

***United Moon
Colonies***

Chronicles of the Clone Incident

by

Tom Merritt

United Moon Colonies

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NOTES:

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“To James”

United Moon Colonies

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President Chong stepped toward the elevator door and turned quickly, before his aides and guards could enter.

“You’ll take the next car.”

The guards obeyed his command, but Lawrence, his chief aide, protested.

“Mr. President, you must--”

“I must go alone. It’s a powerful symbol, Lawrence. What we’ve done so far to help has only gained us their ear. I’ve got to underline it to make the lesson last.”

At that the door closed, and he began the descent from Platform 86 down to Earth.

As the wispy atmosphere formed around him and natural gravity began to pull, Chong thought about what had led them to this point. The United Moon Colonies, the UMC, had rebelled from Terran control about a decade before he was born. They had labored not only for existence but for respect ever since.

When the colonial powers abandoned their “police action” on Luna, they also abandoned all but the pretense of assistance, including all but the barest minimum of trade. If the Moon colonies wanted to go it alone, the colonial powers decided they would make sure it was very alone.

Only decades later, when the recidivist threat reared its ugly head, was the UMC finally seen not only as a friend but as an ally. Without UMC technology, manufacturing, and plain old firepower, the alliance would have fallen from within three years ago.

UMC involvement had turned the tide of the war. The Lunar outcasts now stood in a position of power over the old countries of the UN. Chong chose to emphasize his country’s position by taking a

solitary ride down to Versailles, France, where the final peace settlement was being dictated.

The doors opened, and a UN delegation stood waiting. They appeared rather startled.

“President Chong, where is the rest of your party?” inquired the European diplomat sent to fetch him. A small slight to send a diplomat and not an actual head of state. Small, but a slight nonetheless. Chong noted it.

“Coming along in the next car. They had business to attend to, and I did not wish to keep you waiting,” said Chong.

“Very well,” said the diplomat, more shocked than displeased, but still trying to appear blasé. “I will escort you to the Great Room. The remainder of my party will await . . . uh . . . the remainder of yours. Right this way.”

The grandeur and symbolism of Versailles was not lost on Chong as they walked through its ancient halls. He was certain it was chosen to impress upon the vanquished recidivists, and upon himself too, that the old world was unassailable. But he had something in mind that would outweigh the symbolism of the structure and in fact quite possibly benefit from it. His arriving alone was only the beginning of the plan. He meant for the UMC to never again want. For a woman to never again starve herself to feed her children. For the UMC to take its place in the community of nations, not just as a member, but as a leader.

The UMC did things differently and better than the world below. He wished to make both worlds better.

President Chong entered the great hall and saw the delegates of the ancient countries of Earth milling about as if they were at a school mixer or an office party. Nobody turned to acknowledge or welcome the leader of the United Moon Colonies.

A waiter approached with a drink and Chong took it, grateful for the distraction. The diplomat excused himself by saying he would announce Chong’s arrival. Eventually the leader of the British Isles approached and introduced himself. This was especially insulting, as the two had met twice before. However, that had been before the war, and Chong got the impression that it was perhaps meant to be self-deprecating rather than insulting.

United Moon Colonies

“You’ve helped us so much, President Chong; I hope we can show sufficient appreciation. Our worlds have been apart far too long. Cheers,” said the minister.

He held up his glass towards Chong and looked expectant. Chong was not well-versed in these Terran pleasantries and balked for a second. He felt suddenly like the country simpleton he knew many in this room held him and his countrymen to be.

But rather than make him feel stupid, the minister saved them both.

“It’s an old British custom, I’m afraid. Sort of old, quaint, and stupid, but I hope you don’t mind my sharing it with you. Nothing to it really. Just clink the glasses, like so--and say ‘cheers.’ ”

The minister’s ability to save the situation impressed Chong. He touched his glass to the minister’s and said “Cheers.” At that moment his advisors entered the room. The guards waited outside. Chong could tell his chief advisor looked fairly impressed at how he was getting on.

“Learning an old British custom, Lawrence. You should try it. You wish someone well or say something hopeful, if I’ve got it right, Minister. Then say ‘cheers’ and touch glasses. Cheers.”

Chong held his glass towards Lawrence, who had just taken one from a passing tray.

“Uh . . . cheers,” replied Lawrence, then almost smashed the glasses together. The minister chuckled, but before Chong could reprimand his advisor, the diplomat who had accompanied him from the elevator announced that it was time for everyone to take their seats.

“I believe you’re over here just by me, Mr. President,” said the British minister, smiling.

There was a large table set in the middle of the room for all the heads of state. Advisors were seated along the walls of the room directly behind their leaders. The UMC was along one side, fairly near the middle, between Britain and Germany. France, as the host of the event, took the head on one end of the table. The American president, for no stated reason, took the head on the other end.

In addition to the alliance countries, representatives from Venezuela, the African Confederacy, United Arabia, and Israel were in attendance. These were the four nations of the Fundys. The recidivists called themselves “The Fundamental Union of Nations,” but others shortened this name to “Fundys.” The governments of the Fundy

nations had encouraged uprisings in North America and Europe--and had almost won the war.

Of course, the representatives in attendance were not the leaders who had started the war. Living Fundy leaders were under UN supervision in Miami, awaiting trial by the World Court. Instead new leaders of the defeated countries had been acknowledged by the alliance, and invited here to accept the terms of the official end of the war. It was merely symbolic. All these nations were occupied. Each of them was split up into areas controlled by UMC light forces, North American Army, European Union Brigades, and Chinese Regulars. The fighting had ended over a month ago. The treaty would bring closure to the bloodiest period yet of Earth's history and attempt, again, to make sure it never happened again.

The French president rose to speak.

"On behalf of the European Union and the people of France, I welcome you to Versailles: a rich and ancient hall that has seen its share of history and is steeped in the business of peace-making. May the efforts made in its--"

An explosion ripped through the south end of the hall, knocking down a quarter of the wall behind the French president, throwing him to the ground. All the leaders scurried away from that end of the room as security guards rushed in.

The guards had Chong almost all the way back to the elevator before he collected himself.

"Stop. We're not going to run. I want to find out what happened here."

"Sir, it's not safe," protested one of the guards.

"I'm not interested in that right now. Get me to the security center."

The guards took the president to the area they had been told to use for security questions, where he was referred to the actual security offices.

Outside the office, a functionary attempted to brush him away.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we're busy pursuing leads on this. If you'll just remove yourself to a safe location, we'll update your ministry as soon as possible."

"I'm not going anywhere. I want to talk to the head of security. Now," said Chong.

United Moon Colonies

“Sir. I’m terribly sorry this has happened, but it is just not possible for you to speak with the head. He is dealing with this situation. He has no time.”

“He’ll make time for me.” Chong pushed his way past the outraged man. He had decided that if he was to be viewed as an offworld backwards ruffian, he might as well act the part when it benefited him.

With the functionary on his tail, he found the head of security at his office going over a report.

“What is the meaning of this?!?” cried the security chief, standing up as Chong burst into the room, followed by the functionary and the two UMC guards. Lawrence had chosen to wait outside.

“I am President Richard Chong of the United Moon Colonies. You may know us as one of the reasons you’re not in a compulsory religious internment camp right now.”

“Mr. President, I, uh . . . understand your indignation, but I am trying--”

“Shut up and listen to me! Your mole planted the bomb using a detrailling device. I recognize the signature of the blast from mining work at New Canaveral. A detrailling device like that will have a goldmine of DNA in it from skin flakes because of the intricate setting mechanism. That is, if you can find it. They bury themselves after detonation. I can show you where if you’ll allow me to accompany you to the blast site.”

“Our mole?”

“Yes, mole. It’s the only way a detrailling device could get in this place. They’re impossible to hide unless you bring them in small pieces over time. Now, let’s move.”

The security chief looked less surprised than the UMC guards did, but he still looked uncomfortable.

“Right this way.”

Chong left the guards posted outside the great hall and spent a few minutes investigating the blast site. The French team working on the site showed no small amount of confusion at the sight of the president of the Moon rooting around in the rubble. Chong couldn’t care less. He crawled around on his knees, seeming to sniff the air above certain patterns of cracks in the wall and floor. After about five minutes of this odd behavior, he called Lawrence over.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing, Lawrence?”

Lawrence looked uncomfortable, shifting his gaze between the staring French workers and his boss, the president of the UMC.

“What exactly are you seeing, sir?”

“Come on. Lawrence. Don’t pretend we didn’t spend two summers deep under New Cav recovering these damn things for beer money. It looks like a Terran-made Caterpillar brand, and I think it dug and detonated. Right there.” The president finished by pointing to a very slight indentation in the floor where several minute cracks seemed to meet.

Lawrence lost a bit of his self-consciousness as he looked.

“You know, you’re right. Those Cat detrailers are hard to come by, though. Seems unlikely, but it sure fits the pattern.”

“Hard to come by on Luna, you mean. Not so hard to come by in France when the factory’s in Stuttgart.”

The security chief finally intervened. “I’m sorry, but I’m not following what you are saying. Do you mind explaining?”

Chong enjoyed a little glow of pride.

“Of course, chief, I’m sorry. It looks like your mole used a Caterpillar brand self-detonating detrailer device. A detrailer is a mining machine. Without getting too much into it, it blasts rock to cover up marks made by other mining equipment. If you want a real smooth overlay, you need a self-detonating detrailer. One that blows itself up after it’s done. In a mining situation this leaves a perfect aftermark, something you can deal with. In the halls of Versailles it’s not so pretty, but it’s essentially the same thing. The detrailer blew off the wall, creating a leveled path here, then buried itself over here and blew itself up.”

“You said something about Stuttgart, I believe?” The Chief was starting to think like a security man again.

“The beauty of a self-detonating detrailer for a criminal is that it leaves no trace. If you don’t have someone familiar with these kind of devices, you’ll never find it and never know what did it. But I recognize the pattern. It’s the mark of a Caterpillar Detrailer. They’re made here on Terra at Stuttgart. If I were you,” and here Chong began to assume a more presidential air, “and I wouldn’t presume to give orders to such a highly capable man, but if I were in your situation, I might try digging down under that black mark and running DNA tests on anything you find. Some organic material might have survived the blast. I would also call Caterpillar in Stuttgart and find out who has

United Moon Colonies

obtained Caterpillar Detrainers in the last few months and if any have gone missing.”

The Security Chief ordered his functionary to do just that, then turned to Chong. “Thank you very much. I am sorry about the confusion earlier. How may I reach you if I have further questions? We are lucky to have an expert of such eminence as yourself willing to assist.”

“I believe I’m staying here. Unless those arrangements have changed?”

“Well, in light of the current situation, I hardly think someone such as yourself would want . . .”

“Oh, I want.” Chong smiled. “I want to be as close to this as possible. That detrainer was a prelude, nothing more. I intend to prevent the sequel from occurring.”

After moving into his room in the palace, Chong was called to a small meeting of dignitaries before dinner. Most of the delegates to the peace meetings had stayed, though most chose new accommodations. The business of the interrupted meeting had been mostly ceremonial. Tomorrow the treaty would be signed.

Most of the terms of the treaty had been worked out beforehand in diplomatic conferences. Minister Narang of Britain called a few principals to meet before dinner to discuss the only true point of negotiation, the term of the occupation.

“Ah, President Chong, thank you so much for coming on such short notice. It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it? Please come in.”

Chong was impressed that Narang opened his own door. It was something Chong would have done, but he would have thought it would come off as unsophisticated.

The leaders of France, Russia, China, Mexico, and Canada had already arrived.

“President Torres is on his way. He’s the last to arrive. Can I get you a drink?” offered Narang.

Chong asked for water, and to his great shock, Narang went off to fetch the drink himself.

“We have no servants here tonight, Monsieur Chong. This meeting is supposed to look as if it’s about the treaty, but it is not,” said the French president. “While you have proved a great help in the

bombing investigation, we already know who set the bomb and why. We're meeting to determine an immediate course of action tonight."

Chong tried to look nonplussed. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because the criminal left word with the heads of Europe and America. His name is John Ford. He's not a Fundy, but he is a Terranist, and he believes the UMC should be removed from Earth at once. He wants his victim to know everything about why he is dying. He's after you, Mr. Chong. He wants you dead."

Chong couldn't help it. He laughed. "I'm sorry, Mr. President, I do not mean to laugh. But your presentation strikes me as melodramatic. There is someone named John Ford who wants to kill me to encourage the withdrawal of UMC troops from Earth? I understand. So what do we do?"

The American president arrived at that moment and immediately voiced his opinion.

"You need to go home, Chong. The business of this conference can finish behind closed doors without you. Your man Lawrence seems very capable. The only point of contention can be worked out here this evening."

The American president tried to look like a commander. You could tell he was used to being doubted, but also used to getting his way. The Fundys in the United States had been the most vicious, and the US response had been the most criticized in the early stages of the war. However, the US also saw the strongest resistance against the Fundys before the UMC entered the war. You could see every line of that experience in his face.

Chong had communicated quite often with the American president, Rodrigo Torres, through the course of the war.

"Thank you for your concern, Rudy. I mean it. And I may take your advice. But let's get down to business first and worry about that later."

The leaders quickly organized into two camps. One camp, led by the China and the European countries, argued for a long-term occupation with a strong rebuilding plan directed by the occupying forces, with a ten-year plan for elections and resumption of local control.

The American leaders and the UMC preferred a very short-term military occupation with a longer term advisory council moving

United Moon Colonies

quickly into hybrid local control, while still waiting for a ten-year period before withdrawing entirely.

At one point China insisted their military would stay in occupied territories for security, no matter what term was decided. This angered even the Europeans and threatened to break down discussion.

“Let’s wait for a moment,” said Chong. “If China wishes long-term military occupation, so be it. I propose we cede our territory to them immediately to restructure, as they will. The UMC forces will withdraw now.” The president got up to leave during the stunned silence.

He made it out the door, where Lawrence, who was waiting for him, seemed surprised.

“So you’ve come to an agreement?”

“Not exactly.”

“President Chong?” It was the British minister. “Before you leave, the Chinese premier would like a word with you.

“Very good.” Chong turned towards his chief aide. “I’ll be right back, Lawrence.”

The Chinese premier met him at the door. “You’ve made your point, Mr. President. We will negotiate the military term.”

The rest of the meeting was awkward and uncomfortable, but ultimately productive. Chong had bluffed his way into discovering just how much leverage the UMC had. His was the only territory that had not experienced any fighting. His was the only army with minimal losses. He didn’t have the tactical advantages of being able to effectively to rule the territories he occupied, but he could certainly get his way.

After the meeting, President Torres walked him to his room.

“I meant what I said back there, Rich. You need to get back for your own safety. There’s no reason to stay and let him figure out how to compromise the elevator or booby trap your room. Get out. The sooner the better.”

“Thanks, Rudy, but I have to see some stuff through and I’m not worried. I’m really not. Maybe I should be, but I’m not. I think what he really wants is to make me leave and weaken our standing. I’m not playing into that.”

“He’s willing to kill you if you don’t.”

“How do you know so much about him?”

“Because he used to be a top advisor to all of us before the War. He was the UN economic liaison.”

“*That* Ford? Well, I guess I wouldn’t know him, but I certainly remember him. He wanted a free trade pact with us, but nobody would let down their guard. What happened to him?”

“During the War his family was killed, and he led a home guard division voluntarily in Omaha.”

“Was he there when . . . ?”

“Yep. You bet. The UMC terror bombing, he calls it.”

“It was a mistake.”

“He doesn’t care, and he wants you dead.”

“This is my room.”

“Think about it, Rich. Good night.”

Lawrence opened the door, and Chong walked into his room to find John Ford lounging on the couch.

