

Bug Out

By

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Phase One

"I've got a launch plume."

Frieda Orr sat in an arc of eight manned stations in the circular monitoring room. The two people on either side of Orr briefly glanced at her, then looked back at their own screens. They were scrutinizing the typically turbulent weather on the planet beneath them.

Julio Escalera, the watch supervisor, remained seated in his position in the middle of the room, behind all eight stations, and continued reading his message pad. "Record it," he said to Orr.

Orr turned to look at Escalera and shook her head; no one else was looking in her direction. "You don't understand, sir," she said. "This launch looks a little different."

Escalera sighed, gently placed his pad on the small table next to him, and walked over to where Orr sat. He was pulling on his mustache, a sure sign of his impatience. Orr turned back around during his approach and kept her eyes on her monitor. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the two observers next to her exchange a worried glance. She wished they would stop looking up.

Escalera leaned over Orr, a little too closely. "What do you mean, a little different?"

"It's not an ordinary launch plume," Orr said. She continued staring intently at the monitor screen, trying not to look up at him.

He sighed. "This isn't the first time you've thought the Alulans had managed a jump in their launch capability, Orr. Are you sure you want to go on record?" He pointed firmly towards the monitoring camera in the center of the ceiling.

Orr felt her cheeks flush, but refused to let Escalera get the better of her. "I'm telling you, sir, this one is different. The plume brightness, the trajectory angle—"

"Do you have feelings, or figures?"

She colored deeper. "Bringing up telemetry, sir."

Escalera sighed loudly, pulled a rolling chair over, and sat down. Muttering about wanting to get back to his reading, he wheeled his way between Orr and the observer on her left, who gave Orr an angry glare.

Orr looked at the clocks: the 24-hour one for the observation base, and the local clock tied to Ustehhat, the most populous city on Alula. Coincidentally, it was very early morning in both places ... and that was strange. The launch site was near the same longitude as the standard-time city, and all previous launches had come near midday.

Just as Orr was about to point this out, Escalera whistled. "Ay, caramba. It's still boosting." His voice held traces of confusion and wonder. Orr read the telemetry, and confirmed that this rocket had been boosting for much longer than any of the previous ones.

“Let me check something,” she said. She pushed a few buttons, and the image of Alula changed to a close-up of the rocket. It appeared much larger than any other rocket the Alulans had launched.

She felt vindicated.

“Orr, call up a computer projection.” Escalera had no doubts in his voice now.

“Already doing it, sir.” The image of the planet once again appeared on the screen, showing a long white launch plume. Accompanying it was a blue line, tracing the projected path of the rocket.

She tapped at the screen. “This isn’t just another up-and-down launch. Look at that—orbital insertion trajectory. Their rocket program just became a space program.” And, Orr thought proudly, it was her discovery.

Escalera studied the projection. “They’re not supposed to be ready to launch satellites into orbit yet. According to Sentient Sciences, this should be years away.”

By now, the white rocket plume had overtaken the blue projection line, and the computer worked to continue the projection. It clearly displayed an orbit.

“What do we do now?” Orr asked.

Escalera stared at her for a few seconds in silence. “What do you think we do, Frieda? We wake the Director.”

* * * *

Shanti Kachru fought off a yawn. Everyone on her senior staff was yawning in a cycle of contagious protest at the early hour. Even Amin Az-Zahir, the imperturbable security chief, succumbed. But not her. She had more discipline than that.

Even at this hour.

Escalera finally entered the briefing room, pads in hand. He passed them out and, on a nod from Director Kachru, began his report. “Ladies and gentlemen, just under an hour ago, the Alulans launched their first artificial satellite.”

People shuffled in their seats, straightening out their postures as they reacted to the news. To their credit, no one interrupted as Escalera continued. He recited some figures that they could all find on their pads, including the twenty-kilogram payload he estimated the rocket had boosted into orbit.

“There’s no telling yet whether there’s any instrumentation on board. We detected no radio emissions from it before it swung behind the planet. Once it emerges from shadow in about six minutes, we should get more information.”

“Could they use it to detect our presence?” Az-Zahir asked. Inwardly, Kachru smiled, pleased at Az-Zahir’s usual efficiency.

“That’s not my area of expertise,” Escalera said. He turned toward one of the other seated staff members, Winston Chalmers, the head of the Sentient Sciences Department.

Chalmers stroked his plump chin. “I can’t imagine how it could detect us,” he said with his smooth British accent. “It couldn’t spot anything on farside, never mind within our lavatube.”

“What about the sensor cluster over the horizon, or our own orbital satellites?” Az-Zahir asked.

Chalmers shook his head. "No. Furthermore, they don't know that there's anything to look for. We are quite safe."

Kachru studied Chalmers sternly over her pad, which she strategically used to cover the yawn finally escaping her mouth.

Escalera resumed. "One unusual datum here is the launch site. It is in the territory of the Tested, as always, but not inside their rocket complex. This one was farther north, and appears to have come from an underground silo. This was meant to be secret."

That did it. Kachru let her pad fall upon the table, drawing everyone's attention as it hit. "Chalmers, why didn't you know about this in advance?"

Chalmers leaned back and held his hands out. "You heard the supervisor. This was a secret."

Kachru didn't blink at his jest. "From your previous reports, the Alulans frequently build underground, out of their weather."

"True," Chalmers said. "Rather frustrating when you want to see what they build, but informative in its way."

"Yet," she continued, ignoring his tangent, "you could not anticipate that they would launch from an underground facility."

He sighed. "Director, we cannot know everything that happens on Alula. We haven't the observation assets, and those we have are divided rather thinly between our four departments, as my colleagues will attest. Now, if you're offering to increase my share of—"

"I'm not." Out of the corner of her eye, Kachru saw two of the other department heads smiling, probably thinking that they were out of her visual range. "Chalmers, what I meant is, with all the insight you claim into the Alulans—particularly the Tested—why didn't you realize they were capable of an orbital shot?"

Chalmers bristled. "Madam, if you crave mathematical perfection, Scholar Shen of System Sciences is your man." Shen stiffened, but Chalmers carried on. "My information is necessarily imperfect, meaning my conclusions are necessarily approximate. We haven't been here nearly long enough to understand Alulan society completely, not looking through the keyhole as we must. If you want certainty, give me a wider keyhole, or give me time."

Kachru hardened her face at his last word. "Oh no," Chalmers said. "Tell me you aren't about to make the decision I think you are."

"The decision is already made," Kachru said, encompassing the room with her statement. "Earth's policy toward Alula is secrecy. They are the first intelligent alien race we have discovered, and the United Exploration Council will not risk disaster with premature contact. From a hidden base on their inner moon, that risk was acceptable. Now, they have the theoretical capacity to reach their moons. That makes the risk unacceptable."

She stood, no feat in one-tenth gravity, but still sure to bring all attention to her. "We have one option: to begin evacuation of Alula Observation Base One."

The shock held for a long moment. "That's it?" Henry Stark of Planet Sciences said, his voice like clanging metal. "One satellite, and we're bugging out?"

Kachru smirked at his expression. "Yes. We are 'bugging out,' as you put it."

Now the objections came, tumbling over one another.

“We aren't finished charting the tectonic plates,” said Stark.

“Our species register is barely an outline,” pleaded Andrea Eugenikos of Biosphere Sciences.

“The closest approach of the second binary is only seven years away,” said Shen Po-Lin.

“We have to examine its weather effects,” added Stark.

“Besides,” said Eugenikos, “the next supply and exchange ship isn't due for over four months. We don't have to start anything—”

Kachru held up a hand, and motioned everyone into silence. “You forget,” she said calmly, “our emergency ship.”

Everyone was put off-stride for a second. “That's only for disaster use,” Stark said.

“And this situation qualifies.”

“The ship isn't large enough,” Shen noted. “It won't carry the entire staff, plus a disassembled base.”

“It doesn't need to. Using the emergency ship now means faster notification of Earth, more thorough preparation on their end. It and our regular supply vessel will shuttle between Alula to Earth, until we are gone and no trace of us remains. It is the first step in an orderly evacuation.”

Az-Zahir was muttering commands into an interface mike, and reading what his monitor made of them. “Four shiploads will suffice in evacuating the base. Assuming the usual transit and turnaround times, we should be gone within fifteen months.”

“Very good.” Kachru's gaze returned to Chalmers. “The Tested won't be landing outside our surface lock in fifteen months, will they?”

Chalmers swallowed, and when he spoke, his words sounded carefully crafted. “If I recall my history, twelve years elapsed between Sputnik 1 and Apollo 11. Their progress was driven by national rivalry, about as strong as what pertains on Alula now.”

“I will take that as a no.” She knew he would give nothing firmer, in his touchy mood.

“If I might ask,” said Escalera, almost forgotten in the cascade of events, “who is leaving first?”

Kachru considered the question for a moment. “I will begin a triage list once this meeting is over. I can say this much: anyone scheduled to finish their assignments and leave on the next regular ship will go first.”

Shen opened his mouth, but Kachru caught him before he could speak. He subsided without a word.

“As for the rest,” she continued, “have your Section heads submit brief lists of who they can and cannot spare. File your own as well. I wish this facility to operate as efficiently as possible for as long as possible—but be forewarned, my decisions are final.”

That left little else to say. “Time to break the news,” Kachru said. “Dismissed.”

The staff got up slowly, their energy drained by the loss they faced. Stark moved confidentially close to Eugenikos. “A terrible waste,” he said.

“Perhaps, but there's no talking our Director out of it.”

“Did you notice who didn't even try?”

“Yes. Of all people, I wouldn't have thought Chalmers would—”

Kachru shuffled her feet behind them, startling them and breaking off their exchange. She said nothing, her near-black eyes staying squarely on Winston Chalmers until he disappeared into the corridor.

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A beep from the door interrupted Shen Po-Lin as he was stuffing a duffel bag from the mess of clothes scattered around the floor. “Who is it?” he called out.

“It's Winston Chalmers. I want to talk to you.”

Shen sighed, dropped the bag, and walked over to the door. He pushed the button which caused the door to slide open.

“Winston, I don't have time.”

Chalmers smiled gently. “Yes, I heard.” He took one step in and put a hand on Shen's shoulder. “Come on, Po-Lin, I'll help you pack.”

“Not ‘Scholar Shen’? How informal,” Shen said, but smiled. He moved aside to let his friend into the main part of his quarters. He glanced at the clock on the wall. “If three hours ago, you had woken me and asked me what I'd be doing now, I never would have guessed packing.”

“If three hours ago, you had woken me, I would have snarled at you and told you that I needed more sleep.” Chalmers paused. “In fact, that's what I did.”

Shen smiled briefly, but his friend's comment was still not enough to lift his mood. He gestured around his quarters. “I find it hard to believe that in two days, this room won't even exist anymore.”

Chalmers nodded. “The tech crew has already started dismantling some of the living quarters.” He looked around. “So what can I assist with?”

“I'm not sure yet. But I'm willing to have the company, I guess.” Po-Lin went back to stuffing clothes into the duffel bag. “You can help me decide what to keep and what to leave behind.”

Chalmers snorted. “We can't leave anything behind.”

“You know what I mean. What to abandon. I guess it'll be packed away or destroyed after I'm gone.”

Chalmers sat down on one of the two tiny chairs which flanked a small table. He ran a hand through blond hair going to gray and sighed. “Po-Lin?”

Another handful of clothes went into the bag. “Yes?”

“If it's any consolation, I'm sorry.”

Hearing this, Po-Lin stopped what he was doing and looked up. He held a blue shirt in his hand. “Do you know how long I've been here?”

Chalmers shook his head.

Shen smiled bitterly. "Thirteen years, longer than anyone else. Except for Kachru: we came in together." He stuffed the shirt into the bag. "And now, just when things are going to get good, we're evacuating. 'Bugging out.'" The words soured on his tongue.

Chalmers gave him a puzzled look. "I thought you were getting sick of this place."

"I thought so too."

"Why the change in heart?"

Shen considered the best way to express his feelings, and then decided to show Chalmers. "Here, look," he said, turning towards his wall screen. "Network, please display the Xi Ursae Majoris system model coded Shen Oh-One."

"Can't you just call it Alula, like the rest of us?"

Shen smiled. Xi Ursae Majoris was the technical designation, but its Arabic name, Alula—"the first of spring"—enjoyed almost unanimous use on the base. "Alula has a much nicer ring to it, I'll grant you that," Shen said. "But it lacks precision."

"Spoken like a true astronomer."

Within seconds, the screen displayed an image of the two close binaries in the system as four white circles. One pair, designated B and B-prime, had their inhabited second planet highlighted in red. Shen stabbed his finger at the other binary. "See that?"

"Yes."

"That binary will make its closest approach to this one in seven years. Can you imagine the opportunity for astronomical discovery?"

"I certainly can." And geological, meteorological, cultural. Every department looked forward to this approach—or had.

Shen shook his head. "A double binary system, ripe for the studying. All for nothing, now, because of that stupid Sputnik."

Chalmers stood up and walked over to the screen. His hand reached out, and his fingers brushed the circle which represented the planet, the only planet that had another indigenous intelligent race on it, as far as humanity had discovered.

He let his hand fall. "You know, Po-Lin, maybe you don't have to go just yet."

