



Nika Veresk

IN THE
SHADOW
OF THE
STOLEN LIGHT

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«ЛитРес: Самиздат»

2015

Veresk N.

In the shadow of the stolen light / N. Veresk — «ЛитРес: Самиздат»,
2015

In 2270 millions of people live on an artificial planet called Titanium – in a world of total social wellbeing and endless technological progress. For more than 250 years they have had no knowledge about those who were left on Earth, went through a global ecological catastrophe and formed a military alliance with powerful aliens to survive. For a long time these two human civilizations have been hundreds of light years apart, but now they are destined to reunite in order to face the only true enemy of mankind and fight for their future.

**May you live in interesting times,
may you find what you are looking for...**

We have no knowledge about what happened to Earth. Having left our planet a long time ago, we have been travelling through the Milky Way in search of a new abode for two hundred and fifty years. We avoid talking about it, but I sometimes think that no matter how great the Universe is, we will never find a place that we can truly think of as 'home'.

From Lora Merion's diary

Twentieth day, fifth month, year 2270 according to the Earth calendar

Chapter 1

A subtle alarm buzz and a dim light, that turned on softly afterwards, broke the quiet cosiness of the room. A young lady, who had been sleeping peacefully and tucked up in her bed just a second ago, winced discontentedly. She opened her eyes, her glance resting upon the light colour ceiling. A moment before she could feel a light wind caressing her skin, warm sun rays getting tangled in her dark hair; while a soft floral scent fascinated and intoxicated her mind. But it was only a dream, nothing more. Lora got out of bed and stretched her arms. She then reached a small control panel on the wall, making it flash many colourful lights.

“Good morning, Lora! I hope you slept well!” a warm female voice greeted her.

“Yes, thanks,” answered Lora, somewhat indifferently, to the computer programme.

“You have no new messages. Today’s schedule of the Council meetings is already on your personal communicator. Your breakfast will be ready in 10 minutes. Have a good day!” added the electronic voice and stopped, leaving the room in total silence.

Lora nodded and then froze for a moment. A picturesque landscape from her dream was still haunting her, so she shook her head confusedly in an attempt to get rid of the pleasant hallucination and to finally come back to her small flat. Her eyes swept the interior: transparent furniture of nude colour, deliberately made in order not to limit the already tiny space of the flat; while the soft light reflecting off the milky-white floor was never meant to hurt the eyes.

“Switch on the video panel,” said Lora quietly, looking into the space in front of her. “Display a sunrise over a lake.”

In response to her words, a rainbow flash lit the walls around and, a second later, she could see tranquil waters of a mountain lake under a sky as clear as a bell. Following the first rays of sunrise, a warm gentle breeze burst into the room. It softly touched the girl’s hair and she smiled dreamily.

After having a shower and putting on a lightly-coloured uniform, Lora sat at a small table on which she found a glass of orange juice and a fresh sandwich waiting for her. Finishing her breakfast quickly as usual she fastened the Universal Communication Device (UCD), an absolute must-have for information exchange and communication between people, to her temple before reaching for a transparent tablet the size of her palm from a shelf. She activated it by pressing her thumb on the sensor and nodded in response to the message that flashed on the screen “Personal access codes have been updated”.

“Power off,” said the girl. The video panels went black, plunging the room into darkness for a short while before one of them moved aside silently. A dim blue light of the space city slipped through the opened window and Lora said quietly, “Good morning, Titanium!”

Lora had already been working on the report for over an hour when she heard a familiar voice.

“Hi! I knew I was going to find you here!” Paul sat next to her on the bench and adjusted his slightly dishevelled blond hair. “You still don’t like working at the office?”

“Hi! No, I prefer a more spacious environment!”

The girl glanced at the cosy little garden. Since the time she had started working in the Council, this garden with neatly clipped bushes, bright flowers and benches nestling in the shadows of small trees, had become her true treasure...

“You do realize that you are on the forty-seventh floor of the “Unity” building?” chuckled the young man.

“I keep forgetting,” admitted Lora, honestly smiling and looking into his kind grey eyes, and added, “I’m glad to see you!”

“Same here! When did you get back?”

“Yesterday. And, the truth is, I missed Titanium.”

“No kidding! After a month away in the Lactian capital! How do you like our new allies?”

The girl shook the transparent tablet in the air. “It’s all here! How’ve you been?”

“It depends,” said Paul, avoiding the straight answer.

“Oh! I know that voice!” Lora hastily put the tablet away into a case on her belt and looked at her companion with genuine curiosity. “Tell me!”

“I guess I should create some suspense,” the young man lowered his voice and went silent for a second.

“Come on, don’t keep me waiting!” Lora was pulling at his sleeve, showing her impatience.

“OK! Here it is... Our Laboratory of Universe Exploration has received a message from the inhabitants of a distant planet that we collaborated with about half a century ago. Our location systems on their orbit have been receiving information all this time...”

Lora frowned.

“OK! I got it! To cut a long story short, they have discovered an object of Earth origin drifting in space.”

“Is it something from Earth?!” Lora’s eyes became wide with amazement.

“A number of tests have been carried out and the majority of them confirm that fact.”

“What’s in there?” Lora did not understand why she was whispering now. The city had no secrets. Any information about absolutely everything – be it about space finds, negotiations with whatever races, or discoveries – was stored in the central computer and was available to everyone.

“A Rescue unit, an ark... Something like that. The distance is more than five light-years away, that’s why the information is not detailed enough. They’d never have noticed this piece of metal if the signal it transmitted didn’t look so much like the SOS signal. Its frequency band sounds very much like the one transmitted from our ships.”

“An ark?” Lora could hardly hold back the avalanche of questions that was about to befall her friend. “Are there any signs of life?” She was nailing him with an intense gaze.

“Doctor Blake thinks that the ark probably holds a cryogenic capsule...”

“That means there’s a human being inside!” Lora jumped from her seat, ready to run and do something, but she knew not what exactly.

“Hey, calm down!” Paul was a bit shocked by this wild outburst of Lora’s emotions. “Have a seat...”

“It’s just that it’s so amazing!” said Lora, trying hard to breathe normally and getting back to her chair.

“You give too much importance to that,” the young man was trying to calm her down. “Earth is many thousands of light-years away; besides, the object’s energy resources are meagre...”

“You can’t know for sure! When’s Doctor Blake going to send a team to the place where the object was discovered?”

“He has no reasons to hurry.”

“And what if there is a human being? What if he or she is dying?”

“Please, calm down...” said Paul again desperately. “I’ll talk to Doctor Blake. My team has no immediate tasks for the next three days. We are in reserve so there is a big chance that we’ll be able to quickly organise a small expedition there...”

“Now” said Lora more calmly and confidently this time, “Talk to him now.”

“Alright...”

“And I’ll come with you.”

“If the operation is approved, the level of personnel competence shall be A-4,” clarified her companion.

“I have A-2, it is more than enough.”

“What about the project? Weren’t you writing a report about the Lactians?”

“It’s ready!” Lora was grinning contentedly. “There’s nothing that can keep me back!”

The expedition team of five was quickly appointed by Doctor Blake. Three of them were Paul’s crew members accompanied by an expert from the Universe Exploration lab and, finally, a junior Council member, Lora Merion. In only a matter of hours, all of them set off on a journey in a small shuttle.

Having entered the coordinates of their destination, Paul switched on the autopilot and slightly stretched his body placing his hands behind his head.

“Are we entering hyperspace?” Lora glanced at the panoramic view opening from the front part of the shuttle, dashing into the endless darkness of the space.

“Yes, without the speed of light it would take forever to get there,” chuckled the young man.

“I see,” the girl nodded, “I just can’t wait... I want to know who or what is in there so much! It’s been more than 200 years since we last contacted home.”

“You’re probably the only one who calls Earth ‘home’,” grinned Paul.

“I can’t help it,” admitted Lora honestly.

“We lost our home,” said Jane Forest, the lab expert, who sat next to Lora, compassionately patting her on the shoulder. “The time will come when we’ll find a new home; a place where we can live in harmony and build our future without fear that someone may encroach on our way of thinking, abuse our knowledge or use it to their profit.”

“But people on Earth could also change for the better,” objected Lora confidently, “We haven’t heard from them for so long!”

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

“Facts of our history are very obstinate. Earthly civilizations appear and perish, one after another. Throughout the thousands years of human history, our kind failed to tame the energy of destruction. Except us.”

“But if we could, it means others can, too!”

“Andre thought so, too,” Oleg Butoff, who was sitting silently till now, joined the discussion. “He died with this belief in his heart...”

Lora remembered a video recording of the clash shown in their history lessons and her hazel eyes filled with sadness. It happened a long time ago.

Back then the ‘Solar Flotilla’ was only one of the many scientific projects developed by the ‘Unity of Opposites’ society, founded by Andre Mendez. Within ten years, a small group of his followers who accepted his philosophy turned into a movement of people able to control the energy of self-destruction, inherent to their consciousness and, thus, able to increase the creative power of the mind. Their great scientific discoveries in energy-saving technologies, ozone layer recovery, treatment of deadly diseases and the revival of the endangered species of plants and animals were made for the good of the people and the whole planet. However, harmony and equilibrium in the society were not easy to sustain in a world where politicians strive for power, industrialists crave super profits, and religious leaders try to manipulate minds. Sometimes facts really are obstinate things.

“Our voyage won’t last forever,” added Jane. “I’m sure about it.”

Lora nodded, staring out the window. The blue glow of Titanium and bright contours of Taria, the planet orbited by the space city, vanished in the pitch black space and her eyes got lost in the dark, as if pierced by silver-blue threads, endless hyperspace.

The autopilot was confidently leading the shuttle to its destination. The majority of the crew members were sound asleep except Lora who could not really understand why she was the only one waiting for this encounter so restlessly. Since 22nd July, 2025, the day when the ancestors of the contemporary Titanium inhabitants left Earth on board five spaceships made by the ‘Unity of Opposites’ society, their descendants never looked back; never sought any information about their home planet. There were many reasons for that.

“Arrival to the destination point in two minutes and thirty seconds,” uttered the autopilot quietly.

Then there was a light jerk and the shuttle slid out of hyperspace.

“Oleg, assume the manual control,” ordered Paul. “Chris, start preparing to seize the object. Jane, what do the scanners show?”

“The object is drifting in the open space. Its coordinates and the images are displayed on the holographic interface,” answered the girl.

Paul approached the monitor on the bridge, while Lora froze looking at the panoramic front window. At first, she didn’t see anything in the darkness that swallowed even the light of the distant stars. But then, in that obscurity, a small dot appeared, which grew bigger and more distinct with every moment.

“According to the data, it’s a rescue unit: spherical in shape and 32 tons in weight. No external marks, it has been heavily damaged by the meteorites. The inside is filled with air. The scanner shows there’s one biological object with weak signs of life.”

“There’s a human being inside!” Lora looked at the hologram and jumped from her seat, pointing at the pulsing red light in the corner of the single deck.

“The ark’s too big for the cargo compartment...” said Paul rubbing his neck. “But, from the looks of it, the ship’s sheathing allows for towing in the hyperspace...”

“Wait!” exclaimed Lora, grabbing the young man’s hand. “We cannot tow a ship in the hyperspace with a dying human being in it! What if there’s some kind of malfunction?”

“We cannot dock to the unit, its technology is outdated...” said Oleg shrugging and pointed at the hologram. “But it’s possible to moor closer to it and throw out the flexible bridge... Here’s the trapdoor, as the scanner shows, and behind it there is an airlock. Let’s get there and see...”

“We also need to assess the level of biological and other threats,” added Jane.

“OK, let’s do that,” agreed the captain. “Time for preparation: 30 minutes.”

“I’m coming too!” Lora dashed to the compartment with the space suits.

“No; Oleg, Jane and I are going. You and Chris will be watching the monitors and following any changes on the scanner.”

“But...”

“I’m in charge of this expedition, Lora” Paul interrupted her.

The girl sighed resignedly.

“That’s better. We’ll be in touch.”

The airlock could hardly be called spacious; nevertheless, it easily accommodated three members of the crew.

“Everything is so old here... I can’t even remember this technology” Oleg reached for the adaptable control panel and connected it to the lifeless console on the wall. A minute later the air was filling the surrounding space with a characteristic hiss. “Oxygen level is normal; we can enter

the ship,” he pressed some more keys and the portal door creaked and moved aside revealing the dimly lit deck.

“How do you like the picture?” asked Paul to the ones left back on the ship.

“It’s clear, the signal is strong, the majority of the machines are switched off and it’s interference-free. There’s no trouble,” reported Chris.

“You can say that again! The ship’s in the minimum energy consumption state...” Jane looked at the screen of the portable scanner. “The signal of the biological object is on the right.”

“And on the left there is some kind of an engine room... Oxygen level is stable around the entire perimeter,” Oleg added.

“OK! Let’s split,” ordered Paul. “Oleg, check the engine room, while Jane and I will assess the condition of the biological object. Stay in touch.”

“Got it!” sounded the young man and the beam of the one of the flashlights went sliding further down the narrow corridor, going to the left of the airlock.

“Give me some light here,” the captain pointed Jane towards a small control panel at the entrance to the next compartment.

“It’s broken,” said the girl sadly.

“We’ll short-circuit it,” decided Paul.

After a couple of simple moves, the portal door slid open. Behind the door it was completely in darkness as well; the attention attracted only by a tiny flickering green light in the corner.