“Mr. Chong. I’m sorry, President Chong. Thank you for coming. I won’t be long. I just have some brief business to take care of with you.”

Lawrence made for the door, but Ford quickly had a gun to Chong's head.

"No, Mr. Lawrence. I don't wish to be disturbed. Besides. I'm not going to kill Mr.--Damn me. Pardon. *President* Chong. Not yet. They have probably warned you about me. I am dangerous. I'm aware of that. But I'd rather not kill you. That's why I've risked my own life. So you understand, Mr. President? My own life is at risk right now. I'm risking my life to save you."

Ford kept the gun at Chong's head, moving it around slowly as he circled the president. He almost massaged Chong's head with the barrel, all the time keeping an eye on Lawrence, who still stood next to the door.

"Mr. Lawrence, please. You'll be more comfortable sitting down." He moved the gun off Chong momentarily and waved it toward a couch. "Please. Have a seat."

Lawrence moved over to the couch, keeping his eyes on Chong for any kind of sign as to what he should do.

"So you see, Mr. President." Ford spat out the words. "I'm paying you back. You risked your life, and the lives of your so-called countrymen, to defeat the Fundys. I respect that action. I truly do. And so I return the favor. But you're all madmen. You indiscriminately kill in order to get your result. As you have seen, I can respect that too. Though I narrowed my bomb's focus a little. I didn't wish to kill. So I'm not quite up to par with the United Moon Colony forces, am I?"

"But I'm a follower of yours, President Chong. An acolyte, if you will. I follow your example, even if I'm learning and didn't get it quite right today. I didn't kill anyone, see? Didn't rob anyone of their wife and children. But I noted you came down the elevator alone. A

good sign. So I followed it.” Ford smiled widely and waved the gun out away from Chong to gesture. “I came here alone too. In order to deliver you . . .”

Lawrence had Ford’s arm in a tight grip. He’d dropped his guard briefly and neither of the other men had missed it. Chong was around Ford in a split second, and the gun was on the floor. But Ford was not to be trifled with. He swung both arms forward and knocked both men to the floor. He was almost back to the gun when Lawrence leaped toward it too. Chong had started shouting from the moment they had jumped Ford, and the guards had come running into the room.

Ford looked up and smiled.

“Oh, Mr. President Chong. I guess you’ll have to hear my message in a different way. If you hear it at all. Remove your troops now. That’s really the short version.”

Ford was out the window and gone before the guards could stop him.

“He can’t have gone far,” said Lawrence, but when they looked out the window, there was nothing. One of the guards had already run to alert security, but Ford wasn’t found.

The guards insisted on remaining in the room, and Chong had to persuade them not to stay in his bedroom. It’s not that he couldn’t have slept with them there, he just felt it was overreacting, and overreaction was exactly what Ford wanted.

The next morning, Minister Narang met Chong in the hallway on his way to breakfast.

“Good morning, Mr. President. So, I see you didn’t take President Torres’s advice--at least not yet.”

“No, Minister. I’m certain it’s good advice, but I’m not ready to run. In fact, I made a decision on my next action this morning in the shower.”

The minister raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Do tell. If you don’t mind my knowing.”

“Not at all. I intend to have Lawrence set up a press conference today. I’m going to Omaha.”

“Is that right?”

“You don’t seem as surprised as I would have expected, Minister. I’m disappointed,” Chong chuckled.

Narang gave a sly smile. “I won’t go so far as to say I have you figured out, President Chong. But I daresay I expect you to surprise us at this point. I couldn’t have predicted you’d go to Omaha next, but it is the kind of thing that seems to fit. Do you know what I’m getting at?”

“Yes. I guess so.”

“Besides, it is also where I’m headed after the peace conference. So I’m happy that I may get the pleasure of your company again.”

“Do you always talk like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like a storybook.”

“Always.”

“Well, it’s damned odd. Why are you going to Omaha?”

“To appear in front of the troops. The small European aid contingent there is largely British. They won’t be needed for much longer, but we need to boost morale to get them over the hump until the end.”

“What a coincidence.”

“Are you staying for the rest of the conference, I hope?”

“Yes.”

“And then you hope to draw out Ford.”

“I hope to kill him.”

This stopped the minister. “Now that--was unexpected.”

“I’m glad I could finally surprise you.”

They had arrived in the Great Hall, and Chong sought out Lawrence to inform him of the plans.

Lawrence was not easily persuaded this was the best way to go about things, but in the end, Chong was president.

The media had been largely absent because of the tight security controls, but they had been allowed to view the signing. Most of them pestered the poor Security Chief and took video of the bomb site, now covered in canvas on one end of the hall.

The meeting was long and boring with many speeches from the different leaders, topped off by the great moment of the official signing of the peace treaty. Chong’s speech was scheduled immediately after the signing. He had been told that the first words in an era of peace should come from the UMC. Lawrence had explained to him that nobody would bother listening once the treaty was signed. And it was true. About two-thirds of the cameras and reporters left the hall immediately after the signing. They had published: now on to other work.

As the national leaders took their seats again, Chong approached the podium. Applause rippled through the crowd. Of those left, most recognized the great contribution of the UMC. While some still belittled the upstart nation and others worried about the larger role they now held on Earth, none of them were ungrateful for the support they gave. If he ever would have the world’s ear, it would be now. The remaining press corps would report his words, and if he did it right, they would end up with a scoop.

“Thank you, assembled leaders and distinguished guests. One hundred years ago, my grandfather came to a conference similar to this. Peace was the goal, but there was no moral high ground for either

United Moon Colonies

side. An uneasy peace was reached. This day is different for many reasons. The Fundamental Union of Nations was an unseen scourge on this world for a long time. They rose out of Earth's failings, and for a time, I'm embarrassed to say, some in my government were sympathetic to their complaints. But their policies were abhorrent, their methods unacceptable, and in the end they became a problem not just for Earth, but for all of humanity.

"It was not popular to enter what was essentially a five-front war, especially on a planet that had such an uneasy relationship with us. Many said that we should leave Earth to itself, stay out of it. But we could not. In the end, we won more than just peace by joining this war. We won understanding. In a sense we're declaring a healing peace in two wars here. This is the end, not only of the Fundamental Union's war on humanity, but of the struggle between Luna and Terra, the Moon and Earth.

"But our work is not done and our responsibilities have not lifted. The UMC forces could just leave, and many would like us to. But we must leave things better than we found them. History has shown that wars fought with no end, end in other wars. We will not let that happen. That is why I will leave from here and personally inspect the conditions in every UMC-occupied area and then consult with the Alliance Countries on an exact plan for rebuilding and withdrawal.

"I will visit Caracas and ensure that their once vibrant economy returns. I will visit our administrative region in Gabon and see to it that the Anthropological Institute can resume its work. In United Arabia, I will personally investigate how to get energy systems back up and running in responsible hands. In Europe, I'll speak with unit administrators in the Vatican.

"But my first trip will be to America. To Omaha. To the site of the bombing and to our military police headquarters in the Midwest. A man named John Ford recently threatened my life if the UMC did not leave this world. He's upset with what happened in the war. Well, so am I. But I will not do people the disservice of leaving before we've put things right. And I will not let confusion rise over what the Fundys did and what we did. And we will take responsibility for what we did.

"A song became popular during this war. Its words referred to "the Looneys coming" and "thank god the Looneys are here." I'll take the backhanded, light-hearted compliment of that song. The Looneys, as some call us, have a way of doing things that has led to the creation

of a strong band of united colonies. When we find adversity, we defeat it and make things better. We will do that, depart, and leave you to do the rest. Thank you.”

A mixture of reaction met the end of Chong’s address. Some leaders showed obvious shock at the revelation of John Ford’s agenda, which they had worked hard to keep secret. Others clapped lightly and politely at what they considered a self-serving and pompous sermon. But the majority of the press, aides, and lower-level guests cheered heartily. They were the ones still glad the Looneys had come to save them. They valued Chong’s straight talk. “Moon men play straight” was another saying that had grown up during the war.

Chong hadn’t planned to announce the visit to Omaha or to speak of John Ford directly when he started the speech. He could already see the frustration in Lawrence’s eyes.

“We’ll figure it out, Lawrence. Don’t look at me like that.”

“You’ll be the death of me, Mr. President.”

“I got here by trusting my instincts. We beat the Fundys by trusting our instincts. I don’t mean to be too full of myself, but I figure my good luck may run a little longer.”

“As you say, Mr. President. Gravity doesn’t make a man, it’s the way he jumps.”

“I never say that. Nobody ever says that anymore.”

“But you sure act the part of the old-time Moon Man quite well.”

“Point taken.”

The press conference was scheduled in an alcove off from the elevator banks. After speaking to the press, Chong would head back to Serenity Colony in the UMC, take care of some business, then take another elevator back down to New York and fly a UMC transit ship to Omaha.

The press conference went off without a hitch. The questions were almost entirely about the trip to Omaha and the revelation about John Ford, but nothing Chong couldn’t handle. At the very end, Lawrence had a habit of allowing a few questions from the unofficial press. These were upstarts with no real press credentials trying to build a name or business. The final question came from a recently popular political intrigue writer, called simply “Bex.” She was a faddish hit who liked sensational material and had been eating up the John Ford story.

United Moon Colonies

“Mr. President. Are you aware of the connection between John Ford and the British minister, Minister Narang?”

“I’m aware that Mr. Ford used to be a key negotiator and has connections to almost every leader on Earth, even me.”

“I’m speaking of their relationship as brothers. Did you know Mr. Narang is the half-brother of Mr. Ford?”

The rest of the press corps groaned. This was the type of sensational rumor Bex thrived on. It needed no basis in fact.

“No. I’m not aware whether that is true.”

“But it is true, Mr. President. I have here documentation--”

Lawrence attempted to cut her off. “That will be all for now. The president will be holding his next conference after his landing in New York tomorrow--”

Suddenly, the doors to the room burst open, and Minister Narang came in holding his belly and breathing heavily. He stumbled up the aisle to Chong, barely able to breathe or speak. “Don’t take the elevator. Ford has it. My brother will get you.” He passed out.

4

Excerpt from the “Guide to the First Worlds War”

While the Worlds War engaged every single nation on Earth and the Moon, some nations were the primary movers. Here are described the main member nations on both sides of the war.

Fundamental Union of Nations (Fundys)

The Fundys believed they were commissioned by God to wipe the Earth clean of sinners and sinful ways. They held no value for either their own lives or the lives of others. They had been considered terrorists or extremists in their areas of operation until they formed a worldwide union, setting aside their differences and coordinating their efforts. What had been Islamic, Christian, or Jewish movements--movements often at each others' throats--were brought together under one banner by Abraham G. Touareg at the council of Caracas. Touareg's Fundamental Union party won control of the Venezuelan government and then quickly expanded their control around the world.

Venezuela

One of the brightest economic lights of the southern hemisphere before Fundy control, Venezuela became the central base of operations for Touareg and his party. Caracas had once been the financial capital of South America; Touareg dismantled its economy and fed on its strength to make the Fundys strong. It is said that the economic success of Venezuela came too quickly for the country to cope, opening the way for Touareg to take control by appearing to bring the country back to basics. At its height, Venezuela controlled two-thirds

United Moon Colonies

of South America and claimed most of Central America as satellite states.

African Confederacy

Venezuela quickly formed alliances with fundamentalist governments in Africa, which gave rise to a continent-wide confederacy there. Touareg considered the African Confederacy to be the Fundys' own UN, where, in Touareg's words, "the moral nations of the world can meet unmolested by sinful ideas in order to discuss how to bring God's plan into being." Odwale Mbeko, Touareg's puppet and right-hand man, rose to prominence as leader of the Confederacy.

United Arabia

The tumultuous history of Arabia had seemed finally resolved with the formation of the United Arabian Shura. However, Touareg's money helped the Fundys take power there, and they soon started rolling back reforms, reinstating fundamentalist laws and programs.

Israel

The shining example of the power of diplomacy fell when the Jewish arm of the Fundys took control of Israel and dismissed the Gneset. Israel became partners with Touareg and United Arabia in a policy of repatriation and appropriate occupation now known as "The Purgings."

Fundamental States of America

A Fundy uprising in the Midwestern states of the USA secured several state governments and attempted to take over the Federal Government of the US as well. The states were kicked out of the union and a second civil war erupted.

Fundamental European Union

Scattered provincial governments fell to the Fundys throughout Europe, starting one of the most complicated theaters of war ever, as two European Unions existed at once over essentially one territory with millions of fronts between many different sects and populations. Europe was the scene of the bloodiest battles in the war. The FEU based itself in Vatican City, holding the Pope as a hostage and mouthpiece for their work.

Alliance of Nations (Later known as Alliance of Worlds)

The Alliance grew slowly as Venezuela marched over most of South America and then converted Africa to the Fundy cause. Mexico started the first alliance with its North American counterparts. Europe joined next, led by France and Russia. The entry of China was felt to be the key to turning the tide, but only the entry of the UMC put the Alliance on the road to victory.

Mexico

As Venezuela began taking over its South American neighbors, Mexico declared war and attempted to free Brazil and some of its other allies.

Canada

When Venezuela caused several Central American countries to invade southern Mexico, Canada joined the war.

United States of America

The rebellion of the Midwestern states moved the US into the war on Venezuela. Mexico, Canada, and the US formed the first Alliance of Nations against the Fundys.

France, Britain, Russia (European Union)

The non-linear attacks and victories across Europe caused some individual countries like Germany and Italy to become essentially non-existent. France, Britain, and Russia are credited with keeping the EU going during the war.

China

Touareg originally signed a peace treaty with China and kept them out of the war until the African Confederacy began to move into southeast Asia. China declared war on Africa, and Venezuela declared this a violation of their treaty and sent troops into China.

United Moon Colonies

The last nation to enter the war, alongside the tiny independent Moon colony, Cana. The UMC held a distinct tactical advantage, able to deploy troops from space anywhere they were needed. The UMC

United Moon Colonies

forces were also fresh and easily supplied as the Fundys had little experience with space-based defense. They knew enough to block Earth access but could not cope with UMC attacks from above. The great space elevators were expanded and used to shuttle troops and supplies between key points on Earth and the Moon. The UMC involvement turned the tide of the war and led to Touareg's death and the fall of the Fundys.

5

On board Air Force One, President Chong sat bewildered, talking with President Torres.

“It doesn’t make any sense. Why would Ford warn Narang, then shoot him?”

“He’s a bloody man, Chong. And Narang will recover; he wasn’t mortally wounded. Ford’s just making his point.”

“Did you ever think he might have meant us to take your ship? That we might be in danger right now?”

“Of course we are, but even so, the security on AF1 is the best in the world.”

“Sir?” A woman interrupted them. Chong lost his breath.

“Oh, hello, Samantha,” The president shifted his weight in his seat so as to face the woman. “This is President Chong of the United Moon Colonies. Rich, this is Samantha Malinao, Speaker of the House.”

“Pleasure to see you, President Chong. This concerns you too.” She smiled at Chong, but remained business-like. Torres raised an eyebrow but kept silent. “Sir, we just received the news that the Paris Elevator has been damaged. A unit of UMC troops was descending to assist at Versailles when an explosion took out the stabilizers. There are two fatalities, twelve injured, and the elevator is inoperable.”

Chong stared at Malinao. She had long black hair and deep chocolate-brown eyes. She wasn’t a bombshell in the classic sense, but she had quite an effect on Chong’s attention. They had met several times over the course of the war, as Chong had met with Torres. He always felt slightly and unexplainably intimidated by her. She on the other hand, while always friendly, and even at times flirtatious, never indicated any interest beyond a professional friendship.