Shen stared at his friend and counted to ten in his mind. Then he sighed. "No, Winston. No."

Chalmers sat back down, and crossed his legs at the ankles. "Why not?" he asked with a slightly truculent tone.

Shen looked towards the door. "I don't want to have this conversation again. Could you please just drop it? If you're here to help me pack, then help me pack."

"But if you don't need to pack—"

"I said, can't you just drop it?"

Chalmers laughed. "You know me better than that."

Shen shook his head. "Sometimes I can't believe that they put you in charge of Sentient Sciences."

"Stop diverting me from my point."

"Which is?" As if Shen didn't know.

"That this would be the perfect time to reveal ourselves."

"You've always said that. First when you pieced together the theology of the Tested, then when the rocket launches began, then—"

"They were all perfect!" Chalmers exclaimed. His voice came close to snarling. "What's wrong with us making contact with the Alulans? Letting them know that they're not alone in the Universe? Wouldn't it be better to treat them as partners in the search for knowledge, rather than subjects under our microscope?"

"You know that's dangerous."

"You only think it's dangerous because for the past twenty years the UEC has said that it's dangerous." Chalmers lowered his voice. "Look, if we just let the Alulans know we're here, now, then there's no reason for the bugout. And you can study the stars to your heart's content."

Shen studied Chalmers for a moment; his excitement had brought redness to his pale cheeks. "Winston, I'd like to, I really would, but—" He turned to the screen. "Network, display the contact protocols list. Continuous scroll."

Immediately the screen filled with text, the official UEC statement on why contact with the Alulans was absolutely forbidden. Shen began to read a few of the statements aloud as they scrolled by.

"The Alulans are a pre-spaceflight society—"

"Not anymore."

He glared at Chalmers, then looked back at the screen. "They're 'politically divided.' The Tested might welcome us, as part of another test, but what about the other sects?"

Chalmers shrugged. "Earth countries don't agree on everything; why should we wait for the Alulans to be more advanced than we are?"

Shen looked at Chalmers. "What if they're hostile?"

"Oh, leave that alone. We have no firm evidence that they would react to us with hostility."

"We have no firm evidence that they won't, either. We don't really understand their beliefs on the existence of aliens. If we present ourselves, they may act just as irrational as—" Shen cut himself off.

"Irrational as what?"

"Never mind."

"Go ahead, Po-Lin, say it. Irrational as me, you mean."

"That isn't what I meant," Shen said quietly.

"You think my ancient alien visitation theory means I'm cracked."

“No, I don't.” Shen felt distinctly embarrassed.

“I'm a scientist, Po-Lin, like everyone here. I draw my conclusions based on evidence. Experts accepted my conclusions in conventional Egyptology gladly, but when I presented evidence that challenged entrenched preconceptions, they resisted like—like you. Take the age of—”

“Winston, please!” Shen could feel a headache coming on; he rubbed his temples visibly, so Chalmers would understand. “Please, not now. I'm under enough stress as it is.”

Chalmers sighed. “Fine. We can agree to disagree, as always.”

The two friends remained silent for a moment. Then Shen said, “I've really got to get back to my packing.”

Chalmers stood up and reached inside a pocket. “I've never seen you with one of Doctor Randal's sketches.” He held out a sheet of crisp paper, folded once. “Perhaps you'd like one now.”

Shen took it gingerly, unfolding it. The subject was an Alulan, rendered in pencil, with as much anatomical detail as their satellite cameras had managed to reveal. It was quite skilled, if obviously posed to capture both the keen expression on the Alulan's broad, flat head, and the intricate patterns on its back, distorted by the bending of its flexible shell. Shen couldn't tell its sex. That wasn't his specialty.

“It's good,” Shen said, “but I couldn't deprive you—”

“Nonsense. Lindsey makes stacks of them. I'm surprised you never got one.” He smiled as Shen gave it another look. “Consider it a reminder—that your colleagues aren't the only people you'll be leaving behind.”

Shen's face lost its smile. He re-folded the paper. Chalmers tensed, plainly fearing he would give it back, but Shen placed it in his bag instead, with some care.

“I've got to go get my own department ready,” Chalmers said, shaking his head. “There's a lot of data we won't be able to gather, a lot we're not going to learn, because of the evacuation.”

“Perhaps. But it's not our decision.”

Chalmers walked to the door, opened it, and hesitated. He turned back to Shen, who was already back to stuffing clothes in his bag. “Just keep one thing in mind, Po-Lin.”

“What?”

“If you do change your mind, and decide that I'm right, you've got very little time to do anything about it.”

Chalmers left. Shen stood still for a moment, staring at the door, and then returned to his packing.

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Chalmers walked briskly, like a man with very little time. He squeezed past technicians with grapplers, laser cutters, and bundled vacuum suits, all of whom were walking in the direction of Shen's quarters. That moved him even faster. His department could wait.

He pushed the signal button on the Director's office door. Nothing happened. He pushed again, then knocked, stinging his knuckles on the metal. He was ready to try again when the door slid open.

Kachru was seated at her desk, looking very efficient with her immaculate apparel and white-streaked hair tied back. Her desk, in contrast, was overflowing with computer pads. She looked up, eyes heavy.

"I am extremely busy, Doctor Chalmers."

Chalmers heard the formality, but ignored the warning within. "We do need to talk." He inched inside, letting the door hiss shut behind him. Kachru reluctantly set down her stylus.

"Director, I believe you are making a mistake. You are using ill-considered regulations to shield you from making a decision whose importance you fear, and I think fear unnecessarily."

Kachru raised her eyebrows. "How interesting. I did not know you held a degree in psychology." She looked back down. "The evacuation order stands."

"It stands on a false premise," he said, striding forward, his words prepared and practiced, "one that holds us silent, bids us to skulk in shadows. I say it is time to step into the light. It is time to step onto that world."

"Time to indulge your personal fantasies?" she parried. "Do you want to re-enact scenes from old video fables, confident in a happy ending?"

"You should know better."

"So should you. You should understand the enormous potential for errors in what you propose. One miscalculation—like yours in judging their spaceflight capacity—could be devastating."

Chalmers could say nothing, his pride smarting too badly. Kachru exploited his silence.

"I should not need to remind you of the security agreement you signed when you were accepted for your research tour. You pledged to make no action to reveal human presence in this system."

That loosened his tongue. "Madam, I resent your insinuation."

Her look stayed steady, betraying no regret, no concession.

He took a step back, needing the space to settle his thoughts. "Very well, consider this. What if we made no active contact, yet maintained our base here? We would continue our studies, with an emphasis on understanding Alulan culture. They will reach this moon in their own time, and eventually discover us. They will have initiated contact, and we will be all the better prepared for the meeting."

There was an instant when Chalmers thought she was considering it. It passed quickly.

"No. Earth's policy is explicit—"

"So send to Earth; at least *ask* them to reconsider."

"—besides which, any ensuing relations would be blatantly biased toward the Tested. Theirs is not the only culture on Alula."

"No, that's true enough." That fact had made studying their civilization immensely more complicated—and absorbing. It also explained why humans gave the planet the same name as the star system: the authorities were loath to 'privilege' one culture by calling it Tehu, or Gikra, or Epteja, or a hundred other candidates from less widespread languages.

"Still," Chalmers said gamely, "someone must be first, since we decline to preempt their radio programming and announce ourselves globally. Why not give the honors to those who worked for it?"

Kachru scowled. "There won't be a first," she said, straining to control her voice. "They are not ready for

us."

"The way we act, one could easily argue the reverse. And frankly, your attitude toward the Alulans is just a bit patronizing."

Kachru gave Chalmers a knife-sharp look. "*I am patronizing?*"

"Yes," he said. "You underestimate their resilience. Heaven knows they need enough of that, to live on their world. You protect them needlessly, keep them in ignorance." Sensing anger, he changed his tack. "You said years ago that discovering the Alulans was the greatest enlightenment in human history. Let us bring that same enlightenment to them."

Kachru rose slowly from her chair, meeting Chalmers's eyes. "You seem very sure that the Alulans will want our enlightenment. Maybe you really believe they *need* our enlightenment. Feeling a tug of 'White Man's Burden,' Chalmers? A bit cocksure that the natives need your involvement, your guidance, perhaps your control?"

Her voice had turned venomous without rising a decibel. "Granting honors to whoever meets your criteria? That, Chalmers, is what I call patronizing. I am quite familiar with that attitude—and its most famous proponents."

Chalmers was taken aback. One offhanded remark, and—? "Director Kachru," he implored, "that isn't what I meant at all. And really, our respective national histories ought not poison our—"

She waved him away, letting the gentle gravity pull her back to her chair. "Go," she said softly. "I have things to do. And you do as well."

She went back to her evacuation schedules. Chalmers managed to walk away without tripping over himself, appalled at the magnitude of his failure.

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Amin Az-Zahir watched from the moon's desolate, rock-strewn surface as the emergency ship took off. The pressure suit made him feel slightly confined, but his presence on the surface was necessary. As security chief, it had ultimately been his responsibility to make sure that the Alulans did not notice the launch. That responsibility had been made much harder with the existence of Sputnik 1, the unofficial name everyone on the base had given the Alulans' first satellite.

However, harder did not mean impossible. Az-Zahir grinned. They had timed the launch just right from the moon's far side so that Sputnik 1 would be beginning its crossing of the planet's far side. Even if Chalmers was wrong about the satellite's capabilities, it could not possibly detect the ship.

Az-Zahir watched the ship rise until it almost hovered motionless. Then rockets ignited, accelerating it away from the moon and the planet. Soon it was a bright pinpoint, heading toward a dim yellow star. Then, with a flash, it was gone.

It would take four months to travel the twenty-six light-years to Earth, using the ABC space-bubble drive, and then four months to come back. In the meantime, the regular supply ship—which, Az-Zahir noted ironically, brought replacement personnel as well as supplies—would be arriving here just as the emergency ship got to Earth. Messages could move no faster than the ships carrying them, part of the reason why this departure was so rushed, to inform Earth of their situation all the faster.

Az-Zahir opened the small metal door at his feet, fell in, and shut the door with what would have been a clang had there been air around. He walked down a long incline to the floor of the lavatube, cut by

magma flows when the moon was young. He cycled through an airlock, removed his pressure suit and hung it with the others, then strode back to his quarters. Mid-afternoon prayer was fast approaching; he had missed his first two prayers today, and many more in days past. He hoped Allah was forgiving.

Within a few minutes he had arrived back at the corridor containing his quarters, which he had seen so little since being awakened for that meeting nine days before. He lived near the junction of the work and residence wings, giving him swifter access to anyplace he needed to be in an emergency.

But something was wrong. As he approached his door, he saw light and shadows dancing on the wall across from it, and he heard voices coming from his room.

Someone was in his quarters. Whoever the culprits were, they had sloppily left the door open.

Being in charge of security here wasn't the same as being in charge of security in a less isolated base. Everyone on the Alulan moon had gone through countless clearance checks, and Az-Zahir's job had more to do with keeping the base secure from Alulan discovery than anything else. Still, old habits died hard, and Az-Zahir had made sure that he and his staff would be allowed to carry weapons and act in the manner of all Earth security forces before taking the assignment. He removed his plasma gun from his holster and slowly crept toward his quarters, keeping his back against the wall next to the open door.

As soon as he had reached the door, he spun around, both hands holding his weapon perfectly steady. "Freeze!" he shouted.

The two people in the room shot up their hands.

"Turn around, slowly."

As they did, Az-Zahir recognized them: Marcus Cogsgrove and Elian Nadel, two of the men in support services, technically subordinate to him.

"Hello, sir," Cogsgrove said, smiling and showing his chipped tooth. "Can we put our hands down now?"

Amin nodded and restored his gun to its holster. He looked around his room. All the furniture was gone, and a pile of cardboard boxes stood along one wall. "Gentlemen, what is going on here?"

"Sorry, sir," Nadel said, looking contrite. "Director's orders. This wing's already partially dismantled, and she's consolidating the inhabitants into other rooms to complete the job. This room will be gone by tomorrow."

"We've been packing your things," Cogsgrove said, "and we'll be moving your boxes. Your furniture's already over in your new quarters."

"I see," Az-Zahir said slowly. He understood the necessity of what they were doing; still, it had come as a surprise. And he hated surprises.

Cogsgrove and Nadel looked anxiously at each other, and then Cogsgrove said, "Would you like us to leave you to finish up, sir? Your new living assignment is on the pad on top of the boxes."

Az-Zahir nodded, and the two men slipped past him and out of the room. He walked over to the boxes, and noted with relief and gratitude that they had left his most treasured possession sitting on top of the boxes as well: the printed and bound copy of the Qu'ran, which his father had given him the first time he had left Damascus for space. His prayer mat was rolled up next to it. He would have to remember to thank the two men next time he saw them; as he recalled, although both were Christian neither were very religious, which made their consideration regarding his religious items that much more significant.

Especially since the hour of prayer was at hand.

But first, Az-Zahir pulled his radio off his belt and contacted the Director's office. After identifying himself to her assistant, Kachru's clipped voice came over loud and clear. "Yes, Az-Zahir, what can I do for you?"

