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Chapter 1

Mission Approved

Don't crack your knuckles! Focus on the speech! Rebecca reminded herself as she grabbed the edges of the podium for reassurance. She hated giving speeches, especially speeches to wealthy, important shareholders and business types. Yet the team had chosen her to be its spokesperson despite her protests, and she couldn't let them down. The whole project would face a major setback if they could not count on the financial support of those gathered in this room, and she was determined that she would not let years of study and research go to waste. Focusing her thoughts, she glanced around the hotel conference room and gauged the attention of the audience. Satisfied of their attentiveness, she took a deep breath and continued.

“In the past, astronomers have located baffling numbers of worlds around other stars. Yet, not even one of these worlds has come close to resembling Earth. These planets are at the extremes of the thermometer, or they are enormous or tiny, or they lack the proper oxygen-rich atmosphere. We have not observed any planets that could possibly support life.

“Until now.”

Rebecca paused for emphasis before continuing, her eyes scanning the crowd. “Since NASA launched its Terrestrial Planet Finder space telescope years ago, my colleagues and I have been scanning the heavens for a planet that would have the chemical markers of life. Our dedication has finally paid off.

“Once this planet, designated 2021 PK, was found, NASA sent a small probe to take photos and readings. As you can see by this next slide, the probe reports confirm our greatest hopes. This planet has many similarities to earth.” Using her fingers to count off the numbers, Rebecca continued. “First, it revolves around a G2V size star. Second, its orbit is only slightly elliptical, unlike most exoplanets we have studied. Third, it is .95 Astronomical Units from its sun, almost exactly the right distance for life to evolve. Fourth, its gravity is only slightly heavier than ours. Fifth, the mean semimajor axis, mean eccentricity, and the mean mass are nearly identical to Earth. And, most importantly, it contains high amounts of liquid water, which would be absolutely necessary for life to have evolved there.” She paused and brushed a loose lock of curly black hair behind her ear.

Clicking to the next slide, she continued. “You can see here a photo of the planet showing the dense atmospheric cloud cover, which may be accountable for the disruption in the radio signals and the slight degree of distortion in the photos.

“Although the reports are not conclusive, we believe that there is sufficient evidence to warrant a manned mission to 2021 PK. The primary goal of this mission would be to find proof of other life forms. The team would dig under the surface of the planet to search for fossils, plants, or any other signs of life, as well as collect numerous rock samples and perform various scientific experiments. We at NASA are proposing a partnership with Ionian Laser Technologies to help complete this mission. We believe that your recently completed laser drill, the RSK-320, shown here,” she changed the slide to a photo of the sleek machine, “would be ideal for digging through the planet’s hard surface. As most of you are aware, the RSK-320 uses Radioplasmic technology to cut through dense planetary layers, shutting off within 1/100ths of a second if it encounters any fossil-bearing materials or any kind of life form.”

She leaned forward over the podium, growing excited. “Because of the sheer number of variables that must be in delicate balance for life to arise, we believe that 2021 PK represents the best chance to find other forms of life in our galaxy. For no other planet that we have ever observed even comes close to the perfect harmony of Earth. The discovery of this planet could very well be one of the most profound discoveries in all of human history. But only if we find evidence of life. We must send a team of scientists to scour the surface of the planet if we have any chance of finding the evidence we seek.

“NASA hopes that you will realize the enormous potential for this mission, and support us wholeheartedly. For once the team returns triumphant, it will usher in a new era of scientific study, not to mention a new era of prosperity for ILT. And your generous financial support will have been the driving force that made it all possible. On behalf of all of us at NASA, thank you for your time and consideration.” Rebecca took a deep breath, stepped back from the podium and gave a heartfelt smile to the audience, which had begun to clap enthusiastically.

She turned, walked off the platform and continued on to her table in the front of the room as the MC returned to the podium to close out the evening. When she reached the table, her supervisor stood and pulled out a chair for her.

“Way to go, kid!” he said in an excited whisper. “You really made an impact.”

Although Rebecca was thirty-two years old and only seven years younger than Dr. Goldsmith, he frequently teased her by calling her “kid.” It had bothered her the first year at NASA, but over time she had come to grow fond of it, especially after realizing that this was what he called everyone younger than him. After a few years she reached the conclusion that it was probably due to the fact that his mostly bald head, old-fashioned glasses and very conservative style of suits made him look much older than his thirty-nine years. On top of that, in his eyes, compared to his own extremely advanced intellect, everyone else was just that, a “kid.”

“Thank you, *sir*,” she replied. She smiled lightheartedly at him as she smoothed out her floor length, blue silk gown and sat down.

Relaxing into her chair, Rebecca took a drink of wine to steady her nerves. *Now’s when the real fun begins*, she thought sarcastically, as she unconsciously began cracking her knuckles together at the unpleasant thought of the after-dinner “festivities.” Although she seemed outgoing and friendly in public, she was, in reality, very uncomfortable meeting new people in unfamiliar surroundings. *Here we go. No rest for the weary*, she thought as the MC finished thanking everyone for coming.