United Moon Colonies

Chong had never married, nor had he even dated much, leading to all kinds of speculation in the press on his love life and sexual tendencies. The truth was that he was bisexual, but he was so concerned with his job that he didn't have time to pursue sexual relationships much. He had once thought he and Lawrence would hook up, but he later realized he probably wasn't Lawrence's type. And besides, they worked too closely together.

"Chong? Do you need to contact your staff?"

Chong shook himself out of his reverie. "Yes, yes, of course. I'll be right back."

Lawrence found Chong at the back of the ship. "We have to return to Serenity, sir. It's not just about your safety at this point."

"You're right, Lawrence. We'll take the New York elevator. But we're coming right back down."

"Very good, sir. I'll make the arrangements."

"Don't smirk, Lawrence."

"Of course not, sir. I never smirk."

Chong returned to his seat to find Speaker Malinao in it.

"Oh, I'm sorry, President Chong . . ."

"You know you can call me Richard, or just Chong, like Rudy here does sometimes."

Malinao smiled.

"It's just more efficient."

"Of course, Chong. Would you like your seat back?"

"No, that's fine. I'll sit here." He took the empty seat next to Torres.

"So what's the scoop, Rich? You need to head back, I expect."

"Yes, Lawrence is arranging it now. I'll take the New York elevator back up, but I'm coming right back down. I intend to be in Omaha tomorrow."

"That's what happened," Malinao interjected. "That's why they shot Minister Narang. He was headed to Omaha as well. They want you there alone."

"Well, they would have known all our itineraries, that's true," said Torres. "I can't go to Omaha. I have a conference on Naval redeployment for the next three days. It's not like you'll be undefended, but the fewer dignitaries, the fewer troops."

“Not just that,” said Malinao, with another smile that melted Chong. “It’s also to have you isolated. No friends around. Terranists like to play mind games.”

“Well, I’m going anyway. I can beef up the guards, but I feel that with a man like Ford, it matters little.”

“Ford?” Malinao looked surprised.

“Uh, she hadn’t been briefed,” explained Torres, slightly abashed.

“John Ford is the man after me. It’s not just the Terranists against the UMC. It’s somehow personal. Ford lost his family in Omaha.”

“And you’re going there on purpose,” Malinao had a look of respect, which Chong hoped included a little admiration. “That seems really stupid.” So much for admiration.

“I want to beat Ford and beat him quick. The problem with all people like him is letting them rule the debate.. They don’t plan for direct confrontation; they plan for games and strategy. I’m attempting to foil his plans by doing exactly what he doesn’t think I’d ever consider doing. Unfortunately he forced my hand with the elevator. So he’s ahead. I wish there was a way I could go directly to Omaha from Serenity, but I’m limited to the elevators, at least from space.”

“Why not have a UMC ship take you direct from Luna?” Malinao asked.

“Because Chong thinks the military efforts are too important to waste time carting his ass around,” Torres butted in.

“But surely this is an exception, no?” Malinao almost looked worried.

Chong shifted uneasily. “I suppose it could be. If there’s a mission headed that way anyway. But there’s probably not.”

“What if I pick you up?” Malinao offered.

“What? From Luna?” Chong asked, shocked.

“I was thinking from ISS 5.”

ISS 5 was the UN orbital station. Because the UN had tight controls on it, Chong would need special permission to fly there. Torres could get him that. However, the UN would not give him permission to travel to Earth from there. He’d only be able to go back to the Moon, unless someone else gave him a ride. That seemed to be what Malinao was offering.

“You can do that?”

United Moon Colonies

“I’m not the masochist you are, Chong. I have a ship at the speaker’s command, and I intend to use it.”

Chong laughed at the insult. He would have laughed if she had slapped him, he thought. “OK. So why aren’t you in your personal carriage right now?”

“I said I’m not a masochist, but that doesn’t mean I’m wasteful. No need to take two ships where one works.”

“Then I accept. Rudy, can you get me landing--”

“Yeah, yeah, you two have fun. I’ll get you ISS privileges. Just do me a favor and don’t get our speaker killed, all right? She might be the next president.”

For the first time, Malinao looked a bit embarrassed.

In New York, Chong had little time to say goodbye before he was whisked out to the elevator at Jamaica Bay.

“I think Speaker Malinao’s plan is sound,” offered Lawrence during the ride up to platform 70. That was unlike Lawrence, who rarely offered any kind of unsolicited advice.

“You’re starting to get downright pushy, Lawrence,” said Chong.

“Pardon me, sir, but if it saves your butt, I’ll do it. I hope you don’t mind, sir.”

“I always thought you were a bit too deferential anyway.”

Lawrence chuckled slightly.

“What?” Chong turned to see his aide struggling to keep a straight face.

“Sorry, sir.”

“No, out with it, what?”

Lawrence sighed and lost all composure as he put on a dead-on imitation of Chong’s voice. “Lawrence, I know we’ve been friends for a long time, but now I’m the president. This doesn’t change our friendship, but we have to act like professionals.”

“Which you agreed to!” Chong was starting to get a little angry.

“And which you’re now telling me I can ease off of. I guess it’s natural when we’ve been at it for seven years. Still, sir, it just struck me funny. I apologize.”

There was nobody else in the car to hear the conversation, but they both knew it would be observed and recorded for security purposes.

“Fine,” Chong sighed. “I hereby give you a presidential order to lighten up a bit.”

“Very good--Rich. Sorry, can't do it, sir. Here's your schedule. We have a staff meeting at the capitol, then we need to head to Armstrong, to the Floyd Center for a UMC business council address, then Clavius this evening for a University meeting, then New Canaveral for your shuttle flight to ISS 5.”

“You certainly know how to pack an agenda, Lawrence. Any way of skipping the University?”

“Well, they've been waiting for you to attend for months, and the shuttle can't leave until late anyway. So it wouldn't hurt. You don't have to speak or do anything but eat their dinner and smile.”

“I'd rather be alone, but all right. It's important. Thanks, Lawrence.”

The elevator arrived at platform 70, and UMC guards escorted the president and his chief aide to the waiting shuttle to take them to the Serenity colony on the Moon.

Excerpt from “A Guide to Luna and its People.”

Colonies of the Moon

The United Moon Colonies are a federation of twelve of the thirteen Moon colonies, plus the two Lunar research stations at Tranquility and Houston de la Luna. It was founded in the year M90. Cana is not a member of the UMC but is listed here for completeness. Moon years are expressed as M and then the number of years since the founding of Tranquility; this system is used on the Moon to prevent confusion between Earth and Moon time. The years correspond approximately to a terrestrial year but may have different start and end dates. Lunar days are twenty-five hours long.

Tranquility (M1)

The first Moon colony, founded by an international effort led by NASA. The base was a proof that the concept of a Moon colony could work. Tranquility consisted of minimal research facilities and living quarters. It continues today as a museum and tourist attraction, considered a settlement rather than a full colony. It used to be governed by Serenity Colony, but it was transferred to Avalon’s governance in M100. Only museum staff live in the settlement, and many museum staff members live in other colonies and commute. The year Tranquility was founded marks the start of Lunar calendar year M1. It is the only colony without a spaceport, although if necessary ships can land in a clearing near the site of the first Moon landing (CE1969).

Houston de la Luna (M6)

The second Moon colony was founded as a command center and spaceport. Several space agencies decided that further exploration and colonization could only succeed if the Moon had its own version of Earth's space command center in Houston, Texas. Houston de la Luna was designed to provide that command presence on the Moon. It still serves as the main spaceport for ships from Earth. Like Tranquility, Houston de la Luna is considered a settlement, not a full colony. It is governed by the colony of Armstrong.

Serenity (M13)

The first full-fledged colony on the Moon was built as a university. The University of Luna still operates there and is the colony's major employer. It is also the capital of the UMC and headquarters for all armed forces except for the Air Force. Representatives of the founding colonies signed the Contract of Union here.

Clavius (M15)

The cultural center of the UMC was founded by the European Space Agency as the second full colony on the Moon. While it had been planned alongside Serenity, the success of the University of Luna drove many research scientists to Clavius to escape the restrictions of academia. It also provided a path for graduating students. Clavius is now the home of the Union theater, ballet, opera, and symphony.

New Canaveral (M21)

Canaveral was meant to be a launching point for Martian missions and did fly several such missions in its early years. It was the first colony to be planned and built primarily with Moon resources. Some raw materials were shipped in from Earth, but as much as possible was mined locally. The UMC Air Force is headquartered here. New Canaveral is also home to the major military academies on the Moon.

Selene (M21)

Officially, the Japanese space agency founded Selene for additional research capacity. In reality, a fight over the colony that became Septendecim led to a colonial race with the ESA that the Japanese won by one year. Selene has grown into the technological heart of the UMC. It is also home to the most-used spaceport outside of Houston de la Luna.

Septendecim (M22)

This colony was originally to be named Imbrium. When Japan left the project, the ESA renamed it with the Latin word for “seventeen.” The number was steeped in Celtic mythology and was used both for luck and to represent the number of countries still participating. Some say Septendecim needs all the luck it can get. The colony has often faced economic difficulties and has recently tried to promote itself as a vacation spot in competition with the very popular Avalon colony. Casinos and entertaining night spots have helped some. Septendecim is the only colony with any significant crime problem. It also has an incredibly vibrant independent music and literature scene.

Trudolubie (M25)

The manufacturing center of the UMC has grown well beyond its Russian roots but still retains a distinctively Russian flavor in its architecture. It is often called by its nickname, “Little Moscow,” which many find easier to pronounce. The colony spaceport handles almost all direct freight and cargo flights to Earth.

Chang-Ngo (M25)

When China announced plans for Chang-Ngo in M3, they aimed to build the best and most self-sufficient colony on the Moon. They certainly succeeded in building the most beautiful of the colonies. The colony dome is the only one on the Moon that is entirely translucent. The city looks as if it was carved from ivory. Stunning views are around every corner. However, it does not promote itself as a tourist

option. The colonial government has instead encouraged business and finance. Chang-Ngo is therefore called the UMC's second city, as it ranks second to Avalon in business and tourism.

Armstrong (M29)

The final NASA colony seems older than it is, as it was originally planned along with Serenity and New Canaveral. Moon colonization had succeeded far beyond expectations, and Armstrong had to play catch up. However, it has grown into the economic capital of the UMC. A far-sighted entrepreneur named Sally Floyd volunteered for colonization in the then relatively cheap Armstrong expedition and immediately started a stock exchange. The Floyd Center is now the heart of the UMC financial system and houses the UMC bank.

Ahsaas (M29)

Known as "Hollywood on the Moon," Earth tourists make it a point to spend a few days in Ahsaas to see the stars under the stars. Few know that the colony was never expected to succeed. India planned and built it in four years, stunning the space community with their success. In addition to hit movies, Ahsaas also provides a remarkable twenty-five percent of the UMC's natural foods.

Avalon (M30)

The top UMC vacation hotspot is often decried as shallow and crass, but the numbers say plenty of people love it there. Canada founded it with the intention of providing a great place for recreation. They haven't failed. Nine lakes, a hundred and fifty hotels, hundreds of restaurants and shops and more populate the seemingly endless Avalon complex. The colony's marketing slogan, "You'll get what you want." isn't far off the mark.

Tollan (M35)

Mexico originally meant Tollan to be an additional vacation spot, but it has since grown into the agricultural center for the UMC, producing

United Moon Colonies

forty percent of the Moon's food. It is also acknowledged, logically enough, to be the home of the finest restaurants in the UMC.

Rafiki (M36)

The colonial government calls it the "Animal Colony." Residents just call it home. The UMC National Zoo is here, and it's also home to the highest concentration of pets and vets. But the most striking thing about Rafiki is how comfortable people look and act. Residents of Rafiki take the fewest trips out of town compared to residents of any other UMC colony.

Cana (M40)

This is the only colony not a member of the United Moon Colonies. It is however, still a member of the MCA (Moon Colony Association), the predecessor of the UMC. Through that membership it maintains integration and coordination and trade with UMC colonies, while retaining its independence. Cana was founded as a religious utopia but has broadened out into a less singularly-focused colony. It still boasts the highest concentration of churches on the Moon.

Various minor settlements

From one day to the next, minor settlements start up and close down on the Moon. There are an estimated average of 550 minor settlements in operation at any given time. These settlements engage in water and mineral mining, exploration, research, astronomy, and even some archaeology. Over ninety percent of these settlements are operated by the UMC, though some are operated by Terran nations and a handful are under Cana's control.

New colonies

No new permanent colonies have been attempted since M100, when the UMC tried to establish the colony Ambrosius for the second time. In M45, the ESA had tried to establish a colony at the same site with the same name. Both times the colony never got past the temporary stage because of lack of interest. While Armstrong and other colonies

complain of overcrowding, some colonies have plenty of space and handle overflow from these crowded colonies quite well. The UMC estimates that two more colonies will become an imperative within the next two hundred years, but as yet demand remains low. Permanency of settlement at the Ambrosius site is considered a prerequisite for attempting new colonies again. While the settlement has experienced longer-term settlements over the past few decades, the last run of six years just ended when the site was vacated by the Chicago Water Mining Company. No new tenants have yet been found.

Transit System

Colonies are connected by spaceport or train. Most colonies have a spaceport capable of handling Lunar ships and in some cases ships from Earth, though most Terrestrial-originated ships land at Houston de la Luna.

Moon Transit Map

The two main transit links are the Moon Metro (MM) and Lunar Link (LL). Most UMC residents refer to them as M and L. The UMC is unusual in allowing two competing public transit systems to operate two independent railway systems.

The L system runs in a cross-hatch pattern between all the colonies with only spur links to Cana and Tranquility. The M system uses a hub and spoke pattern with long haul direct lines between far points of the system, including Tranquility. Cana can be reached on a spur line from the main system.

If you ask several different UMC residents how to make sense of the transit system you'll likely get several different answers. Only UMC natives can make enough sense out of the system to determine which system to take when and which ride is cheapest. Visitors take comfort in the fact that both systems can get you reliably from one place to another.

United Moon Colonies

The Moon Colony Association (MCA)

The MCA was founded to coordinate logistical needs between the different colonies and to expedite cooperation between the parent government of the various settlements. In the days before the union, the MCA resolved disputes between colonies and organized cooperation for transit, trade, and eventually currency. MCA members developed a sense of unity that eventually led to the separation movement after the Armstrong incident.

When the colonies met in M90 to found the UMC they met as the MCA. Cana, Armstrong, and Chang-Ngo voted against founding the union, fearing, among other things, that it would be bad for the Lunar economy. However, Armstrong and Chang-Ngo agreed to honor the decision of the group, while Cana objected on moral grounds and refused to join the UMC. Armstrong, Chang-Ngo, and Cana continued to meet as the MCA, and the two UMC colonies acted as liaisons to Cana during those tumultuous times. Eventually the UMC government agreed to send a representative to meet with Cana under the auspices of the MCA and continue coordination between the lone colony and the united ones. Cana is now an independent colony with its own government and customs, though they use UMC currency.

7

Chong sat waiting for the M train to leave Avalon on its way to New Canaveral. Lawrence had gone to talk to the conductor and make sure there would be no delays. The shuttle waiting for them at New Canaveral would not leave without them, but Lawrence just liked to know what to expect.

The train was empty except for the guards. It was a regular M-line train, though, except for having the president's guards on it. Previous presidents traveled on special trains or flew on expensive shuttles. Not Chong. He wanted to know how the two main transit companies were doing and what it felt like to ride in the manner in which ninety-seven percent of the UMC population got around between colonies.

The door to the car opened. Chong looked up expecting to see Lawrence. Instead, a tall, dark-haired, dark-skinned woman attempted to enter the car. The guards stopped her, but she put up a stiff fight. Chong heard her say something about John Ford.

