the damage, but the colony government reports multiple fires. We’re going to go down there to help in any way that we can. The engineer and Mechanic are going down because we have to make sure structures are safe before we enter. The medics will be with Doctor Smith. Marines, I’m relying on you to provide assistance to the Doctor and the engineers wherever required. We’ll know more once we reach the surface. Let’s help the colony, and make them proud of Stellar Corp. Let’s go.”

Jeremy walked into the shuttle. The rest of the crew followed. The sleds of supplies were loaded and the side hatch was sealed. Jeremy sat down at the pilot station and activated the radio. One of the marines sat at the co-pilot’s position beside him.

“This is Applegate shuttle, requesting permission to disembark,” Jeremy said.

“Shuttle, this is S.C. Applegate. Permission granted,” Smitty said over the intercom.

Jeremy activated the departure program. The hangar doors opened and the shuttle lifted off and flew out of the hangar.

"Good luck, Captain Bach."

"Good luck, Captain Smitty."

As they got closer to the colony, they could see smoke rising in the center of the city. Several ships were flying in from the other colonies. The shuttle activated its communication protocol once they were within range of Adriana's port, bringing up a line with Adriana's traffic controllers.

"This is Adriana port traffic control, go ahead," the traffic controller said.

"This is Applegate shuttle. May we have permission to land at landing bay twenty-nine?"

"Permission granted Applegate shuttle. Proceed, and, uh..." Again there was murmuring on the other end of the connection. *"Uh, Applegate shuttle, a team is going to meet you at the landing bay to escort you to the attack site."*

"Understood traffic control."

A small group of men waited for them at the landing bay. The first one stepped forward toward Jeremy and raised his hand – it was more a wave than a salute.

"I'm Chief Volaris Gollari. The Governor asked me to meet you and escort you to the attack site. My staff can help you unload your shuttle. We have a truck waiting just outside."

"Thank you, Chief Gollari. How bad is it?" Jeremy asked. His marines were already at work unloading the supplies onto dollies. Volaris' men went over to assist.

"It's bad, and call me Volaris. The weather observatory is completely destroyed and at least five buildings around it have collapsed from the shockwave. There are several others that look at risk of collapse as well. There are also multiple fires, mostly from ruptured gas lines."

"That's not good at all. Hopefully my engineering team and medical team can help. If there's anybody to rescue... or dig out.... Whatever it takes, whatever we can do to help."

"Thank you, Captain. As soon as the truck is loaded we'll drive straight there."

Once the last of the supplies were loaded they drove away from the port. Volaris pointed to pillars of smoke rising in the distance.

"The atmospheric scrubbers are working at emergency capacity, and the carbon-sequestering factories are running at full tilt. They're just dumping raw carbon powder into the street right now so they can make room to absorb more. We'll worry about what to do with it all later."

"How long can they run like that?" Jeremy asked.

"A few days. But Lucetta and Bona are sending additional scrubbers, and we'll have them set up later today. That will give us some more, um, breathing room, ah, no pun intended, to get the fires out."

"That's good news."

The truck abruptly stopped. A smoldering piece of metal was sitting on the road. The truck reversed to the previous intersection and went a different way.

"There's bits of debris all over the colony. So far they haven't caused any significant damage, so we're focusing our effort on the immediate area around ground zero," Volaris said. They continued down the road toward the impact zone. There was debris scattered on either side of the road. "We're only a few kilometers away now. Looks like the road has already been cleared for us. Probably the first response teams."

The damaged buildings became visible as the truck turned the corner. The four or five buildings closest to them had lost all their windows. Further down the street there were several smoldering piles – buildings that had collapsed from the shockwave. Those piles formed a kind of ring of rubble, and in the center there was a crater about twenty feet deep where the observatory had been.

Volaris pointed at a trailer, about fifty meters down the street, that people were coming and going from. "That's the command center. And over there are the search & rescue tents. We'll unload here. Your doctor can take his supplies to the search & rescue tent."

"Doctor Smith, take the medics and five marines with you," Jeremy said.

"Okay, I'll get to work. Let me know if you need me." The doctor began unloading supplies from the truck.

"Volaris, I suppose we should go to the command center."

"I was just going to say that. You'll be able to speak with the site commander there. I'll introduce you."

They walked over to the command center. The engineers and Mechanic followed behind them. The five remaining marines took up the rear, towing the non-medical supplies behind them.

“Governor Shull, this is Captain Bach, from the S.C. Applegate,” Volaris said.

“Captain!” the Governor declared excitedly. He jogged toward him from the other side of the trailer. “I’m so grateful for your help. Miigwech! I hear you brought medical personnel with you.”