“Captain,” Oleg’s voice could be heard from the earphones. “The preliminary diagnostics have been performed; the ship supplies only the life-support systems of the biological object. I wouldn’t risk providing it with energy from our shuttle, it’s too dangerous.”

“Confirmed, I agree with you. It’s pitch-black in here...”

“I think he’s there,” Jane started, slowly moving towards the signal.

“How’s the air test?”

“There’s no biological danger, but the ship was a long time in the open space so there are traces of radiation everywhere...”

“How long could it have been flying?”

With the help of the flashlights they could see lifeless electronic panels on the walls and the central control panel, as well as two large horizontal capsules standing parallel to each other.

Jane approached one of them and, bending down, called the captain with her hand. She wiped the shining dust off the surface with her glove.

“Can you see what we see?” Paul’s words resounded a bit louder than was expected in the absolute silence.

Under the thick clouded glass there was a man, though his image was obscured by the glare of the flashlights.

“So... we see a man...” answered Chris.

“Is he alive?” Lora’s voice trembled with excitement.

“There are weak signs of life. This used to be his data display, it seems,” Jane touched a small screen above the man’s head. “It’s not working... There’s nothing we can do to help him, he needs to be hospitalized.”

“What about the other object?” asked the captain, nodding in the direction of the other capsule behind Jane.

She turned away, scanned the capsule and shook her head.

“I see. Oleg, is it possible to take this capsule out of the ark and transport it to Titanium in the quarantine compartment? We’ll tow the empty ark.”

“Yes, I’ll be right there.”

After six hours of tireless work, the team finally connected the capsule to the mobile energy source and took it on board their shuttle with the help of the mini transporter operating on electromagnetic pillows.

Lora restlessly waited at the glass wall separating the snow-white quarantine compartment from the deck.

“Can I watch?”

“Of course you can. Just let Jane finish with the anti-radiation treatment. Oh, and put on the protective coveralls.” The young man could not help smiling at her impatience. “There’s nothing unusual there, just a man-sleeping, so to say.”

“Do you think he’s from Earth?”

“This was Dr Blake’s preliminary assessment. Chris is now analysing the data from the onboard computer. We’re going to find out soon...”

“If only it was that easy!” Chris joined their chat.

“What do you mean?”

“Almost all the data is a total mess... It’s as if their computer went crazy... But...” he paused knowingly and smiled.

“But...what?!” Lora was listening to that small report holding her breath.

“But I can say for sure that the mother ship that carried this ark was launched from Earth... Around two hundred years ago!”

“So it’s true!” Lora forcefully grabbed Paul’s arm, like a child who had received a long-awaited present for her birthday. She looked at all the crew members with excitement. “Half a century after our departure from Earth, others also learned to travel into the deep space!”

“The technology resembles ours. I reckon they used the designs developed at the scientific department of the ‘Unity of Opposites’, abandoned back on Earth. And, finally, they were able to implement the interplanetary spacecraft project,” clarified Butoff.

“Then what happened to the ship itself?” frowned the captain.

“Unless I sort out the madness of the onboard computer, I will not be able to give you a definite answer.”

“I’m going inside,” Lora smiled.

“I’m coming with you,” Jane had already put on the coveralls. “Let’s scan the man for illnesses or diseases. Two hundred years in open space and God knows how long he was inside this capsule.”

“What happened to the second capsule?” asked Lora when they were left alone.

“I think the onboard computer switched it off by itself. Having compared the state of the organisms in the two capsules, it chose the strongest one. I have read about that system, just a mathematical calculation; nothing more.”

Lora shook her head regretfully. When they entered the compartment, Jane started filling data in a medical form, while her companion bent over the clouded glass, breathless. She could see a pale face, with skin that seemed almost transparent and dark hair that contrasted with the whiteness of his suit’s and the capsule itself.

“How does the capsule really preserve life?”

“I think a kind of preservative is injected in blood which neutralises later on. An old technology... It is highly dangerous to the synaptic connections in the brain.”

“Can something be done in order to bring him out of this state?”

Jane frowned.

“It’s preferable to leave him as he is now till our arrival on Titanium. One wrong move could cause the antidote to be injected into his blood, and then who knows how our guest will be feeling when he wakes up and what kind of help he might need!”

Lora nodded.

“Why do you think his spaceship has travelled such a long way? Was it just a scientific expedition? Or, is it possible that they might have been looking for us?”

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

“Who knows. Let’s hope that when he comes around he’ll tell us the whole story.”

The Titanium Central Hospital was a quiet lonely place. The residents of the artificial planet rarely got ill due to their inner balance practice, a result of Andre Mendes’s philosophy. Therefore, the medical workers indulged more in scientific research than in medical practice. After having met another civilization in a planetary system similar to the Solar system many decades ago, the voyagers from Earth ceased to think about intelligent life in the Universe as something extraordinary. In the period of over two hundred years of its space travel, ‘Solar Flotilla’ – a fleet of five spaceships launched from Earth – has established a lot of new contacts with the inhabitants of other planets. The earthlings’ technological advancements happened to be higher than those of the other living beings, which helped them to make collaborative partnerships for mutual benefit. On the one hand, to get supplies for the spaceships and, on the other hand, to provide the aliens with new technologies, especially new custom-made medical medicines.

The walls and the vaulted ceiling of the spacious hospital hall consisted of multiple sleek video panels. They were normally snow white, but once a visitor appeared, they would immediately display panoramic views of all kinds. It could be tall mountains with dark forests at their foot, endless plains stretching beneath cloudless blue skies or ocean waves reaching the shores. Similar panels with exquisite nature views were hardly a rare thing to see on Titanium. However, only here in the total solitude would Lora truly feel as if she had found herself on Earth, where she could hear the real sound of waves crashing or leaves blowing in the wind, and enjoy the warmth of the sun while walking barefoot on the sand.

“Lora Merion?”

The sound of her name jolted her out of the dreamy thoughts about Earth.

“Yes?”

“My name’s Dr Borshchevsky,” said a grey-haired elderly man. “Are you here for patient number sixty-four?”

“Yes... Sixty-four? I thought the wards were empty...”

“Well, ten hours ago we picked up some refugees from Taria. They are sixty-two Tarians and a diplomat from Titanium. They have suffered great stress and a little anoxaemia due to the life support system’s failure on board their spacecraft. They’re going to be fine.”

“But what had happened? Why did they have to flee?”

“I’m sorry, Ms Marion, I was too busy taking care of them and had no time to ask about what had happened on Taria,” answered the tired doctor. “The majority of the doctors are away at a seminar, so we have a shortage of staff.”

“Yes, I understand,” nodded Lora. “Can I help somehow?”

The man shook his head.

“The specialists have been called in and are going to be here in fifteen minutes. So everything is going to be back to normal. As for patient number sixty-four, we have neutralized the preservative without injecting the antidote. The truth is, to identify the chemical substance and devise a neutralization method took more than three hours. That’s why we hadn’t been able to give you any details earlier. Before that, the total scan had shown malnutrition in some regions of his brain. I’ll probably repeat myself by saying it’s malnutrition, not total cessation. So there’s a 70% probability that his nervous system functions will recover after proper treatment.”

“How long will the rehabilitation process take?”

“It’s difficult to trace any improvement in such a short time; however, despite a long coma, he has a very strong immune system. Lucky man! The capsules were well protected from the radiation.

Oh, yes, and something else... His blood contains antibodies to a virus unknown to us. I have sent the full report to the Council. This man poses no biological threat to the citizens of Titanium. My colleagues are getting ready to start the autopsy of the second body.”

“Thank you,” Lora touched the middle of her chest with her palm as a sign of sincere gratitude.

“Always happy to help you,” the doctor said smiling, with his palm touching his chest like Lora’s.

Lora left the hall and hastily walked to the teleport. Her next destination was the ‘Unity’ premises, where the Council was located.

Chapter 2

“Aren’t you early today, Lora!” Jean Prequeaux, one of the seven members of the ‘Solar Flotilla’ Council, greeted her.

Smiling, she placed her palms together in front of her chest and bowed slightly.

“How was yesterday’s meeting? Was my report on the Lactians any good?”

“Good, very good! Also, the report was remarkable! I’m sure we’ll sign several agreements with this race and install three powerful telescopes on the two satellites of their capital planet.”

“That’s great news!” nodded the girl, taking a seat opposite the councillor. His round-shaped office in the ‘Unity’ building was dimly lit and a storm was raging silently on the walls, lightning striking and rain pouring over an endless meadow. “So what happened on Taria? I was at the hospital; there are sixty-three injured including our diplomat...”

“A sad story,” Jean’s face became sorrowful. “The planet is on the verge of civil war. Taria’s leader’s authority and ability to govern a planetary system are in serious doubt. He has a strong opponent, a hostile man planning to militarise Doht. He is haunted by the imaginary enemies, and Titanium with ‘Solar Flotilla’ is no exception.”

“What are we going to do?”

“As always, Lora, we adhere to a laissez-faire policy. We have no right to adjust other civilizations to our own liking. They have their own unique path. We’re all strangers here, able to offer some help in scientific research and world’s welfare, but when it comes to war, taking sides and fighting for others’ values, we stay out.”

Lora frowned.

“But how about all the innocent lives lost in a war, lives of those who were against fighting from the very beginning?”

Jean sighed heavily and, stroking his thick grey hair, approached the holographic interface in the middle of the office.

“Look here,” he said gesturing to Lora to follow him. A large image of a star map appeared there. “Our astronomers and the central computer have developed a new voyage route. The spaceship engines have been improved which spares us the need to stay close to liveable planets. Thus, our search speeds up dramatically.”

Lora nodded.

“Considering the situation on Taria, the Council has an assignment for you.”

“What is it?”

“You are to go to Misgran, the closest populated planet to us that belongs to the Lactian Empire. A Lactian diplomatic mediator is going there too. You are to negotiate all the terms and conditions of our stay on their territory, and our further collaboration within the framework of our peace agreement.”

“I was hoping to stay here on Titanium,” Lora frowned.

“I thought so when I received the report about the findings from Earth. But you are the only one who knows so much about the Lactians and have met with them on several occasions.”

The girl nodded in agreement. Councillor Prequeaux was right.

“It will only take a couple of weeks. As far as I know, the survivor from Earth is in a very serious condition and his rehabilitation will take a long time. I don’t think you’ll miss anything if you set off right now. Besides, I will recommend the Council to entrust you with this project. I’m sure upon your return you will be happy to lead a group of experts who will investigate what has happened to the Earth transport.”

“Thank you,” Lora nodded again. “That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you about.”

The councillor smiled, satisfied with their mutual agreement.

“Now, let’s see the results of the interim report, shall we?”

“Yes, of course,” Lora shook her head fending off sad thoughts about a sudden departure. “The doctor told me about an unknown virus...”

“Councillor Prequeaux, you have a call from the Universe Exploration lab,” his secretary announced calmly.

“Thank you, Kelly. Switch the image onto the holographic interface, please.”

“Good day, Councillor! Hello, Lora!” a 3D image of Jane Forest, hovering over the projector, was greeting them by joining her hands in a welcoming gesture. “We have a small report about the object delivered on Titanium 10 hours ago.”

“We were just reading the medical report.”

“Well, their report is probably the most detailed. The IT department will need more time than we had previously thought to reconstruct all the data. So far, they have been able to define the exact date of the ship’s departure from Earth, it’s the 13th January, 2077 according to the Earth calendar. The spacecraft with the rescue capsule on board was travelling at super-light speed for a long time and, initially, its trajectory was almost the same as ours... We can suggest that it was deliberately trying to follow the ‘Solar Flotilla’; but, for some reason, it was jolted out of hyperspace before reaching its goal. The reason why the rescue capsule subsequently separated from the mother ship remains unknown.”

“This is very interesting...” mused the councillor.

“Unfortunately, we can only speculate about the events, basing our conclusions on assumptions: not facts. The biggest problem is that we don’t have the mother ship that carried the capsule.”

“Thank you, Miss Forest. I’d appreciate it if I received all the details electronically.”

“Of course, my report is ready.”

Jean rubbed his chin thoughtfully and turned to Lora.

“How’s our guest doing?”

“Not very well. The life support system that has been keeping him alive all these years is far from perfect and eventually caused brain malnutrition. Doctor Borshchevsky sounded hopeful, but didn’t give any accurate prediction about the length of the therapy.”

“I see. So all we can do is wait. Did you say something about a virus earlier?”

“Yes, the doctor said that he has discovered some kind of antibodies in the blood of this man. We can check the report...”

“Of course,” the councillor swiped the sensor panel with his hand, causing the holographic interface to display a series of pages.

“From the look of it, he acquired these antibodies while already in flight,” said Lora, studying the notes carefully.

“It’s an unknown disease. It hadn’t existed before our launch from Earth, but we also haven’t encountered it on other planets. The causative agent could’ve appeared much later...”

“The origin of the virus is still unknown...” added Lora.

“We still only have very meagre information. We can only guess whether the infection was present in the ship from the beginning of its launch or it appeared while in flight, causing the rescue capsules to detach from the mother ship...”

The girl shook her head thoughtfully.

“What if it was an attempt to ask for our help? What if an unknown epidemic struck the people, threatening them with total extinction, and those two were the only survivors?”

Jean raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Your assumptions are impressively fatalistic.”