Sure enough, no sooner had the last words left his mouth, than elegantly dressed “well-wishers” immediately surrounded Rebecca. For the next half hour, she was caught up in a whirlwind of questions, compliments, and congratulations until she felt her face would crack from smiling.

Lost in the flurry, she didn't notice the slight pressure on her arm until a familiar voice spoke near her right ear. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, but I need to borrow Mrs. Evans for a moment," Dr. Goldsmith said, as he led her by the arm out of the throng of guests.

"My knight in shining armor has finally come to rescue me," she whispered to him after they had turned away from the group.

"You're welcome, fair maiden." He leaned in toward her and, with an air of mystery, said, "There's someone who would like to speak with you."

She pulled away and gave him a look of mock indignation. "Betrayed! Out of the frying pan and into the fire." However, after noticing his expression of excitement, she quickly became curious and returned her attention forward in an effort to locate their destination.

Two distinguished looking men standing near the back of the room immediately captured her gaze. The one on the left was an elderly, gray-haired man with thin, wire framed glasses and wearing a navy blue, double-breasted suit. The man on the right looked to be about in his mid-forties and was dressed in a shirt and tie underneath a dark blue flight jacket. His hair was cut in typical military style. The insignia on his jacket's left breast caused Rebecca to catch her breath in shock.

Wait a second! Is this about...Are they here to...Do they want... Her thoughts were whirling around at such a dizzying rate that when she found herself standing in front of them, it took her a moment to realize the elderly man with the glasses was addressing her.

"I said, it is a pleasure to meet you, Gunnery Sergeant Evans," he repeated in a deep, gravely voice. She looked down, and to her embarrassment, saw that he had his right hand extended toward her. She quickly reigned in her jumble of thoughts and emotions and politely shook his hand.

He continued, "You look even more lovely in person."

Standing under his scrutiny, Rebecca suddenly became self-conscious about her appearance. She had never been considered beautiful as she was growing up. However, she had a plain kind of attractiveness that was brought out further by her bright, intelligent brown eyes and her friendly smile. She thanked the gods of fortune that she had gone through the extra trouble of putting on makeup tonight, even though she absolutely despised it. "Thank you, sir," she managed.

“My name is Henry Bremen, and this is Captain Jonathan Coffner,” he said, indicating the man in the flight jacket.

Rebecca shook his hand politely and smiled, her confidence and strength returning. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen.”

“Your presentation was very thorough, and quite impressive. You did a fine job representing NASA. I don’t think the board members at ILT will have any problem approving our request. You are clearly very passionate about the search for other life in the galaxy.”

Her heart began thudding even harder in her chest. “The question of the origin of life is the greatest question of all time,” she responded.

He looked at her and gave her a warm smile. “Yes, I agree; and that is why we’re here. Mrs. Evans, as you are probably aware, I am the Mission Coordinator at NASA, and I came here tonight to personally inform you that you have been accepted as Special Mission Science Advisor for the upcoming mission to 2021 PK.”

A million thoughts simultaneously assailed her in that instant. Through it all, one spoke loudest: *It actually happened! I’m going!* When she had first submitted the request to accompany the mission, she never really believed it would be accepted. It was one thing to be a NASA scientist, but quite another to be an astronaut. It seemed like a fairy tale, a dream. And now, it was coming true. Her fantasy was becoming reality.

Dr. Goldsmith brought her back to the present. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen her truly speechless.” Rebecca turned to look at him, then looked back at Mr. Bremen, attempting to recover her voice. “Thank you! I... I don’t know what to say!” she said, giving a short, awkward laugh.

Mr. Bremen looked to Mr. Coffner. “Captain Coffner here will be commanding the shuttle *Vanguard* for this mission.”

The captain smiled and extended his hand. “Welcome to the crew. We’re all looking forward to working with you. Congratulations.”

“Here is your assignment, along with some forms and necessary documents,” Mr. Bremen said, handing her a packet in a manila envelope. “Mission training will begin at the end of the month. Congratulations once again, Gunnery Sergeant Evans. We’ll see you then.”

The two men bowed slightly and turned to leave.

“Way to go, kid!” Dr. Goldsmith said once they were out of earshot. “I have to admit, I’m quite envious. If I could’ve passed the physical, I would have jumped at the chance to go myself. When they told me you’d been accepted, I thought that tonight would be a great time to break the news. Don’t you agree?”

She nodded absentmindedly; her thoughts still a jumbled mess.

“Come on, let’s share the news with everyone else and then we’ll go celebrate. What do you say?” When she failed to reply, he chuckled to himself and shook his head. “I’ll be right back,” he said before walking hurriedly towards the front of the conference room. In the back of her mind, Rebecca could hear him gathering all their colleagues together.

With shaking hands, she grasped a chair from the nearest table and collapsed into it, one thought breaking through the confusion in her mind. *I’m actually going!*

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

Rebecca pulled the phone away from her ear as her sister’s scream spewed forth from the earpiece. She laughed as she waited for her excitement to die down. “I can’t believe it! You’re going into outer space! To another planet! I mean, this is like *Star Trek* or something! You’re going to be famous! AAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Her younger sister, Katie, had always been the emotional one; and this time proved to be no exception. “So when do you leave?” Katie asked.