Chong stood up. "Let her talk."

The guards stopped pushing her but didn't let her move any farther forward.

"What do you want?" asked Chong.

"I want to talk to you about John Ford. I can help you figure out why he's doing what he's doing." The woman struggled a bit more against the guards.

"Is that right? Who are you?"

"I'm Silhouette Johnson. John Ford's wife."

Chong told the guards to allow her to sit down but to keep her guarded. He took a seat diagonal to her.

"Ford's wife and children are dead. That's the reason he hates us so much. You're not his wife?"

United Moon Colonies

“John sent me to the UMC during the war. I had been in Fundy-controlled Omaha, trying to convince my parents to leave. He put me on one of the last shuttles out before they cut off contact with the Moon. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“That’s all well and good. That still doesn’t prove you’re his wife or explain why he thinks you’re dead.”

“I don’t know what’s happened to him. He was never like this before the war. But in the last days I was with him he became increasingly agitated. He would get--I don’t know--jumpy. Like scared of his own shadow. He was very distracted, often not remembering things we’d talked about the day before. One day he just came in and started packing and told me I had to leave right away on the Moon shuttle or I’d be dead. I thought he was coming with me. He stayed behind and said he’d contact me shortly. He never did.

“You can check the records to see my name. Run a DNA scan if you need to verify me. I have a suspicion about what’s going on, and I want him back. I want him back the way he was. I think you’re the only one who can make him that way. You’re his only chance.”

Lawrence walked back in during her soliloquy. Chong turned to him.

“Lawrence, get me the records on the ident of John Ford’s wife and take a hair from this woman for DNA-vert.”

“Right away, sir. We’ll be leaving in a couple minutes, though.”

Chong rubbed his chin and stared at Johnson. “She’ll have to ride with us to New Canaveral, then. If that’s all right with you, Ms. Johnson?”

She nodded her assent and let Lawrence take a hair for verification.

“All right, we’ll know soon enough if you’re telling the truth about who you are. Meanwhile, tell me what you came to tell me.”

Silhouette sighed. “Minutes after our shuttle took off, the UMC bombing of Omaha began. I saw our neighborhood destroyed. But our shuttle was somehow cleared by the UMC air command and we got away. We were all interned on arrival in Houston de la Luna for about six months. I used to think John thought that I didn’t make it on the shuttle. But I’ve tried every means possible to contact him. He won’t respond.

“I think something was happening to him before we left. Something was driving him mad. I think--”

She paused, obviously unsure about what she was going to say. The train car lurched as it began its trip to New Canaveral. She looked out the window as the car bulleted out of the colonial tunnel and the Lunar landscape appeared on the viewports.

“It’s always so beautiful and lonely,” she said. The silver light bathed her face, making her look like an antique. She exhaled, and the effect dissipated. “Anyway, I think he did think we were dead at first. There was a lot of confusion in Omaha when I left. He may have thought we got shot down. I think whatever was driving him mad, well, that drove him over the edge. And now he’s so far gone, he won’t acknowledge that it’s me. That I’m OK. That he can’t use me as an excuse for whatever’s been afflicting him.”

She stopped again and stared at a series of billboards for low-cost condos in Septendecim, cheap loan rates, discounted MedEnhance surgeries, and affordable home dome insurance for off-colony residents.

Chong broke the silence. “So what are you thinking?”

She looked tentative. “I was hoping--I was thinking you could take me along. When John confronts you again, I could be with you. I’d prove to him it’s me. That I’m here.”

“I think that’s mighty dangerous.”

Lawrence entered the car.

“She’s Silhouette Johnson, all right, and Silhouette Johnson is John Ford’s wife. But she’s dead.”

This surprised even Silhouette.

“What? What do you mean I’m dead. Do I look dead to you?”

Chong saw real panic start to take her over. That swayed him a little more towards believing her.

“Well, technically you’re dead and not dead,” continued Lawrence. “UMC records show you as a living resident of Avalon. You have refugee status with indeterminate but revocable residency. Your husband John Ford’s last known address was in Omaha, Nebraska, FSA. Well, it’s the USA again, of course.”

“That doesn’t sound like dead to me,” remarked Johnson.

“But Terran records differ from UMC records. They say you lost custody of your children and you were executed as a traitor to the

United Moon Colonies

FSA. The date of the execution is after the date of your immigration to the UMC.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” interjected Chong, standing up. The train slowed down for entry into New Canaveral.

“Ms. Johnson, I will consider your suggestion. I want to find out more about why you were supposedly executed. I’ll need to go to Omaha to do that. Meanwhile, let’s hope your husband doesn’t kill me before I find out. If you agree, I would like you to leave your contact information with Lawrence here. We’ll contact you when we have more information. If that’s all right with you.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, sir . . . thank you, Mr. President.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Chong and his guards exited the train, leaving Johnson behind. He had more items for Lawrence to add to the Omaha trip’s agenda, and, worse, he had a much more complicated and unpredictable situation now. But all he could think about was seeing Speaker Malinao again.

ISS 5 had been launched a mere three years before the war. The Fundys had controlled Venezuela then and had been a growing threat at the time, so it had been built with security in mind. Chong wondered if that was why it looked like a spiky grenade.

The docking procedure was almost impossible. Any ship not pre-cleared with a double-authenticated one-time pad International Space Agency key had to wait two hours to dock instead of thirty minutes. Chong witnessed a demonstration of “security by bureaucracy” as Speaker Malinao’s ship arrived and docked while his UMC shuttle waited. He respected the fact that it didn’t matter whether the president or the janitor was on board, but he thought the overall security was a little overdone for peacetime.

The shuttle finally got assigned a docking spike near the speaker’s. After one hour in transit and two waiting outside their destination, Chong, Lawrence and their guards finally set foot on ISS 5.

It was in fact, a historic occasion that went largely unmarked. No UMC citizen, much less a president, had ever been on ISS 5. The head of UMC’s space agency had visited ISS 4 in the decade before the war, but the ISA was never excited about UMC personnel on board, and the war had frozen out any chance of UMC citizens finding their way over to the Earth’s prime space outpost.

It was really just jealousy. UMC troops could have guarded the ISS 5 during the war, but the ISA had resisted. When the colonies united and rebelled against Earth, they also rebelled against the ISA,

United Moon Colonies

which oversaw most of the missions that founded the colonies. Many of the revolutionary leaders had been members of the ISA, so it was natural for the remaining ISA members to see the UMC as an ungrateful child. The most loyal ISA leaders accused the UMC of setting back space exploration by decades. Martian missions aside, it was true that no new colonies had been founded since the Moon revolution. It was also true that the two attempts to found a new colony at the Ambrosius site, one before and one after Lunar independence, had both failed for lack of interest. Moderates agreed that the UMC's independence was more a symptom than a cause of the stall in colonization.

That didn't change the chilly reception as the president of the UMC set the first Lunar foot on ISS 5. A single lieutenant met them and barely greeted them before instructing the pilot on the conditions and procedures for leaving. Chong felt that this was more than a hint: it was a push.

Then Speaker Malinao came running in with a few aides in tow, huffing and puffing, out of breath.

"I'm so sorry we're late, President Chong . . . uh, Chong. I know we look close from outside, but they docked us five stories up and the lift is in use for cargo or something ridiculous, so we had to hoof it. I'm so sorry. Anyway, how was your trip?"

Chong thought it remarkable how much she glowed after a little exercise. He quickly stamped out further thoughts along these lines, but not before it became apparent he was staring.

"The president and I had a lovely trip and were impressed with the strength of the ISA's security protocols," Lawrence said, clearly trying to break the awkward silence.

"Yes, quite a wait," Chong managed. "How was your flight?"

"Uneventful, thankfully. I'll show you the way to our ship. You know these ISS types, always in a hurry. Still, I think we'll take the stairs."

Malinao led the way back up to where the US ship was docked. Chong found himself walking up the stairs behind Malinao. He struggled for all five flights not only with carrying on a conversation while huffing and puffing but also with trying to decide where his eyes should focus.

"Welcome to the USS Sam Rayburn, my home in the stars," said Malinao, gesturing at her ship. "It's been in use by speakers of the

House in the United States for just over fifteen years. But they didn't make it for us. Before it was given to the speaker, it was used as the vice-presidential shuttle for five years. It was the USS Cheney then. It's old, but it's spaceworthy. They've kept it maintained and upgraded. It fits six nicely, but since we have about nine it may be a little cramped. I hope you don't mind."

Chong admired the enthusiasm that filled her deep brown eyes when she spoke about her ship. "I don't mind at all," he said truthfully. Lawrence looked like he disagreed.

The interior was velvet red and to Chong's Moon-raised eyes seemed like it was built for twelve rather than six. But there were only six seats, which meant three of the guards had to strap themselves into wall spaces for the departure. After Chong said it was all right, one of the guards took the invitation of the pilot to sit in the cockpit.

The departure protocols took all of five minutes, the benefit of leaving in a pre-authorized ship. He wondered how long the UMC shuttle would have to wait to leave.

"Your pilots should be leaving right after us. They won't waste time on the way out," Malinao said, as if reading Chong's mind.

It was a one-hour trip to Omaha. After departure they would have about twenty to thirty minutes to float about the cabin before reentry. Malinao took the opportunity to show them around the ship.

At one point, Chong found himself alone with Malinao, looking out a viewport at the Earth rolling by beneath them. He wasn't really alone, but the guards were in the cockpit, and Lawrence was conferring with the aides on arrival logistics.

"Don't you ever miss it?" Malinao asked.

"I never had it," Chong said. He got this question a lot from Terrans. "I grew up with a black sky and silver light. It's all I've known. The Earth's beautiful to me, but so are many things." He realized what he had said just as he also realized Malinao was looking up at him. He turned quickly away and thought he caught the hint of a smile.

"The Mona Lisa is beautiful. A Martian sunrise is beautiful, but I don't particularly miss either one of those things. I appreciate them, but they aren't mine."

"So you have to have something to miss it?"

He irrationally feared answering that question.

United Moon Colonies

“Well, yes, I suppose. At least when it comes to planets--” He was interrupted, saved, by the announcement that all passengers needed to secure themselves for reentry.

“You’re a strange one, Chong. A good strange. We’ll continue this later,” Malinao said with a grin as they made their way back to their seats.

9

It was a rough landing in Omaha. The spaceport had been destroyed during the war, so Chong pulled some strings and cleared the Rayburn to land at the temporary UMC military spaceport south of the city. Needless to say it had none of the comforts of even the smallest civilian spaceport.

The group disembarked onto a gantry that led down to an open tarmac. Not only was this rustic, but somewhat dangerous. The military port was quite active and shuttles were large, loud, and blind. Chong breathed an inward sigh when they finally made it to the temporary command structure away from the moving space hulks.

A car waited to fly them up into central Omaha. Chong planned to check into a hotel there and then tour the city with Malinao. On the ride, he saw the effects of the bombing he had authorized. Stretches of normal suburban businesses and houses were punctuated by large tracts of empty land and charred earth. The rebuilding efforts were underway in the center of the city but had not reached far beyond. Cleanup crews had gotten as far as removing the rubble and prepping the land. The empty stretches were desolate with nothing but black soil studded with signs and markers, waiting for future rebuilding crews.

Just before the car flew over Mandan Park, Chong saw a neighborhood that had not been cleared. He tapped on the window to get the pilot's attention.

"Fly closer to that area, I want to get a better look."

The pilot looked questioningly at Lawrence, who just nodded.

Malinao scowled. "Are you sure you want to see that right now, Chong?"

He said nothing, but fixed his gaze out the door. He soon realized why everyone was concerned. Among twisted metal and mounds of ash were hundreds and hundreds of bodies preserved in

United Moon Colonies

stasis bags. This was an identification center for war dead. The field of bodies seemed endless. Nothing lived down there, and workers wore clean suits to prevent themselves from getting infected. As they swooped down to their lowest point, Chong saw that not all the bags had bodies. Some contained mounds of what appeared to be collections of limbs. Smaller bags contained only charred skull-like heads. He shuddered. Suddenly the field ended. In a snap, he was looking at a shopping center. Granted, it wasn't bustling. Doubtless people had little to spend and wouldn't be too keen about shopping near the dead. However, aside from the lack of people, it looked untouched, as if the war had never happened.

Malinao leaned forward and touched Chong's knee, sending an electric shock up his spine. "Are you OK?" she asked.

He found himself frustratingly speechless, not because of what he'd just seen, but from Malinao's touch.

"There'll be worse tomorrow, you know," she said, concerned. She removed her hand and freed his tongue.

"I know. But that's what I came for. We have to confront it in order to get past it."

Everybody stayed silent until the car floated to a landing at one of the few open hotels in downtown Omaha.

The downtown streets were quite a contrast to the outlying areas. People swarmed everywhere, working construction, making plans, protesting issues, or merely asking for handouts. The bustle lifted Chong's spirits, and he saw it had a similar effect on the others with him.

Lawrence checked them in and brought everyone their room cards.

"They weren't terribly pleased to see me, I'll say that," said Lawrence as he doled out the cards.

"Don't take it personally," Malinao said. "They've been through a lot. I don't think most of the Omaha residents have anything against the UMC. Most of them blame the Fundys at this point. Ford is unique. Most of these people had fled the area by the time of the bombing."

Chong felt the weight of a long day of travel, planet change, strong emotions, and more. He made his apologies and retired to his room to get some sleep. A guard stood outside his room. Even

Lawrence had been too tired to talk and had gone straight to his own room. They all agreed to meet in four hours and begin their tour.

Chong threw his things down on the couch and opened the doors into the suite's bedroom. Sitting on the bed was John Ford.

“Hello, Mr. President. I hear you've met my wife.”

Chong had certainly not expected this, but he was a bit more prepared this time. He touched his tongue to a sub-molar notification device that would summon the guards.

“Your wife’s dead,” Chong tried.

“Of course she is. But that didn’t stop her from popping on your train and having a little sit-down, did it?” Ford got up and waved a gun as he talked.

“How do you know that?”

“Thanks to your vigilant protection of the Lunar populace, you have a camera on every train, no? I have connections. I must say, it’s not very hard to get copies of the video. You ought to look into that. Oh, and another thing,” Ford frowned, “the audio is awful. Enough to hear what you were saying, but still.” He shrugged.

“So you know your wife is not dead?” Chong touched his molar again. Where were the guards?

“Don’t strain your tongue muscle, Mr. President. The frequency’s jammed. Good idea and all, but . . .” He shrugged and smiled. “I was ready.”

“Why so much talk, then? Why don’t you shoot?”

“Good tactics, Mr. President. You’ve been trained well. And I must give you credit: you’ve seen through me. I don’t really want to kill you. I needed to make you believe that. And it doesn’t mean I won’t kill you.” Suddenly Chong felt like an invisible knife had sliced into his leg. He fell to the ground. Ford’s gun was capable of sub-sonics. It could use sub-audible sound waves to incapacitate or kill the victim.

“A low setting, Mr. President. Just to show you I’m serious. Now. I’m going to shoot you again, just to knock you out.”

Chong screamed, but no sound came out. Suddenly he realized he was lying down in the seat of a car, bouncing around all over the place. He opened his eyes and sat up. He was handcuffed in the back part of a truck cab. It was an old fashioned ground car. John Ford sat in front, operating the antique.

“Good morning, Mr. President. Sorry for the accommodations. I imagine you’re used to much better. However, it was necessary to get where we’re going unnoticed.

“And where’s that exactly?” Chong mangled the words as he worked the sleep out of his mouth.

“You’re probably working off the drug. I gave you some Perenity. No lasting effects, but you will have a bit of a hangover.”