“You’re so right. I don’t understand what’s been happening to me...”

“You just attach great importance to what’s gone on...”

Lora looked at Jean, puzzled.

“How can I not?”

“What do you mean? How can anyone not think so much and not assume the worst?” the councillor asked her calmly.

“It’s not about my assumptions, though the finding has been really haunting me. It’s just that we are talking about Earth! Our home!” the girl realized that she almost shouted the last words.

“Calm down, please,” Jean put a fatherly hand on her shoulder. “We’ll sort it out. In the end, the man who needed our help is safe now. He has you to thank for that. It was you who urged Doctor Blake to rescue him.” He paused and Lora nodded in agreement. “Please, be a little patient. Although, patience is a virtue you’ve never really possessed,” he smiled.

In the ‘Unity’ building, Lora sat at the desk in her small office and dropped her head on her hands, feeling tired. She had just returned from Misgran after three weeks of constant negotiations, and immediately started preparing to leave again. Titanium and ‘Solar Flotilla’ were getting ready for launch from the Taria’s orbit. The unrest on the planet was constantly growing. The new leader’s aggression left no chance for reconciliation with space travellers. Despite the fact that they had spent more than one Tarian year on the planet’s orbit working closely with the previous government, the new authority wished no further contact with aliens. Lora sighed sadly – it was the first time in her life that they’d had to leave a populated planet so urgently. Before this moment, their ships left other races’ territories of their own free will after their cooperation, technology and resources exchange had exhausted itself. Besides, the citizens of ‘Solar Flotilla’ never forgot that they were only visitors. In search of a new home, they had been examining one planetary system after another. But every time they were ready to settle on a planet, they encountered intelligent life there.

“Hey, what’s the sad face for?” the matte glass office door slid open and she saw Paul in the doorway.

“I’m not sad, just tired. The new Tarian government refused to fulfil some terms and conditions under our agreement...”

“No wonder! They can’t wait for the day they get rid of us!”

“You can say that again.”

Lora’s UCD beeped quietly and a green light of an incoming call flashed.

“This is Doctor Borshchevsky,” Lora explained taking the call, “Yes, doctor, what can I do for you?”

“Good day, Miss Merion! Great news! Our patient, the only one left in the hospital, has regained consciousness! Would you...”

“I’m on my way!” Lora jumped from her seat, her fatigue disappearing instantly.

“I’m waiting for you,” replied the doctor and the green light died.

“What did he say?” asked the captain curiously. The communication device transformed voice messages into a number of electric impulses and transferred them directly to the hearing nerve of the receiver.

“The rescued man has come around!”

“I’m coming with you,” decided Paul in a flash, leaving the premises together with Lora.

“It’s been three weeks since we found out about the civil war on Taria,” noticed the young man on the way to the closest teleport. “You’ve been working very hard from dusk till dawn ever since. You need some rest.”

“Well, yes,” said Lora. She was still walking very quickly, barely escaping a collision with the passers-by and not being able to tame her growing excitement.

“Did you even hear what I was saying?”

They entered through the teleport glass door.

“Yes?”

“Hello! Please state your destination,” announced the ever-polite voice of the local teleportation programme.

“Central hospital,” answered Paul quickly, still piercing a confused Lora with his stare.

“Thank you,” uttered the electronic voice and the doors closed shut.

Just then, through the whirlpool of her own thoughts, Lora understood what he meant by that.

“Look, I’m not so tired to need an urgent vacation. The evacuation is in full-swing and I’d like to be a part of it.”

“Welcome to the Central Hospital,” announced the programme and the doors slid open, revealing a spacious brightly lit hall to their view.

“What about this story with Earth? It also requires a lot of your energy and attention. You’re risking losing all that if you continue working at such a pace.”

The girl sighed deeply; Paul’s concern for her was so predictable. Ever since they had become close friends as small kids, they had been constantly caring for each other like brother and sister.

“OK, let’s begin by seeing how our patient is doing,” Paul nodded apologetically.

They passed through the hall, which flashed with images of a beautiful sunrise and soon they entered the doctor’s office.

“That was fast!” the doctor smiled, welcoming them inside.

“Thank you for telling us immediately,” nodded Lora gratefully.

“So, I need to warn you that the patient is still very weak. Furthermore, his memory has been tragically letting him down. I think we’ll be able to restore it, but it will take quite some time.”

“I get it.”

“Does he remember anything at all?” asked Paul when they stopped in front of the ward door and, looking through the glass, saw a motionless man in bed.

“He remembers his name, Derek... I have firstly conducted the biological tests to examine his physical condition. A psychologist is on his way.”

“May we go in?” asked Lora, not letting the patient out of her sight.

“Of course. The quarantine has already been lifted. But please be careful with information as he is still suffering greatly from post-traumatic stress.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“After you,” he smiled politely in response.

Lora slowly entered the ward and approached the bed. The dim lighting inside didn’t prevent her from examining the rescued earthling. Still very pale he was lying on the pillow, with his eyes closed. He had a thin face with harsh features, and his breath could hardly be noticed. If not for his dark hair, he would be invisible in the whiteness surrounding him in this dimly lit ward.

“Is he sleeping?” whispered Lora.

In response to her question addressed to the doctor, the patient moved and Lora stopped talking, frightened.

“No, he isn’t. He’s just too weak. Every move demands a lot of energy from him. Sound and light seem too strong. But there is no doubt that his young body will be able to cope with all this.”

A quiet voice pierced the silence of the ward.

“Who are you?”

Lora approached the bed and turned to see the doctor. He nodded in agreement.

“My name is Lora,” she said quietly, and carefully touched his hand when he turned his head to see her.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital. This is also Doctor Borshchevsky and the shuttle captain, Paul Stones.”

“Shuttle? I’m in a shuttle?”

“No, you’re on...” she hesitated not sure whether to tell him about the artificial planet. “You’re on board a spaceship. Do you remember anything? Do you remember what had happened to you before?”

The young man winced.

“The lights are too bright here.”

“Reduce the lighting by 30 percent” said the doctor to the space in front of himself and the ward lighting became very dim. “Is it better like this?”

“Yes... a little...”

“I’d suggest that you wear protective lenses,” added Borshchevsky.

“Will I be able to open my eyes then?”

“Well, you could at least try.”

After the patient nodded lightly, the doctor carefully put a pair of sunglasses of some sort on his eyes.

“Everything is floating...”

“This is temporary,” Borshchevsky reassured him.

“If you find it difficult to talk now, we can come later...”

“No!” the young man moved his fingers and touched Lora’s hand. “Don’t go. Silence is more deafening than sounds.”

“Alright, just take it easy.” Lora tried to calm him down. “Is your name Derek?”

“I think so. That’s the first thing that came to my mind when I was asked. But what ship is it? How did I get here?” the patient tried to turn his head but stopped wincing in pain.

“We’ve found your rescue unit in the open space not so long ago. You were in stasis. We also know that your ship was launched from Earth.”

Millions of questions troubling Lora were about to burst out, but the realization that this man was too weak and probably didn’t know the answers even to one tenth of them helped her control her emotional avalanche.

“I remember Earth... But everything is so vague. Like flashes, different disconnected pictures...”

“Try to relax,” said the doctor. “You’ll remember everything. Just give yourself some time.”

“Also, I remember that I have very little time...” added Derek quietly.

The next day a truce was announced on Taria allowing the ‘Solar Flotilla’ to slow down the evacuation pace and to give a break to all those involved.

Chapter 3

“The hospital is not the most suitable place for a man in his condition,” said Doctor Borshchevsky confidently when Lora showed up at his office the next morning.

“Does he need anything special in order to get better?”

“He needs company,” clarified the doctor. “Thanks to our know-how, his physical condition is improving incredibly quickly. In the last 24 hours he has shown unbelievable progress. However, his memory and some brain functions’ recovery is a more complicated process. Medicine plays an important role, no doubt; but in my opinion, his integration back into the society will prove to be even more significant. Unfortunately, we’re unable to return him to his normal life, which is the generally

accepted method... But what we *can* do is to accommodate him in an apartment, show him Titanium, tell him about the life of ‘Solar Flotilla’.”

“But what we have to show him may shock him.”

“It’s quite possible, but keeping him in ignorance of it all can be even harder. I think it’s best if we tell him the truth, but carefully.”

“I see. I need to discuss this issue with the other members of the Council.”

“Of course. But I don’t think they’ll be against it.”

The top floor of the ‘Unity’ tower, boasting a high dome with bright blue sky and a few slowly floating clouds, housed the ‘Solar Flotilla’ Council. Year after year the seven members of the Council meet in this spacious hall and make the most important decisions on behalf of all Titanium citizens. On the one hand, they managed the collaboration between different key departments such as Universe Studies; Medical Technologies; Engineering and Innovative Solutions; Chronology and Education; as well as Spaceship Services. All these, in turn, consisted of a number of laboratories and other services, which altogether provided for all the needs of ‘Solar Flotilla’, during its travels. On the other hand, these seven people were in charge of foreign policies with alien races and their unions.

“So the doctor suggests helping our guest adapt to life on Titanium,” clarified Councillor Bella Groster calmly, after Lora had finished her short report on the results of the new project.

All the seven Council members were present around the table in the middle of the brightly lit colonnaded hall.

“Exactly. Derek’s quarantine has been lifted because he poses no biological threat to us,” noted the girl.

“Well, what about other types of threat?” asked John Simps, fixing Lora with his steady wise glance.

“What threat can a young man pose with severe memory loss, weak physical state and unarmed after such a long and dangerous journey?” Lora shook her head perplexedly. “It’s true we are still unable to say exactly why the earthlings had launched that ship. However, keeping the only survivor locked and in quarantine until all the details are clarified is, I believe, really cruel.”

“I agree,” nodded Andrey Volkhontsev. Being the youngest Council member and a former employee of the Universe Exploration department, Andrey had always been profoundly interested in diplomatic contact with other races and emphasised the necessity of collaboration with them. “This man is our guest. Our people have worked tirelessly in order to successfully save his life, not to take his freedom and make him a ‘prisoner’ of the Central Hospital. Sooner or later we’ll learn everything from him or from the engineers analysing his spaceship computer. Until then, it seems sensible to follow Doctor Borshchevsky’s recommendations.”

“What you say is not without logic, but still the fact remains that the earthlings attempted to kill Andre Mendes. Two hundred and fifty years ago, it was a deadly feud with the Earth governments that forced us to leave the planet. It was the only chance for us to stay true to our beliefs and avoid a world war.”

“But this happened more than two centuries ago,” insisted Lora.

“Our guest has been in stasis for the past two hundred years, so our perception of time and past events long gone is dramatically different to his” said John Simps. “His parents had witnessed that confrontation.”

“Anyhow, suspicion as well as trust to that man stem only from our assumptions,” summarized Jean. “What’s going to be the Council’s decision?”

“We all trust that the decision will be the right one,” Maria Fernandez’s voice sounded quiet and calm.

“So, you may follow Doctor Borshchevsky’s advice,” Jean pinned his gaze at Lora. She looked around at the rest of the Council members, and they nodded in agreement. “I’ll pass on the orders to the Spaceship Service to prepare everything.

“Thank you,” Lora bowed a little, putting her hand on her chest.

After she left the hall, no words were uttered for a while.

“I’d like to suggest something,” John Simps, the eldest Council member, broke the silence.

“I think I know what it’s about,” Andrey Volkhontsev smiled uneasily.

“Arrange an espial after our guest and an additional investigation into the destruction of his ship by using alternative information sources,” continued Councillor Simps, ignoring the last comment.

“Why didn’t you suggest it while Lora was here?” said Jean, looking at him very intensely. “It’s her project, so she has a right to know everything about it. There are no secrets here on Titanium.”

“Yes, I agree. This decision is an unusual one for us indeed, but the situation is far from ordinary as well,” said John Simps. “So, what’s going to be the Council’s decision?”

Lora was worriedly watching the medical assistants help the guest from Earth make himself comfortable in the mobile chair on the electromagnetic pillows, as he was still very weak to be able to move on his own.

“So,” Lora heard Doctor Borshchevsky’s voice from the back. Appearing there as if by magic, he came smiling and looking at everyone around. “How are you feeling, Derek?”

“Much better, thank you,” the young man subtly smiled, adjusting his dark glasses. “I don’t have the courage to take them off.”

“You can take them off when your eyes feel comfortable with the light,” the doctor assured him. “No reason to hurry. And something else,” he approached the patient and handed him a heavy metal bracelet. “There is a three day supply of medicine inside; injections will be made automatically, while a special device will warn you about it in advance. If there are no symptoms to be concerned about, then I’ll be expecting you here by the end of the period.” Then the doctor looked at Lora. “He’s in your care now.”

After the medical personnel left the ward, Lora perched at the edge of the empty bed and looked intently at the person in her care.

“Derek, before we leave the hospital, I’d like to tell you a little something about the place where we are now.”

“About the spaceship?”

“Yes, I guess you could say so... The thing is, Titanium is not exactly a ship... It’s...” Lora remembered how hard she had been rehearsing this conversation that morning, but when the moment came she was at a loss for words. “It’s a whole city” she finally uttered.

“A city in space?” the young man tried to clarify.

“Yes, a big city in space... So big that we actually classify it as an artificial planet with its own atmosphere and climate and...”

“Wait there!” the earthling shook his head. “Give me a second to think... An artificial planet?!”

“Yes, exactly.”