“Well, first we have to go through all sorts of training. Even though my primary assignment will be to operate the drill once we reach the planet, NASA insists that all shuttle personnel be cross-trained in all the basic shuttle operating procedures, from piloting to navigation.” Rebecca sat down on the edge of the bed in her hotel room and kicked off her shoes. “Then, there’s the physical training. I’ve heard it can be pretty tough. It’s been awhile since I trained that rigorously.”

“Are you kidding? This coming from my sister, the ex-marine? You’ve always been as tough as nails for as long as I remember. Remember way back in fourth grade when you beat up Bobby O’Conner?” Katie retorted.

“Well, that’s what he gets for putting a fake spider in my lunch. You know how much I hate those things,” Rebecca said, smiling at the memory.

“Yeah, and he sure left you alone after that. Don’t worry, Becky. You’ll do just fine, especially with all the hours you spend at the gym. But you still haven’t answered my question: when do you leave?” her sister asked again.

“Well, the last part of the training is the mission simulators, and those are scheduled for the beginning of next year, so we should probably lift off about May or June,” Rebecca said. Pulling the barrette out of her hair, she let it down and brushed her fingers through the tangled knots.

“Wow, that’s a lot of training.” Katie was silent for a moment. When she finally continued the conversation, her voice was suddenly filled with concern. “Becky, is it safe? I mean, you don’t even know what’s on this planet. What if there are... I don’t know, things out there?”

Rebecca laughed and lay down on the bed. “I sure hope so! That’s why we’re going – with the hope that we’ll find evidence of other life forms.”

“You know what I mean. Aliens, or monsters, or...”

“Listen to you! You’ve been watching too many movies. The probe reports don’t show any signs of life on the planet’s surface in the area in which it landed. But it did find water. The kinds of life forms we’re looking for are in the early stages of evolution and are probably buried under the surface of the planet. You know, worms, amoeba, stuff like that. I highly doubt there are any *intelligent* creatures out there. And, if there are, we’ll be prepared. ILT has developed more than just drills, you know. Each of us on the crew will have one of Ionian’s new laser pistols. So if any of your ‘monsters’ do turn up, we’ll blast them to oblivion just like on Star Trek,” she said with mock bravado.

“Ha, ha, ha,” her sister replied dryly, clearly not amused. “Just be careful. You’re my only sister, and I need you to come back so that my kids can move in with you when they become teenagers.”

“Oh, no. I don’t think so, sis.”

Katie let the jest go unchallenged and returned to the main conversation. “So what’s so important about finding a few worms, anyway?”

Rebecca sat up in the bed. “Do you realize that if we find life on another planet, even simple life, that it will prove that evolution is true? It will finally bring unity to science. The problem now is that many scientists spend so much time arguing among themselves about whether or not life evolved, they lose precious time that could have been spent in the pursuit of increasing the quality of life or solving some of the world’s problems. If we find life on another planet, it will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that evolution is true. On top of that, it will stop all of this ‘Creation Science’ religious nonsense.”

“I guess I see your point, but just be careful. Religion isn’t all bad, you know. It helps to keep my kids in line at times.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not out to destroy religion. I just think it’s about time religion gets its nose out of science.”

Her sister let out a slow breath, her amazement still evident in her voice. “Wow, Becky. I envy you so much. I bet Jeffrey’s proud, huh? Have you told him yet?”

“No. You’re the first one I’ve called.”

“Really? Well, what can I say? I’m honored. Hey, how’re you two doing, anyway?”

“Good. Real good. We just haven’t seen much of each other lately. He’s been gone for the last two weeks. You know – his usual research stuff,” Rebecca commented flippantly.

“Well, that’s not going to improve much now, since you’ll be in Florida for training,” Katie said lightly.

Rebecca sighed. “Yeah. Tell me about it. At least I’ll be closer to you and Mom and Dad. Speaking of Dad, how is he?”

Katie’s voice took on an edge of concern. “The therapist said he’s adapting well to the prosthetic, and he’ll be able to walk with the use of a cane before long. The good news is that his blood sugar has been down near one hundred and twenty, so he seems to be doing better. The bad news is that he’s so stubborn he refuses to change his eating habits.”

“Surprise, surprise. Well, what can you do?”

“Hey, hold on a second, Becky. Paul just got home with the kids.” Rebecca heard muffled voices in the background, then the phone erupted once again with screams of excitement.

The youthful voice of her eight-year-old nephew suddenly burst from the mouthpiece.
“Aunt Becky, is it true? Are you really going to another planet to meet aliens?”

She laughed, “Well, I don’t know about aliens, Zach. But I am going to another planet.”

“Can I come too? I promise I won’t get in the way.”

Rebecca smiled into the phone. “Sorry, buddy. They don’t have a suit that’ll fit you. But I’ll try to bring back a little alien dirt or rocks for you, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks Aunt Becky. Can we at least come see you blast off?” Zach asked, excitedly.