How best to phrase this? "Director, the ship has departed—and I returned inside to discover that my quarters were being emptied of my personal belongings. Without my consent, I may add. This is the sort of thing I'm starting to expect from Chalmers, not from you."

"Chalmers?"

"Yes, especially after his 'White Man's Burden' behavior, earlier this week."

Az-Zahir heard mumbling from the other end, and then Kachru came back on. "I wish I knew exactly how that comment got out. In the meantime, Amin, please do accept my apologies. You've been so busy that I haven't had a chance to tell you personally when we'd need to evacuate your current quarters."

"Apology accepted," Az-Zahir said aloud, even if she had overridden the security protocol for his quarters. That was the only way anyone could have gotten in. "However, next time I would appreciate it if you would allow me to do my own packing. I have many personal items which I consider just that. Personal."

"As do we all, Amin. Believe me, next time I won't get in your way. Assuming we have the time. Kachru out."

Az-Zahir turned off the radio, and took a moment to relax himself, clear his mind of all extraneous thoughts. In the midst of all the chaos of the past hours and days, he had craved order and peace. Once he felt ready, he unrolled his mat upon the floor, knelt, and began to pray.

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Alone in her office, Kachru sighed as she got off the radio with Az-Zahir. So many details, so much "hurry up and wait" going on. And she wasn't looking forward to her next meeting.

Finally, there was a beep from her door. He had responded to her summons, five minutes late. She pushed a button on her desk, and the door slid open.

Chalmers appeared with a pad in his hand. "You wanted to see me, Director?" He stood in the doorway, waiting.

She resented his impertinence. He wasn't going to enter the room until she invited him in. She briefly considered sliding the door shut, but thought better of it. Knowing Chalmers, he'd jump out of her office instead of in.

"Please enter, Doctor," she said. "We need to discuss some concerns I have."

Chalmers settled himself into a chair. "So what are your concerns, Director? Afraid I'm going to disobey Earth protocols? I got your message loud and clear before."

She shook her head. "Yes, Doctor, but that isn't it. I was harsh with you, and I do not apologize for it." She paused. "The fact is, however, that you know more about the Alulans than anyone else here." Kachru spoke through clenched teeth; she did not want to say what came next, especially given the way Chalmers had spread stories about their last meeting. The last thing she needed was for the base to see her position weakened and his strengthened. Still—"I need your help. *We* need your help."

“My help?”

“We need to make sure that this base is left in such a manner that the Alulans never suspect that we were ever here. Now, I can easily imagine what would make one of us suspicious, but I have a harder time knowing what might be a clue for an Alulan.”

This was it; she knew Chalmers had her now. He could help, but it was be on his terms, not hers. And she would have to watch his work carefully, to make sure he followed through.

For a moment, Chalmers looked stunned. Then he smiled broadly.

“I’m sorry, Director. But I have to follow the evacuation protocols to the letter.”

Kachru bit off a laugh. “You’ve never followed anything to the letter, Doctor. What are you talking about?”

He leaned forward and shoved the pad over to Kachru. “Read this. In the event of an evacuation, department heads have the duty to collect as much more information as possible within the time window. This work holds priority over all others, including assisting the evacuation procedure.”

Kachru read the pad, and when she looked up, Chalmers was still smiling. “I’ve been refreshing my memory on what my department must do in case of evacuation, Director.” He pointed at the pad. “This is our top priority, not what you want.”

Grudgingly, Kachru said, “I agree.”

“You do?” Chalmers asked, his voice climbing in pitch. He sounded surprised.

“Yes. You have your time; make the most of it.”

Chalmers grunted. “Very well, then, Director.”

Just as he began to get up, Kachru spoke. “But, Doctor, please note.” She waved the pad. “This doesn’t apply when it comes down to the final wire. In the last few weeks, everyone—and I mean *everyone*—must work on the jobs I assign that ensure the successful completion of the evacuation. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal, madam.” Chalmers hefted himself out of the chair and left her office, without waiting for her to dismiss him.

Not that she cared. She was exhausted, and looking ahead to many more exhausting days and nights. Kachru left her office and went back to her undisturbed quarters for a nap, all the while grateful that rank still had its privileges, along with all the headaches.

Phase Two

The Analysis Complex was the heart of the base. Every bit of data passed along by the monitoring room went to one or more of the four department centers there. Scientists sifted the information, formed their hypotheses, and consulted with other departments, through the computer network or in the Hub, located dead center in the complex to indulge the psychological comfort of physical consultation.

So vital was the Analysis Complex that, two months after the emergency ship had departed, not one bolt of it had yet been disassembled. It would be the last place broken down and packed away, if the staff had its way.

Sentient Sciences boasted the busiest piece of the Analysis Complex, rarely less than half-full during any shift, even after the first wave of evacuation. Rank, however, carried its privileges, in this case a quiet nook that served as Winston Chalmers's inner office. Even having a colleague there didn't make it uncomfortable.

"We were right," Chalmers said, raising the magnification on a live satellite feed. "They've uncovered another Mew of the Eye."

The screen showed an excavation site in late afternoon, mostly covered in tarpaulins as protection against the elements. Despite that, the stone slabs of what had been underground walls were visible. Bipedal forms milled around them, their postures appearing stooped to a human eye from the carapaces on their backs. Chalmers looked up at the near wall, papered with sketches by Randal, comparing them to their models.

"The joins look primitive," Louise Georges said, stroking her chin. She had been at Alula for only two years, but had already advanced to deputy department head after the evacuation of Edgerton. "I'd say fifteen to sixteen hundred years old, right at the inception of Testism."

"I wish they had kept the sunhole intact," Winston said.

"You should have asked them to," Louise replied, her natural lilt veiling some slyness. Winston only smiled.

The sunholes were for observation of transits, the dwarf star of the B binary crossing the face of its larger, brighter sibling. It appeared as a small dark pupil turning in an eye socket, crossing every four days by human reckoning. For many Alulans of millennia past, it had been taken as the eye of God gazing upon them.

Clouds drifted along, obscuring the view. Winston sent a request for a new satellite angle, and grew increasingly agitated as his request waited in the queue.

"What was that?" Louise asked, hearing him mutter something scalding.

"Az-Zahir," he repeated partially. "It's his fault for de-orbiting half our low-orbit satellites."

"He had valid cause. The Alulans will have reason to track objects in orbit now." She saw Winston's hurt look. "I didn't say I agreed with the premise, but it is a rational conclusion."

Winston shrugged. "I oughtn't have brought it up. Now I feel guilty for doing this bit of telearchaeology, rather than broadcast analysis to predict the next launch."

"Lindsey Randal and Edi Agbeve are quite capable. Don't you trust who you assigned?"

"Certainly. I just trust myself more." He grimaced. "Not that my trust is warranted, seeing how I missed the first launch—and the second."

"And gave up to fifteen hours warning for the next three," Louise added.

"Oh yes," Winston said. "I'll never forget how Kachru actually told me 'Good work' for the last one. I could live on those kind words alone for a month. Add a stale peanut, and I could stretch it out to three."

Louise covered her laughter with a long-fingered hand. "I had worried that your humor had deserted you. I've never known that to happen for long, even during the worst of your ... controversies."

Winston managed a wavering smile. "You have always been very understanding of my eccentricities." He let it stand there, turning his attention slowly back to work.

They spent a long stretch gleaning what data they could through the thickening clouds, before local sunset fell. They scarcely spoke, scarcely needing to. The next time Winston strung three words together, it was to pick up the conversation as though nothing had intervened.

"It's important to know how their spaceflight capabilities are advancing, when they'll reach the next plateau. When they'll reach this moon."

"We'll be gone by then," Louise said.

"I'm not so certain." He let out a long breath. "I should hope it never happens."

"What?"

"It would preserve our presence," he said, his voice dulled. "If their aspirations flame out, if they fall back, our need to leave falls away as well. Even Kachru would have to admit that."

Louise gave a slow nod. "It could happen. Enough storms or temblors at key launch facilities—"

"They built them away from fault zones. I checked that with Stark."

"—they could be diverted by an attack from the Chev League, or cowed by their threats. The Mayor Sovereigns' speeches have grown belligerent of late." She felt as much as saw his wince. "Or perhaps they would simply lose interest."

"They would never do that!"

She lifted her eyebrows calmly. "I didn't really think you wanted them to fail, Winston."

He dropped his head. "I don't. There's been so much against their development—hostile weather, tremendous tides, frequent quakes—that should have kept them in the Stone Age. A large close moon is responsible for much of that. I almost feel guilty just living here."

"Yet they've surmounted it all."

"Yes—and the Tested most of all." A soft sneer crossed his face. "Science and religion have had a nasty running feud for centuries on Earth. A one-sided affair lately, and all the more spiteful for it. Here, though, they found a better way."

"God challenges His creations with the hostility of their world, and judges them by how they persevere and build despite it. Science is no threat; it is almost a sacrament. Fifteen hundred years old—rather youthful as far as religions go—and it has carried them so far." A quiet bliss lit him softly.

"Carried the Tested," Louise reminded him.

Winston turned a wary smile on her. "You still think the other blocs on Alula were technologically ahead until recently, rather than scrambling to keep up with the Tested? Perhaps so. You see," he said merrily, "I'm not dogmatic with my theories *all* the time."

"A good thing," Louise said, matching his brightness. "We'd have proof by now, if Alulan broadcasts weren't so euphemistic, so elliptical, so—so—"

"So that's why we should ask them ourselves," Winston said. "In all your years in Egyptology, Louise,

did you never feel frustration? You gathered dusty data, devised your theories, unearthed new data that might or might not support you. Never could you match your hypotheses against the living culture. It maddened me, more times than I can count."

"Many things madden you," she said gently. "Those frustrations are why our skills were so crucial. We needed to devise the best approximations possible, so the next approximations would be closer still to the target, to the truth. It's like mathematics without calculus. You can still solve difficult questions, but it takes far more patience and pains-taking."

"Precisely. Pains we don't need here. Why waste our lives calculating every piece of a diminishing series, when we can start taking the differential with the single word 'Hello?'"

Louise said nothing. Winston soon joined her in silence. They finished some last observations before the excavation site sunk into night. "Our shift is over," she said some indefinite time afterward.

"Go ahead. I'll stay a while. Something about those walls..." She was almost out of the alcove before he turned. "I will see you tonight, won't I?"

Louise smiled. "Of course."

* * * *

Louise was there in his quarters that night. So were several dozen other coworkers.

They were meeting over the Network, all of them people who had expressed desires not to abandon the base so precipitately. Over half were from Sentient Sciences, and the group tended toward youth and lower seniority. A large number of them had only Ph.D's, like Chalmers, or even less.

Their meetings were unacknowledged; Chalmers hoped secret. This was their third, and already some despair was setting in.

"She would not listen to me," said Dionijs Euwe, the System Sciences head since Shen's evacuation. His glutinous accent made for hard listening now. "She suspected no connection to you, Doctor Chalmers. Her obstinacy is on principle, not personality."

Chalmers nodded. "I'm sure you did your best, Scholar Euwe. We'll simply have to send more people to reason with her. Although after that imperialism comment she made to me, I sometimes wonder if she's open to reason. Still, we must keep trying."

"And failing?" Edi Agbeve said. "We cannot shift her singly. We must act in concert. The petition is our best hope."

"We agreed to wait on that," Chalmers reminded him, "present it when the supply ship arrives, for maximum effect. It doesn't help us now."

"Then maybe it's time to look at fallback positions," Agbeve said. "Let's think about what signs we can leave behind for the Alulans."

"I'd rather not," Chalmers grumbled.

"It's premature," said Karin Nilsmark of Biosphere Sciences.

Soon dozens of voices were clashing with each other. Chalmers held his ears, a futile gesture, then pressed a button to cut off the audio for ten seconds. That always cooled off the group.

He restored sound, but someone beat him to the first word. "Winston," Georges said, "perhaps it is time to think about it."

Chalmers frowned, but not for long. "All right," he said, before the gabble could rise again. "Let's look at this from an unusual angle. Suppose you were looking for evidence on Earth's moon that alien sentients had once established a base there.

There were moans of protest. Many were part of this group despite Chalmers's more notorious notions. "Wait," Nilmark said, "I think I see where this is leading. Go ahead."

"Thank you. Now, say you were one of the early explorers on the Moon: an Apollo astronaut, a staffer at the Mare Crisium base, something before the colonization period. What evidence could you uncover of that alien presence with the tools and knowledge of your age? The aliens try to leave the place pristine, but they're only human ... er, you know. What not quite obvious detail might have slipped their minds?"

Finally, there was pensive silence. "They would sweep up their physical tracks," Lindsey Randal said, "but the sweepers they used would leave their own patterns. We could look for those."

"Surely they would avoid any obvious pattern," Euwe said. "Metachotic analysis would work to uncover second and third-order effacements, but that's not a twenty-first century discipline. We could leave long-term traces to be discovered if Kachru—I mean the aliens—are uninterested in such detail."

"She won't be." Chalmers said. "To her, no trace means exactly that."

"What about element ratios?" Agbeve suggested. "This moon is volatile-poor like ours, and living beings leave behind a lot of volatiles. One unusual chemical analysis of the regolith might give us away." He snapped his fingers. "Hydrogen exhaust from ship's thrusters! How would we erase that?"