“It’s unbelievable!”

“I’m ready to show you everything, but the consequences of stasis, amnesia... The doctor is concerned...”

“Don’t carry on, I got the general idea,” Derek softly interrupted her confused explanations. “Even though I might not remember my past, it doesn’t mean that I’m not ready to see the future of mankind.”

Lora nodded. She relaxed a little at the confidence and calmness of his voice. Derek was leaving his ward for the first time during his stay at the hospital. A windowless ward had prevented him from seeing the city till this very moment. But now, passing through the hall with the panoramic glass walls, he could hardly contain his amazement.

“Oh, God...” sighed the young man, gazing at hundreds of towering skyscrapers; at the foot of which one could see rivers, lakes and parks, surrounded by rich greenery and blue rays.

“Welcome to Titanium!” said Lora proudly.

“This is unbelievable!” Derek moved closer to the window in his chair. “A real city! These are trees, aren’t they?” he pointed at one of the parks that could be easily distinguished even from the one hundred and eighth hospital floor.

“Yes, the city has a lot of greenery,” said the girl. It was hard for her to understand his emotions as the dark sunglasses hid his true feelings behind them. However, she could read the excitement in his voice and his pulse running wild as the bracelet indicated. “Let me show you the hologram,” she thought quickly. “This’ll help you understand how Titanium was created.”

“Yes, of course!” Derek turned away from the window and looked seriously at the transparent tablet computer on Lora’s palm.

“Display the panoramic hologram of Titanium,” said Lora and a basketball-sized 3D model appeared above the tablet. “This is the view from space. The planet is a sphere with a blue nucleus at its core. The inhabited part of Titanium with all its buildings is not on its surface. The city expanse cuts the planet just above the equator into two hemispheres, while a part of the core stays visible and the city, sort of encircles it. The Upper hemisphere is the energetic dome rising over the megalopolis, which keeps the air and protects the inhabitants from the deadly radiation. The floating clouds are only a perfect illusion of the sky: a holographic projection. The Lower hemisphere housing all the city buildings is built from titanium and is shaped like a layered pie. It includes a layer of city communications system, an equatorial transport terminal and several thousand more layers going deep down.”

“And this?” the young man pointed at the shining, rainbow-like cover enveloping Titanium.

“It’s the outer energy field generated by the nucleus and functions as passive protection from a possible attack from the outside.”

“How could people have created such a thing and launched it into space afterwards?”

“The planet was built in space. At the base of the building process is a constantly perfected nanotechnology. The tiny nanites process raw materials and recreate the necessary construction elements according to the project.”

“Did nanites build all this?”

“Yes, nanites and the robotic devices. The raw material was the debris of a gigantic asteroid field. Our scientists have found a way to convert the basic chemical materials from the asteroids into the chemical combinations necessary for the construction. Titanium prevailed among other solids that were used; hence the name of the city: Titanium. Travelling in the megapolis is possible by means of a teleport. I think it’s time you had a real feel of the transport system at work. There are also stairs, but they’re not as popular. The teleport system is the fastest transport means in the spaceship.”

“The fastest after the stairs?” smiled the young man.

“No, after the micro-transport on the electromagnetic pillows,” Grinning, Lora pointed at the guest’s chair. Suddenly her tension that had been so strong back in the ward was melting away fast.

“Do many people use them?” asked Derek, feeling genuinely curious.

“Not these ones in particular, however, there are many devices for carrying different loads. By the way, the central teleport is a public transport, but there are also freight units.”

“I get it, like buses and lorries.”

“Buses?”

“Well, it’s like some old-fashioned transport means with tyres. They used to travel by land burning tonnes of petrol. However, they were improved later when the electric engines were introduced.”

“They’re described in encyclopaedias,” Lora tried to remember.

“They must be.”

“So, you remember the transport means on Earth. Anything else?” asked the girl as they were slowly heading towards the closest teleport.

“I remembered when you started talking... This information sounded like something I take for granted...”

“The doctor said that you would remember things which were associatively connected to your memories.” remembered Lora.

“Looks like he was right then.”

“I can take you directly to your apartment if you wish to rest.”

“I’d prefer to take a walk if possible,” answered the young man.

“Alright, what would you like to see first?..” At that moment the UCD on Lora’s temple buzzed softly, lighting a green colour which was indicating an incoming call. “Will you excuse me, I’ll have to take it,” she explained to the man. “Yes, Jean.”

After a short conversation she returned to the previous discussion with the guest from Earth.

“I was going to show you some of the local attractions...”

“What’s that?”

“This?” the girl touched the mini contraption with her palm. “It’s a universal communication device, UCD for short.”

“Is it a walkie-talkie?”

Lora frowned trying to remember the meaning of this word and finally answered.

“It connects people, but that’s only one of its functions.”

“Why didn’t I hear the voice of the other speaker?”

“A UCD transforms sound into an electrical pulse and transmits it onto the auditory nerve.”

“What else can this device do?”

“It provides a connection to the central computer, thanks to which any information that I may need reaches the brain through the visual nerve and visualizes as if in front of my very eyes. Again, only I can see those images.”

Without realizing it, they arrived at the teleport cabin.

“Good morning!” Initiated by the arrival of two passengers inside the spacious matte glass cabin, the local teleport system interrupted Lora’s explanations. “State your destination, please.”

“The North City Park,” decisively said Lora.

The doors closed, opening a second later.

“Welcome to the central square of the North Park!” reported the programme.

The young people went outside and Derek looked around. They were in the middle of a brightly lit hall with a colonnade, while to the right and left of them other tele-cabin doors were opening and closing. Coming out of the cabins, people were joining a moderately moving crowd following the direction indicated by the neon lines on the floor.

“We are now on the fifth level of the North Park teleport complex,” explained Lora. “The building looks like a pyramid based on a square with a side of one hundred and fifty meters long and with nine hundred cabins on its twenty levels. There’s a viewpoint at the top, on the twenty-first level, boasting an amazing view of the park. The main staircase runs along the eastern side, we’ll use it to go down to the park.”

“The North Park, the eastern side,” said the young man thoughtfully, proceeding alongside Lora. “If this is a city in space, then where do the sides of the world come from?”

“A good question,” Lora smiled. “The city territory is divided into four parts: Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Titanium. On the one hand, these are just names that have nothing to do with the real sides of the world; but on the other hand, they are the internal guidelines – simply indispensable.”

The two of them slowly joined the bright lively flow of people ascending the staircase, and they soon found themselves on a large square, with a tall white pyramid of the teleport itself towering

over it. Further down stretched a real park. Short trees and bushes framed the winding paths and straight alleys, while braided stems of blooming ivy were climbing up the park pavilions. Here and there the neatly-cut lawns were decorated with rock gardens featuring blooming flowers and gurgling clear streams. Derek looked up to face the clear sky, lit by the rays of the rising sun.

“It’s hard to believe that these are not real clouds...” he noted.

“No matter how realistic they look, these are just projected images,” Lora added, feeling a bit sad.

“The park’s so huge...”

“Yes, it is. The North Park is the biggest in the city. The city fairs, our painters’ exhibitions and alien cultures’ displays are all held here.”

“Alien cultures? You actually have found traces of life on other planets?” Derek was mistrustfully looking at Lora.

“Why traces? Travelling through our galaxy we have encountered many living alien civilizations. We collaborate with some of them, exchanging technologies and resources...”

“That’s incredible!..”

“That means that at the moment of your spaceship launch, contact with other alien races hadn’t been established yet.”

“Well, this... or my memory is failing me tragically...”

“At your apartment you can gain access to the central computer in order to get an idea about all the voyages of ‘Solar Flotilla’. There you can also get descriptions of all the habitable planets we have visited...”

“That would be great...” the guest from Earth suddenly froze and his chair stopped moving.

“What’s wrong?” Lora stopped beside him looking worriedly into his face.

“My ship...”

“You mean the rescue unit?”

“Yes, I wasn’t alone there. Did you find only me there?”

Lora slightly pushed his chair to a bench down in the alley and sat.

“There was also a woman in your rescue unit. Unfortunately, she had died before we arrived.”

There was a pause and the man shook his head.

“I don’t remember her name,” he said bitterly. “I’m trying but I just can’t recall anything!”

His last words were permeated with obvious rage.

“Are you angry with yourself?” her question sounded very quietly but Derek reacted immediately.

“Wouldn’t you be?!”

Lora shook her head.

“Of course I can become angry... But rage is a tremendously destructive force that can cause a lot of harm.”

Derek’s anger immediately turned into amazement and now he was intently listening to Lora.

“We have learnt to control the self-destructive part of our personality,” she explained, seeing how much it puzzled him.

“Control? What do you mean by that? Control your temper?”

“No, we don’t actually repress fury, but we realize its futility.”

Derek still didn’t have any idea of what she was talking about.

“You are people though, aren’t you?” he tried to clarify. “Ordinary people get angry, fight, become furious...”

Lora sighed heavily, realizing that she was unable to explain her point of view to Derek without revealing to him the genuine reasons for the long voyages of ‘Solar Flotilla’.

“Derek, there is no doubt that we are human beings and that our ancestors were from Earth. But you must know something else. The doctor said that you mustn’t get stressed...”

“Please, spare me, Lora! What haven’t you told me? Do you mean about me spending 50 years in the rescue unit, and that since then the earthlings started flying into space on huge spaceships?”

“It’s much more complicated than that.”

“Even more complicated?” Derek repeated her words hesitantly.

“Our ancestors left Earth more than two hundred and fifty years ago. We think your ship was sent to look for us fifty years later. You were in stasis for two hundred years, Derek. And, to tell you the truth, I don’t know how to begin.”

There was a long pause.

“Every story has a beginning,” the young man uttered unexpectedly.

Lora nodded.

“In 2014 Andre Mendes, one of the richest men on the planet at that time, founded a society called the ‘Unity of Opposites’. Not many people believed that one day he would transform from a successful and practical businessman into a philosopher and philanthropist. Nevertheless, many different people became interested in his ideas and joined a team under his leadership. Andre thought that every human being has two opposite sides: one being a creative side, while the other a destructive side. The latter makes people desire limitless power which they use to start wars and enslave others; save up enormous fortunes at the expense of simple workers; and turn a blind eye to the hungry and terminally ill. Mendes was absolutely convinced that the expanding human ‘ego’ was to blame for the destruction of civilization. Our leader taught his followers to be aware of that destructive part, to find the line beyond which our feelings and desires become a deadly weapon against ourselves and the outside world.”

“Is this all the philosophy?”

“In general terms, yes. Many people thought that Andre created yet another sect of fanatics; however, with time, his teachings bore real fruit. People who managed to tame their ego and achieved harmony could discover new inner abilities. As a result, they could easily develop cutting-edge technologies and expand the human knowledge in all areas of science. Soon after, a large plot of land on the African continent was purchased where the society members built a whole city; a stronghold of science and new philosophy. Their inventions could help the human race to recover from many illnesses, preserve nature, create alternative sources of energy and much more. Besides, all of that was free of charge. Andre proposed to the governments of the world to collaborate in providing mutual help in the development and application of new technologies; not for profit or war victories, but for the sake of the harmonious co-existence of all the people on the planet.”

“But this is utopia!”

“No. He promoted the principles of rationality. However, politicians, religious organisations and large corporations wanted to master new knowledge in order to use it for their own benefit. As the years went by, the number of our enemies grew more and more. After seven years, the confrontation between the Unity and the rest of the world reached its culmination when an attempted assassination of Andre occurred during his annual speech. On that day the Council, created by Andre to manage his organization’s affairs, faced the ever-important question of ‘what to do?’ Their philosophy did not accept any kind of military resistance, but what could they do to defend their beliefs? After the injury, our founder was very weak and the councillors were afraid that the death of their leader in the circumstances of an implacable hostility could become fatal for the whole society. It was then that the ‘Solar Flotilla’ project, housed in some of the city buildings, became the ultimate priority. In its core lay one astrophysicist’s dissertation, where he had predicted the destruction of Earth due to strong flames from the Sun. Using this paper as a base, Andre Mendes decided to develop several experimental projects-arks of some sort, able to save humanity from extinction. The construction was in full swing, but this time with a new purpose. Gradually all the society members were relocated to the ships. None of the enemies had the slightest idea about the magnitude of the project. They were only watching closely fearing a strong reaction from the ‘Unity of Opposites’ to their potential direct

hostilities. This never happened and on 22 July 2025 five of the biggest city buildings roared to the air and left planet Earth forever.”

She stopped.

Derek did not move and continued staring at nothing in particular in front of him.

“I realize that my story sounds absolutely bizarre and probably confuses you even more, taking into consideration your memory loss about any events that happened to you on Earth.”

“I guess you’re right...” the young man answered, puzzled.. “All this is absolutely incomprehensible... The two hundred years in stasis, the people who had left Earth before my birthday and who continue living now in a space city...”

Lora sighed heavily.

“And we still don’t know why your ship went after us...”

“Why are you so sure that it followed ‘Solar Flotilla’?”

“Our ships headed in the same direction. This data is supported by your onboard computer and the calculations of our experts. And although they don’t know how your on-board navigation system managed to trace ‘Solar Flotilla’, there is no doubt that our ships were meant to meet, but failed for some reason. The fact that we found you in space was a total accident.”

Derek frowned.

“I don’t know the answer. I can only recall some vague images...”

“What images?”