“I asked where we were.”

“Yes, you did. We’re in Oakland, California. Uh . . . Grand and Harrison, right at this point.”

“Why are we in Oakland, California?” Chong’s geography was good, but he wasn’t exactly sure where Oakland was. He vaguely remembered it being in northern California. Somewhere near San Francisco?

“Well, Oakland has become a favorite spot for people to hide out in. It’s got an old reputation for violent crime that long ago became undeserved, But because of that, it’s become the perfect place to hide for awhile. Nobody bothers you. Everyone’s nice. The restaurants are good. Only issue is the police--you can’t get away with much violence here. That should comfort you. Killing someone in Oakland is tantamount to turning yourself in. But non-violent crimes? Petty crimes? That’s a different story. You’ll understand.

“Amazing city, this Oakland. One of the few untouched by the war. Fundys focused all their might and anger on San Francisco, right across the bay. Left Oakland untouched. Sort of treated it as unimportant. Another advantage in my mind. Closest the war came to me here was the internment camp at Emeryville. A few Fundys still over there, actually. With San Francisco depopulated as it is still, nobody’s paying much attention to the area yet. And if they are, it’s to the freedom fighters in Berkeley.

“But I do ramble. There’s water in the flap of the backseat for you. I think you should be able to open it even with the handcuffs, but let me know.”

United Moon Colonies

Chong opened the water and drank. He noticed that Ford was different, much more affable. A closer approximation to the Ford who had been a negotiator before the war. Chong thought maybe he was imagining it, but Ford looked a little different, too. Older, maybe? Chong couldn't put his finger on it, but something was odd.

They pulled up next to an old building that had the name "Great Western" carved into the front and a huge smokestack on top. The truck moved through an alleyway, around the back, and into a private garage. Ford helped Chong out of the truck and walked him through a door into an empty warehouse.

"This used to be the Great Western Power Station, way, way back in the day. Was used for all sorts of artsy and not so artsy things for a long time after that. Now it's my little laboratory." Ford sat Chong and himself down on a set of church pews in one lighted corner of the empty hall. The rest of it was dark and gloomy.

"Here's the thing, Chong. I can't explain to you everything that's going on. You'll have to piece it together for yourself. And there's no way you're going to trust me right away, so I'm going to have to keep you locked up for now. But I assure you," Ford moved in closer to Chong with a determined, almost manic look in his eyes, "I assure you with all I know and believe: there was no other way. What I'm doing, only I could do. And it's not only for your benefit but for the benefit of both worlds. The war is far from over. In fact, if you had attended the peace conference without incident, the worlds would be in dire straits now. You did defeat the Fundys. You did kill Touareg. But you missed a piece. There was a faction even Touareg distanced himself from. And they've persisted. They have not surrendered. They're far too clever for that. You've met one now. My wife. And she was my wife, in a way. You'll understand. But she's not to be trusted. They may be impossible to defeat. But I may know a way. If I'm right, it's the only way. And it must happen just so."

Chong was overwhelmed by the mad rant. He felt more in danger here than when confronted by Ford in his hotel room. At least he felt he understood the homicidal Ford. But this Ford just seemed insane and capable of just about anything. He wasn't simply mad, but mad with a cause. Chong tried to remember his training in psychology, but he had never meant to go into the discipline and had only really mastered the interpersonal methods, not the clinical methods for dealing with the truly ill.

“Stand up.” Ford seemed nervous now. Chong obeyed. He had no other choice. Disobeying wouldn’t gain him anything.

“Walk . . .” Ford tapped at his own head compulsively as if he had a tic. “I’m sorry, it’s just that nobody’s ever seen it yet. I have to be confident.” He seemed to be talking to himself. “I’m doing the right thing by showing it to you. Walk forward about three meters. Stop when I say stop.”

Chong did not like the way this was going. “Why?”

Ford screamed, “Because I said so!”

Chong could provoke Ford and get into an argument with a madman who claimed he didn’t want to kill him, or he could walk forward ten feet and see what happened. He walked.

“Stop!” Ford commanded.

Chong was surrounded by darkness. He heard a low hum near him and felt the presence of something large in the gloom. His heart raced.

“President Chong, meet . . . the rest of me.”

A bank of lights came on suddenly. Chong squinted. When he could see again, he faced a row of refrigeration units with glass doors. In each unit was a copy of John Ford, about a dozen in all, with three units empty.

Chong gaped. Ford was engaging in illegal cloning. Or were these androids? It seemed more like cloning. You wouldn’t need to refrigerate androids.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around to see three versions of Ford. He immediately recognized two of them. The youngest was the Ford who had attempted to kill him; he sneered as Chong recognized him. Another was the older Ford who had driven him here, still looking nervous. The third stepped in front of the others. His voice rasped out like dry paper.

“President Chong, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m John Ford. The original John Ford.”

He appeared much older than the other two. In fact, he appeared to Chong to be ill.

“Thank you both,” he said to his two copies. “I want to talk with the president alone in my office.”

He motioned for Chong to follow him over to a small office built along one wall. Ford said nothing until they were both sitting down inside.

“Can I get you a drink?”

He pulled a bottle of brown liquid out and set it on the desk between them. He popped it open and poured a couple fingers in a paper cup.

“Sure,” said Chong. For some reason he absolutely wanted to trust this version of Ford. It was the opposite reaction to the Mad Ford who’d driven him here. That’s what must have made Ford such a strong negotiator. He just oozed good feeling and trust. Chong told himself to be wary, but he was dying to find out what had happened.

Ford poured the other drink and slid the cup over to Chong.

“Well, I guess you must be pretty confused and angry about now. For that I apologize. As the other me has probably told you, I couldn’t see any other way. After I explain more, I hope you’ll understand.”

Chong shifted in his seat and took a sip. Hot fire burned his lips and throat as the liquid raged down into his stomach. Now, that was whiskey.

He snorted a bit. “I’ve never tasted anything like this.”

Ford chuckled. “Of course you haven’t. Scotch this good is embargoed from trade with the Moon. Maybe a bottle of twelve-year-old Macallan every once in awhile, and that’s the best they’ll let you get. Most of the time you’re stuck with blends. This here is twenty-one-year-old Oban. Pre-war. It’s my favorite. Dry and smoky.”

“It’s good,” agreed Chong. “I’m not all that angry right now, but I’d like to know what the hell all this is about.”

Ford settled in for a long talk. “A group of the Fundys started experimenting towards the end of the war, after you all entered in. They could see the writing on the wall, what with the UMC forces raining hell on them from above. Experimenting on their prisoners was nothing new for them, but this group of scientists in Omaha started something unique. Investigations into stem cells. I assume you saw the body fields in Omaha?”

“Yes.” Chong shuddered a bit at the memory. “We flew over them on the way to our hotel.”

“You’ll find similar scenes at various Fundy installations, but nothing quite so vast. Fundy scientists, with some kind of twisted religious justification, were learning how to duplicate the humans in their care. I believe their rationalization ran something along the lines that the sinners they had captured had lost their souls, so reproducing

their bodies would not be a problem. The idea was to send these clone armies out to defeat the heathens and win the war.”

“How did they get around the protein limitations?”

“Rather clever, that. They only clone the ovum. Easy enough. After that they clinched a way of replicating the womb conditions exactly. Then they figured out how to speed the whole thing up. The cells think they’re in the womb, so they have all the proteins they need. The speeding up is the extremely brilliant part. After that, all you need is the right machines and a little knowledge of biology and everyone can do it.”

“So why haven’t we seen the clone army?”

“The machines are quite power-intensive. In the end, your bombs were battering away at the electrical capacity so badly that they could only produce a few clones. A few of the ones seen here were created by the Fundys. I’ve liberated them. The clone of my wife you met on the train in Avalon was another. They’re sending out the existing clones as spies to attempt to find them a new base where they can draw enough power without drawing attention. They’ve tried Cana colony on the Moon, but as sympathetic as the religious Canaans may be to the Fundys, they reject cloning out of hand as a sin. And besides, anywhere on the Moon would suck up too much power and draw attention.”

“So why do you need me?”

“It’s tricky. You are who they want more than anything. The Ford I sent to lure you in was one of theirs. I’ve barely kept him on my side. He was programmed to hate the UMC. These Fundys--well, they’re really not Fundys anymore. They’re radical cloners. They want the UMC gone from Earth more than anything so that they can slip back under the radar. I needed them to think their rogue Ford clone was just at large doing their work. They won’t think so much about his not contacting them. It’s how they work.”

Chong felt the liquor hit him and decided not to finish the cup quite yet. He rarely drank. “So, that’s all very interesting, it really is. But what’s the short version? Why do you want me? What is this place?”

“I need you because you’re the president of the Moon. I need to keep you safe and out of their hands. I also need you to help me finish them off. They’re running scared right now, but if we do nothing they will find their niche, grow bold, and unleash something far worse

United Moon Colonies

than the Fundy war. Those body fields in Omaha are littered with failed experiments. But they've learned much. That clone of my wife really thought she was my wife. They've learned how to program clones to think and believe anything. I have one of their machines here. I've made a few John Fords on my own, sure, but they don't start out thinking they're John Ford. They're clones are unswayable adherents to a bloody ideology. Nobody can change their mind, it's fixed on one purpose, annihilation of everyone else, starting with you. If they find a willing protector with enough power, the world is doomed."

"But why me?"

"Because you're talented. You're smart. And they fear you. They really do. In their eyes, you rained down destruction from above. And they've found it almost impossible to infiltrate the Moon colonies. Not in any numbers. My family did die in Omaha, but not in the bombing. They died in the body fields. I almost did too. I got away with one of their machines and hid here. If we teamed up, well, I don't think a thing could stop us."

"I see." Chong rubbed his chin. "So what's the plan?" He wasn't convinced but he wanted to find out more.

"We start--"

A loud crash interrupted him. They all ran over to a bank of security monitors. Chong's mouth gaped at what he saw. Outside, a UMC command craft and a battle fighter had landed in the street in front of the building. A cadre of UMC troops were being led by Lawrence to surround the building. Yet Chong suddenly wasn't sure he wanted to be rescued.

"Do you have something I can write on?" Chong asked.

One of the Fords handed him a tablet. He scrawled down a quick message and left it sitting on a table.

"Let's go." He turned to the original Ford. "Just you and me."

"This way." Ford made for a set of stairs near the back of the building that went down into a cellar. "I'm very glad you've decided."

Chong followed him, and Ford sealed the door shut above them.

11

Chong and Ford ran down a rickety pile of wood that turned out to be only a close approximation of stairs. Chong found himself breathlessly trying to keep up with the impressively fitter and significantly older man. After a hundred meters or so, the stair-like remains ended in a flat, dirt-floored room. Ford opened an old metal door that opened on a tunnel. An old set of train tracks ran below the ledge they stood on. Ford motioned Chong forward into the gloom and pulled out an LED torch to give them some light. Chong sighed in relief as the light filled the tunnel.

They passed an old sign that said “19th Street.”

“Is this an old transit system?” asked Chong.

“BART,” barked Ford. Chong could finally hear him breathing heavily, something Chong had been doing since halfway down the stairs.

“Who’s Bart?”

“Bay Area Rapid Transit. Dates back to the late 20th century. Used to connect this whole area together with trains. They’ve long since dismantled the system, but the tracks are still here, underground.”

“So what do we do, just hide out here?”

“No, too dangerous. The cameras and sensors don’t reach down here, so what little crime there is in Oakland flourishes. I use it as a route to get to places without being seen. Hence its attraction to the criminal element.”

Ford jumped down onto the tracks and helped Chong do the same.

Up ahead, Ford’s torch showed a glint of metal.

“What’s that?” Chong squinted ahead and saw the outline of what looked like a Lunar mining cart crossed with a motorcycle.

United Moon Colonies

“It’s called a rail rider. I bought it from a hobbyist--they use them to explore the tunnels. It’s sort of like a motorbike, but it grips a rail for its motion. It’s a two-seater. Pop the hatch and climb in back.”

As they got closer, Chong saw the rail rider had a silver, oblong capsule. He could just make out the change in tint where the front windshield must be. He found the pop latch for the back seat and climbed in. Ford was already strapping into the driver’s pod.

“We’ll go about halfway down the tunnel and exit through a service grate. That’ll take us under a neighborhood just north of the lake. I have a place there. I rarely use it, but we can stay there unobserved for awhile. Even if the UMC comes door-to-door looking for you, they’ll have a hard time searching this place. It’s got multiple apartments, all behind double locked doors. Not an ounce of electronics in the place, but damned secure all the same.”

They took off down the rails, and Chong hoped hard that Ford wasn’t really a delusional old man. Since he was in the passenger pod, Chong couldn’t see much, but inky black. Soon they slowed to a halt. Chong saw a dim bit of light from a grating once he got out of the rail rider. They climbed up steel rungs covered in muck and rust and pushed up out of the grate. Chong half expected to see UMC guards there and wondered what exactly he’d say if he did. Most likely they’d assume he was being forced to do whatever he was doing. And he wasn’t sure what that was exactly.

Ford helped him up onto a narrow ancient street paved in asphalt. It was a residential area with a mix of apartment buildings and houses. Ford led them up to an imposing gray block of apartments and pulled a small piece of metal out of his pocket. He used I to open the front door.

“What was that?”

“This, my friend,” he said holding up the metal, “is an honest-to-goodness key. Not the encryption kind that’s more metaphor than object. This is what the encryption is named after.”

Chong looked at it, puzzled. “Can anyone just stick a piece of metal in and open the door?”

“Has to fit. You can pick a lock, but then you can break encryption too. And there are so few mechanical locks these days, nobody’s learning how to pick locks. It’s actually quite a bit safer that way.”

Ford pulled out a different metal key and opened another door that led into a dark stairway. These stairs were solid and seemed to be made of metal, unlike the rickety wooden ones they'd taken down to the train station. One flight up, Ford pulled out a third metal key and opened another door. It led into a dark hallway with several doors unevenly spaced along it. Ford went down a hallway and through a door at the end, using a fourth metal key.

"I see what you mean about the security," remarked Ford. He doubted even the UMC elites could break through four ancient mechanical locks very quickly. Ford's apartment was as old as the building itself, sparsely furnished, but quite comfortable.

"All I can offer you is water, I'm afraid," said Ford from the small aisle of a kitchen. "As I said, I don't spend much time here, so I don't keep much that's perishable."

"That's fine," Chong said, still looking around at the apartment's fixtures. It had a large window that looked out into a private courtyard that was overgrown with weeds.

"Now, what was it you were saying when my army so rudely interrupted us by trying to rescue me?" prodded Chong as Ford brought him a cup of water.

"I don't know how they found you unless you're tracked. Are you?"

"Simple RFID, but difficult to pin down in that time. They must have had help. It should have taken them a couple days to narrow down my pellet's signal."

"My brother."

"Narang?"

"Yes, Minister Narang. He's my half-brother and a full annoyance. He doesn't know about any of this, and he's determined to bring me back to the right ways of thinking. I've tried to explain some of it, but I don't want him to know everything. I don't want to implicate him."

"But you shot him!" Chong exclaimed.

"One of me did, yes," Ford sighed, "but he didn't kill Narang. He's hard to control, that one. But he's worth it. Right now he's probably just finished cleverly hiding all our cloning work. Your UMC boys and girls will find nothing."

"And my part in this? I'm still curious."

United Moon Colonies

“Of course. I believe I know several of their main operations centers--‘they’ being the Fundy cloners. They know about me. They think I’m still on their side, but I’m rogue, and compartmentalized. If I get near them, they’ll disappear. I’m only to make contact with them in a very specific way after I’ve completed my task. Or that’s what one of my clones tells me. The one actually sent out to kill you, the one you’ve met. I believe him. It’s funny how well you can read someone when they’re exactly like yourself. Or almost exactly. In fact, the shock of finding out he wasn’t me is what led him to join me. Anyway, I get sidetracked at my age. I can’t get near them, but you can.”