"She's thought of that, too," Chalmers said. "I have it on good authority, Kachru ordered the ship to use the antigravity plates as far as it could before igniting thrusters."

"We can still leave hydrogen ourselves, or nitrogen or carbon—"

"Would higher radioactivity readings tip them off? Or is the surface so irradiated—"

The clamor began rising again, and Chalmers's thoughts wandered. He really needed to break them into subgroups—or would those groups go spinning off into chaos too?

"A single nugget of gold might be inexplicable any other way—"

His eyes turned of themselves to his shelf, almost on top of him in the tight quarters. There sat a small gilded cat, carefully restored by experts, looking down on him with perfect indifference. It was part of the Hawass Prize he had won in Egyptology twelve years ago. Artifacts like that existed licitly only in museums, and to the annual Hawass winners. It was a gesture of great respect—and yes, he had been respected once.

The artisan had perfectly captured the natural aloofness, the high disdain. No wonder cats were sacred to the Egyptians, in their godlike detachment. Of course, Chalmers had his own theory about ancient Egypt and feline appearances. That was why he was here, with only this personal item brought from Earth to keep him company.

He had fought lonely, doomed battles before. What souvenir would he carry away from this one?

"Winston?"

Her voice brought him back. "Sorry, Louise, I went wandering. What did we conclude?"

She sounded weary. "That there are things the Alulans will notice, and things the Director will miss, and that the two probably don't overlap."

"No," Chalmers murmured, then more forcefully, "No. I won't accept that. There's something we can leave behind that she'll overlook. Kachru is observant, but she is not perfect. Nobody is."

And perhaps, he did not say, that goes for our own visitors as well.

* * * *

Chalmers sat with two other department heads, Andrea Eugenikos of Biosphere Sciences and Henry Stark of Planet Sciences, on the stage of the assembly room. The large hall was filled with the new arrivals from the regular supply ship, which had just arrived. Kachru had wanted to make the announcement to everyone in person, and she had requested her senior staff be present on stage along with her.

But, Chalmers noted wryly, the three of them weren't really the whole senior staff. Az-Zahir was working the crowd, of course, along with his security staff, and Euwe was missing, probably to avoid drawing attention to Shen's absence. Chalmers didn't really want to be present either. In the months since his cabal had first started meeting, Chalmers had been trying to juggle both his regular duties and the ones he had assumed upon himself. He really didn't have the time to be present at this meeting, which as far as he was concerned was a waste.

However, the Director had insisted. He glared at her back as she stood at the lectern, ready to address the crowd. Then he looked away.

As soon as everyone was seated and quiet, she began.

"I would like to begin by welcoming you all to Alula Observation Base One. I would also like to begin by inviting you to settle in and get started on your duties." She paused. "However, as much as I'd like to do those things, I'm afraid that I can't."

Murmuring came from the crowd, and Chalmers saw a few people nodding their heads. Kachru waved her hands, and everyone fell silent. "Some of you have probably heard rumors by now, although I had asked the staff to keep everything quiet, so I could break the bad news to you myself." She took a deep breath. "Almost five months ago, the Alulans launched an artificial satellite. We're evacuating the base."

Pandemonium. Once again, Kachru waved everyone to silence. "I know this will come as a shock to all of you, but I'm afraid that almost all of you will be getting back on that ship and returning to Earth."

Chalmers leaned forward when he heard her say, "almost." What did that mean? As far as he knew—as far as he had been told—all the new people would be returning to Earth, along with a smattering of the current staff.

Kachru finished off by laying out a schedule for the next evacuation wave and asking everyone to report to their departments for assignments. As the crowd stood and a conversational hubbub filled the auditorium, Kachru turned to leave via the backstage door. Chalmers tried to intercept her, but she slipped out just as Stark and Eugenikos came over to ask him questions. He would talk to her later; after all, he had work to do.

Sure enough, when he got to his office, a long line of new arrivals stood at the main door. He greeted them perfunctorily and walked past them, where Louise Georges was handing out assignments to

everyone.

“Hello, Louise.”

“Hello, Winston,” she said, glancing up from a pad with a grim look on her face.

“I’m going into my personal office. Let me know if there’s anything I need to deal with.”

“Actually, Winston—” She handed him the pad. “Here. You’re not going to like this.”

He barked a laugh as he took the pad. “Not going to like what? There’s already plenty I don’t like.”

He started to examine the pad, but Louise interrupted him. “Why don’t you read it inside?” she asked, pointing towards his door.

He shrugged, took it inside with him, and behind his closed door began reading. By the time he sat down at his desk he was furious.

The pad displayed the list of personnel assigned to return to Earth on the ship, and now Chalmers knew what Kachru had meant by using the word “almost” when speaking to the new arrivals about who was going home. Some of the new arrivals were actually staying at the base, their berths to be filled by current staff members.

Including a suspiciously long list of names Chalmers recognized.

Chalmers lunged out of his seat and ran out of his office. With a quick “She can’t do this” uttered to Louise, he pushed past the line of new arrivals and ran down the corridors until he found himself at the Director’s office. He pushed the beeper, and when the door didn’t slide open, he started banging furiously upon it.

The door opened, and he almost fell into the office. Kachru sat at her desk, looking more exhausted than she had in the past five months, but Chalmers didn’t care. He marched over to her, shouting and waving a finger of shame at her.

“How dare you! Gutting my department! Just when I need my people the most!” Including his cabal of supporters, although he couldn’t admit that aloud.

He stopped at her desk, looming over her. She fixed him with a steely glance. “What, not waiting to be invited in before ranting?”

Chalmers ignored her comment and shoved the pad in front of her face. “Look at this list! Over half of the new evacuees are from Sentient Sciences!”

Kachru held up her own copy of the list. “A little less than half, actually. Forty-eight point two percent.”

“So I’m off by one point eight percent.” He tapped his pad. “But I can play at mathematical games, too. Over seventy percent of these names were drawn from the petition!”

“I wouldn’t know,” Kachru said dryly. “I’ve been far too busy dealing with the evacuation to study it closely.”

“You’re clearing out my people in order to make room for new arrivals. This is still unconscionable.”

“No, Doctor. It is perfectly reasonable.”

Chalmers sat down. "Prove it."

Kachru sighed. "Az-Zahir has relayed your protests of the destruction of our low-orbit satellites. Their de-orbiting is part of the evacuation protocols, which you are so fond of reciting. Tell me, Doctor, which department is most reliant on those satellites?"

Chalmers remained silent, and Kachru continued. "Sentient Sciences, of course. We're not going to be receiving as much data on the Alulans anymore, and it is pointless to keep more staffers than required to analyze what we will have. As for the new arrivals who are staying, they all have skills or expertise that would be useful in closing down the station." Kachru paused. "In short, my decisions are completely logical."

Chalmers shook his head. "Plausible deniability, that's all it is, Director."

Kachru narrowed her eyes. "If you like. Frankly, Doctor, I don't care what you call it. It's all by the regulations. Earth would back me up to the hilt. And they will, if you bother to file a complaint."

Not that it would matter, thought Chalmers; it would take almost nine months for any complaint to be processed, and it would have to go out on the same ship that was taking away much of his staff. The reply would come on the ship that removed the last of the base.

"You should have told me earlier—" he began.

"Just you?"

He waved her comment away. "Us, I mean. All the senior staff. You've obviously had this planned for some time; why didn't you post the list until today?" He suspected her real reason: by announcing this list so late, just so it would be too late for complaints, but he doubted she would say that.

"Doctor Chalmers. Please remember one thing. I do not take orders from *you*. You take them from *me*. Is that understood?"

"I was just—"

"Is that understood?"

Defeated, Chalmers sighed. "Yes, Director. Understood."

"Then get busy."

* * * *

Chalmers thought he might be too busy to nurse recriminations. He wasn't.

He had the duty of integrating the new Sentient Sciences members—the interlopers, the changelings displacing people he knew and trusted—into the department. He went through the motions, not bothering to conceal his resentment, and didn't much care whether Louise picked up the slack.

His bitterness rankled for two weeks, as friends said their good-byes, as strangers took their places, and as techs tore down more of the base every day. One night, he imagined he awoke to see the ceiling being pulled away, the air blowing out of his room with hurricane ferocity, hurling him into blackness.

He awoke for real, afraid to take a breath that might not be there. His computer screen was flashing, announcing a staff meeting that morning. That news banished any thought of returning to sleep.

He arrived at the meeting with an aching head and a poisonous mood. Department heads and deputies

were there, including those who would be departing on the ship that afternoon. Euwe and Eugenikos were in one corner, looking forlorn and forgotten, while Paul Branchaud of Planet Sciences was getting a quiet talk from Olivia Passarella, the new deputy chief.

Chalmers dropped into an open chair next to Louise, barely mouthing a “Good morning.” He lifted his eyes long enough to spot Az-Zahir, and dropped them again.

Kachru entered moments later, and went straight to business. Her main topic was the need to set rational research priorities, as observation resources continued to tighten. Chalmers had heard or anticipated it all before, though he did roll his eyes when she referred to the increased pace of satellite “retirement.”

“Doctor Chalmers.” Kachru caught his eye, with difficulty. “This would be a good time for you to report on the current status of the Alulan space program.”

Chalmers leaned back, crossing his legs. “How coincidental that you just mentioned these ‘retirements.’ Thanks to Mister Az-Zahir’s diligence, the Alulans now have more satellites, by number and total mass, in low Alulan orbit than we do.” He peeked to see Az-Zahir’s reaction, and enjoyed it.

“A striking comparison,” Kachru said dryly. “How close are they to demonstrating manned capabilities? We’ll understand a certain lack of precision.”

The casual condescension was like a slap in his face. Chalmers had a solid figure—one he hadn’t intended to give her before. This made his refusal far more satisfying.

“Why do you care?” he snapped. A shocked hush fell. Chalmers paid it no attention. “If they did slow down their program, it wouldn’t slacken the pace of your evacuation one iota. Don’t pretend it really matters.”

“It does, Doctor.” Kachru’s voice was strangely measured, perhaps restrained by the new personnel. “It affects the radius of their possible detection capacity, the speed with which our other satellites are—”

“Retired? Lovely euphemism, that, for such a massive overreaction.” Chalmers was standing now, ignoring the hard tug on his sleeve. “Their chances of spotting our satellites are infinitesimal, but that doesn’t stop you. Destroying them is just one more way of wielding power, the kind of autocratic power that lets you enforce a policy your subordinates do not support!”

Kachru met his eyes, fire clashing with fire. “I will tell you again, it is Earth’s policy. My opinion of that policy—and yours—is irrelevant. It’s what we agreed to when we came to this base.”

“That policy is destroying what little work we can still do here!”

“No. It isn’t. You are.”

“Me?” He swept around to the other staffers. “Do you believe *this*?”

Still tightly controlled, Kachru took a stack of pads out of a drawer. “A list of complaints from new Sentient Sciences members, citing hostility and lack of cooperation. Complaints from all three other departments, about diminished sharing of data, frictions initiated by people from your department, arguments, even a fistfight.”

She slammed the pads onto her desk, hard enough to bounce in the light gravity. “You’ve polarized the staff, undermined inter-departmental communication, and now you withhold data about the Alulan space program. You have made this base a battlefield, Chalmers.”

“If peace is defined as a lack of opposition, then it's a righteous war.” He gasped for breath, his head spinning. “I'm surprised you haven't banished me to Elba already, to make things easier for you. But I suppose I'll be on the next ship out now.”

Slowly, Kachru reached for one leftover pad. “As a matter of fact...”

Chalmers stabbed a finger at her. “Ha! I knew it. It's all politics!”

“Wrong!” Seething red was burning through her dark face. “It's your stubbornness, your pettiness, your arrogance. You're one of the best researchers we've ever had here, but your attitude now is undoing all that's gone before. If we're to salvage something from our last months here, we cannot afford to have you here ruining it.”

“If that's true,” Chalmers shot back, “why am I not leaving today?”

Kachru trembled, fighting herself. “Don't make suggestions, Doctor, if you don't want me to agree to them.”

Chalmers snorted. “Fine. I shan't. Brief me later, Scholar Georges.”

Before Louise could utter a word of protest, Chalmers was through the door, out of the reach of further temptation.

Phase Three

Everyone on the base was kept very busy during the month after the regular supply ship had left, with a mix of evacuation jobs and standard duties. As a result, the cabal that Chalmers had organized was never able to have a full meeting, relying instead on smaller meetings to recruit new staff who had just arrived. Chalmers was chagrined by this, but he himself was not exempt from being too occupied, as he needed to keep his eyes on the Alulan space program. Late in the month, the Alulans attempted another launch, and most of the staff was relieved to see it fail and explode on the launchpad. Chalmers and Edi Agbeve were the only ones rendered distraught over this failure, for reasons which both agreed needed to be kept secret.

Finally, Chalmers managed to organize another full meeting of the cabal over the Network. Their ranks were diminished, but Chalmers had insisted. Especially given the news he had received from Kachru when the ship had arrived so many weeks ago.

“Is there nothing we can do?” Louise Georges asked, as she had asked Chalmers privately these past weeks.