“The clearest is of a wooden house... It’s far away from the city, but the megalopolis towers are so tall that they can be seen from dozens of miles away. There is smog hovering over them... Black clouds... I’m sure it’s hot and stuffy there. While here, far away from it, there are trees and you can breathe much easier.”

“Is it your home?”

“I’m not sure,” he shrugged, “Also, I see a building without windows. Inside there are many gadgets like monitors, flickering lamps, some beeping sounds. There are people, many people, all dressed in the same clothes,” the young man looked at Lora’s white uniform. “Their clothes are different. They’re dark blue, I think.”

“I have an idea!” Lora abruptly jumped from her seat. “Let’s go to the archives. There’s a lot of information about Earth and, thus, it’s more convenient to look through the old files. You’ll probably be able to find something familiar.”

“Alright,” nodded her guest, a little shocked by her enthusiasm.

The interior of the archives was shaped like an enfilade, whereby a row of rooms were successively attached to one another with doors placed on one axis, creating a sense of cross-cutting perspective for hundreds of meters away. Derek unwittingly compared this place with a giant library, where thousands of shelves would stand against both sides of the central corridor, and hide in the dark under a sky-high ceiling. They were full of tiles that looked like books with glowing neon spines. Lora paused at one of the information boards, which looked like a tall table presenting holographic data.

“OK, let’s see,” she swiped the surface with her hand and a blonde-haired woman’s projection appeared over the board.

“Welcome to the data backup programme. Please state what information you are interested in: the time period or the location.”

“The period is the beginning of the twenty first century according to the Earth calendar. Let’s begin with the uniform of the organizations on Earth.”

“Please specify your request. The data volume based on these parameters is very large.”

“A blue uniform,” added Derek.

“The data has been sorted out. I’m forwarding it on the holographic interface.”

The woman’s face disappeared and in its place a virtual stack of cards appeared over the table.

“Like this,” Lora touched the card on the top and gently pushed it aside.

Derek quickly got used to the backup system and after some minutes he was easily interacting with the electronic lady, whose knowledge was truly profound.

“Firstly, I’d like to see only the images of the uniforms, without the descriptions.”

“One thousand two hundred and forty-seven images were accessed.”

Lora slowly sat into an armchair nearby, watching her companion putting aside one card after another. It seemed like the enthusiasm she had felt while coming here besieged him now. But, after two hours of constant data study, Derek’s energy level noticeably fell.

“You need rest,” she said.

“Yes, my eyes are sore and the holographic light is so bright that even the sunglasses can’t protect them any longer”. “We can continue tomorrow...”

“I’ve seen everything that the programme generated,” the young man sighed heavily. “I think, it’s a memory of a military uniform, but I haven’t found anything which matches it exactly.”

“The backup data is old. It was made long before your birth date.”

“I understand... It’s just that I want to remember about my past so much...”

Leaving Derek in his apartment; a white spacious room separated by matte glass into a living room, a bathroom and bedroom; Lora looked back at the hunched and tired figure of the man. She liked his genuine interest in everything new, but she also couldn’t help noticing how his curiosity and enthusiasm faded giving ground to longing and detachment when he was wandering in the depths of his lost memory.

Pausing for a while at the door, Lora then approached the motionless young man in the armchair and took the universal panel from his hands.

“Let me show you something.”

She spared him the explanations, and just gently touched the virtual keys on the screen causing the lights to go dim. And the walls, so white just a second before, flashed with an image of a soft sunset. Then, the silence of the room was interrupted by a light breeze and a melodic swishing of the surf.

“Get some rest,” Lora said quietly.

Giving him back the panel, she lightly touched his hand, which was motionlessly lying on the arm of the chair and left the apartment immediately. In this way she expressed her profound compassion and genuine support. She said nothing because she was sure that Derek was not a man in need of pity and consolation. Her silent presence was more important than words filled with sympathy.

Chapter 4

The next couple of days saw Lora and the man in her care embark on endless trips around the city. The teleport proved to be a convenient and fast transport means. When the distances were not very long, the young people preferred to walk. And anywhere they went they could see that life on Titanium followed its quiet and measured flow regardless of the circumstances. Everything, they said, was in its time. Even when a hasty evacuation from Taria began, the people did not panic; instead, everyone continued doing their job.

Studying anew the history of his own native planet and getting to know the world of the future, Derek recalled the Earth cities, traditions and laws more and more. However, Lora sometimes felt that his memory, despite the fast recovery, remained a picturesque but lifeless picture. He still didn’t remember the details of his own private life, events of previous years and the reasons why the earthlings had sent their transport on such a long voyage.

One evening, after having worn their feet out the busy streets and having spent endless hours in the archive, Lora announced intriguingly.

“You know, you still haven’t seen the most impressive place on Titanium!”

She typed the destination in the teleport control panel and smiled mysteriously.

“You can’t keep me in the dark for long,” Derek chuckled, because the glass cabin doors slid open almost immediately.

“Yes, our transport system has its drawbacks...” answered Lora with pretentious sadness.

“Welcome to the viewpoint, sector B-153,” announced the programme politely.

“I don’t think you’ll need your glasses here,” noted the girl when the teleport doors closed behind their back. They found themselves in a dark hall with two pale neon lamps along the smooth floor as the only source of light. Slowly changing colour, they ran parallel to each other: one along a dark shiny wall, while the other ran along a seemingly endless panoramic window, behind which the black infinity of outer space pierced by the light of the distant stars opened to their eyes. ‘Solar Flotilla’ followed the Earth calendar and every morning Lora put on her favourite trainers and came here for an hour of jogging around this cyclic track, looking into the unchanging emptiness in front of her and trying to get rid of all doubts and worries.

“Is it always so... empty here?” said Derek looking around.

“The length of the viewpoint is more than seven hundred kilometres. It runs around Titanium and parallel to the Equatorial transport terminal. From here you can watch spaceships arrive. Besides, there are observatories in several of its sections.”

“These ships,” Derek pointed at the rows of spacecraft of strikingly different makes and looks, “Are they alien?”

“The majority of them are. For example, those ones that look like gigantic beetles are the Tarian tractors. They have to stay outside the outer protective field and pass their cargo in smaller loads to our shuttles. They, in turn, go through the energy barrier and deliver them to our transport terminal. Unfortunately, at the moment, none of the five ‘Solar Flotilla’ ships that had started from Earth are even close to Titanium. They are all on the evacuation missions. Their appearance and the technological equipment have changed a lot, of course, during these two hundred and fifty years, but they still work. The ships are named after the five letters of the Greek alphabet, the flagman ship is ‘Alpha’, and the others, ‘Beta’, ‘Gamma’, ‘Delta’ and ‘Epsilon’ are of smaller size and insignificant fire power.”

“So where is Taria?”

“We are moving along its orbit and, at the same time, we are also rotating,” explained Lora. “As is the circular viewpoint.” Lora took out the tablet and checked some data. “We are going to see Taria from here in fourteen minutes.”

“I’d like to see it.”

“Of course, let’s wait!” Lora sat comfortably on the floor, crossing her legs.

“How many stars!” noted Derek with admiration. “They seem as distant as in the sky over Earth.”

“For as long as I can remember, that’s been my view of them from here” echoed Lora.

“Why do I have a feeling that this voyage brings you sadness as much as joy?” suddenly asked Derek.

Lora tightened her lips thoughtfully.

“I’m not really sure myself. But you’re right. Even though our journey is incredibly interesting, allowing us to explore the Universe and meet alien races flying through space in search of a new home, I can’t help believing that the true home for the ‘Solar Flotilla’ people is on Earth and that we can come back...”

“It seems that not many agree with you?”

“My people have their reasons for that, I told you about it...”

“Yes, I know,” the young man nodded with sympathy. “I’m sorry that I can’t remember anything to support your assumption.”

“Me too,” Lora smiled sadly and immediately added, “but your presence on the ship gave me new hope. I believe that everything happens for a reason. All the events, encounters and separations are there to direct a person to their true goal.”

“Do you believe in fate?” Derek wanted to clarify.

“No, I believe in providence,” Lora specified. “I’ve always tried to listen to that voice of the Universe, as I call it.”

“Is it from Andre Mendes’ teachings?”

“It’s not that literal,” answered Lora. “Everyone understands it differently.”

“I’d like to learn a little more about his theory.”

“All the information is in the central computer. You can also ask for help from any guide at any school.”

“A guide?”

“Yes, guides are people who help us study Andre Mendes’ philosophy and reach the inner equilibrium.”

“Can’t *you* teach me?”

“Enlightenment is a special gift, and the guides are naturally gifted. I can’t say the same about me...”

The earthling nodded.

“So I’ll have to sit at the school desk again!”

“Here, look!” Lora noticed a green light on the right. The glow was growing brighter and brighter with every second and soon the planet’s contour emerged as well.

“I thought Taria looks like Earth...”

“Hardly,” Lora shook her head. “The green luminosity of the planet is due to the gases accumulated in the top layers of its atmosphere. Only 30 percent of the light of the Doht, the star that gave name to the whole system, passes through the clouds.” She paused and then added, “Looking at these huge planets populated by billions of living beings, it sometimes seems to me that our fleet looks like a grain of sand lost in the vastness of the Universe.”

“It’s sometimes not so bad to be a tiny and unnoticeable grain of sand,” Derek tried to be funny. “Especially, when there are plenty of hostile aliens all around you.”

“Not many of them are hostile,” began Lora, but then stumbled realizing that her companion rose up from his chair and was now standing on his own legs, leaning a little on the glass.

“I’ve decided not to warn you about my intention,” Derek smiled, “to avoid the unnecessary stir.”

Frozen, Lora was watching the earthling. He cleared his throat.

“I’m fine.”

“I see,” she finally said, “This is great!”

He nodded.

“Despite the popularity of transport means on electromagnetic pillows here, I’d prefer to walk from now on. Shall we?”

“Sure!”

Amused, Lora was watching with how much effort her new friend applied to be able to walk. Despite the Council’s reservations, it seemed to Lora that she had come to know Derek very well in the past few days. He surprised her with his perseverance, hard work and energy. However, notwithstanding his obvious character virtues, the earthling was still far from having the inner equilibrium, inherent to all Titanium citizens. The latter remained calm and rational in any situation, trusting their intuition and accepting everything with wisdom. Derek’s behaviour was often quite the opposite of that. His feelings were contradicting, reactions unexpected, while his emotions were so strong that they drowned out the voice of reason.

Some days later, Lora and Derek came to have lunch in the canteen of the 'Unity' building. Lora's first and foremost obligations as a junior Council member constantly demanded her presence. That's why the majority of the day was spent doing her main job, while she met Derek closer to the evening.

"This time I'll order food myself," said the young man taking a seat. His hand swiped the sensor panel making a holographic menu appear over the table.

"Now choosing as if touching the names of the desired dishes..."

Derek was precisely repeating the instructions given by Lora during their first lunch together.

The young lady nodded contentedly when her companion easily completed the set task. After a few seconds, the central part of the table moved apart and two metal holders lifted a tray with two white food containers.

"Here you are, help yourself! But what did I choose?" Derek hesitated a little.

"Hm..." with pretentious seriousness Lora peeked under the round lids. "There's an omelette with meat and an apple pie with raisins." She moved the containers, which now looked more like plates, closer to her companion. "Here you are."

"A typical omelette. Where do people keep the chickens that make these eggs?"

"Nowhere," Lora shrugged, "The majority of the groceries are artificially produced from proteins, fats and carbohydrates..."

Derek was about to swallow a bite. He paused, not sure whether to continue with the meal.

"It's just named like that!" hastily Lora calmed him down, "The taste, the texture, and nutritional value correspond to those of the natural products. You should be convinced by now!"

The young man finished chewing and gave her a cunning grin.

"Just kidding."

"We only grow fruit and vegetables. There are several plantations on Titanium."

"How old are you, Lora?" suddenly asked Derek, moving his glance hidden behind the dark glasses away from the meal to Lora.

"Twenty-two."

He slightly moved his head away.

"I didn't mean to ask personal questions... The doctor said the tests have shown that my biological age is about twenty-seven years old. But I don't remember even one year of my past life. Do you have parents?"

"Of course, I do," affirmatively nodded Lora. "Unlike eggs, people are born naturally here. My parents live on the Epsilon, one of the five satellite ships of Titanium. They spend most of their time in scientific expeditions. They are astrophysicists. We don't see each other very often."

"What about when you were a kid?"

"Parents care for their children until they are five years of age on Titanium. After that the young generation enters the educational programme. There are guides and teachers of different subjects, who pass the knowledge accumulated by the past generations to the young citizens."

"It must be hard to get separated from your parents at such a young age."

"Why would you think that?"

"On Earth the bonds between children and parents are unbreakable. They stay together and show their love and affection."

"I love my parents," agreed Lora, "And they love me too. Certainly, the strength of our feelings doesn't depend on distance."

"Are you forced to send your children away?"

"Of course, not!" Lora was shocked, "Everything we do is done of our own free will. We have no laws."

"No laws..." with more seriousness stated Derek, totally losing his appetite.

"Hello! I see you are having a lively discussion here!" Paul appeared next to their table. "May I?"

“Of course,” nodded the girl. “Derek, this is Paul, the shuttle captain who has brought the rescue unit to Titanium. He was in your ward when you regained consciousness.”

“I remember this voice,” Derek nodded watching Paul greet him with a small bow, his palms together in front of him.