“You don’t think a big old presidential convoy would make them scatter?” Chong was skeptical.

“Yes, it would, but that’s not how we do it. You’re going to go off on a tour. You need to go off on that tour, or appear to. Then I’ll guide you to the centers. One of them is on the Moon. You’ll scout them and assess them, posing as a potential member.”

“And they won’t recognize the president of the Moon?” Chong shook his head, skeptical.

“No, they won’t, and here’s why. You don’t look the same in person as you do on video. And besides, President Chong will be on video touring the planet. So they won’t think you’re Chong. How could you be? Chong will be talking live from Iraq.”

“How do I pull that off?”

“We clone you.”

“Ah, no.”

“It’s the only way.”

“No way. I’m sorry, but we’ll have to do better than that. I understand what you’re up against, what we’re up against, but the cloning has to stop, and we don’t make it better by making another clone. Especially of me.”

“If you have a better plan, I’ll hear it.”

“I’ll need more of your whiskey for that.”

“That I do keep here.”

“I thought you might.” Chong gazed out the window into the garden. There had to be a way to do this without any more cloning. Ford’s plan could work, but was there a better way? Yes. There was.

Chong found Lawrence outside the hotel where the UMC task force had quartered, grabbed him, and pulled him off into an alleyway.

“Chong? Is that you?”

The president had disguised himself with a stocking cap, dark glasses, and a new wardrobe, courtesy of Ford.

“Yes, it’s me,” Chong whispered. “Keep your voice down.” He motioned for Lawrence to keep quiet.

“What happened to you?”

“I had a very interesting diversion, but I’m not in trouble. Well, not in the trouble we all thought I was in. I’ve been with Ford.”

“He’s brainwashed you!” Lawrence’s eyes grew wide.

Chong looked exasperated. “No, no, no. Not at all. He let me in on a few secrets that I now understand he had to keep. I’ll let you in on them too, as soon as we meet with Speaker Malinao. Here’s what I need you to do.”

Chong explained that he needed a meeting but couldn’t risk being recognized. Lawrence knew how to take care of it. He was a master of getting guards and waiters and whole armies of people in and out of important areas without being seen.

“You’ll need to lose that garb. You may not look like the president of the Moon, but you sure stick out. I thought you were a homeless guy.” Lawrence and Chong talked over their plans, and then Lawrence left the alleyway alone and went back in the hotel.

Lawrence’s mind was racing. He only knew part of Chong’s plan at this point, but he also knew Chong, and that meant the rest of the plan would not be any saner. Chong was a very practical and levelheaded guy, but he was also creative. And that spelled danger for an aide trying to keep the wheels of government under control. He reached the president’s room, which had been kept reserved but unoccupied. He radioed down to the guards that he was ordering in a meal to the president’s room for the speaker and himself so that they could discuss some news on the president’s abduction.

Then, using the same pretext, he sent a message to Speaker Malinao requesting that she meet him there. Finally, he contacted the front desk and confirmed that a luncheon could be sent up. Then he sank down in a chair and caught his breath. He hoped it all would work. Chong had always had such confidence in him.

United Moon Colonies

He thought back on the time Chong decided to run spices from New Canaveral to Tollan without a license. An Air Force Colonel was bringing them in from Earth and selling off his extras.

Chong had been confident that Lawrence could talk the inspector into letting them on the M with forty pounds of unlicensed spice. Lawrence had panicked right up until the moment they had confronted the baggage inspector. On the spur of the moment, he had made up a story about returns. He had claimed these were spices *from* Tollan that a restaurant in New Canaveral was returning. The inspector had bought it, and he had stamped them “Approved.”

Lawrence had avoided having a coronary but it had encouraged Chong to develop a series of wild ideas that Lawrence would have to panic about before inspiration struck. He really hoped inspiration would strike this time.

Within half an hour, Speaker Malinao arrived, looking a bit skeptical.

“What’s this all about, Lawrence? I thought we went over all the Oakland findings?”

“Something new has come up. Please have a seat while I check on the luncheon.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather hear what all this is first. I may have to miss the lunch. I have a meeting with the southern Omaha commanders’ council to discuss air security in the wake of Ford’s penetration of the hotel.”

Lawrence looked dismayed. “I assure the speaker that if she waits, she won’t be disappointed.” He didn’t know what he’d do if she bailed on him.

“Lawrence, I can something is bothering you, but what it is I can’t fathom. So please, stop playing games and come out with it. It’s not like you.”

Someone knocked on the door. Saved! Lawrence opened with a smile that quickly faded. It was a UMC guard.

“Sir, the luncheon will be late. There’s been a personnel change and we’re implementing new security measures, so we’ll need to run a complete screen on the new waiter. Our apologies. If you could give us about a half-hour?”

Lawrence was devastated.

Malinao overheard and got up. "I'm sorry, Lawrence, but I can't wait that long. Whatever it is will have to wait." She made to move past him. And Lawrence slammed the door.

"Lawrence!" she protested, but he held his ground.

"I need you to trust me, Speaker. Do you trust me?"

"Normally I'd say yes, but I'm starting to wonder--"

"Yes or no."

Malinao sighed. "Yes."

"All right. If you do what I suggest, we will have a meeting you need to have. You'll just have to trust me on this. Will you do what I suggest?"

"What is it?"

"Will you do it unquestioningly? It's not dangerous . . . just . . . odd."

Malinao could see that Lawrence was sincere but afraid she might not cooperate. But the man rarely had guile. She gave in.

"OK, I'll do it Lawrence. It would take something extraordinary to make you act this way. What is it?"

"Open the door and order the guard to send the luncheon up right away."

"What? That's it?"

"Yes. Tell him you can't wait for the luncheon and that the new security protocols can be implemented at another time. Tell him to simply check ID and send the new waiter up immediately."

The speaker's eyes twinkled. "Our meeting is with the waiter. I see. How very spy game. OK, then."

Malinao opened the door and instructed the guard to have the luncheon sent up right away. The guard reluctantly complied.

Malinao had expected some special agent of the UMC, or a minister, but when the waiter entered the room, her mouth gaped. Chong could tell she was about to scream and cut her off.

"Yes, it's me. Now be quiet, please, Madame Speaker."

"Where? What? What's going on?"

"Thank you, Lawrence," said Chong as he set the food out.

"It wasn't easy, Mr. President."

"Speaker give you trouble?"

"She has a very important meeting."

"I'm sure she does, so let's get right to the point." He finished laying out the food, sat down, and turned to Malinao.

United Moon Colonies

“I need your help Mal. I cannot come out of hiding. Not just yet. It turns out Ford is not the enemy, but we have a plan to beat the people who are.”

Chong told them Ford’s whole story, then started in on his plan. Lawrence objected.

“I don’t think that can work--”

“It can. It has to,” Chong cut him off.

Malinao smiled. Chong had always impressed her with his daring-- until you got him in private conversation that is. Then he just locked up. But oh my did he know how to pull off just the right amount of dash when he didn’t think you were paying attention. She saw Lawrence looking at her to help him object. She saw Chong’s steely eyes fearing she would.

She giggled a bit in spite of herself. “You know, I think it can work, Lawrence.” She looked both of them up and down and smirked. “You’re just going to have to believe in this plan, Mr. Lawrence. That’s all. If you can get behind it, it will work.”

Lawrence looked dismayed.

Chong butted in. “The speaker will bear the brunt of the scrutiny in this case. If she’s up for it, and if, as she says, you do your part, then I think it can work.”

“The Speaker agrees,” She shot Chong a look. She had been Mal for a brief moment, then back to being the Speaker. She had other things to worry about. “We’ll have to move quickly, though, if we want it to have the effect we think it will have.”

Chong nodded. “Yes, you’ll need to be at a press opp tomorrow. I suggest you start in Caracas. That’s the first one I indicated in my speech. Follow that order.”

Malinao frowned. “But everyone knows you’re here. They’ll expect you to start here.”

“True, but the scrutiny would be a lot greater here and I’ll be expected to give a momentous speech, which I still intend to give. The smokescreen of other news will dampen the questions of why I didn’t start here in Omaha.”

Malinao nodded. “I’m in. Lawrence? Are you up for it?”

Lawrence sighed and looked from one to the other.

“I must be crazy. I’ll probably get killed, but OK. I’m in.”

“Fine,” said Chong getting up and clearing away the dishes. “I’ll just be on my way. Remember, Lawrence, I’ll contact you using New Cav code. Got it?”

“Got it.” He stopped Chong. “Be careful.”

“You know I will.”

Malinao got up and saw Chong to the door. She held his arm before he opened the door. A smirk crossed her face. “Goodbye, darling.”

Chong froze. All he could manage was a curt good-bye.

Malinao turned around and gave Lawrence a studious look.

“And hello, darling.”

Lawrence groaned and sank into his chair.

“Will the world be a better place?” Malinao exclaimed to the assembled crowd in Parque los Caobos. “Yes. Will Venezuela be a better place? Yes. Will Caracas once again feel the flow of the world’s economy through her veins? Yes. President Chong has just finished meeting with your newly elected government. He has committed continued UMC aid for the rebuilding efforts and a UMC troop withdrawal plan for Caracas that will be dictated by your government. I now present the President of United Moon Colonies, Richard Chong!”

The crowd’s uproarious applause stunned Lawrence a bit and he paused. They began chanting Chong’s name.

“Come on, Chong,” Malinao whispered as she pulled Lawrence toward the podium. “You have to talk a little or it won’t work.”

Lawrence approached the podium and waved to the crowd. He was dressed in a hat and coat. They had dyed his hair, and from a distance he could be mistaken for Chong. The problems were the close-ups. The hat and dark glasses helped with that. He supposedly wore them as result of injuries from the abduction. And really, it was amazing what people would accept when there was no reason for suspicion. Sympathy was with Chong right now, and any suggestion that he looked different was taken as mere Fundy prejudice. As for the voice, Lawrence had been imitating Chong privately to other staff members for years, but it was quite different to do it in front of a crowd of cheering Venezuelans.

“Thank you, Speaker,” he managed, in what he felt was a passable imitation. He only had a few sentences. He just had to power through it.

“I am only sorry my health has not recovered sufficiently to allow me to speak to you more. I feel the rise of Venezuela today!” He

even managed to give a Chong-like uptick at the end of the sentence that caused another round of cheering and applause.

“The Moon is committed to rebuilding the Earth. We start here, and in Omaha, and in Africa, Europe, and United Arabia. But our commitment will strengthen the entire world and make a peace both lasting and beneficial to all peoples.” Lawrence was just getting into it, but he only had one line left.

“We will not quit before the job is done. We will not stay beyond what the job requires. We stand united with Caracas and the world!” That last little bit had been his own improvisation and he was smiling to himself about how Chongian he thought it sounded. He did write the occasional speech after all. He felt the speaker grab his arm.

“That’s enough, Mr. President,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

“Thank you, and Viva Venezuela!” She almost yanked his arm off as he said it, but it sent the crowd into frenzied cheering and he yanked his arm back so he could wave to the crowd before he departed. The Mayor of Caracas was next, thanking the president for all he had done and trying to soak up some of the crowd’s approval for himself. The speaker led Lawrence off the stage between some UMC guards who accompanied them down the steps.

The chief aide of the president *pro tem* of Venezuela stopped them before they could make a clean getaway to their waiting car.

“Mr. President, you promised to stay for the ceremonies. Where are you going?”

Malinao butted in. “The president’s health is still precarious. I’m afraid even that little bit of excitement was too much for him. Our apologies.”

Lawrence obligingly hacked out a dramatic cough, making it appear that he was close to losing a lung or two.

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Be well, Mr. President. And thank you for all you have done for our country.” The aide shook the President’s hand with the air of someone who is already telling the stories of how he once shook the president of the Moon’s hand. Lawrence thought how nobody might ever know that the story was a lie, including the aide himself.

When he was safely in the car, Lawrence took off the hat and glasses and let loose a huge sigh of relief. The streets of Caracas swept by as they flew toward the airport.

United Moon Colonies

“Not bad, but don’t go getting a big head and improvising whole speeches, Lawrence. We can’t afford that much exposure,” Malinao chided.

“I’m sorry. I got a little carried away. Hopefully, though, my little touches of realism will help more than hurt, Speaker.”

“Mal.”

“I’m sorry?” Lawrence stopped fiddling with his clothes and looked up at her.

“If we’re going to be spending so much time together, you can call me Mal for short. Besides, the cover story is that we’re lovers, and I doubt lovers call each other ‘Speaker’ and ‘Mr. President’ when alone.”

“It *is* just a cover story,” Lawrence said nervously.

“Well, not for lack of trying, yes.” Malinao sighed staring out the window. When she looked back Lawrence had a confused and slightly fearful expression. She burst out laughing.

“Oh! You meant...” she guffawed in a very un-ladylike manner. “Don’t worry, Lawrence. I didn’t mean you. Just trying to add some touches of realism, like you say,” she continued, chuckling to herself.

Lawrence was a bit put out at her laughter, but thought it wise to keep his thoughts to himself. Instead, he changed the subject.

“Have you heard from him?”

“Not yet.” Malinao’s tone turned suddenly somber. “I’m sure he’s all right. We aren’t supposed to worry until two days from now. By then we’ll be in Gabon.”

14

The trip to Libreville in Gabon was uneventful, and the tour, the meetings with the government, and the big speech all went off without a hitch. Luckily, the president's planned route included many areas he had never visited; so few people had any reason to be suspicious of Lawrence's ignorance. The story of his illness took off and spread like wildfire through the press. Lawrence got some entertainment out of reviewing the theories as to what was really wrong with President Chong.

The toughest stop would be Vatican City. Many UMC officials were stationed there, too many to include them all in the cover story. Also, Chong had met with the Pope before and would likely have to meet him again. Malinao and Lawrence discussed whether Chong should take a turn for the worse during their stay in the Vatican. They decided to see how the trip to Baghdad went before they made any firm plans.

The Libreville trip came to an uneventful end, and they still had not heard from Chong. Malinao and Lawrence waited for their car in the lobby of the Hotel de Ville, and two UMC guards stood by while they waited. An old man in a seersucker suit was the only other person in the lobby. Most of the staff was on a break. A solitary bellman stood guard over the front desk. Tourism in Gabon had not returned to normal levels since the Fundys left; there was still a lot of rebuilding to be done.

Lawrence watched the old man in seersucker page through a French newspaper and occasionally spit into a plant pot. He found this behavior odd, but he had seen odder. Yet the man's clothes did make him stand out. Lawrence felt alarm bells go off. Did he know the man? Maybe he was just paranoid. He was about to make himself stop thinking when the man looked over at him.

United Moon Colonies

“Lawrence?” the man asked.

Lawrence barely caught himself before he answered. He was in full Chong disguise mode, from the hat to the shades to the coat. He was not supposed to be Lawrence. Malinao answered.

“I’m sorry sir, I’m afraid you have us mistaken.”

The old man nodded. “Oh. Of course. I’m sorry.” But instead of going back to his paper, he got up and walked over towards them. The guards snapped to attention.

“Oh, my. I *am* sorry. I just wanted to introduce myself. I’m John.”

A guard stepped in front of him. “The president is not receiving any visitors at this time,” he spat, in a deep, imposing voice that dissuaded most people from continuing. Somehow, it didn’t stop the old man.

“Oh, president, eh? My, my. President of the whole Moon, then?”