“Yes, they’re already at work. I’ve also brought engineering and mechanical expertise.”

“Great. Great! We’ve had a tough time with the buildings closer to the attack site.” He turned to Volaris. “Deputy Chief Gollari, would you help the engineers get set up? Show them which buildings we’re trying to secure.”

“Certainly, as long as it’s okay with Captain Bach, I’ll take his men and get them started.”

Jeremy turned to his engineering team. “Go ahead. Let me know if anything needs my attention. Take three marines with you.” The engineer, the Mechanic and the three marines left with Volaris.

“Captain, our space port control told us that you were fired upon by the ship that attacked us?”

“Yes, they launched chaff at us.”

“Chaff? That’s an odd tactic.”

“It is. It turned out to be a great way to buy themselves some time before flashing to superlight.”

Governor Shull learned closer to Jeremy.

“We should talk in private.”

“Of course. Marines, please wait outside.” The marines saluted and left. There were some people at the other end of the trailer, but nobody was within earshot. Still, the Governor spoke quietly into Jeremy’s ear.

“I don’t know who to trust. Something seems wrong here.”

“What do you mean?” Jeremy asked.

“This ship, it comes out of nowhere, fires a single rocket at a weather observatory, and then runs. Right?”

"That's correct."

"So this single building was attacked. Why?"

"I don't know. It doesn't make sense."

"Exactly. Something is going on here."

"But what?" Jeremy asked.

"The timing is strange too," Shull said. "It's Sunday afternoon."

"What's strange about that?"

"The observatory was closed today, and most people in this neighborhood were already out at the market. There have been very few casualties so far."

"That's a good thing."

"I agree, but the timing of it is either a lucky coincidence or it was planned this way."

"Planned this way?" Jeremy asked. "Do you think someone here on the colony could have been involved?"

"Maybe. At least someone who knew the best time to make their move if they wanted to minimize deaths."

"Hmm. What can I do to help?" Jeremy asked.

"Look around, see if you can find out what really happened here. I'm hoping I can trust you. I have to trust you. If this involves people from the colony then I have to be careful."

"All right, I'll go talk with my team and we'll let you know what we find."

"Thank you, Captain Bach."

Jeremy walked out of the command center. The two marines were waiting outside.

"You two stay with me at all times from now on. Let's go find Doctor Smith."

They walked down to the Search & Rescue tent. Doctor Smith was checking on a patient, the medics were changing bandages, and the marines were helping to clean up the area.

"How'd it go?" Doctor Smith asked.

"Can I talk to you in private, when you're done with your patient?" Jeremy asked.

“Sure, I'm actually finished now.” The doctor put his hand on his patient's shoulder, and said, “Keep your arm in the sling for the next two weeks. Take it off to sleep and bathe. After two weeks go back to your regular activities, but don't lift anything too heavy at first. Take it slowly.”

The patient left.

“So?” Doctor Smith asked.

“Notice anything strange?”

“Other than the crater in the middle of the colony? No.”

“The governor is worried that someone in the colony was involved. He thinks the timing was too good to be a coincidence – most of the people in the area were at the market at the time.”

“Now that you mention it, there aren't a lot of injuries or casualties.”

“Exactly. With an explosion this size....”

“That's true. Maybe it's just luck.”

“Maybe. Keep an eye out for anything strange. Keep it between us. Oh, and keep the marines near you, just in case.”

Jeremy walked out of the Search & Rescue tent and went over to the Engineering and Mechanical area. The engineer was looking at blueprints of buildings and comparing them to live structural scans. The Mechanic was looking at electrical and robotic schematics of the city infrastructure. The marines were leaning against a long table. They stood at attention when they noticed Jeremy enter.

“Relax, guys. Any luck?” he asked.

The engineer – John Dvorak – handed a data tablet to the Captain. “We've completed scanning seven of the damaged buildings. Two need to be demolished, the rest can be repaired.”

“That's good news.”

“Now take a look at this.” He tapped an icon on the tablet, and the display changed to a topographical radiation map. “David discovered this. David, you can explain this better than I can, could you come over here?”

David, the ship's Mechanic, came over and pointed to the pad. "This is a plot of the impact zone and everything within two-hundred meters of it. See the red areas? Those are traces of carbon-14. The warhead was nuclear."

"Nuclear? You're sure?" Jeremy asked.

"Absolutely, that's the only kind of warhead that creates carbon-14."

"Okay."

"But look at the area outside of the impact zone. There's no red – no carbon-14."

"Well that doesn't make sense. Radiation doesn't just stop like that."