“I’m glad you’re better,” said the young man taking a seat at the table and ordering a meal. “I think I’ve interrupted something important.”

“Just now I was telling Derek that we don’t have laws,” explained Lora.

“I don’t understand how that can be... there were laws, codes, courts on Earth... It seems like an immutable truth...”

“General information is easier for you to remember, isn’t it?” clarified Paul.

The earthling nodded.

“The doctor said that the tough part will be to remember the details of my life. My family, work, the voyage in the interplanetary ship,” he sighed poking at the cold breakfast with his fork.

“Well, laws were necessary on Earth in order to artificially control the self-destructive side of the human nature from the outside,” Paul decided to distract Derek from his sad thoughts. “All the government and religious institutions were created with the purpose of defining what is good and bad, and to force people to abide by these rules under the threat of physical or spiritual punishment. But the concept of good and evil is inherent to every human being... And we, Andre Mendes’ followers, realize that...”

“Sounds ominous... Like a conspiracy theory...”

“It’s not a theory. It’s a rational perspective on the earthlings’ lifestyle.”

“It seems you don’t identify yourself with your motherland at all,” Derek looked at the speaker.

“Far from it,” interrupted Lora, “It’s just been a long time.”

The earthling shrugged indifferently. With Paul around he started behaving in a more reserved manner and spoke with more tension in his voice.

“The difference in the point of view became a stumbling block for our ancestors,” noted the girl seriously. “But many things could have changed after ‘Solar Flotilla’ left.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t remember that,” Derek frowned.

“Take your time,” the captain reacted calmly. “Besides, our scientists have been working hard to receive the maximum information about what happened on the ship. I think you’ve heard that the autopsy of the other person found in the ark revealed that the woman had died from a virus unknown to us. Because of the substance injected in the blood, it’s difficult to understand the details of the infection and its development but...”

“I have an idea,” Lora interrupted him, “It’s most likely that the infection was from Earth. In any case, nothing points to the alien origin of the virus. It could’ve been activated during the flight, or you were already infected when you were getting into the anabiosis.”

“I doubt that the authorities from Earth would’ve sent ill astronauts on a mission in space,” commented the captain.

“Was I an astronaut?” asked Derek.

“We’re not sure. We still haven’t been able to restore the data from the onboard computer,” the girl sighed heavily, “The scariest scenario to my mind is this: what if your ship was actually sent for help? It’s possible that people suffered from a pandemic and couldn’t find an alternative way to contain it.”

“In this case, they’d have to wait for our return for quite a long time,” noted Paul.

“What if there was no other way? Or, what if the ship from Earth carried the only survivors?”

The young men simultaneously looked at the girl.

“Derek, do you remember you said that you had very little time? It could be connected with the illness. Maybe even the anabiosis couldn’t stop the virus and you knew about it...”

Paul frowned and rubbed his temples.

“If we develop this idea further we can come to a conclusion that the Earth population has been destroyed... Two hundred years have passed...”

There was a pause. Lora couldn't see Derek's eyes behind the dark glasses.

“Derek?” Lora was closely watching the young man, “Have you remembered something?”

He seemed to have plunged into his thoughts again as had happened many times until that moment..

“No,” answered Derek, “Anyway, I must go back. If your experts can't find the answers on the onboard computer, I'll find out everything myself on Earth.”

“You'll have to cross half a galaxy to go back,” exclaimed Paul, “Literally.”

“Do I have a choice?” asked the guest.

“It's important to wait for the test results from the IT department,” answered the captain calmly. “And, of course the medical department results as the return might not be safe...”

“What if there are survivors on Earth and they need help?!” Lora joined the conversation.

“What if the old feud doesn't matter anymore and we can go back home forever?!”

“Slow down, I don't follow you,” said Paul.

“But I do,” Derek's words resounded with unshakable confidence. “The only way to find out is to return to Earth.”

“Paul,” the girl looked at her friend, “We must speak to the Council!”

“Do you want...”

“To prepare an expedition to Earth!”

The young man raised his hands.

“Whoah! An expedition through half a galaxy? Based on bare assumptions?”

“We have nothing else,” Lora shrugged, “Why wait...”

“Two hundred years have passed,” the captain negatively shook his head, “Why should we hurry now?”

“We're moving further and further away from Earth,” Lora found a sensible argument.

“Yes, but...”

“But the next Lactian year we'll surely spend on Vistana's orbit, collaborating with the Lactians. It's our chance to fly to Earth and come back!”

“I'd like to address the Council myself,” the guest interrupted their argument. Lora looked at Derek. He sounded very confident. “Is it possible?”

“Of course,” she nodded.

“But what are you going to tell them?” asked Paul, “Ungrounded assumptions are not going to be enough. If only you had some facts...”

“My memories are still hidden from me. But when I heard Lora's assumptions, they seemed very realistic. I can't prove anything; but, in my opinion, waiting for the test results is a waste of time.”

“You're both very stubborn,” suddenly smiled the captain. “I believe, if a sustainable expedition plan is devised the Council will give an affirmative answer.”

Lora nodded energetically.

“Will you help us?”

“On one condition, which you, I have no doubt, will find very reasonable,” Paul paused and stared at his companions. “It's not the best idea to present a project like this to the Council at the peak of the evacuation. We'll wait till our arrival on Vistana and then come forward with our suggestion.”

His companions didn't think much.

“Sound logical,” Lora smiled, seeing that Derek also nodded in agreement.

“What are you doing after dinner?” Paul asked suddenly. He sensed Derek's unhappy mood and wanted to cheer him up.

“We were going to the archive...” Lora pulled a plate with salad and a glass of juice closer.

“My crew is going to Gron, one of Taria’s moons, in two hours. We need to collect the equipment of the portable observatory back to Titanium. Would you like to come with us? I promise a walk in a spacesuit.”

“Are you serious?” Derek asked with excitement.

“Absolutely serious!”

The earthling turned to Lora.

“It’ll be nice to do something different together for a change,” she nodded smiling. “The spacesuits with neurocontrol are quite easy to use. Also we’ll show you the Equatorial transport terminal from inside!”

“Then I’ll be waiting for you at platform B-278 in an hour,” said the captain contentedly. “After a short training session, we’ll be ready to set off.”

Chapter 5

An hour later, Lora and Derek went out of the tele-cabin and onto the landing platform. The inner area of the Equatorial transport terminal, where they happened to be, was filled with air. Thousands of docking modules and landing platforms for the freight as well as the public space transport could be found there. A seven-kilometre wide circular system of gateways separated the spherical hangar, ninety kilometres in diameter, from the outer area, where there was no atmosphere and the ships arrived right after passing through the protective field. The young people were standing almost in the middle of the hangar, while the blue nucleus of the artificial planet was, as usual, glowing several thousand metres over their heads.

“So, I was brought on Titanium on board this beauty,” asked Derek, his hand gliding on the silver cover of the shuttle while he was observing the huge spacecraft with great interest.

“Yes, it’s series one hundred and one. Compared to the majority of ships, this is a tiny one,” explained the girl. “Paul calls her a whale.”

The young man looked at Lora questioningly.

“Its shape and smooth lines resemble the blue whale, living in the depth of the Earth’s oceans,” explained the captain appearing next to them as if by magic.

“Where did you come from?” said Lora surprised.

“We’re testing the teleport system on short distances,” smiled Paul. “Are you ready to come on board?”

The briefing and the flight to the moon passed in a friendly informal atmosphere. The shuttle crew clearly liked Derek, and the feeling was mutual. Also, the earthling showed great interest in the modern space technologies and listened carefully to everything Stan, the mechanical engineer, was telling him. Aswell as this, the panoramic glazing of the bridge was not left unnoticed either. When the shuttle left the transport terminal, Derek was watching with genuine amazement the blue glow of Titanium slowly melting in the darkness of the space and the sparkling lines of ships flocking towards it. However, the proximity of Tarias satellite deprived the earthling of the opportunity to enjoy the flight with all his heart. Very soon, the silver ship landed on the crater-covered moon.

“Dismantling the observatory in the vacuum of space will take about four hours,” said Paul as if still briefing, “Oleg and Mary will go with us, Chris and Stan will stay on the ship to watch after the scanners: times are rough, many ships are leaving the planet and its populated satellites carrying refugees. The Tarians are scared and, at times, behave very aggressively. Mary, can you help Derek with the spacesuit, please!” added the captain, seeing how awkwardly the young man was pulling the suit up.

Lora, who spent the majority of her flight time studying some data, also looked at the earthling and smiled almost unnoticeably.

“You’ll see, by putting this thing on, you feel somewhat fitter and stronger already. A similar technology was used by our scientists to create exoskeletons for the medical service on the planet Roma. After the war there were many soldiers unable to walk independently because of injuries. The exoskeleton performed the functions of the damaged motor nerves receiving the impulses directly from the brain.”

“But don’t forget that this suit doesn’t replace your muscles and nerves, it only strengthens them,” added Mary helping Derek to put on a helmet. “Now you’ll see a virtual display in front of your eyes...”

“I see it.”

“It’ll show your physiological indicators. You can voice request the main menu and choose the landscape scanning, ask for a geological map, the route and even music. The personal communicators are switched off only after the captain’s command; the radio connection between all the crew members must be constant.”

“Thank you,” said Derek with gratitude.

“How are you feeling?” Lora quickly put on her suit and looked at her protégé with curiosity.

“Great,” he answered with excitement.

The girl smiled and slightly nodded to Paul thanking him.

“Any time,” answered Paul moving only his lips.

Cold darkness enveloped the pale grey, as if covered in time dust, moon of Gron. Paul and his companions left the shuttle airlock one-by-one heading to the observatory at the top of the cliff. Derek was carefully watching Oleg and Mary ahead of him. He figured out that the space suit could sometimes reduce gravity, thus allowing small jumps or kind of leaps to be made and also increases it and so helps to achieve a more accurate transportation in the direction of the beacon, indicating the location of the portable observatory. Derek felt more and more confident with every step and every leap, forgetting completely about his weak muscles after a long anabiosis. The spacesuit wasn’t heavy and allowed him to manoeuvre and make precise movements. For instance, it was easy to squat in it and pick even the tiniest object. When the group reached the observatory and Paul with his assistants set to work, Lora and Derek had plenty of time on their hands for a real walk on the moon. However, obliged to stay within view of the rest of the group, they didn’t go very far.

After about an hour, Chris’s agitated voice resounded in everybody’s ears.

“Guys, come back immediately! There’s military action on the orbit: a group of ships with the refugees onboard tried to escape the planet and came under fire of the Tarian border cruiser!”

“In this case, let’s not waste any more time walking back! Chris, teleport everyone in turn, except for me,” he ordered, “Lora, Derek, copy?”

“Yes,” answered the girl.

“Great, I’ll just attach the container with the dismantled parts of the station and then join you. Start calculating the route to avoid the fire zone. Stan, check the defence systems and get the shuttle ready for launching.”

“Yes, captain!”

When Lora and Derek came onboard, Mary and Oleg were already hastily taking off the protective suits. Paul also didn’t take long.

“Show me what’s going on,” the captain approached the holographic projector.

“Here’s the cruiser, and these are the eight passenger ships carrying about two thousand refugees. Things don’t look well for them. It seems the cruiser has made some warning shots since there is no external damage to the ships. The agreement with the Tarians doesn’t allow us to listen to their broadcasts, so it’s difficult to say for sure.”

“They demand the refugees to return back to the planet,” said Paul almost without any hesitation.

“Wait,” Mary called to everybody, “We’re receiving a signal on a neutral frequency.”

“Turn on the speakerphone,” immediately reacted Paul.

The loud speakers transmitted some rustling and swishing. The crew members could hardly discern the words among the stray signals. Derek shook his head.

“It’s obviously a speech, but I understand nothing,” he whispered into Lora’s ear, “Do you know Tarian?”

“You could say that,” answered Lora still trying to listen carefully. “A UCD,” she barely touched the small gadget at her temple, “is multifunctional, and can work as a translator. The part of the communicator that you see is the receiving part of the gadget, while the part that analyses and archives data is implanted directly into the brain. All the Titanium citizens undergo this operation at sixteen. I’m sure that when you get better, Doctor Borshchevsky will suggest you to have this simple procedure done. The implanted element creates grammar and vocabulary memory zones that allow us to understand foreign speech. Thus we could say that our brain actually studies languages by itself.”

The earthling nodded.

“It could come in very handy.”

“By the way, the Tarian refugees are asking for help from all closely located alien ships now,” Lora added quietly.

After a few seconds all they could hear were some rustling and swishing sounds. Everybody simultaneously looked at Paul, awaiting further instruction.

“We’re going to…” confidently started the captain.

“Sorry captain, there’s some movement!” reported Chris.

The crew members tightly surrounded the holographic projector.

“One of the refugees’ ships manoeuvred and is trying to leave the fire zone,” Paul pointed at the green dot moving to the edge of the projection.

“It’s not being followed,” noticed Oleg. “The cruiser is holding the others at gunpoint, while the fighter planes are yet to arrive in order to cut off the fugitive’s path.”

“The cruiser is ready to fire!” added Chris. He was now at the holographic projectors in front of the captain’s seat and on one of them he showed a detailed picture of the border ship with the embattled artillery

From that moment on, the events started evolving as quick as a flash. The ship with the refugees turned out to be cumbersome and was unable to avoid the line of fire. The first series of volleys hit it directly, depriving the spacecraft of its, though weak, protective field. As a result of the second series, the back engine was damaged.