Agbeve said, “First they get rid of Lindsey Randal, now they want to get rid of you. It isn't fair.”

Chalmers leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands together. “The next ship isn't due for a few months yet. We still have time to come up with a plan before Kachru forces me out. Which is the main reason I thought it was high time for another full meeting. Any ideas, folks?”

There was an awkward silence as people glanced at each other's images. Then Agbeve spoke.

“I know I was one of the first to suggest leaving a clue,” he said. “But we simply don't have the time to consider it anymore.”

Chalmers felt stunned. “You can't be serious.”

Dionijs Euwe spoke up. “I don't know, Winston. Maybe Edi is right. Maybe we should just forget the

whole thing."

Chalmers shook his head. "We can't."

"But with so many of us gone," Euwe said, "how could we come up with a workable plan?"

Chalmers leaned forward and glanced from image to image. "Look, we know that astronauts visited ancient Egypt—"

"We do?" Karin Nilsmark asked.

"Yes, *I* do," Chalmers said testily.

"I don't know that," said Moshe Kruv. One of the new staff members in Sentient Sciences who arrived on the last ship, Kruv had been recruited into the cabal shortly after his arrival. "What are you talking about?" he asked, picking at his dark beard.

A collective sigh went up from a few of the cabal members, but Chalmers ignored them. "That's right, Moshe, I haven't had a chance to explain it to you. It's all very simple, really. There is strong evidence that a bipedal felinoid alien race landed in the Nile Valley around thirteen thousand years ago."

Moshe's brow crinkled. "If aliens had landed in Egypt, I'd have heard about it."

"The theory's not widespread," Chalmers replied tartly, "but the evidence is. The Sphinx, for instance, as there's considerable evidence of it having been built in 10,500 BC."

"I prefer BCE," Moshe said. "Before the Common Era. Besides, you don't need aliens to build the Sphinx."

"Ah, but they did. Earth was coming out of the last Ice Age. The Nile was a relative trickle, incapable of supporting the huge numbers of people needed to build such a large statue as the Sphinx. They must have had outside, skilled help. Whose help? Well, consider the lion's body on the Sphinx: an inversion, most likely, transposed to honor some human potentate. And facing it toward the constellation they named after the lion, probably for their home star being there. And let us not forget the Egyptian pantheon: deities with human bodies and animal heads."

Kruv blinked his glazed eyes a few times, saying nothing.

"Winston," Louise said, "is this leading anywhere?"

Chalmers stared at her for a moment, then nodded. He'd try to convince Kruv later. "The point is that we know of these aliens through indirect evidence, not open declarations to later ages. Now, we may not be able to cobble together a Sphinx, but we could still just be 'sloppy' during the evacuation. Couldn't we?"

For a moment no one said anything. Then Louise said, "We still haven't figured out a signal that Kachru would miss. And she's really intent on making sure that the Alulans never observe us."

Chalmers smiled. "Have any of you considered the possibility that the Alulans have already observed us?"

"What do you mean?" Louise asked, her question echoed by a few others.

"Look. We know that their public radio broadcasts tend to remain silent on the progress of their space program. Perhaps that's because they don't realize that we can also monitor their secret transmissions, and they think they're keeping us in the dark."

A few people started murmuring about how that made sense.

Louise nodded. "That's one possibility for the Tested's general silence on their space program, Winston, I'll grant you that. On the other hand, there's another possibility—"

Chalmers's screen beeped, and a band of text appeared at the top.

"Hold on, everyone. Escalera is trying to contact me." Chalmers instructed the Network to place everyone's image in the lower right corner of the screen, and he took the call from Escalera.

"Julio. What can I do for you at this late hour?"

Escalera looked grim. "I have some information I need to bring to Director Kachru. I thought—I thought you might want advance notice. You may even wish to come with me to present the information jointly."

Chalmers frowned. "What is it? What happened?"

"The Alulans have sent up another orbital satellite."

He stared at Escalera for a second and chortled. "So? Tell Az-Zahir to have his department track it."

Escalera shook his head. "This one is a little different."

Chalmers sighed. "How is it different?"

"It's manned."

"That's impossible!" Chalmers said. "Their first manned ship failed, they wouldn't—"

"What do you mean, their first manned ship failed?"

Chalmers felt a chill run through his body; in the heat of the moment, he had revealed too much.

"Give me twenty minutes to check the latest radio broadcasts," he said gruffly, ignoring Escalera's question. "I'll meet you at Kachru's office." He switched off the Network screen and dashed out.

* * * *

"What do you mean, it's manned?" Kachru asked, looking first at Escalera, then at Chalmers, and then back at Escalera. Her stare unnerved Chalmers. He had rushed over to Kachru's office as quickly as possible, in hopes of getting there before Escalera. But he had failed, and was now wondering just how much Escalera had told her.

"We mean," Escalera said in measured tones, "that there are Alulans on it. Three of them, from what we've been able to determine."

Everyone sat in silence for a moment. Chalmers still felt nervous, but he also felt a twinge of joy. After all, the Alulans were making swift progress, which was good. On the other hand—

"Doctor Chalmers, Escalera tells me that when he reported the manned launch to you, you reacted as if this was not the first one. Would you care to clarify?"

"No, madam, I would not."

"Hm." She turned to the intercom. "Edi Agbeve, please report to the Director's office."

Chalmers shifted in his seat.

Kachru turned back to him. "Doctor Chalmers, would you not say now that my haste in organizing the evacuation was justified?"

He mumbled agreement.

"What was that, Doctor? Please speak up."

"I said, yes, perhaps your haste was necessary."

"Thank you. Do you mind telling me why you didn't predict this development?"

He bit his lip. "No, madam, I cannot."

"Really?"

Chalmers thought for a moment about telling the truth, but rejected the notion. Instead: "It's puzzling, madam. I can only plead precedent."

"Precedent?"

"Human precedent. We've tended to base our predictions on the schedules of the first human space programs, the ones organized by the defunct superpowers of the twentieth century. And it took the human race four years to advance from satellites to putting people in orbit."

The door opened, and Agbeve walked in. He looked surprised to see Chalmers and Escalera there. Suddenly Chalmers realized that instead of rushing to Kachru's office, he should have spoken to Agbeve first. But it was too late.

"Director?" Agbeve asked.

"Doctor, come in and please have a seat."

Agbeve shrugged and did as she said. "What's going on?"

"Please tell me about the first manned launch you and Doctor Chalmers discovered."

Chalmers jumped up and tried to speak, but Kachru silenced him with a wave of her hand, and he sat back down. "Well, Doctor Agbeve?"

Agbeve glanced at Chalmers, then turned back to Kachru. "Well, I guess you found out. The last launch, the one that exploded on the pad, had three Alulans in the rocket."

Kachru nodded. "And how did you know that?"

"It was in the radio broadcasts."

"And as the chief translator, you naturally went to Doctor Chalmers with the news. When he found out, he ordered you to keep the content of those broadcasts secret."

Chalmers had no choice but to keep quiet, but it didn't matter. Agbeve would tell Kachru everything, and then all their plans would be for naught. She'd probably toss him onto the surface without a suit, if she could.

But Agbeve surprised him. Glancing quickly at Chalmers, he said, "Not exactly."

"What do you mean?" Kachru asked.

Agbeve looked down at the floor. "It was my idea, not telling you the truth. I forced Doctor Chalmers into it."

Thank you, Edi.

"Do you expect me to believe that?" Kachru asked.

"It's true," Chalmers interjected quickly. "And even if you don't believe it, you have no way to prove otherwise."

"Fine," Kachru said. "I'll accept your version of events. So tell me, Doctor Chalmers, now that all the cards are on the table—what's going on with the Alulans?"

"Madam?"

"I've been reading up on the history of human space programs. From the very beginning, setbacks—especially those which cost lives—were usually followed by a period of latency. How is it possible that one week after a failed launch kills three Alulans, they're sending up another manned rocket?"

Chalmers shrugged. "Maybe they refuse to agonize over their dead. I would have thought that they would lionize their dead for taking their god's challenge, but perhaps they simply consign them to obscurity for failing." He stroked his chin, thinking. "Their radio broadcasts seem to indicate that the opposition to the Tested are becoming more influential. Perhaps that's why they are rushing their space program."

"So they may be here sooner than we thought," Kachru said.

Her voice was quiet, Chalmers noted. She seemed to be taking all the news with relative equanimity—even the news of his collaboration with Agbeve. Perhaps—

"Director?"

"Yes?"

"May I humbly suggest one more time a way out of our difficulty? If we were only to reveal ourselves—"

"No!" she shouted.

"But, Director—"

"Doctor, I have had enough!" She jumped out of her seat. "You refuse to take no for an answer. Over and over, you bring it up. You rile up others, with those stupid petitions!" She took a deep breath, seeming to regain control of her anger. "Doctor Chalmers, from now on, please send Scholar Georges whenever your department has something to report. You may consider that an order."

Chalmers nodded.

"As for you, Doctor Agbeve—you are hereby confined to quarters, and your Network privileges are revoked. I'll have Az-Zahir post a guard at your door." She looked at all three men and shook her head. "Dismissed."

Agbeve left quickly, not even looking at Chalmers as he rushed out. Chalmers hoped Agbeve would forgive him later.

Chalmers and Escalera walked out together, and once they left the office, Escalera spoke. "You

shouldn't have done that, Winston. Kachru's under enough pressure as it is."

"We're all under pressure, Julio."

He shook his head. "Hers is different. You're just responsible for your department. She's responsible for your department, and mine, and the others. Plus the evacuation. If the day we finally make contact with the Alulans, they tell us that they discovered our base..." He shook his head again. "Earth will have Kachru's head on a platter."

A small sacrifice, Chalmers thought, to achieve his goals.

* * * *

Holding his plotters together took more effort than Chalmers expected. Several were shocked at how easily Agbeve had divulged the suppression of data, and left the group, fearing Chalmers had pressured him and that they might be next under arrest. Others left out of frustration at their plodding progress. A few said they were tired of hearing about ancient astronauts, but Chalmers put that down to hiding their true feelings.

Still, Chalmers kept a solid core of people with good ideas. As weeks turned into months, those ideas became a plan.

Alulans had to contend with a world in greater constant motion than humans did. Four suns, two moons, weather that never seemed settled: complexity of all kinds was the norm. Chalmers made a psychological leap from there, with some anecdotal support, to postulate that Alulans had a natural proclivity for assessing dynamic situations.

The inner moon, by contrast, was a static place, interrupted only by whatever detritus, from dust to comets, came crashing down. It was a passive environment, providing sharp contrast to any signs of activity, to an eye well conditioned to observing and interpreting such signs.

Humans would leave hundreds of patterns in the course of evacuation, even if nothing more than their footsteps walking to the ship. These would be swept away, of course—but shadows of the erased patterns would remain, and even the act of sweeping would be dynamic, containing unconscious patterns.

Chalmers's group came up with ideas for patterns they could create without it looking deliberate, that would survive effacing best. That was merely supplemental, though, to what the base would leave behind as a matter of course. If no extraordinary measures were taken to cover their tracks, Chalmers believed the Alulans would notice the patterns sooner or later.

They played with other ideas—depositing telltale concentrations of unusual elements or patterns of static charges in the regolith—but this one had an aesthetic style they could not resist. With a week to go before the next ship due, Winston Chalmers could actually feel at peace about having to leave.

Until Louise Georges entered his office one morning.

* * * *

"I've seen a copy of Director Kachru's evacuation plans," she told an impromptu meeting of the cabal that night, "including the part containing details of how to conceal our presence. She intends to draft our antigrav cargo loaders for other capacities, primarily to avoid leaving tracks that would have to be erased."

Chalmers had expected an immediate uproar, but there was nothing apart from some murmurs.

Louise continued. "She also plans to cannibalize an antigrav plate from spare parts for sweeping

purposes, and program it with an algorithm provided by John Durst.” Durst was in Sentient, another new arrival hand-picked by Kachru to stay, and an ex-cryptanalyst. “They are confident they can shuffle the regolith randomly, leaving no erasure patterns for the Alulans to recognize. With my limited expertise, I would say their chances are excellent.”

That broke the ice. “That’s unbelievable,” Karin Nilsmark said. “It sounds like Kachru got her best advice from us, and ... no.”

“Yes,” Chalmers said tightly. “That is exactly what happened. She got her advice from us. One of us, that is, perhaps more.”

Now the clamor came, as bad as Chalmers had feared. He heard snatches of names in accusing tones, voices rising in self-defense, all order fleeing. He cut the sound, and was tempted not to restore it. Eventually, he did.

“—from happening again!” Nilsmark was saying, oblivious that she had been unheard. “We have to find the turncoat among us!”

“No,” he said, the weariness of that word gripping their attention better than any shout. “No, we don’t.”

“You aren’t even angry?” Kruv said.

“Angry? More angry than you could know. Angry enough to...” He looked at a bare wall. “After Louise told me what she had learned, I came this close to erasing our department’s data cache out of pure spite. Four months of research, wiped off the Network in a moment. That’s how badly I wanted to lash out at Kachru. That’s how much I hated her.”