"It doesn't. Someone either cleaned it up – which you can't do in only a few hours, or there was a force-field used at the time of the blast."

"A force-field? Who raises a force-field just before an attack like that? You'd have to know when and where it was about to happen."

John Dvorak traced a circle on the screen around the impact zone. "The destruction was worse near the impact zone because the force-field contained the blast. It kept most of the energy locked up inside it." He zoomed out to a wider view of the colony, and drew another circle. This larger circle was about twenty-five percent the size of the colony. "This is how far the damage would have spread without the force-field. That force-field saved a lot of people."

"Have any of you talked to anybody about this?" the Captain asked.

"No sir, nobody."

"Okay, let's keep it that way. Something's not right here. We don't know who was involved. Keep collecting what you can, and we'll decide what to do later. Don't talk to anyone. Keep the marines close."

"Got it."

"I'm returning to the ship. Make sure to let me know when you're on your way back."

Jeremy got a drive back to the space port, accompanied by two marines. Once in space, he turned the shuttle toward his ship, and radioed ahead.

"S.C. Applegate, this is Applegate shuttle, requesting permission to dock."

"This is S.C. Applegate. You have permission to dock."

"Miigwech, S.C Applegate. Tell Smitty that I need to speak with him right away. And get a pilot ready to take the shuttle back down. I don't want my people down there any longer than necessary."

8

Aboard Horatio Station

Ashley Chung was sleeping soundly in one of the small glass-walled private rooms in the infirmary. Doctor Poisson could hear her snoring, even through the walls. He was busy preparing his notes on the incident – he was required to report any drug overdose to Stellar Corp. His report included all the details of her medical history, all of the scans that he ran on her, and detailed logs about the station's own drug inventory. Phenobarbital was available on some of the colonies, but the fact that it wasn't stocked in the infirmary led the Doctor to the only possible conclusion – that it was smuggled onto Horatio Station. He specifically mentioned this in his report.

Lauressa Tajiki was in the Research Centre, scanning through the ship manifests and itineraries that had been sent over by Steven Wang. Some of Ashley Chung's vomit was on the floor – thankfully it was far enough away that she couldn't smell it from where she was sitting. There were a few hundred ships to review, each with its own itinerary and cargo manifest. This was going to take all night – or longer. Lauressa tried excluding any ship that wasn't scheduled to be at Oberon in the prior twenty-four hours. This cut down the list of ships to a few dozen. Then she realized that just because a ship didn't have Oberon on its itinerary didn't mean it couldn't be the ship in question. Any ship could have flown in from anywhere and gotten itself blown up. She'd have to go through all of the ships in the Hamlet Customs Brokers itinerary, one by one.

Lauressa scanned each itinerary line-by-line, looking for anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Everything looked normal, and after the fiftieth ship and eight hours of searching, she began to doubt that this method of investigation was even worth it.

The sensor logs! Why didn't I think of that first? Horatio Station's sensors recorded all ships coming and going. There could be hundreds, or even thousands of ships in the logs for just one day. But at least it would eliminate the cargo ships that hadn't arrived that day. That would narrow the search down tremendously.

The Commander loaded the sensor logs onto her primary display. She started with the past week of logs – over ten-thousand ships had come and gone in that time. She narrowed the data down to just the past twenty-four hours. Twelve-hundred ships. The ships were categorized by type – based on their size and shape as detected by the sensors. There were more than ten military frigates – the kind designated with an “S.C.” in front of their names, a few dozen local patrol vessels, and hundreds of various types of cargo ships, passenger transports, luxury liners, and diplomatic and trade vessels.

Lauressa narrowed down her search further by excluding everything that wasn't a cargo ship. The list was now down to two-hundred-twenty vessels. She ran a comparison against all of the ships on the Hamlet Customs Brokers itinerary. All accounted for. Every ship that was supposed to be at Oberon in the past twenty-four hours had arrived without incident. She ran the comparison in reverse to look for ships that the sensors had picked up but that weren't on the itinerary. Nothing out of the ordinary – no mystery ships to be found.

This didn't look promising. All the ships were where they were supposed to be and they were all on the itinerary. Lauressa hunched over and put her head in her hands. *When was the last time I slept?* Some time the previous day it seemed. She looked at the clock on the wall and figured she'd been awake for more than twenty-four hours at this point. She needed to rest, but she needed to make some progress on this. The first person to fire on another ship in seventy-five years? That took precedence over sleeping.