“Of course you can, Zach. In fact, I’d be upset if you didn’t.”

“Alright! I can’t wait to tell my friends at school.” There was a slight pause. “Mom wants to talk again. Bye, Aunt Becky.” Another pause.

“Paul said ‘congratulations.’ He’s putting Carolyn to bed, and I should go give him a hand. Congratulations, sis. I couldn’t be happier for you.”

“Thanks, Katie. Well, I’ll let you go. I’ve got so many other people to call, one of them being my husband. Take care. I love you guys.”

“We love you too. Bye.”

Rebecca hung up and lay back down on the bed, letting the phone slip from her grasp. *I’m really going to miss them*, she thought as she took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. Suddenly, unbidden yet familiar tears began to slide down her cheeks. As much as she loved to talk to her sister, each time they spoke together she found herself growing more and more envious. For years, Rebecca had wanted to have children, but for whatever reason, she and Jeffery were denied the joys of parenthood. With each passing year she grew more and more sensitive to her age, her dreams slipping away with the sands of time.

Brushing her tears aside with the back of her hand, she took another deep breath to vanquish her emotions. Once again in control, she picked up the phone and dialed Jeffery’s cell phone number. She couldn’t wait to tell him the good news. Her excitement mounted with each ring, dispelling the remainder of her longing, until finally she heard him answer. “Hey, honey. What’s up?”

“Jeffery, you’ll never guess what happened to me today!”

Chapter 2

2021 PK

The viewport of the sleek shuttle was filled with the image of the space station *Independence*, the sight of which caused Rebecca to marvel at human ingenuity. “Will you look at that,” she said in awe.

Lisa Staley, the shuttle technician, looked over to where Rebecca sat several feet away on her right side. “You ain’t kidding. We truly are *homo sapien sapien*. Wise WISE man.”

The station was by far the largest orbiting space station ever built. Its design was circular and reminded Rebecca of a bicycle wheel with four main spokes stretching towards the dome-shaped central hub. Reaching out towards empty space through both ends of the hub was a long shaft shaped like a lance with a point on both ends. The station’s slow rotation on its axis simulated gravity in the outer sections, offering the eighty-person crew some measure of the comfort of Earth. Rebecca remembered reading in her briefing that due to the lack of gravity in the central spire, it was used mostly for storage and zero gravity experiments. Docked at the furthest tip of the spire floated a short, cylindrical vessel – their destination.

“*Independence*, this is *Vanguard* on final approach. We’re preparing to connect to the Cortex Propulsion Drive,” Captain Coffner said as the shuttle edged closer to the enormous station.

The Cortex Propulsion Drive consisted of five separate sections that, when linked together, formed a ship that resembled an ancient sword. However, the only section that was currently docked at the station was the “hilt”, which housed both the bridge, living quarters and power system, as well as several other vital components.

“Isn’t it incredible to think that we get to reap the benefit of millions of generations of human knowledge and creativity?” Rebecca commented as their shuttle flew up and over the other ship, aligning itself in preparation for docking.

“Yeah, it’s truly amazing what the human mind can do,” Lisa replied.

Rebecca turned away from the awe-inspiring view to look at her friend, her face reflecting unease. “Are you nervous at all about the fact that our fuel for the return trip is waiting for us at the planet? I mean, what if someone made an error and the supply ship is not where it’s supposed to be? Our lives depend on so many calculations to be precise. How many times have they used this thing on real missions, anyway?” she asked.

Lisa laughed reassuringly. “Four, but never as far as we’re going. Hey, don’t worry. The greatest minds on our planet planned this trip. NASA has left nothing to chance.”

Rebecca turned back to look out the viewport once again. The docking was almost complete.

Captain Coffner toggled the radio. “Touchdown in 5...4...3...2...1... Mark.” A thunderous boom enveloped her, accompanied immediately by a violent shake as the shuttle was clamped into place. After a moment, a voice was heard over the intercom. “Welcome to the *Independence, Vanguard*. We hope your stay, though short, will be pleasant. Our crew should have all the connections between you and the CPD double-checked and secure in just under fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks for your hospitality, *Independence*,” Captain Coffner said. “We’ll wait for your green light.”

As the minutes ticked by, the excitement of the blast off and docking at the station began to ebb, leaving Rebecca’s mind free to dwell on the events of the past month. With the memories also came the feelings of concern and worry.

Noting the change in her friend’s countenance, Lisa reached over and placed a comforting hand on her arm. “Hey, Gunny. Are you okay?”

Rebecca shrugged off her thoughts and smiled at the usage of her military nickname, grateful for Lisa’s thoughtfulness. “Fine, thanks.”

Her best friend always had a knack for being able to read her mind and her feelings, sometimes to the point of annoyance. Ever since they had met in the marines, they had been like sisters. The hours of training and short combat stint formed an iron bond between them that had been strengthened further in recent years as they worked together at NASA. In the back of her mind, Rebecca wondered if her friendship with Lisa might not have had something to do with her being assigned to this mission.