He forced his eyes back to the screen, to his colleagues’ frozen faces. “Thankfully, I didn’t. My life has been about gaining knowledge, not destroying it. As much as I want not to deny knowledge to the Alulans, I would not deny it to Earth either. Temporary suppressions, yes; permanent ones, no. Anger brought me to the brink of an unforgivable act. Don’t let it control you the way it almost did me.”

He had to swallow hard before he could breathe again. It had been hard, but they needed to know.

Nilsmark was first to speak. “We still have to find the informer, so we can plan our next move in security.”

Chalmers laughed gloomily. “You must not play chess, Karin. There is no move after checkmate.”

“Winston—” Louise began.

“Kachru’s been ahead of us all along. She knew of our parlor conspiracy for months, and rather than break it up, she exploited it masterfully. Let us face facts: she’s beaten us.”

A few voices raised half-hearted protests, but Chalmers stilled them. “Inside of a month, I’ll be on a ship returning to Earth, as will most of you. I propose we take the fight to Earth with us. We will be too late to forestall the final evacuation, but perhaps, without the mastermind Kachru to thwart us,” he said with a smirk, “we can persuade her superiors to alter their isolationist stance. Our challenge remains. If we cannot meet it here, we must meet it elsewhere.”

“I won’t have that chance,” Nilsmark said. “What will I do here?”

“Your work,” Chalmers answered. “The conspiracy, on Alula, is at an end.”

“No! You can abdicate, but I won't—”

The picture display disappeared, replaced by the face of Shima Nakata, watch supervisor in the monitoring room. “Doctor Chalmers,” she said breathlessly, “the latest launch—”

“You used override priority?” he said pettishly. “How important can this be? I already knew about the launch.”

“The rocket detached a new type of capsule. It masses about eighty kilograms, too small to carry an Alulan, but—I've already informed the Director—”

“Informed her of what?” A warhead? They had never picked up a nuclear test, but chemical, biological—were the rivals of the Tested right all along?

“It's boosting on a lunar insertion trajectory. Doctor Chalmers, it's heading right for us.”

The lights suddenly dimmed, and a klaxon began sounding in the corridor. Chalmers was gone even before the emergency summons from Kachru began flashing on his monitor.

* * * *

Twenty-four hours after the klaxon sounded, the satellite entered orbit around the moon. Chalmers spent the next few days in the crowded monitoring station, alternating shifts with Louise, grabbing a few minutes of sleep here and there when he could. Plentiful supplies of coffee and other stimulants were kept coming, as the staff of Sentient Sciences stayed busy recording and translating the Alulan radio broadcasts as quickly as their high-orbit satellites intercepted and relayed them. It was vital for the base to know, as soon as possible, what the satellite had detected, if anything.

Meanwhile, the rest of the base went into “stealth mode,” something that had never been attempted before. Power output was reduced to the bare minimum need for life support; lights were dimmed; surface excursions were canceled. Outgoing radio transmissions were halted completely, leaving satellites to their own devices, effectively halting data gathering.

By the end of the first day of orbit, Chalmers and his staff confirmed that the new satellite was definitely a photographic mapping probe. Throughout the second day, they sweated over the transmissions that they had intercepted from the satellite, and continued their frantic translation of Alulan voices over the radio.

Their stealth seemed to be working—but the emergency ship was due to return within days, and there was no way to contact it before it broke its bubble and appeared in-system. One photo of it would be a disaster. It could stay safely out of range, but that meant no landing, and no evacuation progress, while the probe operated. The staff began steeling themselves for a long siege.

By the middle of the third day, however, Chalmers calmly called everyone in the monitoring station to attention. He stood in the center of the room, with Louise at his side. “We would appear to be out of the woods,” he said flatly.

“How so?” Escalera asked.

He lifted a pad, which contained the translation of the latest Alulan space program broadcasts.

“According to the latest reports, the transmitter on the lunar satellite has failed. They did manage to beam back several photos of the moon's surface, but we've intercepted them all. Only one long-range picture included our base area, and its resolution couldn't possibly make us out. We are quite safe.”

“How did it fail?” Nakata asked. “Is there any chance of it becoming active again?”

“From what we can gather, a connection between a battery and the antenna came loose. It's extremely unlikely they'll be able to fix it.” He paused. “We'll probably need someone monitoring it closely for at least the next few days. But I think the rest of you can safely relax.”

He turned to Louise and handed her the pad. “Louise, please take my report to Kachru, and tell her that we can probably stand down from stealth mode.” He yawned. “I'm going to get some sleep.”

* * * *

The Analysis Center was back to normal, or at least back to equilibrium. The technical crew had been working there for two weeks, their disruptions disrupted in turn by the probe's arrival. They were done now, and Chalmers calmly surveyed the damage to Sentient Sciences.

One of the walls had moved in a dozen meters, cutting floor space almost in half. Chalmers felt an instant of panic for the terminals behind it, before remembering that they were crated and ready for loading now, not sitting in vacuum. A whiff of hot metal lingered from the reconstruction, stinging the nose. Personnel filled every remaining station, with some waiting in line for available space. That crowding would not last long.

Chalmers could see some stations tuned to surface cameras, watching a familiar ship settle toward the surface of the moon. It had left nine months before with the first evacuees. He stopped by one monitor to watch its antigrav plates raise a puff of dust, just before the landing bars deployed and the ship touched down.

“The beginning of the end,” Chalmers said.

Louise jumped in her seat. “Winston,” she said, switching the monitor to something else and looking distinctly embarrassed.

“Don't worry about it. I'll be in my office. Oh, and you'll have my report by this afternoon.”

His office was still intact, though the outside smell had penetrated. He settled at his desk to write. He needed to complete his report on the state of knowledge of the Alulan civilizations, and his recommendations for study in the last months remaining.

He treated it seriously, adding and revising for hours, though it was really a paperwork formality. Louise knew almost everything he did about the Alulans. She would be fine as the next—the last—department head.

His monitor flashed, notifying him of a staff meeting. Annoyed, he shut it off. It was supposed to ignore those notices. It had for four months.

Chalmers went back to writing, until a rap on his clear door interrupted him. It was Louise. He hit the door open button. “Come on,” she said, “the meeting.”

“Have you forgotten, Louise? I don't go to staff meetings any longer.”

“Kachru wants you this time. She won't start without you, so don't keep everybody waiting.”

Chalmers submitted to the inevitable. “I suppose our Director can afford to be magnanimous now,” he said as they walked off. “Perhaps there's a small party, in celebration of my departure. Is that the surprise you're keeping from me?”

“What? No, no.”

“Louise, are you quite all right? You've acted nervous all day.”

“Well ... I have been meaning to say...”

“Say what?” he asked, offering a smile.

Louise got hold of something inside her. “That I wish your group the best of luck on Earth.”

“Thank you, Louise. I suppose four months in a sardine-tin spaceship should give us time to plan our appeal to the Exploration Council. I'll be most high-minded; won't even bring up the secret identity of the Sphinx.” His mouth twisted. “One hopeless cause at a time, right?”

Louise was saved from answering by their arrival at Kachru's office. They sat quickly, under the Director's silent gaze. Kachru picked up a pad.

“The evacuation ship delivered a message from the United Exploration Council. To quote the most important paragraph: ‘You are ordered to evacuate Alula Observation Base One as rapidly as possible. All precautions to insure against your detection, directly or in later native exploration of the base site, must strictly be observed.’” My policy has been confirmed.”

There it was: her vindication, as though it was ever in doubt. Chalmers thought it a bit of unseemly gloating, though she never once glanced at him during her recitation.

“However—” Kachru showed a flash of irritation “—the method will be altered substantially. Quoting again: ‘Personnel will be evacuated on seniority basis. Those with least time on-site will be first to return to Earth.’”

There were murmurs. Chalmers's eyes widened, as he did some quick calculations.

Kachru set the pad down. “This is unexpected—indeed, it overturns our plans at the worst moment—but it is also an order. We will follow it. I will have new evacuation lists for you momentarily.” She started giving orders to her terminal.

Louise nudged her neighbor. “I won't need to see that report, Winston. I'm going to be on this ship.”

“Yes,” Chalmers replied faintly, “and I'm not.” He shook the cobwebs from his head. “And most of our—ahem, friends—are rather junior. Even more of them may be going home than before.”

Kachru was done quickly. She gave pads to the senior staffers, wearing an opaque frown as she handed one to Chalmers. He scanned it, and surely enough, he was one of the few pro-contact plotters in Sentient Sciences staying behind.

“You're going to be very busy informing your subordinates,” Kachru said, “so I'll let you go now. Meeting adjourned.”

Chalmers held his tongue until he was in the corridor. “How kind of her,” he told Louise, “to leave us the dirty work.”

“I'll announce it to the department, if you like.”

He thought, as Henry Stark squeezed past them. “No. I'm department head, and apparently staying that way. It's something I should tell them.” He glared back at the office door. “There's something I should tell the Director as well, but she has the privilege of not listening.”

Louise steered him by the arm. “We'll announce it together—but quickly, before rumors begin to

spread."

"What, in this facility? Who would ever imagine that?"

* * * *

Midway through the loading of the supply ship, Chalmers went to see Kachru. Given the fact that he was now staying until the last evacuation, and Louise was technically no longer serving in Sentient Sciences, Kachru had acquiesced to the need for Chalmers to report to her again.

He found her hard at work making notes on a pad when he entered her office. Her hair looked grayer—no, that wasn't it. It had grown ragged at the temples, the strands thinner.

She looked up. "Hello, Doctor. Is the evacuation going smoothly?"

The eyes shocked him: darkened, sunken, the hatching ground for the wrinkles across her face. She was about his age, and he was scarcely in his first youth—but she looked old. Had the last months been that hard on her?

Had *he* been?

"Doctor!" Kachru was impatient, and that anger put energy back in her face. "How is the evacuation going?"

"A-as well as can be expected. Director, I have some ... interesting news."

She put down her stylus. "Interesting? Not good or bad, but interesting?"

It depended on who heard it, Chalmers thought, but settled for saying, "Judge for yourself. Political tension on Alula, between the Tested and the other two main confederations, has been rather high. The Idridari and the Chev League have claimed that the Tested space program has sinister military aims. Some of the independent city-states have echoed those concerns, drifted toward their orbits."

"That I know," Kachru said. "What has changed?"

"The secrecy. The Tested government is finally acknowledging the program publicly. They have denied any military aims—the Chev don't take them at their word, though I do—and outlined their plans for exploration."

"Exploration?"

Chalmers nodded. "Of their moons, for a start. This one first."

Kachru's face paled. "I see. Did you manage to get any information about their timetable?"

"Nothing exact. You can query your agents in the monitoring room. They'll confirm I'm concealing nothing."

"What—?" Kachru stopped, discarding the pretense, accepting his knowledge sedately. "Any educated estimates?"

"Soon," Chalmers said. "I've discarded my last illusions about judging Alulans by human standards. Based on their previous headlong pace, I estimate they'll make their first attempt at a landing within six to twelve months."

Kachru tapped her stylus against the top of her desk. "Six months, you say. Not, perhaps, four?" The

last ship was due in five.

“Even if I guaranteed that,” he replied with light irony, “you wouldn't believe it.”

Kachru nodded absently, and Chalmers spoke aloud the thought they were both sharing. “The Alulans may manage to reach us before the evacuation is complete.”

“Well,” Kachru said, and she stopped tapping her stylus. “We'll just have to see to it that it doesn't happen.”

“There's not much more you can do,” Chalmers said. “You've evacuated this base as fast as you could have.”

Kachru tipped her head. “That sounds suspiciously like a compliment.”

“It's a factual statement, nothing more.” Chalmers decided that one more try couldn't hurt. He sat down across from Kachru, and as softly as possible, said, “Director?”

“Yes?”

He tried to be deferential. “Ignoring my own leanings for the moment, don't you think it would be wise to start developing some contact protocols? If the Alulans exceed even my own predictions...” He trailed off.

Kachru stared at him, and for the first time in a while, smiled benignly. “Doctor, thank you. I shall consider it. But in the meantime, the evacuation process will have to go forward, at a stepped up pace. Dismissed.”

Chalmers stood. He saw the usual high-handed arrogance in that smile, and it annoyed him. “Very well, Director. I look forward to receiving your updated schedule.”

* * * *

Dwelling a moment on the meeting he had just left almost got Chalmers lost. His room had been dismantled a few days after the ship's arrival, another morsel for Az-Zahir's insatiable machine. The move to new quarters was less traumatic than it could have been, since he was already packed for his aborted voyage home.

He needed a second to orient himself, and finally hit upon the right corridor. Down, turn right, third door on the left—and look who was there.

“Weren't you on the ship, Louise?” he said. “I didn't think they were letting anyone return to base once they were boarded.” He finally looked closer at her. “And why are you looking so distressed?”

Louise coughed hoarsely. “Could we go inside?”

Chalmers led the way. No sooner had he closed the door than Louise spoke. “I know the identity of the infiltrator, the one who passed our theories on to the Director.”

“Really? Well, that explains your mood.”

Louise held back a shudder. “I didn't know whether you still cared about who it was, but you have the right to learn. It's your choice to make.”

Chalmers considered. “How reliable is your information?”

"I'm certain. No doubt whatsoever."

"None?" The furrows on his brow smoothed away. "All right, I would like to know."

"Are you sure?"