She stared at the display for a few minutes, almost falling asleep. Then, Lauressa noticed something peculiar about the display. It had all of the cargo ships on it, and each new arrival was time-stamped accordingly. The quantity of ships arriving followed a pattern, a kind of an ebb and flow. It worked out to a ship every five to ten minutes. But there was an oddity. There was a gap between two of the ships of about a half-hour. Lauressa zoomed in on the gap. It was probably just an abnormally long lull in cargo traffic. Just to be sure, she had the system display all ships, not just cargo ships. But the gap was still there. It seemed as if not even a single ship had arrived during that time – which was just not possible. There was a hole.

Something had happened to the sensor logs. But there weren't any extra ships on the Hamlet Customer Brokers itinerary. *What's going on?* Lauressa queried the computer for suspicious activity. The computer's security logs did not report anything odd. They had just installed new real-time sensor backup software a few days earlier. She checked the size of the backup for that hour – it was 10 Petabytes. But according to the current logs, there were only 7 Petabytes of data. Someone had definitely deleted information, even though the security system didn't know it.

Lauressa began a data restore operation, which the computer indicated would take four hours. *Well thank God for backups.* She went straight to her bed and set an alarm for four hours later. She passed out as soon as she hit the pillow. She started to dream about Steven Wang. *Damn it!* He wouldn't leave her alone during the day and now she had to deal with his unwanted advances at night? This wouldn't do at all. She tried to convince herself to wake up in her dream. But she was so tired that her body wouldn't let her. Instead, Wang began to caress her arm. He soon moved down to her thigh. *Oh no!* Lauressa found herself making mad, hurried love to Wang. She loved it, but she felt dirty and disgusted at the same time. He

was so revolting to her, but still she loved onward, harder and faster. It went on like this for thirty minutes or more, until the dream faded away into a deep sleep.

* * *

Doctor Poisson was enjoying a nap on the couch in his office. He had sent his report to Stellar Corp and was waiting for their reply. Dealing with a drug overdose was stressful – now add on top of that dealing with the various crew who came in with their own stress due to the whole ship-blowing-up incident, and the Doctor was a little on edge. So instead of actually going to bed, he had decided to just recline on his couch and drift in and out of sleep as his anxieties nipped at his mind. He heard someone walk in.

“Doctor?” Ashley asked.

The Doctor opened his eyes. “Oh, hi there, Ashley. How are you feeling?”

“Better, I think. How long have I been asleep?”

“The better part of twelve hours.”

“Wow, I must be a mess.”

Doctor Poisson smiled. “I’ve seen worse, don’t worry about it.”

“My stomach is upset.”

“It’s probably a bit of a hangover. Come, sit here. I’ll get you some soup to eat. It should help settle your stomach.”

Doctor Poisson left the room for a few minutes. Ashley reclined slightly on the couch with her eyes closed. She leaned her head back against the wall. The Doctor came back with the soup. He stopped at the doorway and watched her for a moment. She was pretty.

“Ashley, here you go.”

“Oh, thanks, Doctor,” Ashley said. She swallowed a spoonful of the soup. She waited a few seconds to make sure she felt okay, and then took another spoonful. “This is good. Oh wow, I’m hungry!” Ashley finished the rest of the soup hurriedly. “Oh, that hit the spot.”

“You don’t have to stay here now. You can go back to your quarters. But make sure to rest for another twelve hours.”

“I’d feel better if I stayed here for a while. So why are you sleeping here?”

“I can’t sleep. It’s been a stressful day, so I was just lying down, trying to de-stress.”

“I hope I didn't cause all this stress.”

“I'm concerned that someone has been possibly running around the ship drugging people – and I'm glad you're okay. Also a ship got blown up, which frankly has everyone stressed out, and they're all coming to me.”

“Oh, that's no good, you need to rest. Why don't you sit down?”

Doctor Poisson sat on the couch beside Ashley. She looked at him. She reached out and put her hand gently against the side of his face.

“Thank you.”

“Ashley. What...”

She ran her hand through his hair. “Handsome man.”

He didn't think of himself as handsome, although he'd heard gossip to the contrary. Doctor Poisson closed his eyes. This wasn't proper. He wasn't supposed to allow this kind of behavior. But she was quite lovely. And he had been alone for some time. The feeling of her hand against his skin felt electric. He couldn't help himself. He reached out with both arms and embraced her and drew her in close. Her body felt hot against his.

They made love – deep, slow, love. The couch could barely fit the two of them sitting side by side, but somehow they now had more than enough room to do as they pleased. They became entwined: her thighs pressed against his waist and their arms wrapped around each other's backs. She was admirably athletic for someone who had just recovered from being drugged.

Afterward, Ashley said 'thank you' again, and went into the glass-walled room to rest. The Doctor reclined on the couch. A smile grew across his face. He fell into a deep sleep, still smiling.