Lisa smiled back, but wasn’t fooled. “Are you still worried about your father?”

Rebecca smiled ruefully. "I've never been a very convincing liar, have I?"

"Nope," Lisa replied simply, trying to lighten the mood.

Sighing, Rebecca turned to look out the window again. "Yeah, I am. He seemed to be doing fine a month ago. He's always had a strong heart. I just...I don't understand what happened."

"I've heard that diabetes can do that to a person, no matter how strong they are."

Turning to face her friend, Rebecca continued to express her concern. "I just hope he's okay by the time we get back. It's going to eat me up not knowing how he's doing for six months. And being confined to a wheel-chair for the rest of his life is going to be hard for him to cope with," she paused, looking uncertain. "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"I know what you mean," Lisa replied, letting out a sigh of her own. "I miss my girls already. It's bad enough that I won't get to see them for almost seven months, but I'm going to miss Jenny's ninth birthday on top of that, *and* I'm talking their favorite 'aunt' Becky with me!"

Rebecca smiled slightly, despite her concern for her father. "At least you won't have to spend three hours trying to get pudding stains out of your couch and make-up off of the neighbor's dog while you're gone."

Lisa groaned. "Don't remind me!"

They laughed at the shared memory, then lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, each lost in her own thoughts. After several seconds, Rebecca became serious once more. "Lisa, why *did* you come? I mean, I'm glad you're here, but...but what if something happens to you? What if neither of us comes back? Who will take care of Jenny and Amanda with...with Brad gone?"

A momentary flicker of emotion passed over Lisa's face at the mention of her late husband's name. "I've told you before, Becky, it's just something I have to do. Since Brad died I've had to really come to grips with who I am. This opportunity came at the perfect time. It was a way for me to move on with my life."

"Yeah, but...what if...I mean, if they were...my daughters, I..." she said, leaving the thought unfinished, her chest constricting painfully.

Lisa, recognizing her friend's emotional struggle, remained silent for a moment before continuing. "Becky, I appreciate your concern. Besides," she commented casually, trying once again to lighten the mood, "it's not like anything is going to happen to us, right? And as for your father, you coming on this mission is probably the best thing you could do for him." Seeing

Rebecca's confused look, she explained. "It gives him something to look forward to, something to fight for, kind of like this mission was for me. Not to mention it's a little late to change your mind now anyway, unless you want us to leave you here on the *Independence*," she said wryly. "You could always hitch-hike! I think the *Alliance* shuttle is schedule to dock in about four months!"

A lopsided grin spread across Rebecca's features. Sighing deeply in an attempt to ward off the remainder of her worries, she turned back toward the front viewport. "You're right. He's a tough old bird. I'm sure he'll be fine," she said with more confidence than she felt. "Thanks for your concern, Lisa. Anyway, with all the excitement of the trip, I'm sure the time will just fly by." *At least I hope it will*, she added silently.

The comm suddenly came alive with the voice of the commander of the *Independence*. "*Vanguard*, you're locked and loaded. Have a safe trip."

"Thank you, *Independence*," Captain Coffner said. "We'll see you in a few months, God willing." He switched off the comm as the pilot, Ricky, reached forward and grabbed the piloting joystick. "Take us to the dish, Ricky."

The thirty-something, dark-skinned Hispanic studied his instrument panel, then responded with a slight accent, "Sure thing, *Capitán*. T-minus five minutes."

Rebecca felt her pulse quicken and her stomach knot up. "Stage I complete," Captain Coffner announced. "All stations, report status." Rebecca listened as each member of the eight-person crew responded with an 'all clear'.

The shuttle and the newly attached CPD module slowly moved away from the *Independence* and headed off towards the moon. Since she was a child, Rebecca had always dreamed of traveling into space and seeing the magnificent, natural satellite up close. All those years of waiting had been worth it, she now decided. The majesty of it, the sheer immensity, left her feeling small and insignificant. *And to think, without this giant ball floating high in space, there would be no tides to mix the oxygen in the ocean. There would be no life.*

As she pondered its beauty, her excitement grew once more. According to the probe, 2021 PK had a moon as well. Would they really succeed in their mission? Would they really find other life forms? NASA certainly believed it was worth the risk. *And the expense.*

"There she is," Ricky said, pointing to something that was just becoming visible as they came around the dark side of the moon and into the shining radiance of the sun.

The viewport immediately darkened to compensate for the brilliance. After a moment's adjustment, Rebecca could begin to make out five shapes in the distance.

Although dwarfed by the moon, the objects were still immense, particularly the one closest to the sun. Stretching nearly seven thousand miles across but only a fraction of that in thickness, the hexagonal sunlight collector glowed with a bright orange-yellow light, impatient to release its pent-up energy.

Beyond that, three more objects floated motionless in space in close proximity to each other. The cylindrical laser was positioned to receive the focused sunlight, ready to convert it into the high-powered laser beam that, once reflected off of the giant mirror stationed next to it, was channeled through the particle accelerator, which then increased the speed of their laser light to almost fifty times normal, propelling their ship into deep space in record time.