"I just said so," Chalmers said, starting to lose patience. "Who was the informer?"

Louise drew herself up. "I was, Winston."

Chalmers felt himself sway. The room took on a bright fuzziness. His lips moved to say "No," but he couldn't hear the word.

"I have great respect for your abilities, your intellect. I even find it easy to tolerate your ... eccentricities." A smile almost surfaced through the pain. "But you allowed your desire to reveal ourselves to the Alulans to go out of control. Anything not working toward your goal was enemy action. There was no sense of proportion."

"Louise, how can you—"

She waved away his words. "At that awful meeting, where Kachru recited all the ways you were undermining work here, I realized she was right. I had seen it, first-hand. We were violating our commitment to obey Earth's policies, and she was struggling to hold this base together. It was chaos or order. I chose order. I went to her; we struck our bargain. I betrayed you—to keep my promise."

Chalmers had sagged against a wall, pulling a sketch loose. "Why are you telling me this?" His voice drifted, torn loose from reason. "Why? Why?"

Louise found a reserve of composure. "I had to be honest with you, with all of you. Respect demanded that." Her gaze wavered, but held. "I'm telling all the members, leaving notes for them ... but I knew I had to face you, or there was no facing myself."

He stayed rooted in place. He clenched his fists, knowing they would do nothing. He struggled to show something other than shock, but could not.

Louise resisted the miserable pity as long as she could. "I'll go now," she said, in time to preserve some dignity. She did not look back.

Chalmers managed a step toward the door as it closed. "I—" he said before stopping himself.

It was pointless. What did he think he could say to retrieve the situation? "I love you?" The time for that was long ago, and it wasn't even true any longer.

He had met Louise Georges fifteen years ago in Egyptological circles. He had been taken at first by her beautiful looks, her vivid red hair and slender body. But he had also been impressed with her intellect and her compassion. Their paths had crossed with casual frequency, and little by little he found professional amity becoming something else. He didn't breathe a word of it, not daring to risk humiliation. She had the higher degree, the greater respect: he didn't feel equal.

So he set about raising himself to her level, and in a meteoric streak of brilliant work, achieved it. The Hawass Prize should have broken down the barriers, cleared his path to declare himself. In the flush of success, though, he overreached himself.

Awareness of the discovery of the Alulans, and the nascent studies of them, had filtered through his tight

professional focus. It stirred notions within him, which coalesced into an earth-shaking theory. Egyptologists had always been prone to ideas about “ancient astronauts.” He thought he would find a receptive audience.

He stopped pressing his theory quickly, before the damage to his career was total. The embarrassment stalked him in all the work he did thereafter—and incidentally erased any notion of approaching Louise. His application for outpost duty was an admission of defeat, its acceptance a relief more than a triumph.

That was over nine years ago. When Louise arrived seven years later, he found the old fires dead, but the friendship stronger than ever. Their relationship was akin to a chaste marriage, an intellectual intimacy guarded by respect and trust.

Trust. How strong a bond.

How fragile a bond.

The ship left three days later, carrying almost all Winston Chalmers's remaining friends away. He sat in a dark office, pretending to match weather patterns to rocket launches, and silently thanked God it was gone.

Phase Four

Isolation had some compensating advantages. One was the impossibility of betrayal by people one didn't trust in the first place. Another was absolute freedom of action, without others whose reputations had to be considered.

Chalmers spent his spare hours poring over technical texts, painfully translating them into slow advances on his project. With the right reprogramming, the satellite communications relay perched on the edge of nearside could be augmented for much more powerful transmissions. If he could reach Alula with one message, Shanti Kachru would be thwarted yet. It would mean his career, but he counted that a comparatively small loss.

After three weeks, he was perhaps a quarter of the way there. Eight hours later, after his shift in the Analysis Complex, he was nowhere. His personal files had been cracked, the programming code he had written erased.

Chalmers spent a night in panic, expecting to be haled before Kachru by the strong arm of Amin Az-Zahir. It never happened. When he did pass Az-Zahir in the corridor days later, he thought he saw a knowing glint, but nothing else.

His spirits imploded. Kachru felt so secure that she could let his transgression pass without the slightest reprimand. That itself said more than any punishment could.

He made work his solace, his purpose. He focused himself completely, narrowing his vision tighter and tighter. The attitude fit the work: every day, the pipeline of information constricted a little more. He imagined Az-Zahir was enjoying the work, vectoring satellites to plunge into Alula's primary suns, spinning them away like beads tumbling from a broken necklace.

The rocket facilities grew distant and hazy in their dwindling sight. Chalmers could no longer predict the next launch even a day in advance, save for the time the Tested announced one to the world. Two others he didn't know about until the monitoring room tracked the satellites in orbit, having launched from the hemisphere pointed away from the moon. Kachru didn't hold her silence then, but it was a muted criticism. Even she could understand the handicaps bedeviling him now.

The workers in Sentient Sciences began to complain. He wasn't leaving enough of the dwindling flow of work for them. With a month to go before pickup, he relented, going back to working single shifts.

Chalmers did not spend that time idle. He volunteered to work with the technical crews.

Az-Zahir forbade it. Kachru, after a few more days of polite, restrained petitions, overruled her security chief. "She wants every working hand she can taking down the base," Az-Zahir snarled to Chalmers in his office. "That doesn't mean I have to give you soft work—or that I won't be watching you at every moment."

"That suits me," Chalmers said mildly. He knew Kachru would approve his petition. The hard part was watching Az-Zahir smile as he thought of ways to redress all Chalmers's insults of the past year and more.

It began with a week of dismantling what the chief called "effluvial systems"—and what the tech crews called a great many other things. Chalmers assumed he would fit in best by doing his work without complaint. He soon learned he could do better with lots of complaints, if they were directed at the right things and people with the right breezy crudeness.

Even before that on-the-job training, the technicians took a liking to him. "Why shouldn't we?" Elian Nadel told him. "Every scientist at this station demands things from us, and we're lucky to hear 'Thank you' once a day. You volunteer for the worst duty there is here, and don't shirk a minute. Like you? We're ready to make you crew boss. Pass over that piece of pipe."

"Here you are." He only grimaced slightly at what he put his hand in. "And thank you."

"For what?"

Chalmers grinned lopsidedly. "For all the times I forgot."

Soon, the weeks ran down to days. More scientists began joining the tech crews, as draftees rather than volunteers. Az-Zahir rode herd over them as much of the day as he could muster. Ramadan had begun, and he tried to match fasting hours with sleeping hours, with uneven success that began to take its toll.

One last manned launch came up before the storm season hit the rocket bases. It performed docking maneuvers for a few days, then reentered. The anxiety that this was the moonshot turned to relief—or vice versa in a very few cases.

Chalmers kept up his vigil, until the due date for the supply ship arrived. He continued it after the day passed without event. People began to speculate. A damaged engine might mean weeks or months of repairs. It might mean waiting until Earth sent the other ship to pick them up. Some worried that their lately departed friends might be stranded in deep space.

For Chalmers, it meant the slow rekindling of old, faint hopes. They did not last long.

* * * *

The final supply ship—now an evacuation ship—had arrived two days ago, and Kachru had ordered the dismantling of everything remaining on the base within a week. All departments were geared towards this goal, with the exception of a few people in Sentient Sciences, ordered to continue monitoring the planet until the last possible moment. That moment would come when the last sensor cluster, located on the edge of the moon's near side, would be taken apart.

Chalmers sat in the monitoring station, where he pretty much was now living, along with three members of his staff. One person kept an ear on the Alulan radio transmissions, another watched their satellites.

Chalmers had taken the task of keeping an eye on the planet for himself; at least the weather patterns might stave off boredom. He watched the clouds move past swiftly, and the flashes of lightning appear in the sky, depressed that the storm season meant no more launch attempts.

Another flash of lightning broke through the clouds, and it took a moment before Chalmers realized something strange. The flash was lasting a lot longer than normal. Instead of vanishing without a trace within seconds, it stubbornly continued its existence.

That wasn't lightning. It was a rocket launch.

A huge launch plume developed on the planet's surface, along the path of the flash. Chalmers's eyes got wider as the plume seemed to continue to stretch, the line of smoke extending further and further. Could this be—?

He gulped nervously and looked around. No one else was looking towards his screen, and no one else seemed to have noticed. Very carefully, so as not to arouse anyone's attention, Chalmers focused a surveillance camera on the plume. The picture that came up was of a multistage rocket, the kind that would be overkill if all one needed to do was get a satellite into orbit. Chalmers had the computer project the trajectory of the current rocket, and a blue line appeared on his screen.

The line ran all the way from the surface of the planet to the surface of the moon.

He smiled; he couldn't help it. After months of planning, trying to come up with a method of signaling the Alulans, it turned out not to have been necessary at all. They were on their way, now; they would discover the base well before the evacuation was complete.

In fact, he could even help it along. He looked up, and verified that the monitoring camera had already been removed from its usual position in the center of the ceiling. For once, he was grateful for the efficiency with which Kachru was running the evacuation; this meant that the only record of the current launch existed inside his computer station.

Chalmers instructed the computer to stop monitoring, and the screen went blank. He ejected the memory crystal which had recorded the launch, slipped it into a pocket, and stood up.

"Folks," he said, and everyone turned to look at him. "There's no point in monitoring the planet anymore. Let's disconnect the sensors and go help with the evacuation."

The other three smiled and nodded and started turning off their screens. Chalmers had judged it correctly; although he technically didn't have the authority to release them from monitor room duty, none of his staff would question his order. They would rather be doing something physical and helpful than just sitting here. He figured he would keep the crystal and toss it in with his own possessions, a little souvenir of this day—

—when the door slid open, and Kachru walked in.

"Doctor, what is going on?" she said, looking around at the blank screens. The staff members glanced at Kachru and then turned towards Chalmers, deferring to their superior.

"I've given the order for us to stop monitoring," he said slowly. "At this point, we'd probably be more useful helping with the evacuation, wouldn't you say?"

Kachru smiled, showing her teeth. "You must have turned off your monitors a few minutes ago, then. It's a good thing I had the computer programmed to alert me to any new launches." She walked over to his monitoring station, and turned on the screen. Everyone gasped when the picture of the launch plume

came up.

“The Alulans have launched a moon rocket,” she said. She pushed the button to record the data, and the computer beeped. “That’s odd,” she said, turning to Chalmers and looking him directly in the eyes. “There’s no recording crystal in here.”

“I must have ... forgotten to put one in,” Chalmers said. He was aghast at her for circumventing his authority, *and* for having been smart enough to do so.

“That’s understandable,” she said, as she reached into her pocket for a crystal. She inserted it into the computer and set it to record the data. “Doctor,” she said, “would you care to do the honors? We need to confirm our suspicions.”

With leaden steps, Chalmers walked back over to the monitor and pushed the buttons ordering the computer to project once again the path of the current rocket. The blue line cut across the screen from the planet to the moon like a gash in space.

Kachru nodded. “My suspicions are confirmed,” she said, looking at Chalmers.

He glared at her. “Only some of them, madam,” he said under his breath.

“Enough.” She took a radio off of her belt, and turned it on. Her voice came over the speakers, and Chalmers winced at the volume.

“Attention, everyone on Alula Observation Base One. Attention. The Alulans have just launched a manned moon rocket. I repeat, a manned moon rocket. The five days we had left to break everything down, pack up the base, and get out of here has just become thirty hours.”

She paused. “This is not a drill, this is not a mistake. The computer has confirmed it. I am giving the final order.”

She looked at Chalmers, then shouted, “Bug out!”

* * * *

Within minutes, every person in the base was awake and working. A parade of specialists, many bleary-eyed with sleep, plodded past Kachru’s door, leaving with the assignment pads she thrust into their hands. There were no more scientists, and no more time for science, at the remnants of the base.

What remained was little removed from organized vandalism. There was no time for careful disconnections, for every nut and wire in its place. Valuable equipment went pell-mell into cargo containers, sometimes deliberately smashed to make room for more. Computer memory crystals were the only things treated with care.

Soon there were no enclosed spaces left in the base. Work there, or on the antigrav cargo loaders shuttling between the lavatube entrance and the ship, required suits. There weren’t enough to go around.

Those suitless went inside the ship, stowing containers in the hold. Heliologists and meteorologists worked cheek by jowl with volcanologists and linguists, a leavening of technical crew making sure their inevitable errors weren’t too catastrophic. The crates piled up faster than they could stack them, but that would change as suits in use ran out of life support, and their wearers took shifts in the hold during resupply.

Kachru tried to be everywhere, and succeeded in making the impression. Where she couldn’t be, Az-Zahir was, constantly in suit-radio contact with her. The bugout remained organized, barely.

There was one instant when she saw Winston Chalmers, recognizable through his faceplate's distortion. He was aboard a small loader, looking inside a container as he closed its lid, and shaking his head. Briefly, she sympathized with him over the destruction—but only for a second. She had no time for more.

She looked at her wrist chronometer. Twenty hours had passed. That long? If her fatigue was any indication, yes. She concentrated furiously on some calculations. Yes, they had time.

One of Az-Zahir's lieutenants appeared, driving a refitted loader. An antigrav plate hung past the nose, jury-rigged into place. It was the eraser.