“They won’t go far with this kind of damage!” sighed Stan.

Then again someone’s speech was heard despite the interference.

“The passenger ship detected our shuttle and is moving in our direction,” translated Lora. “Now it’s us they’re asking for help.”

“They would surely be able to reach Gron and make an emergency landing there,” nodded the mechanic.

“Within the framework of the active agreement between ‘Solar Flotilla’ and Taria’s government,” quickly commented Paul, “we can help their citizens in case of an emergency. Even in times of battle, this can’t be considered an intervention into their domestic policies.”

The crew members nodded in accordance.

“So we are going to just stay there and watch how they fire at the helpless ship until it crashes right next to us?!” said Derek shocked.

“Yes, because we are bound by this agreement,” Paul sat in the captain’s chair continuing to closely monitor the scanners. “Judging by its trajectory, it’ll land next to us. Chris, activate the protective field and get ready to manoeuvre. There could be the threat of a collision. Oleg, you are responsible for the defence arms. Stan, calculate the possibility of using the teleport ray for transporting the injured onboard. Mary, get the spacesuits ready, they could be useful.”

“What should we do?” Derek looked questioningly at the captain.

“Fasten your belts for now,” he answered calmly. “But the night is young.”

“The object is on our right!” reported Chris.

The earthling and Lora sat in the vacant chairs, staring intently through the panoramic glass into the darkness surrounding the shuttle.

“The speed is too high, it’s going to be a rough landing!”

Soon after these words were uttered, Derek noticed a ship approaching them at speed; moving in jerks, losing and gaining height. When it was too close to the surface, it touched the spiky moon rocks which cut into its cover before bursting in all the directions.

“The scanners show that only one of the brake motors switched on! The ship’s going to turn around now!” reported Chris.

However, within seconds; not only did it turn, but it broke into two parts. One of the pieces of debris flew far ahead, disappearing from view of the onlookers and exploded as shown on one of the scanners. The bigger part bumped into several cliffs before halting one and a half kilometres away from the shuttle.

“Scan the debris for the presence of survivors,” commanded Paul.

Stan shook his head gloomily.

“Fifty-two life forms, but I can’t say anything about their physiological state. By the way, before firing the scanner had shown three hundred and seven Tarians.”

“So, our help could be useful,” summarized Paul. “Stan, what’s the situation with the teleport? Can we transport them one by one?”

“No, can’t do that. The damaged ship equipment could cause a lot of interference. If anything goes wrong, we’ll get the Tarians in pieces. But if we stick small beacons on the survivors, then every object’s signal will become stronger and the risk of harm or injury will be considerably decreased.”

“Is there a risk of explosion?”

“Not at the moment, but the engines of the ship are badly impaired; the beginning of a chain reaction is only a matter of time,” replied Oleg. “I think we have about an hour.”

“This mission isn’t directly connected with the interests of ‘Solar Flotilla’: that’s why I can’t give orders to anyone.” Paul looked at his crew.

“We’re coming, captain,” Mary gave a nudge to Oleg.

“Coming,” he nodded in agreement and, walking fast, they left the bridge.

“I can also help,” Lora said, ready to follow them.

“Great! Stan and Chris will stay with me onboard,” decided the captain.

“I want to go,” suddenly said Derek, loudly and decisively.

Paul raised his eyebrow in surprise, while Lora who was already heading to the spacesuit chamber stopped hesitantly.

“A walk in a spacesuit, despite all its advantages, is quite a tiring thing...”

“But I feel great. Besides, Paul said that he can’t order...”

“I can’t order you to go...” specified the captain, “But if your actions put other crew members in danger, it’s a different matter.”

“I can handle it,” confidently said Derek and pointed at the hologram, “Besides, we have little time to evacuate all the injured. Another pair of hands really could do.”

“He’s right,” agreed Chris, “Fighter planes are taking off from Taria. I don’t think they’ll ignore a ship that crashed on the moon.”

“The injured are all around the ship,” added Stan, “Teleporting our rescue team there will save some time, but they’ll have to move around the inside the spacecraft on their own, which can be very difficult.”

“Alright, put on your spacesuits and wait for departure at the teleport cabin.”

The rescue mission preparation took less than 10 minutes. Getting inside the Tarian spaceship, Lora and Derek looked around. A wide corridor, where they had been teleported by Stan, partially collapsed with clusters of bare wires sparkling, broken pipes and pieces of twisted metal. The flat bio scanner monitor attached to Lora's spacesuit displayed the ship scanning data. Thus, receiving the directions, they headed to the place with several bio signals. From time to time, the piles of debris became a serious obstacle and moving ahead was badly hampered. Making her way through the blockage, Lora lost her step causing her leg to slip from a pipe, wet due to steam coming out of it. The girl screamed, lost her balance and rolled down on the floor with a crash.

"Hey, are you ok?" the earthling didn't manage to catch her on time, but immediately rushed down to help her.

"It seems so," she winced with the pain in her knee.

"Shall we move on?" he was watching her closely.

With the corner of her eye, the girl assessed her physical state indicators that flashed on the spacesuit virtual display right in front of her eyes and nodded affirmatively. Then they continued the way to their destination.

"What do the Tarians look like?" asked Derek, carefully following Lora.

"You'll see for yourself," the girl answered. "Here we are! Can you help me move this bulkhead.

Applying a great deal of effort, the young people managed to free the entrance to one of the passenger compartments where, according to the scan results, a few survivors were. The place was filled with thick steam and, judging by the squishing sound under their feet, there was a lot of water on the floor.

Suddenly, from Lora's side, Derek heard a hoarse rattling sound resembling the kind of speech that they heard during the broadcast from the Tarian ship.

"What's this?" the young man looked around.

"I just asked in Tarian if there is anyone there" answered the girl.

"How can you make sounds like that?" the young man was perplexed.

"Thanks to another element of the UCD, the personal speech synthesizer," explained Lora. "The thing is that human vocal chords are not always able to reproduce the speech of alien races. I'm sure you have seen this gadget before. It's a pendant that all the Titanium citizens wear around their necks. It works as a speech device, receiving signals directly from the brain and wording my thoughts towards it."

"I need one!"

"Of course, but for now activate the interpreter, installed in the spacesuit."

"We are the rescuers from the 'Solar Flotilla' shuttle, our crew is ready to help you!" Switching on the device, Derek heard a perfectly clear translation of the rattling created by Lora's synthesizer. "Come out, don't be afraid," she added and within seconds they were surrounded by five short humanoids.

Derek had never seen the Tarians before and was now staring with great interest at the creatures that had appeared in the dimly lit compartment. In physique, they looked like short stocky men who, instead of skin, had small red scales. Their short strong limbs had long nails at their tips, while the heads and partially the shoulders and back were covered with a leathery carapace that resembled a helmet. From under this armour, yellow snake-like eyes observed the humans who had just arrived. The young man unwillingly smiled, watching the aliens' clumsy movements while the rising water was up to their waists now.

"You were asking for help," the girl broke the long silence.

"Yes, the captain of this ship tried to get in touch..." started one of the survivors, "But we don't know where he is now..."

“Our friends will try to find him. For now we can offer to evacuate you to our shuttle. The atmosphere created in one of its compartments is the same as the air composition on Taria. We’ll take you to Titanium like this.”

“To Titanium?” the Tarians looked at each other. “But your Council had refused to get involved...”

“We’re not getting involved,” explained Lora, “We’re just offering help to a spacecraft that had crashed. This doesn’t violate the terms and conditions between our races.”

The refugees nodded in agreement.

“That’s great!” smiled the girl, “I’m going to stick a transmitter onto every one of you, and it will initiate your teleportation into the compartment with a suitable atmosphere.”

By the time Chris’s agitated voice was on air again, Lora and Derek had already helped a dozen Tarians they had found in different compartments.

“Guys, finish with it! The fighter ships are already near. Paul is talking to the unit commander, who had been sent to Gron after the spacecraft that was shot down. Their ships will be here in less than twenty minutes. They have orders to destroy the remains of the ship.”

Lora looked at her watch.

“Message received, we’re coming back!”

“You’ll have to climb one deck up so that the beacon signal becomes stronger,” added Stan.

“The scanner has detected three more life forms on the level above us,” noted Derek and pointed Lora in the direction of the correct compartment.

“We didn’t follow this route when we came here. There could be piles of debris,” answered Lora. “Let’s follow the more certain way.”

“But the Tarians will die then!” insisted the earthling. “We’re obliged to save them!”

The girl sighed deeply and peered at the persistently flashing red light at the corner of the virtual screen. She didn’t want to tell Derek about her injury she had got due to the fall. Besides, regardless of the leg trauma, the chances of saving several other refugees were miniscule. At the same time, the risk of dying under the fire of the Tarian fighter planes far away from the place where Stan could teleport them was quite high.

“We’re not going there, Derek,” Lora concluded calmly. “We did everything we could. It’s time to go back.”

“The sooner, the better,” Captain’s voice could be heard on air. “The fighters are seventeen minutes away, and we also need time to fly as far as possible before the shooting. Come back, this is an order!”

“We can’t leave like this!” insisted Derek, “I can make it!”

“Now it’s not only your life you’re endangering,” suddenly firmly stated the girl, “Your efforts are senseless, if the captain doesn’t risk the shuttle and everyone else on board.”

“She’s right,” the captain interfered into their argument, “We’d have to stay very close to the debris in order to teleport you and the other three. And, Lora, what are your bio indicators?”

“Everything’s fine,” Lora tried to calm him down.

“It wasn’t just a minor injury, was it?” guessed Derek.

“There’s no point discussing it now, the main thing is to get out of here.”

On arriving at the shuttle, Lora was immediately transferred into the medical compartment. By the time Derek took off the spacesuit and entered the bridge, the ship had already left Taria’s satellite.

“You did a good job,” said the captain noticing him come. “How’s Lora?”

“Mary said that she’d be fine,” answered Derek. “What about the Tarian fighter planes?”

“A few seconds ago they started heavy shooting at the remains of the ship.”

“What happened to those the cruiser was aiming at?”

“They remained there. Not one of them took the risk any more. I think, sooner or later they’ll either land on Taria or die.”

“Can’t we help them in some way?”

“We have no right to interfere in the domestic conflict, but have the order to return back to Titanium. Today ‘Solar Flotilla’ will leave Taria’s orbit. The Council made this decision less than half an hour ago.”

Derek didn’t say anything. For a while not one word was uttered on the bridge.

“Captain, the border cruiser started shooting at the passenger ships,” Chris broke the silence. “We’re outside the affected area, but several ships with refugees followed by the fighter planes are moving in our direction. They are seeking asylum on Titanium. Shall I turn on the loudspeaker?”

The captain nodded. Voices and loud sounds resembling explosions were transmitted on air. Derek was very grateful to Mary for the speaker with synchronized translation. Now he could understand the aliens’ language.

“We have no authority to provide asylum for you,” answered Paul calmly, using his personal speech synthesizer. “We can’t interfere...” Suddenly the connection was lost.

“This ship has just been destroyed,” quietly reported Chris.

Paul shook his head, signs of sincere regret could be read on his face.

“Another one is coming too close. The fighters shooting at it could hit us by accident.”

“Get me their captain.”

“Ready! The connection is established!”

“I am Paul Stones, the captain of ‘Solar Flotilla’s’ shuttle. Your actions threaten the safety of our spacecraft. I am asking you to stop fire!”

“Your ship’s well protected and will not be damaged even if the passenger transport explodes!” answered the Tarian through interference.

Derek approached the porthole – now he could clearly see what was happening outside with his own eyes. The transport with the refugees was awkwardly manoeuvring and trying to stay close to the shuttle in an attempt to prevent the fighters from shooting at them.

“What does our protective field have to do with anything?” said the captain indignantly. “You have no right to put my crew’s life at risk!”

“In this case, go faster so that the ship of the delinquents can’t use you as a shield!”

“We have some cargo onboard that’s slowing us down” confidently lied the captain, which came as a total surprise to the earthling.

Stan hemmed and, looking at the earthling sullenly, put his finger to the lips symbolizing silence. The Tarian was obviously dissatisfied.

“Alright! We’ll stop the fire, but only until your shuttle enters the Titanium protective field!”

The connection was lost.

“But the refugees’ ship won’t be able to pass through the protective field of the artificial planet...” noted Derek, watching the captain closely.

“No, it won’t,” like an echo answered the captain.

“What if we teleport them?”

“Such actions can be viewed as interference into the domestic conflict...”

The earthling swore.

“This is not our war, Derek,” added the captain quietly.

The lighting in the medical compartment seemed too bright for Lora after a long time spent in the darkness of the broken ship. She squinted and covered her eyes with her palm while lying in the regenerative capsule that allowed a quick recovery of the damaged tissues. Her loneliness was disturbed by Derek walking in silently.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine, thanks,” she opened her eyes and noticed a gloomy expression on his face. “Did something happen?”

The earthling explained the situation in short and the girl sighed heavily.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the consequences of the fall?” asked the young man with reproach after a short silence.

“What for? We were on a mission that I could handle. If the situation had been more serious, I’d have definitely told you.”

“Ligament rupture is not a serious situation?!” said the young man indignantly.

“There’ three minutes and twenty seconds left to full tissue recovery,” reported the medical programme.