The last of the five objects was their laser sail. The circular, diamond-film disc was a full six hundred miles in diameter. Its clear, crystalline surface refracted the light from the sun, causing rainbows to dance about in all directions. The effect was stunning, causing all within the shuttle to simply stare in wonder.

Several minutes of silence passed uninterrupted, until at last Captain Coffner spoke. "We're coming up on the Harness. Take us in nice and easy, Ricky."

The Harness was a small, eighty-foot wide circle that was attached to the laser sail by several nearly invisible cables. Ricky piloted the Cortex Propulsion Drive through the center of the Harness with ease, slowing as they neared the connection point.

"Easy-does-it," the Captain said softly as the ship crawled forward, now moving at a snail's pace. Finally, a loud click echoed through the ship, followed immediately by a slight shudder as the connectors locked into place.

The Mission Specialist, Adam, looked up from his console and gave them a 'thumbs up'. "All lights are green. Nice job, Ricky."

"*Independence*, this is *Vanguard*. Stage II is complete," Captain Coffner said into the comm. "You may inform NASA that we're ready for Stage III."

"Acknowledged, *Vanguard*," came the reply.

"It's too bad we can't take the laser with us," Lisa said as they waited for NASA's signal. "Traveling by laser light is so much more efficient than the anti-hydrogen engines used by the CPD."

Rebecca's pulse quickened in anticipation of the coming trip so that she had to swallow hard to even get her voice to work properly. "And quicker, too. If this planet turns out to be all we hope for, maybe NASA will use the laser to send components to build another laser at the other end so we can travel both directions instead of having to use fueled rockets. Who knows? Maybe 2021 PK will become a second Earth. The new *New World*."

The voice from the *Independence* returned, breaking into their conversation. "Hold on, *Vanguard*. We're about to turn up the juice. Have a safe trip."

The viewport darkened until it became completely opaque, or so it seemed. Then, the entire world around them turned bright yellow as the laser light was captured by the massive sail. Rebecca was thrown back against her chair as the shuttle and her escort shot forward towards its destination, and its destiny.

* * * * *

The next six weeks passed uneventfully. The laser continually pumped light into the sail, sending their craft hurtling through space faster and faster until they reached their maximum speed of nearly fifty times the speed of light. As the hours turned into days, the crew fell into a routine. They passed their time either conducting scientific experiments, sleeping, or performing various shuttle duties. After nearly a month and a half of travel, the sail reversed, beginning to slow the ship down. Finally, eighty-seven days after launch, they reached their destination.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, there she is, 2021 PK," Captain Coffner said.

Growing ever larger in front of them loomed a reddish-colored planet with dense cloud cover. The images received by the probe were nothing compared to actually viewing the real thing. Rebecca felt butterflies in her stomach as the excitement of the mission was renewed.

"Now, where are the fuel storage units for the CPD?" the Captain asked, his eyes narrowed as he scanned the empty space around them.

"There they are! One o'clock!" Ricky called out as he pointed.

There was an audible sigh of relief as the entire crew relaxed. "NASA, we have arrived and the package is right where you said it would be," Captain Coffner spoke into his comm. "We're preparing for CPD separation and will be entering the atmosphere momentarily.

Standby.” Without waiting for a reply, which he knew could take several minutes to reach them, he switched off the transmitter and nodded to Ricky to continue.

“Velocity approaching zero,” Ricky reported as he grabbed the control stick. “CPD separation on my mark. 3...2...1...mark.” As before, a loud metallic bang sounded and the shuttle shook.

“CPD separation complete. Prepare for planetary entry,” Captain Coffner said. “Ricky, do you have a solid lock on our probe?”

“It’s a bit fuzzy, as expected, but still strong enough to follow.”

“Good. Take us down.”

The pilot expertly guided the shuttle through the thick atmosphere. Rebecca had never experienced anything so terrifying in her life. The shuttle shook so violently that she felt it would surely shake apart. Then, abruptly, it was over; and they caught their first view of the surface of 2021 PK.

“Doesn’t look like much, does it?” Scott Boland, the shuttle’s Payload Commander said, clearly disappointed.

Rebecca couldn’t help but agree. The surface appeared barren and dry and utterly devoid of any signs of life.

“There doesn’t seem to be any vegetation, just those gray, rolling hills and large boulders,” Lisa commented. She turned and looked over at Rebecca. “Do you think the whole planet is like this, or is this just some sort of desert-like area?” Rebecca just shrugged and continued to stare out the viewport.

“There it is!” Ricky said triumphantly. “Do you see it? Right there, in front of those mountains. And there’s the lake we saw in the reports.”

As promised, the probe sat near the edge of a small lake which looked to be about four miles in diameter. Behind it stood a tall range of mountains.