Kachru hopped aboard from the ground, and pointed the loader over where she had leaped. A shuddering through the deckplates set her whole body on edge. Less than a minute later, it stopped. When she looked over the side, she couldn't see where her footprints had been.

The eraser became her flagship during the last hours of the evacuation. Another loader, carrying a chemical analyzer, sometimes traveled with her. It was sniffing the regolith for any unusual concentrations of elements. Once or twice, its crew lowered a sifter to comb through the dust, removing or adding something in just the proper proportion.

The sniffer made its rounds, then disappeared into the lavatube itself. The fuller-steel braces of the entry were all that remained of the base, and crews began taking them apart as soon as the sniffer emerged. Kachru's eraser went inside for a last sweep, then joined the sniffer, which was now circling a predetermined point on the lavatube roof, offset toward the entry.

The sifter was permeating the regolith with volatiles: hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and various simple compounds of them. A few other trace elements went in as well. According to System Sciences' best minds, it was a typical proportion of chemicals to be found in a comet of the Alula system.

Kachru waited for the sifter to finish, then went in herself to the thin shaft bored into the surface. She and a crewmember lowered the antimatter explosive to the shallow bottom. She ran a diagnostic on her pad, showing all green.

The explosive would mimic the impact of a small comet on the moon's surface, in just the right place to collapse the majority of the lavatube, including where the base had been. Construction had left a few unavoidable cavities within the tube, and Scholar Georges had told Kachru that the most enduring archeological structure known was a hole. The best way to cover their small holes was with a large hole. Antimatter was necessary, as chemical or nuclear explosives would leave telltale residual elements.

The one piece of imperfect imitation was the removal of rocks from the surrounding regolith. With the evacuation ship still on the surface and vulnerable to flying debris, it was a chance they had to take. Some rocks had been pitched into the ground nearby to imitate the spatter of debris. It would be enough, Kachru thought.

She returned to the cluster of loaders gathered near the ship. They would comb the wreckage together, as a last check of the site, after the detonation. They had the time. By Kachru's calculations, they would be away with half an hour to spare.

"Full polarization on faceplates," she ordered over the radio. "Nobody is to look at the detonation." She checked every helmet for compliance, then opaqued her own. Not all the way, though. She had to see to key in the detonation sequence.

She shut her eyes with the last number, but the flash still reached her behind her eyelids. She blinked at the afterimage, even as the reverberations reached her through the graviton curtain of the loader's antigrav

plates, jarring bones together.

When her eyes cleared, she saw a piece of the moon falling in on itself. The cave-in was perfect, chunks of lavatube roof tumbling in, one slab pulling in another and another. Everyone watched through de-polarized faceshields, expressions of awe visible to Kachru during the instants when she could take her own gaze off the spectacle.

She waited half a minute after the last landslide, as the pall of dust settled. "It looks good. Amin, organize a perimeter recon with all the loaders. Smith, take the sniffer in for one last—"

"Where is it?"

Kachru turned. "Who was that?"

"Nadel, Director." A suited arm waved. "One of the loaders is missing. There were seven here before the detonation, including yours."

She made a fast count, coming up with six. Where could it go? "Who was driving it?"

"I'm not certain." He called some names, getting prompt replies. When he said "Winston?" twice, Kachru's blood froze.

She turned toward the horizon, the one closest to nearside. "There!" She pointed at the dwindling speck. "Amin, enter 'four-seven-clear' on your loader's control pad, and bring him back!"

* * * *

Chalmers looked back. The loaders weren't moving; the people on them, distant though they were, didn't seem to be either. The bloom of fallout probably still had them mesmerized. That, or Kachru still wouldn't let them un-tint their helmets. It would serve them right for their meek obedience.

He put on a burst of speed, steering to the left of a landmark hill. That hillock had held the first line-of-sight relay antenna to the nearside array. Both were gone now, the ground beneath them pristine.

Twelve degrees left, he recalled, tweaking his course. Then again, he didn't need to be exact. His destination was rather large.

The mapping probe had taken few photos and fewer close-ups, but two of them were of the same thing: a double crater thirty kilometers from base, past the edge of nearside. The smaller crater was entirely inside the larger, offset toward Alula—the pupil in the Eye.

Chalmers kept his discovery quiet. When others in Sentient Sciences noted the coincidence, he downplayed it. He knew from the start, though, that when the Tested landed, they would do it there.

He would be there first.

He had thought of waiting for the landing itself, of greeting the Alulans who stepped onto this moon. How he wanted to meet them. He could even attempt one of their invocations.

Eill-ota ta heina teyanh dui, koraron dui, ehtanaze dui. God's eye has seen your striving, your reversals, your triumph...

But his own triumph would be short-lived. The Alulans weren't likely to be able to replenish his life support. He didn't want to die here—and his colleagues would surely pursue him. There had to be another way, and there was.

One hand patted the small bag attached to his suit's waist. He had packed it in his room weeks before, just in case, and managed to retrieve it in the first minutes of confusion, before crews started tearing down his room's walls. He told the technicians who asked that it contained his Egyptian cat, a relic too precious to trust to anybody else.

That was true. It also contained a stargram, hand-copied from Network files, showing Alula and Sol. Also tucked inside was the smallest and simplest audio recorder he could find. The Network had an excellent voice synthesizer, and he hoped his translation skills matched its efficiency. His message would say a lot in a little time—including how valuable his golden cat was to him, how glad he would be if the Alulans could return it.

Chalmers would leave the pouch dead-center in the pupil. Az-Zahir's minions would catch him: he accepted that. They would not have time to find his little tan bag in an endless field of gray before time ran out. That was his advantage.

Earth's visitors had left nothing behind, nothing humans had found, or couldn't explain away. It had meant centuries of ignorance, of thinking themselves alone. How badly had that ignorance retarded humanity's progress? It was a question that tormented him—but now it would never torment the Alulans.

The UEC would have to embrace the inevitable. The Tested could not respect people who shrank from the challenge of meeting a new race eye to eye—no more than Chalmers himself did. The longer they delayed, the worse relations would be when they came. Difficulty now, or debacle later: not even human bureaucrats could muffle that decision.

Chalmers would put them in the best possible light with the Alulans, of course. He was the obvious choice as Earth's ambassador. He knew the Alulans best, and would be the one human the Alulans knew at all, the one who had triumphed over so much adversity to leave that epoch-making message.

He would get a tremendous reception; probably his own *chueh-pat*. His colleagues couldn't decide whether the *chueh-pat* was a religious gathering, a political ceremony, or just a ticker-tape parade without the marching and littering. They thought too narrowly, too humanly. It was something of all three, something unique to the Tested. And there he would be, the center of it all, the honoree, the hero.

He felt dizzy, unable to slow his racing breath. This went beyond throwing away his career, excitement enough for an aging archeologist. This was a historic act, altering the fates of the two intelligent races in the known galaxy. This was his own challenge, well met.

He yielded to the giddiness, laughing at what one disgraced eccentric could accomplish.

The loader gave a kick just as it began climbing a small rise. Chalmers went silent, but felt nothing else. Then, on the downslope, it braked hard. Chalmers nearly pitched over the side, but hung on. The loader came to a halt, floating a half meter off the ground.

Chalmers worked the control panel furiously, but nothing happened. The loader hadn't lost power: it was still hovering. He ducked under the panel and pried away the maintenance cover. Nothing had come obviously loose inside, but apart from that, the mechanisms left him confused.

He craned his head around. The rise behind him hid any pursuit. Even the ship was no longer visible. They wouldn't hear a distress call: line of sight...

Line of sight. Of course. One simple program, to stop a loader from going too far. Kachru! Again, *again*, she was a step ahead of him!

Chalmers stood up just in time to see another loader pop over the hill. He realized his error. He should have jumped out and run the moment his loader stopped. He wouldn't have eluded them long, but he would have left a mess of footprints, perhaps too many to clean up before the Alulan capsule pilots spotted their ship. Time had been on his side, and he had squandered it—was squandering it now.

The loader parked beside his. Two people were aboard—and by the identifying stripes on the suit shoulder, one of them was Az-Zahir himself. How fitting.

Chalmers was ready to bail out and run, when a fresh idea hit him. Their loader still functioned, and they weren't armed. If he could lure them over here, then leap aboard their loader, he might get a second chance, and leave them stranded in the bargain. He backed up to the railing of his loader, tensing his legs for his one chance.

Az-Zahir gestured to his subordinate—then came over alone.

Suddenly, running for it looked good again.

Chalmers clambered over the side, but a strong yank pulled him back. Hard suit materials clashed and scraped, and Az-Zahir stumbled from the collision. Chalmers spun himself loose, but out of control. Before he could recover, a second pair of hands snatched him.

He struggled, wrenching himself in every direction, loosening the grip. Az-Zahir grabbed his flailing arm, and hit keys on his wristpad before Chalmers tore loose.

Even in the midst of his struggles, Chalmers could hear the subsiding of the hiss in his spacesuit. Az-Zahir had turned down his oxygen flow. He thrashed, trying to free his other arm to reach the pad, reverse the act. In desperation, he yanked the pouch off his belt and hurled it. They didn't take the bait.

He flailed and tore, even as a distant roar rose in his ears, as the light around him grew brighter—and winked out.

* * * *

“He's awake.”

Chalmers opened his eyes and blinked them against the harsh bright fluorescent lighting. He found himself lying on a hard bed in a room with blank white walls. His head rested on a large, soft pillow. A man stood on his right, at the edge of his vision.

“Where am I?” He tried to pull himself up, but the dizziness overwhelmed him.

“You're in sickbay, Doctor Chalmers.” It was Hiram Greene, medical doctor.

“Sickbay,” Chalmers said aloud. “On the ship. Then that means—”

“Yes,” Greene said, and Chalmers could hear him smiling. “We made it. The ship's launch was hidden quite well from the Alulan moon rocket. It did give us a scare for a few minutes there, but it all turned out all right.”

Chalmers closed his eyes and nodded. “My mission failed,” he mumbled to himself.

“I'm sorry, what was that?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

Chalmers heard someone clearing her throat, and then Kachru's familiar voice—all too familiar—said,

"I'd like to speak with him alone, Doctor."

"Yes, of course," Greene said, and a moment later Chalmers heard a door slide open and closed.

Chalmers opened his eyes to see Kachru standing at the foot of his bed. He stared at her impassively, and she returned his stare.

After a moment, Kachru asked, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Chalmers gently shook his head. Kachru had won; there was no point in arguing anymore.

She nodded, a somber look on her face. "I will have to report what you attempted," she said softly. "Too many witnesses to pretend it didn't happen."

"Go ahead," he replied. "I don't care anymore."

"I don't believe you. I think you still care. You put too much of yourself into studying the Alulans not to. Here's the proof."

She reached over to the endtable, grabbed a familiar tan bag, and handed it to Chalmers. He recognized it and looked inside.

It contained his Hawass Prize, the cat statuette he had intended to leave behind as part of his message to the Alulans. It also contained the starchart and the recorder.

Chalmers almost threw the bag against the wall, but weakness prevented that, both physical weakness and the affection he held for his prize. If only the bag had been missed when he had been carried to the ship. This was the last disgrace. Kachru was using it to play up his final failure.

"I thought you would want your statuette back," she said softly.

Chalmers remained silent, and Kachru sat down on the foot of his bed. "You know," she said, "your final idea was neat, I suppose, but it was too obvious."

That did it. "Obvious? How in the world could you call that obvious? I object to your use of that word!"

"Why?" She seemed surprised.

"I kept that plan well hidden from you, Director. I didn't tell anyone about it. And it almost worked. Don't insult me by calling it obvious."

She looked puzzled for a moment, then laughed. "I meant that it was too obvious for the Alulans. Placing a mote in that Eye? Far too melodramatic. Might as well carve out a human face on the moon."

"I suppose you could have done better."

She nodded. "I suppose I could have, but you could have as well. You could have thought of something more subtle, more befitting the mindset of the Tested."

"Like what?" he said, tired of the game. He just wanted her to go away, so he could forget his failure in a dreamless sleep.

Kachru shrugged, surprising Chalmers: he had never seen her shrug before. "Well, for example, suppose the regolith in the collapsed lavatube had the normal percentage of carbon, but included a fraction of carbon-14, commensurate with the traces we might have inadvertently left behind."

“Carbon-14?”

“Yes. There wasn't any on the moon before we got there, and we might have left some in our wastes. It could easily be passed off as error; if Earth ever found out, they couldn't really hold us at fault. And any Alulans who study the area would know that the carbon-14 can't be natural. It would be indisputable evidence of life having been on their moon, and definitely not native life at that.”

She looked away for a moment. “If they were to discover that, I think they could fairly be said to have earned the knowledge it provided.”

Disbelieving, Chalmers propped himself up on the bed. He felt a small smile appear on his face. “What are you saying?” he asked quietly.

Kachru got up to leave. “I'm not saying anything at all. I'm merely speaking about the concept of subtlety—a trait which you may lack, perhaps, but that some of us possess.”

Chalmers nodded, suddenly glad that Kachru had retrieved his statuette. “Good night—Shanti. And thank you.”

She smiled at his use of her first name, and nodded. “Good night, Winston. You may consider yourself welcome.”

END