Lawrence eyed him closely. The man looked seriously familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He moved back a half-step just in case. Malinao interjected.

“We don’t mean to frighten you, sir, but the president has had some very bad experiences lately. You may have heard of his ill health because of it. We ask that you please just step back.”

“You must be Samantha,” he said turning to her. Nobody called her Samantha. This knocked her back on her heels for half a second, but she recovered.

“Speaker Malinao, if you please.”

“I see why he likes you.”

The cover story worked. Malinao tried to look embarrassed and stole a look at Lawrence.

“No, not him,” the old man said. “I mean Richard.”

The guards had the old man by the shirt collar and looked at Malinao for orders. She looked around. Nobody else was here to witness the conversation, so no damage done there. But what to do with the doddering old fool? Did he really know something?

“What’s your name?”

The man looked more put out than scared by this point. “I told you, I’m John. John Ford. I have a message from Richard.”

“Put him down,” Malinao whispered.

The car arrived just then, and for the first time since Lawrence had met her, Malinao became indecisive. He stepped in.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Ford,” she hesitated then seemed to make up her mind. “Can you come with us?”

Ford nodded and got in the car.

“Is Chong all right?” Malinao asked as soon as the door shut.

“He’s fine, Samantha, just fine.

“Stop calling me Samantha.”

“I’m an old man. It’s my habit to call young people by their first name. What would you prefer I call you?”

She sighed and shook her head. “Whatever. How’s Chong?”

“Richard is all right. He’s actually very close to our goal right now. So close he didn’t want to back off himself. So he sent me to talk to you. At my age, I’m not much use anyway. Not in gallivanting between worlds.”

“Where is he?”

Ford paused. “I’d rather not say, just in case someone comes looking for you. I very much doubt they will, but you can’t be too careful. But as I said, he’s close to finishing. In which case he could take over for you in Vatican City, Lawrence. That could avoid some rather tense confrontations, I imagine.”

Lawrence sighed. “That would be fantastic.”

“Well, try not to get your hopes up, but it’s looking good.”

“Is that all you had to tell us?”

“No, not quite. He needs something from you. Something from each of you. Samantha, if you could be so kind as to get the US satellites over Cairo to shut down at the time period written down here, we would both be much obliged.” He handed her a card.

Malinao took the card. “That’s no easy task.”

“I assume that’s why he’s asking you,” Ford replied drily.

“And, Mr. Lawrence. Richard would like the Cairo elevator to be marked inactive for the next three days or so, but operable by a secret password known only to you both. He said you’d know which one he meant.”

Lawrence nodded. “I know what he means. Of course that’s not an easy thing either, but since I’m him right now, I imagine I can get it done.”

“Very good. He wishes you both good luck. Now it’s best that I’m not seen with you at the airport, so I’ll take my leave of you now.”

United Moon Colonies

Lawrence looked around to ask the driver to land, but before he could speak, Ford had knocked open a side hatch and jumped, plummeting a hundred meters or more to the ground below.

“Ford!” Malinao yelled. “Circle back to get him!”

Lawrence countermanded her order. “We can’t, Malinao. He wanted to keep us clean of any suspicion. Look where he fell, the middle of nothing. He must have had a plan of some sort. I’m sure he’ll be fine. He wouldn’t waste his life just to deliver those two messages. There’s probably a method in his madness.”

Malinao stared out the back window towards the ground. “I hope so. And I hope his madness isn’t catching.”

15

Ford got to his feet deflated his seersucker impact-resistant damage prevention suit, brushed himself off, and began the long trek back towards the city center. His knee felt like it was about to give out, but he thought he could make it. He pulled out a sub-phone and called Chong.

“They bought it, Chong. They’ll both be occupied on the false tasks you assigned them--yes, yes, no suspicions at all--very good. I’ll see you back in Libreville.”

He eventually found the vehicle he’d hidden and flew back into the Oloumi district. Chong was waiting in an empty warehouse, where they had been holed up for the last few days. Ford found him at a deskset, prowling through some data one of the Ford clones had delivered early that morning.

“Did they look all right?” Chong asked as soon as he noticed Ford was back.

“Yes, yes. A little weary, but otherwise fine.”

“I can’t believe you talked me into this.”

“But it’s working. We almost had them here. Don’t worry, son. We’ll get them in Baghdad.”

Chong turned back to the data, muttering.

“Try not to get too lost in that. We need to be in Cana soon,” Ford said.

Chong waved a hand, meaning he knew, and he wouldn’t. The two men had developed a fairly nice rapport over the past week or so. Chong was still put off by the clones, especially the one that had tried to kill him. He wasn’t too sure that particular Ford clone didn’t still wish to kill him. But he actually liked the original Ford.

They had changed the original plan somewhat in Caracas to give them more flexibility and a chance to end things quickly. It

United Moon Colonies

almost worked in Caracas. They'd had less success in Libreville due to some bad luck. They hadn't counted on a rubber shipment arriving and sucking up all the available labor leaving them to do all the footwork themselves.

The plan was elegant in its simplicity, and Chong had to credit Ford with most of its construction. The young Ford clone was assumed to be still working for the Fundy faction; he would set out to plan an assassination attempt on Chong, and this endeavor would lead to real Fundy-related contacts. The original Ford would then meet with those contacts, pretending to be a high-level Fundy himself.

In Caracas, they had pinned down the identity of the chief cloning scientist. He was hiding out on the Moon in the independent Cana colony. In Libreville, they were hoping to get the name of the logistical head. With those two, Ford felt sure he could bluff his way into finding out the location of headquarters. However, they had missed a meeting with the Gabon cell chief of the Fundy clone movement, which had aroused suspicions. Chong had come up with the idea of getting Lawrence and Malinao to create some distractions to throw the Fundys off the scent. Ford had insisted that Malinao and Lawrence be led to believe what they were doing was real, in order to preserve the appearance of a real UMC movement against the Fundys. This would have the negative effect of making the Fundys believe that the UMC was aware of them, which would make them more secretive. However, Ford believed that he had gained enough of the Fundys' trust to make the move worthwhile, and he hoped that it would also cause the logistical chief to make some moves he might not otherwise have made and be forced to reveal intelligence he would otherwise have kept secret.

The killer Ford clone was already on the ground in Baghdad and had sent back reams of data on the Arabian Fundy cells--more than Chong or Ford could have hoped for, and unfortunately more than they could work through before they left for Cana to meet with the chief Fundy scientist.

"Dump it, Chong. Ford 3 can comb it for any other relevance back in Oakland." Ford had his gear on and was heading toward an unmarked car parked at the rear of the warehouse.

Chong unwillingly logged off after sending to Oakland. He knew they needed to hurry. They couldn't take an elevator. Instead, they would catch a Moon flight from Lagos in Nigeria (probably

connecting through Cairo) to Houston de la Luna, the major spaceport in the UMC. From there they'd take the M train through Armstrong out to Cana.

Cana was the only permanent colony on the Moon that was not part of the United Moon Colonies. It had a religious history and therefore was a popular hideout for Fundys. Cana's refusal to ally with the Fundys had made it somewhat neutral ground during the war. Now, Cana was having trouble keeping the former Fundys out. The Scientist Sridat Patel had found his way in and was conducting secret high-level experiments in Cana. Ford suspected his wife's clone had originated there.

After hours of grueling interplanetary travel and overland trains, the M finally deposited Ford and Chong in the Spartan but clean Cana terminal. They still had an hour before their meeting with Patel in the Cana central plaza. They decided to get a meal, which was no easy task in Cana.

Restaurants *per se* were forbidden in Cana, based on the interpretation of some religious precepts. It was deemed unseemly for people to require others to bring them food prepared by someone unknown in exchange for money: something about it being prostitution of the stomach. That didn't mean there was nowhere to eat in Cana; it just meant you had to know who was cooking your meal. That could be trouble for two people trying to keep a secret identity.

However, Cana did now suffer some tourism, though this decadence was decried by the conservatives in their government. A small industry of services had popped up that would introduce strangers to places to eat. All in all, you could find a nice restaurant on Cana with good food at a reasonable price; it just took you two hours to do it, and Ford and Chong didn't have two hours.

Instead, they would either have to ferret out a semi-legal food stand or push through the crowd at an open market bazaar. A bazaar was not considered the least bit sinful, as long as ten percent of the profits went to the Cana Assistance Department for feeding the hungry. If you could get through the crowds, you could find some pre-prepared foods masquerading as groceries. This could also eat up time, depending on the crowd size.

In the end, Ford and Chong decided to risk a food stand. Patrons rarely got arrested at the food stands, especially if they appeared to be from out of town. The owners of the stands were adept

United Moon Colonies

at becoming old friends with you before they prepared your meal. It wasn't an ideal situation for two men with a cover story, but they were hungry and figured the risk was small.

A large burly man with a mustache stood at an unmarked counter along a side street off the main plaza thoroughfare. He spotted their hungry faces immediately.

"Hello, old friends," he shouted, in the traditional call of the Cana food vendor. "Come, come and sit and say hello. It's been ages."

Ford and Chong liked the smells coming from the place, and they decided to sit.

"Boris welcomes you back to Cana."

Chong knew how this went, and he took the lead. "John here and myself--well, you know old Frank--we're so glad to be back."

The man smiled at Chong's knowledge of the game. This would make things much easier.

"John and Frank, what a pleasure to lay eyes on you again," Boris said, taking each of them by the shoulder in the Cana greeting.

"But can you stay and sit awhile and catch up with old Boris on your business?"

Again, Chong knew the patter. "Of course. Our trading in textiles goes well. We hope to make a deal for distribution this week, God willing. My salesman here has the gift of gab. I think everything's going to go great. As a mid-level manager, he makes my life so much easier. But then he has no wife or kids, like my wife Sarah and our two boys Jim and Bob, to burden him."

Ford admired the ease with which Chong wove the story. Chong wondered if Ford knew that this was a standard story used for quick eating. It was often possible to find a stand with three textile dealers chatting about their wives, all named Sarah.

Boris grinned, especially pleased at Chong's adeptness with the story.

"But I am so rude! Won't you stay and eat with me? It is the least that I can share with you in my poverty. It has been six days apiece I have been toiling with my troubles."

This meant they could pay six coins each for their food. Chong nodded acceptance, and Boris disappeared.

"So what kind of food do we get?"

"Whatever Cana provides," Chong said. "That's the trade-off with the speed of a food counter. You don't get to pick."

Boris came back, smiling widely, with two bowls of noodles, sauce, and some kind of cooked meat. Just then a couple tentatively approached. They seemed to be first-time tourists from somewhere in the UMC.

“Hello, old friends,” shouted Boris as he went over to welcome them.

Ford and Chong ate silently. The food was hot and greasy, but very good--a thick meal that would keep them full for awhile. Chong chuckled as he caught snatches of the conversation between Boris and the tourists. They were far from adept at this game, and Boris was bending over backwards to take their orders without breaking the law. At one point he heard Boris muttering low to the tourists, probably instructing them on what to say next.

Unfortunately for Boris, a Canaan constable happened to be strolling by, and this caught his attention.

He approached the three and began berating poor Boris. The tourists were dumbfounded and could hardly speak, which was probably lucky, because if they *had* spoken it might have landed Boris with a fine or a night in prison. After Boris identified them as his old friends Lois and Juan, the constable asked for their IDs.

“Uh-oh,” Chong said. “The diners never get in trouble, but we will have to show ID so that the constable can see if old Boris is telling the truth. That could prove complicated. Let’s go.”

They both regretfully left their half-eaten bowls of food on the counter, along with twelve coins Chong had withdrawn from his account at the train station. The constable noticed their hurried departure and shouted after them.

“Run!” Chong grunted, making for an alleyway. He knew the constable wouldn’t chase after them for such a petty offense. He’d probably suspect they were scared tourists. Chong made the corner and turned around in time to see Ford lying down on the side of the road, holding his leg, as the constable approached with his club held out. In no time, Ford was cuffed and being escorted away by the constable.

Chong thought about running after him, but he knew it would blow his cover. Thank god it was Ford that got nabbed, though. Chong felt a pang of guilt over this, but Ford had legit ID and experience getting out of these situations. As long as the constable was satisfied with his story and didn’t run a UMC check on him, they’d be fine. In

United Moon Colonies

the unlikely event they did check him out with the UMC authorities, they'd find a high-priority presidential warrant out for his arrest.

In Cana that could mean he'd be extradited, or it could mean they'd decide to try him under Canaan law. If they did that, he could be executed.

Chong let out a brief sigh. That would take weeks, and hopefully Chong would be able to rescind the arrest order by then. But it made things extremely complicated.

"Mr. Dewitt?" A man had appeared out of nowhere at Chong's side. He paused for a moment before remembering that Dewitt was the name he had given the Fundys.

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Mr. Patel's assistant. I saw what happened to Mr. Baker. Careless. But I'll see what we can do. In the meantime, would you come with me?"

"I have business in the plaza," Chong said, being careful in case this wasn't Patel's man after all.

"Plans have changed. You're to come with me."

Chong noticed that the assistant held a small charge gun at gut level.

"I guess I'll come with you then," said Chong, wishing he could go back and finish the bowl of noodles.

16

Baghdad was a pit. It had gone through many ups and downs in its history, but the Fundys had brought it to its lowest point ever. The UN had made sure water and electricity services worked, but there was hardly a building worth hooking up to the services. Most of the damage had been done by the Fundys themselves. The Battle of Baghdad had been one of the hardest fought as Touareg himself had been caught in the city. He had ordered Baghdad leveled rather than let it fall into Alliance hands. He had almost succeeded.

Malinao and Lawrence were housed in the UN commission building in an old bus station on Rashid Street. They had a lovely view of the Dijla river and rubble as far as the eye could see. The only building in sight above one story was the Great Mosque, which, against all odds, had survived the war.

Malinao and Lawrence took a walk on their first day there and met only military personnel on patrol. No major rebuilding efforts could begin until they cleared the last of the Fundy mines. Every other day, another family out foraging for food was blown up. The central city was a ghost town. It reminded Lawrence more of an abandoned Lunar settlement than a major Terran city.

It was his hardest test so far. Until now, he had been most dreading Vatican City, fearing that the Pope or other dignitaries there would unmask him. But this was worse. He needed Chong now. These people were truly hopeless. Where the stacks of bodies in Omaha had angered him, Baghdad just made him sad. What hope could the president of the Moon offer a city damaged this badly? Even more, what hope could a political aide pretending to be the president offer them? He did not have the words for this.

The morning of the speech found him sitting, staring out at the Dijla rolling by.

United Moon Colonies

“Are you ready, Lawrence?” Malinao looked more concerned than he had seen her yet. The light of Baghdad turned everything a bit yellow, and it gave her face a fresh glow.

He smiled. He understood why Richard liked her. He wondered if their tasks had helped at all.

“I was just thinking of the president. Do you think he succeeded? Whatever he was doing?”

She shrugged and smiled a little. “It’s hard to say. I guess we’ll find out soon enough. Where’s your speech?”

Lawrence balked. “All up in here,” he managed to lie, pointing weakly to his head. “Cleared it with the rest of the staff last night,” he managed to lie. The truth was he hadn’t been able to think of a word to say, and he had insisted on writing this one himself, over Malinao’s objections. The weight of the devastation had him tongue-tied. He couldn’t ask Malinao for help now.

He decided to brazen it out. Maybe the words would come to him. “Let’s go,” he said, getting up.

“You don’t know what to say, do you?” Malinao looked at him with what he thought was a mixture of annoyance and wonder. “Yet you’re willing to just carry on and do this-- for him. You’re doing more than an aide would, Lawrence. You’re a true friend.”

Malinao could see through him pretty easily. No wonder Chong was afraid of her.