“Put her down over there,” Captain Coffner said, indicating a flat area near the probe, about a half of a mile from the edge of the lake. Ricky nodded in acknowledgement and set the shuttle down gently onto the alien soil, the vertical thrusters kicking up clouds of chalky gray dust

“Well, everyone, welcome to 2021 PK,” Ricky said, impersonating the voice of an airline pilot. “And thank you for flying on the *Vanguard*. Enjoy your stay.”

Captain Coffner looked at him wryly. “Thank you, flight attendant.” Clicking his radio, he said, “NASA, we’ve touched-down. Preparing to disembark.” As he began unstrapping himself, he addressed the others, who were already in the process of extricating themselves from their chairs. “Okay, everyone. Remember, although 2021 PK’s atmosphere is breathable, there’s still a lot of carbon dioxide in the air, so wear your protective breathing gear. Let’s get the perimeter secure with our Motion Detection Units, then we’ll unload the laser drill. Joel and I will head to the north by the lake, Jen and Scott will go west, Adam and Dave head to the east, and Lisa and Rebecca go south near the mountains. Ricky will stay with the shuttle and finish post-flight. So far, our readings show nothing moving out there, but keep your blasters ready. Report in once you have your MDU’s up and functional. Let’s go, people.”

Rebecca checked her jumpsuit to make sure that it was properly sealed. NASA’s new astronaut suits were not nearly as bulky as the older ones and looked much more like slightly oversized coveralls. Despite their appearance, they were much more reliable. However, Rebecca was not accustomed to taking chances. After double checking all of her connections and latches, she slipped on her helmet and locked it into place. Once satisfied that all was set properly, she moved over to where Lisa and the others were waiting near the shuttle’s hatch.

“Are you ready for your first step onto alien soil?” Lisa asked, her voice full of excitement.

“Ready if you are. I still can’t believe I’m here.”

“Well, believe it. Here we go,” she said as Captain Coffner opened the hatch. Immediately, wind blew a fine white dust through the opening as the pressure from the shuttle equalized with the atmosphere of the planet. Weapons in hand, the crew walked cautiously down the shuttle’s ramp in pairs. After a few minutes of making sure that the immediate area was secure, they split up and headed off towards in their designated directions. As Lisa and Rebecca walked toward the distant mountains, Rebecca stared in awe at the landscape. *There has to be life here. I can feel it. There’s something special about this place.*

After a few minutes, their headsets crackled to life. Captain Coffner’s voice was clear, but the atmospheric distortion was already affecting the equipment. “Be careful out here. Keep your sensors active. This wind and dust are reducing visibility, and the distortion may have an unknown effect on our equipment.”

“Copy, Captain,” Lisa said.

Rebecca turned to look back toward the shuttle. “No kidding. It’s difficult to see the ship already. How far out are we going?”

“One mile. Don’t worry, although there’s some distortion, the equipment is working perfectly,” Lisa reassured her.

They kept walking for several more minutes, passing numerous mounds of dirty white earth, each reaching no more than fifteen feet tall and about fifty feet in diameter. Finally, Lisa called a halt. Taking the MDU off of her shoulder, she set it gently to the ground. “According to the gauge, this is far enough. If we go any further, we’ll run into those large boulders on the skirts of the mountain. Does your motion detector show anything in the vicinity?”

Rebecca studied the screen of the instrument panel for a moment. “It’s picking up the others’ movement faintly, but nothing else. This atmospheric interference is really wreaking havoc on the readings.”

“Well, let’s get this thing unpacked. Once all four are online, they should give us a stronger reading than that thing.” Lisa removed the motion detection unit from the bag and began the process of setting it up. Rebecca walked around and looked intently at her hand held unit for any sign of movement.

“These hills give me the creeps,” she said. The tinny sound of her own voice inside the helmet sent an added chill up her spine. “You never know what might be hiding behind one. And these blue jumpsuits will stand out more than a pink tutu in a St. Patrick’s Day parade!”

Lisa’s laughter caused her to start as it crackled over the intercom. “Weren’t you the one who was laughing because your sister was worried that you’d be attacked by ‘monsters’ or ‘aliens’? Relax. If there was anything in the area, we would’ve picked it up by now.” She flipped up the antennae with practiced ease and threw the power switch. The small dish began rotating, accompanied by a flashing light at the tip of the antennae. “All right, that does it. I’m going to check in with the others.”

She pressed a button on her wrist commlink. “*Vanguard*, this is Team 4 checking in. Our unit is up and running. We’re waiting for your signal to initiate link-up. Over.”

Static spewed from the comm for a few moments, then Ricky’s voice came through, broken but understandable. “Roger, Fo – – aiting for oth – teams.” There was a short pause. “Uh, standby, Four.” After a few seconds, Ricky’s voice once again fought its way

through the static. “Four, Te – .. One is encount – – ome difficulty. Stay... - osition.... until further notice. Over.”

“Great,” Lisa said. “Well, we might as well get comfortable. We may be here awhile.” She clicked off her commlink and sat down next to the MDU, which was whirring quietly as it scanned the area. Rebecca followed suit. Taking her backpack off her shoulder, she set it down and sat next to it, facing Lisa. She reached down with her gloved hand and picked up a handful of the gray, powdery dirt. “It definitely feels different than Earth soil. The drill should be able to punch through this in no time.” She looked up at Lisa. “Do you really think we will find evidence of life here, Lisa?”