“What do you think?” smiled Lora on hearing the forecast.

In response Derek scowled even more and sat in an armchair nearby.

“So, you also risked your life,” he concluded.

“I wouldn’t call my actions risky, but rather rational.”

“I think Paul thought differently. He was very worried about your condition.”

“Please, don’t get it wrong but the crew, left on the shuttle, always monitors the physical condition of those who go on a mission. Paul knew about my injury from the very beginning...”

“So, the time when I didn’t want to leave the ship, he deliberately drew my attention to that,” realized Derek, “Very clever...”

The girl nodded.

“You had to be persuaded...”

“I don’t understand... We had a chance to save those three till the last moment... But we just left them to die...”

“The chance to save them was very small, in contrast to the high possibility of being killed ourselves.”

“This is selfish!” said Derek passionately.

“This is rational,” the girl answered quietly.

“Your rationality is a synonym of indifference!?” said the young man with resentment.

Lora shook her head and responded with a question.

“I don’t understand what’s so outrageous about me wanting to save my own life? Or, my life should be less valuable for me than the lives of those Tarians?”

Derek was ready to say something but stopped suddenly. The question hovered in the air for a while confusing him. The recovery programme with a characteristic squeaking sound completed its work and allowed Lora to sit. Now she perched at the edge of the capsule, her legs dangling, and watched closely at her opponent, who was still puzzled.

“So,” he finally spoke, “you believe that your life is more valuable than the life of the others?”

“I’ll tell you what I believe in,” calmly said the girl, “I believe that everyone has the right to life and freedom of choice from the day they are born. These are the highest values. And I believe that if a human being or any other living creature doesn’t value his life more than anything, he won’t be able to truly value the life of others. And, to make it clearer for you, I’m ready to offer help to those who need it, but for me helping anybody is a display of generosity, not a moral duty.”

Paul’s team completed the mission on Gron, bringing more than thirty refugees to Titanium. The moment their shuttle was within the protective field, the passenger ship, that was trying to hide from the fighters behind it, was quickly destroyed in cold blood.

Before ‘Solar Flotilla’ left Taria’s orbit, a lot of Titanium’s citizens gathered at the viewpoint to watch their departure. Lora, Derek and Paul were not an exception.

“Look how many people have come here!” noticed Paul. “Is one of the councillors going to make a declamation?”

Lora nodded. Behind the panoramic windows Taria gleamed with its greenish-blue glow in the pitch black Universe. What had once been a hospitable haven for ‘Solar Flotilla’ was now somewhat of a hostile civilisation, caught in the wicked flames of a civil war. “Greetings to all the Titanium citizens!” a loud voice resounded in the hall. The humming of conversations died down and everyone was now attentively listening to the announcement from the loudspeakers. “This is Jean Prequeaux speaking. All ‘Solar Flotilla’ ships are at the launch positions ready to leave the Taria’s orbit. Today we have no possibility, as before, to personally thank the inhabitants of the planet for a fruitful collaboration and mutual help. But we are leaving their world with sincere gratitude in our hearts. Safe journey to all of us, dear friends!”

The voice in the speakers went silent.

Derek snorted with resentment, while Paul looked at the sad face of his female companion watching the planet disappear in the distance.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked her quietly.

“It’s not even just a case of what I’m thinking but of how I feel. And I feel so much that I struggle to put it into words. My common sense is telling me to agree with the Council, we really don’t have the right to interfere, we are strangers here. But my heart just isn’t in it at all...”

A few minutes later, Titanium accompanied by the five satellite ships smoothly slid into the open mouth of the hyper tunnel and darted through space leaving Doht and its domain behind. Once again, a whole new world was waiting for ‘Solar Flotilla’ – the Lactian Empire – intricately made up of around a thousand stellar systems and dozens of habitable planets.

Chapter 6

After arriving at Vistana, the Council was much occupied with the collaboration issues with the new allies for some time. This gave Lora, Derek and Paul an opportunity to prepare a well thought-out plan of an Earth expedition. And despite the fact that the shuttle captain had more doubts about the necessity of such a mission than the others, still he put every effort in place to make it look solid in the eyes of the councillors. Meanwhile, working closely with the earthling, Lora realized ever their difference in viewpoints, and she couldn’t help but realize that the human civilization split had been inevitable back then. Once, soon after the ‘Solar Flotilla’s’ arrival at the Lactians’ capital planet, Lora had the chance to be all the more persuaded in the idea that the earthling and herself were far from mutual understanding. On the instruction of the Council, Lora was sent on a mission to Barkan, one of the inhabited planets in the Lactian Empire. In fact, the purpose of the trip was cultural exchange, so without hesitation Lora invited Derek to join her. This assignment was a good chance to have a change of scene by visiting a planet new to them. On Barkan they were welcomed by an official Empire representative, Kumimago Hoto. He belonged to the original Lactian race, although it was the representatives of other races, united under the Empire, which often occupied high political and diplomatic posts. The Lactians were humanoids, but looked very different from people: their average height exceeded the people’s height two and a half times, and it was simply impossible to find a plump Lactian as they were all slim and lank. Their blood vessels could be easily seen under the thin skin of golden shade, while their long snow-white hair was always scraped into tight buns at the nape; making their huge transparent blue eyes look even bigger. The three pairs of hands, which they managed with greater dexterity than humans do with just one, were often hidden under loose colourful capes and could be seen only when it was necessary. Traveling in a huge flying chariot, the Lactian representative and his companions were having a tour around Barkan when Derek noticed a spectacular construction towering over a mountain. It consisted of several very tall semi-circular

arches placed in a row one after another. Their incredibly high tops sparkled in the sun like mother of pearl, blindingly bright.

“What’s that?” asked the earthling.

“It’s the Gates of Life, a gift from the Lactians to the Barkan inhabitants.”

“Gates of Life?” asked Derek again, watching an endless procession of pilgrims climbing up a narrow winding path on a steep slope to the top. “Is it some kind of a ritual?”

“You could say that,” Kumimago smiled. “A long time ago, when my race lived on our native planet, we had an incredible technological boom in all the areas of science-in medicine, as well. Our doctors learned to treat the majority of illnesses. However, with time, it became obvious that in spite of all our efforts to stay healthy, every subsequent Lactian generation was weaker than the previous. Just as we found a new vaccine against one virus, another more deadly one would appear. Initially effective treatment methods were turning out to be useless after years, while illnesses became chronic. The doctors had scrutinized over this problem for a long time until a truly genius scientist Armesteh created the Gates of Life. This machine, the prototype of which you can see on the mountain, could renew all the body cells completely, except the nerve cells. After this scientific breakthrough was made, the vaccines, antibiotics and surgeries seemed to become a thing of the past.”

“Apparently, it had some drawbacks,” said Derek quietly, noticing his companion’s glance grow heavier.

“That’s right. The machine worked without causing any side effects. However, for some reason there were Lactians who were able to retain their newfound health for the rest of their days, while the old illnesses were returning to the others after a while. After having carried out a great deal of testing and research, Armesteh and his colleagues found the reason. It turned out that every illness leaves a mark on the subconscious of the Lactians. And the subconscious as a part of the nervous system could not be healed by the machine.”

“But you said that some of your compatriots were totally healed,” said the earthling surprised.

“Only those whose wish to live let them cleanse their consciousness from the true source of all illnesses: fear, and its constant companions – anger and hatred. The humaneness of our society wouldn’t allow denying medical treatment to those who fell sick a second time. These Lactians were coming to the Gates of Life again and again, and by marrying those who were totally healthy, they transferred their illnesses to the new generations. With time, the energy system of our planet became exhausted; a disaster was looming and threatening to extinguish the whole Lactian civilisation. Bordering on extinction, we realized that we couldn’t afford to be weak or nurture the deadly illnesses from generation to generation by healing the bodies of those who were ill in their souls. Our government passed a new law: everyone wishing to be healed by passing through the Gates of Life had to undergo a test in order to prove their vitality: to get rid of fear and to fill their mind with love. This very path *is* the test. The ill person has to walk it alone without anyone’s help. You see the only way to a real cure... Some, however, choose to walk the path differently. Instead of getting rid of fear and hatred, they fill themselves with anger, grow hard and deplete their body and spirit while overcoming the obstacles. Sometimes it works and they make it to the Gates, exhausted physically and spiritually, but full of furious determination. Nobody stays on their way; it’s their choice after all.”

Lora had seen the Gates of Life before, but now she was interested to know what Derek would say about the policy of the Lactian Health Ministry. The earthling didn’t make her wait long to satisfy her curiosity.

“It’s pure genocide...” he whispered quietly when they went back to the shuttle and were getting ready to travel back to Titanium. “Who gave them the right to decide who to be healthy and who to die of illnesses?”

“What are you talking about?” the girl glanced at him in surprise. “Every Lactian had and still has a choice. No one stays on their way to salvation, no one kills them! And you’re calling it genocide?!”

“But, in fact, their government took the life of millions of their compatriots in order to create a more perfect race! The old humaneness turned out to be a relic of the past, an obstacle on the way to preserve the Lactian civilization!”

Lora shook her head. Her disagreement with Derek’s words was obvious.

“You are justifying their actions?” He asked, in disbelief.

“I don’t see anything that needs justification,” she answered. “Moreover, Andre Mendes’s philosophy is very similar to that of the Lactians.”

The young man raised his eyebrows in amazement.

“When our founder revealed his knowledge to the people of Earth,” Lora started explaining, “Many came to him to learn. But his teaching was useful only to those who were ready to change, to rethink their lives and only through self-knowledge and forgiveness to gain strength, wisdom and health. Not everyone was ready for such a strenuous task. Not everybody wanted to spend time on a spiritual quest. The majority just wished to get to the final result, overlooking the very way the Lactian representative was talking about.”

“But some simply might not have had enough strength!” said Derek indignantly.

“If someone does not have enough strength to fight for his own life, why should others rush to save them?”

“Because people should help each other!”

“Help was never denied to them: Andre’s knowledge was, and remains to be, accessible to everyone – the Gates of Life as well.”

The young man sighed deeply.

“How can your ideas be so rational and simultaneously so contradicting with everything I believe in? All this philosophy is totally void of any compassion!”

“It’s not true,” answered Lora calmly. “Compassion and help are not foreign to our society. However, any conscious living being must take responsibility for his life.”

It took more than a month for the ‘Solar Flotilla’ to settle on Vistana’s orbit. Lora and her friends patiently waited for the Council’s affairs to go back to normal and asked for a meeting.

Soft dim sunset lighting in the councillor’s office didn’t prevent Lora from feeling fresh as if it were early morning.

“The Council is meeting tomorrow at eleven,” Jean sat in an armchair and looked intently at the girl opposite to him, “We’ll consider your suggestion, but you must be ready to provide strong arguments in its favour. The distance to Earth is quite long; moreover, the lack of information about the current events there doesn’t guarantee the safety of such an expedition.”

“I’ll get ready for the meeting. I don’t think the Council will be against Derek and Paul being there? Our guest has his own reasons...”

“... And the shuttle captain will tell us about the technical details of a possible expedition,” the councillor finished her thought.

“That’s right.”

“You’re already quite well prepared! Alright, let’s see what the Council will say.”

Excited with the appointment, Lora immediately headed for Paul’s apartment. When she went inside, she saw him working on the holographic interface of the central computer. Derek was holding a thin transparent tablet displaying data from the archives.

“How did it go?” asked Lora. Both men simultaneously took their eyes off their work.

“I’m almost done with the calculations,” answered Paul.

“And I got to learn about the history of the ‘Solar Flotilla’ voyages in more detail,” added Derek. “Any news from the Council?”

“Tomorrow at eleven we’ll have an opportunity to present all our arguments to them. We’re all going to attend the meeting, no exceptions.”

“That’s great!” replied the earthling. The news seemed to give him somewhat of an energy boost. He briskly stood up from his seat. “I completely forgot that I have to make it to Doctor Borshchovsky on time.”

“Let’s get together in the canteen an hour before the meeting,” suggested Paul. “And discuss the details.”

Derek nodded in agreement. He was already at the door when he turned and added with unconcealed gratitude.

“Thank you for agreeing to help me.”

In the morning, before the Council meeting, Lora put on her trainers and set off to the viewpoint as had been a custom of hers for many years. It was almost a ritual to go jogging down the endless dark circle for an hour, throwing away every single thought and listening only to her breathing and the rhythm of her body. But today she didn’t run. Instead she sat down on the cool floor right at the glass window and probably for the first time looked at the empty space overboard: not simply with a belief that a new home was awaiting them somewhere, but with a hope that this home may be Earth.

“Paul told me I would find you here,” a quiet male voice distracted her from her thoughts. She looked around. Derek was behind her.

“I come here every morning for a jog,” explained the girl.

“He said that you always come out in this sector. Any particular reason?”

“The least number of ships approach the transport terminal in this place because there are repair docks under us,” answered Lora.

“I was lucky that you didn’t run far away from the teleport cabin,” grinned the young man, “I had no idea that you’re so keen on exercise.”

“It’s more of a meditation than exercise,” shrugged the girl.

“Sitting in such a position it certainly looks like it,” smiled Derek, “Can I join you?”

He sat next to her and crossed his legs, looking at a rather monotonous landscape outside.

“I don’t know how to meditate. But, I’m sure I’ll easily fall asleep after five minutes if not earlier.”

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