“I sure hope so. I didn’t spend almost three months in that cramped, tin can for nothing.” Just then, Lisa’s commlink chirped softly. “Lisa here,” she responded reflexively.

“Lisa,having... problem with one,” Captain Coffner’s voice said. Even through the distortion, she could read his frustration. “I need.... help over here. Rebecca – ould... able to handle...link-up on that end.”

Lisa gave Rebecca a look as if to say, *Great, just what we needed*. “Yes, sir, Captain. I’ll be over to give you poor boys a hand in just a few minutes. Over.” She stood and shouldered her empty pack.

“Us ‘poor boys’ ...try not...break...–thing until you.....here,” the Captain replied sarcastically. “Over and out.”

“Sorry to leave you, but...”

“Yeah, I know. Duty calls,” Rebecca said. “Don’t worry. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“That’s more like it. A few minutes ago you didn’t sound so sure,” Lisa said lightheartedly.

“Well, your confidence is infectious,” Rebecca countered. “Besides, this will give me a minute alone to start my audio journal. I promised my sister that I would record all my thoughts and feelings so that I wouldn’t forget anything.”

“Just keep an eye on your motion detector. We still have no idea what’s out there.” Lisa turned and started walking North.

Rebecca laughed and called to her as she walked away, “Now you’re the one sounding unsure.” Lisa waved back at her and continued walking toward the ship.

As Lisa's figure retreated into the distance, Rebecca felt her initial fears began to creep back into her thoughts, this time accompanied by an unexplainable uneasiness. *Come on, Becky. It's just your imagination.* She took a deep breath and shook away her troublesome thoughts. *Maybe my journal will help keep my mind from wandering.* Kneeling next to her pack, she rummaged through it until she found her Verbal Notebook. She removed the hand-held device and set it to the same frequency as her helmet radio. "Testing, testing," she said, watching the small readout screen. As expected, her words appeared in tiny letters. Satisfied that it was functioning properly, she began.

Journal Entry #1

I can't believe it! I'm actually standing on an alien planet! It's difficult to put into words the emotions that I'm feeling right now. This moment is one of the greatest of my life.

Before I go any further, let me first say that the purpose of this journal is three-fold: 1) For myself – so that I may always have a record of my feelings and thoughts during this most amazing of times in my life. 2) For my sister and other family members – so that I'll be able to tell them everything that happened in detail. And 3) For others – who knows? Maybe I'll write a book someday!

Well, I don't even know where to begin. As I'm entering these notes, I'm sitting alone next to the motion detection unit about one mile from the ship. Although I understand the importance of all of the security precautions, I must admit that I'm quite anxious to begin digging. So far, the probe reports have proved to be 100% accurate. And now that I'm actually here, I believe more than ever that we will indeed find life. The planet.....

Sudden movement in her peripheral vision caught Rebecca's eye. She immediately stopped speaking, stood, and turned toward the mound on her left. Pulling her blaster from its holster on her right hip, she thumbed off the safety. Her hand shook from the sudden adrenaline

coursing through her veins. Seeing no further movement, Rebecca quickly scanned the area, then looked down at her hand held motion detector in her other hand.

Nothing. No movement anywhere. Did I imagine it? Without putting down either the motion detector or the blaster, Rebecca used her right index finger to touch the commlink on her left wrist. “*Vanguard*, this is Rebecca, do you copy? Over.” Static. “Team 1, 2 or 3, this is Rebecca. Do you copy? Over.” More static. “*Vanguard*, this is...”

Before she could finish her sentence, she saw it again; this time coming from the mound on her right. She whirled around so fast she nearly tripped. Her heart was beating fast and heavy in her ears. “*Vanguard*, do you copy? If this is some sort of practical joke, I think it’s in really poor taste.” She looked down at the motion detector. It still showed all of the other members of the crew, with the exception of Ricky who was aboard the ship.

Rebecca felt her knees weaken. *Something’s not right. Why aren’t they responding?* Gathering her strength, she began walking back toward the direction of the ship. Fear held her in an iron fist, attempting to suffocate her. She gripped the hilt of her blaster so tightly that her joints began to hurt.

Suddenly, there it was again: a dim, but unmistakable moving light. Her will finally giving in to her fear, Rebecca bolted towards where she believed the ship to be. Panic blinded her like a shroud, causing her to stumble and fall, her blaster falling from her grip. Gasping for air, she regained her balance, retrieved her weapon and began to run once more.

Risking a glance behind her, she noticed the light moving steadily in her direction, as if floating on air. She turned to face forward, panic building in her so much she felt her heart would explode. Coming around one of the small hills, her heart leaped into her throat as the ship suddenly came into view. But before she could take one more step, a light brighter than any she had ever seen flashed before her eyes, instantly blinding her. She felt her body falling and pain exploding in her head before darkness quickly enveloped her.