She walked over and took both his hands in hers. “Chong will be all right, because he has a friend like you looking out for him. So will Baghdad, for similar reasons.”

And like that, Lawrence had his speech.

A little over an hour later, he stood on the steps of the Mosque looking down over a crowd of about fifty people in front of a backdrop of broken buildings, torn-up pavement, and unidentifiable rubble. Almost every human within five miles had come to listen. He paused in his speech to let them applaud. He let it die out until you could hear nothing but the river.

“It is hard for friends in trying times. No matter what you do, you can’t always protect your friends. Sometimes the best way to help them, leaves them on their own. But true friends are never left totally alone. The UMC is a true friend, not only to Baghdad, but to all of United Arabia. And after we get you back on your feet, the Moon will

be better for having a friend like Baghdad. May our friendship be unending, insha'Allah. As-Salamu Alaykum.”

The assembled crowd applauded heartily. The minister of recovery, who was in charge of the rebuilding of Baghdad, slapped Lawrence on the back, with tears in his eyes.

Malinao gripped his arm and whispered into his ear. “That was fantastic, Lawrence.” He thought he could see a hint of a tear in her eye as well.

When they got back to the UN building, Malinao and Lawrence took dinner in their room. There weren't any restaurants, anyway, and they were weary of the UN cafeteria. Plus they wanted to speak freely. He had become too popular to do that in the cafeteria. Many of the military men had gained a great new respect for Chong, who had decided to visit Baghdad rather than the more comfortable Riyadh. All that admiration made Lawrence even sadder that Chong was not here to benefit from it, although he knew Chong wouldn't have exploited their high regard and might not even have noticed it at all.

As they sat down to eat, Malinao seemed giddy.

“I had no idea you spoke Arabic,” she said, grinning.

“Oh, I don't. As an aide you pick up little things here and there. Niceties, greetings, etcetera.”

“Well, it worked wonders. I thought the minister was going to marry you.”

“That would have been unlikely,” laughed Lawrence.

“I'm nervous that we haven't heard from Chong.” Malinao bit her nails. Lawrence decided that her giddiness must be nervousness. Her ecstatic smile had changed suddenly to a frown. “Where is he?”

Lawrence started to say something, but he was interrupted by a scuffle outside and the sound of a shot. They both ran into the hallway to see John Ford lying in a pool of blood. Lawrence recognized the killer clone Ford.

“What happened?” he demanded of the guard.

“This man answered the description of John Ford. We caught him attempting to sneak up to your room, sir. Our orders were to shoot on sight.”

Lawrence knew they had to act fast. He heard the UN officers barging up the stairs.

United Moon Colonies

“Post guards at the entryways. Nobody gets in. This man is not John Ford. He’s a clone. That’s top secret info and I need it to stay that way,” barked Lawrence. The confidence of his own voice surprised him. “When the UN asks, tell them it was a ruffian of unknown description. I want this... thing... in a body bag. Now!”

“Sir, he’s not dead.”

Lawrence rushed to Ford’s side. The guard was right, Ford was breathing.

He smiled when he saw Lawrence leaning over him. “You do look kinda like him.” He started to chuckle, but winced in pain instead. “Chong and Ford are being held in Cana,” he coughed. “Separately. They need you now.” With that, the Ford clone passed out. Lawrence looked up at Malinao. He was paralyzed. The adrenaline rush that had given him such decisiveness minutes before had faded.

“I’ll handle the cover-up,” Malinao said. “I’m American; we’re good at it. Stay with him.”

Malinao rushed off to the stairs, and Lawrence could hear her handling the demanding UN reps.

Lawrence stayed by Ford. A medic appeared and attempted to stop the bleeding. Ford opened his eyes one more time and said, “Here in Baghdad, passkey Wilfredo.” Then he closed his eyes for the last time.

17

Chong had no idea how long he'd been waiting. Ever since Patel's man had brought him to the low-slung metal shed, he had been sitting alone in a small room. They fed him, allowed him to use the restroom and showers, and gave him a bed. He wasn't guarded, but he was told that if he wished to see Patel, he must wait. He didn't doubt he would have been confronted if he tried to leave, but they seemed very unconcerned about the possibility of that happening.

He had little choice, anyway. If he left, he could try to find Ford, but that might attract attention. Even if he did find him, they would just end up back here. Without Patel, all their work was for nothing. He spent his time trying to gather as much information as he could. During the day two young Canaans named Giuseppe and Hez guarded the shed's entrance. After their twelve-hour shift a much less friendly German named Friedrich relieved them. Giuseppe and Hez were the only Canaans in the outfit, and incongruously lighthearted. They had tried to teach Chong their favorite boyhood Canaan songs, extremely dirty by Canaan standards. They involved poop and the occasional titillating mention of girls. But a man named Carlos had put a stop to the singing, and after that, the Canaans preferred not to talk to Chong, but they remained relatively friendly.

Carlos was definitely Venezuelan and definitely missing an eye, though the prosthetic replacement was very convincing, if inert. Carlos obviously didn't have the funds or freedom to get a proper working eye installed. Aside from Carlos and the guards, there were two other men who brought Chong food and other necessities, but these two said almost nothing. One was the man who had met him in the street, named Benito. Chong hadn't discovered the name of the other man, but they both seemed Venezuelan as well.

United Moon Colonies

Carlos had given Chong a gruff but polite talk on his arrival. “Mr. Dewitt, you are welcome to stay and wait, but you live by our rules.” Apparently those rules were whatever Carlos said, because he never stated exactly what the rules were. In fact, he hadn’t spoken to Chong since.

As Chong sat in his room, trying to picture Samantha Malinao, Carlos burst in the door.

“Señor Dewitt. Will you come with me to my office, please?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but strode out. Chong followed. In Carlos’s office was perhaps the smallest adult man Chong had ever seen. He didn’t have the proportionally large features that little people usually had. This man’s features were all in proportion to his size, but his size was only four foot seven at most. He seemed shrunken rather than short.

“Mr. Dewitt, a pleasure to meet you. I am Sridat Patel.”

Chong shook hands with him. Patel offered him a seat, and Chong sat down.

“Carlos tells me your associate, Mr. Baker, was taken in for questioning. We’ve located him. He’s being held without bail at the Canaan Central Security Hall. It is unfortunate that this has happened. I hope it doesn’t compromise your position in any way.”

Chong shook his head.

“Good. I apologize for making you wait, but we had to be sure no similar manhunt was out for you. I’m happy to say there is not. So I assume we can proceed without Mr. Baker present?”

“Yes, if that’s acceptable,” answered Chong.

“Quite. My associate from Gabon informed me you are prepared to make a heavy investment with us in exchange for some scientific services.” Patel looked down at this last part, as if too embarrassed to say the word “cloning.”

“Yes, we are. Mr. Baker believes you may have the wherewithal to . . . provide us with some security . . . for our health. It’s my liver, you see. And Mr. Baker has other, similar issues.”

Patel wiped his forehead nervously. “I must tell you, Mr. Dewitt, this is quite a delicate subject for us. We’ve undergone a massive change of perspective regarding these procedures, but not without much controversy. There are those in our organization who would turn you away flat for what you are suggesting. They feel it is sacrilege.”

“And your opinion, Mr. Patel?”

“Hogwash. How can you support part of our research without supporting it all? You are not proposing to animate the subjects, only to grow them. That is no different from what my lab has done many times. And the payment you’ve made already is quite generous, as is that which you are prepared to offer for completion.”

Chong had Patel figured in a snap. He had no morals and was attracted to money. He worked for the Fundys because they allowed him to carry on his work and get paid well, and nowhere else in either world would let him. He had convinced the Fundys to investigate cloning, and when they had finally rejected him, had formed a splinter group, all to keep getting himself paid. His only reason for risking a meeting with strangers was the money. Chong bet himself that Patel’s next question would be about payment.

“I trust the situation of Mr. Baker does not affect that generous payment?”

Almost dead on. “No, sir. The amount in question is registered in a South African Bank under confidentiality rules and is held in escrow for you.”

Patel’s eyes brightened at the mention of escrow. “Excellent. Then there is just one more thing.”

Chong nodded.

“A DNA test. We know your name is most likely not Dewitt, and we understand the need for secrecy. We will not try to identify you directly, only rule out the possibility of your being one of our many enemies.”

Chong tried to remain calm. “I suppose that can’t be avoided. Given the nature of your service, in fact, it must be necessary.”

“It is not only necessary, it is already done. Your stay here provided the material we needed. The test results have been churning away. No positives yet, you’ll be pleased to hear, hence my willingness to meet with you. Benito should be back with the final results any moment. I told him to meet with me here instead of at my office. If everything is as expected, we will go from here to meet with our organizational head and arrange the terms of the deal.”

Except for the DNA test, this was exactly as Ford and Chong had planned. They would make payment and order clones for organ replacement, a highly illegal activity on both worlds. However, they would learn the identity of the Fundy leader. They weren’t planning to

take any action immediately, just to record. Chong would fire two microscopic subdermal darts at the Fundy leader. One would take all the data they needed, including skin flakes for DNA tests of their own, if possible. The other dart would stain the Fundy leader's skin with a traceable quantum dot. Chong would then leave to go back to Earth and hopefully make it to Vatican City in time to meet the Pope.

That is, if Richard Chong's DNA wasn't on the enemy list. A thought struck Chong immediately. If he was on the list, it meant they had his DNA. Could they have already made a clone of him? Or would they need more? He hadn't discussed the workings of the clone machines enough with Ford.

Benito came rushing into the room, panting and gesticulating. Chong braced to run if he needed to, though he wasn't sure where he'd go.

"They've taken Baker to New Canaveral. They extradited him this morning. It's big. He's being taken into UMC governmental custody, which means he's an enemy of the state.

Patel looked at Chong with a raised eyebrow. "Your need for secrecy is very great indeed. Who is Mr. Baker, Mr. Dewitt? I think we might have a case for needing to know."

Chong paused. "I understand. However, it is of such a nature, I would prefer to reveal it only in private. May we proceed to your organizational head's office? His identity would make more sense to your head, I have a feeling."

Patel considered this.

It was a huge gamble, Chong thought. If they found out it was Ford, he wasn't sure what they'd do. They still thought Ford worked for them. It would lead to many questions, like why Ford needed a clone made when he had several already. Like why he needed to sneak around to get one made when he had a machine. But it gave Chong time to think.

"Of course." Patel nodded his head. "I see that is wise. However, I need to confirm that your test came out clear. Benito?"

He was still out of breath. "I had to get over here as fast as I could. I'll have to go back and check."

"Very well," said Patel. "Our time is valuable. Call me when you know. All the likely enemies were cleared, so I don't expect any issues. Meanwhile, Mr. Dewitt, if you please, we will head towards our office. Carlos will drive." He turned to Benito. "We will hear

before I arrive, yes?” Benito nodded and took that as his cue to leave.

Carlos led them outside to a small mini-car. They flew across Cana, from the industrial section of the colony into the poorer section. Cana had little crime, but it did have a large impoverished class. Some Canaans lived that way voluntarily as part of their religion. It was an odd mix of people: some trying to get out, and some trying to get in.

They landed in a parking lot across from a church. Carlos led them over to a pet shop. Small beagle puppies played in the window and mugged for Chong’s attention. He heard them whining as he passed.

They went up a set of side stairs into a dingy unmarked office.

“Wait here, Mr. Dewitt. I’ll call Benito and then bring in our leader.”

Chong had no idea what would happen at this point if he failed the test. He imagined it involved killing him in some way, but he couldn’t put his finger on which way. Maybe choking him with Carlos’s glass eye.

Patel put the phone down and looked Chong in the eye.

“You’re clear, as expected. I’ll just be a moment.”

It was everything Chong could do not to let out a huge sigh of relief, but he kept his look of calm expectation.

After a few seconds, Patel came back with a man dressed entirely in black, wearing shades and a dark hat. He would be tougher to ID than Chong thought. He released the darts and hoped for the best.

Patel’s voice shook as he made the introduction. “Your honor, this is the gentleman who has inquired about our services. I’d like to present--”

“President Chong,” said the voice from under the hat. “How very nice to meet you again. Very distressing, though, I must say.”

Chong recognized the voice of Minister Narang, the minister of Britain. He had no time to think. There were three of them and one of him, and Carlos, by all observed evidence, was not to be trifled with.

Narang took off his hat.

“I must say, I’m as surprised to see you as I imagine you are to see me. And I confess you’ve got me wondering who the person claiming to be you in Baghdad was. But no matter.” He sighed and sat down. “We’ll soon find out, as I plan to capture them on their way to

United Moon Colonies

Vatican City. In fact, if all goes well, I should receive a call within an hour.” He took off gloves and laid them down on a side table. “So, I suggest you get comfortable, Mr. President. We have much more to discuss.”

Just then a phone rang.

“Ah, not so long as I expected. That will be them.”

18

The UN's military truck dropped Lawrence and Malinao at the only working airfield on the outskirts of town. They were taken toward what looked like an old-fashioned jet. This was their way across the Mediterranean to Europe. Lawrence's eyes grew wide as they moved closer to the antique.

"We're taking *that*?"

"Don't worry, Mr. President. She'll fly," said the driver. Malinao pinched Lawrence and gave him a look. Lawrence felt an uncontrollable urge to grin.

"I'm sorry, Commander, you misunderstand me. I'm very excited. I've made a hobby of studying old airplanes."

Now Malinao looked like she was going to sock him. It was true that he had studied old airplanes; it was not true that the president of the Moon had. In fact, the president of the Moon had often mocked Lawrence for his avocation when they had worked together in the Lunar mines.

"You know you can't fly one of those on the Moon. No air," Chong had pointed out to him over and over, trying to get him to see the futility of his hobby. Now Lawrence would finally get the chance to see one at work.

"I had no idea you were an aficionado, Mr. President," said the driver. "This is an honest-to-goodness Airbus 380."

"Where did you get it?"

"Pulled it out of mothballs somewhere in France and started using it at a low point in the war."

"I'm amazed it runs," Lawrence said, with obvious admiration.

"An American Lieutenant got it working so well it's been in use ever since. Perfectly safe, though I imagine it pollutes the hell out of the sky."

United Moon Colonies

“I won’t tell.”

“Can’t imagine they’ll let us get away with it for much longer. But to fit your schedule it was the best they could do. Figured it might be a treat, as well. Not many people alive ever rode on one of these and not many people will again.”

Malinao shrugged and sighed. Lawrence was supposed to avoid conversations to prevent people from getting a good look at him, and here he was chatting up an antique airplane buff. She only hoped he would relinquish the role when and if they were reunited with Chong. Both of them were extremely worried now about Chong’s whereabouts. Lawrence had issued a low-level search order to the few Generals who knew the situation.

The airplane smelled musty inside. Lawrence caught his breath when he saw two wide-eyed passengers staring at them as they came around a corner into the main cabin.

“Dummies,” Malinao pointed out. “Look, there’s even a plaque describing them, here on the armrest. This thing must have been in a museum.”

“Good luck charms,” the Commander shouted up as he loaded the last of their bags. “Been on every flight. We’re all too superstitious to get rid of them now.”

Lawrence and Malinao continued to inspect the cabin and found more plaques describing how people flew back in the old days. A few of the rows had been taken apart to display the oxygen masks and other safety systems. In one seat a tray table was permanently fixed in its down position with a faux airplane snack, magazine and beverage glued to the top.

“I imagine we won’t get that kind of service on this flight,” Malinao chuckled.

“No, I imagine not,” said a deep male voice.

Lawrence turned around to greet someone he expected to be the Captain. Instead he found himself face-to-face with a six-foot tall dark-haired mustachioed man holding a gun.

“I would call you ‘Mr. President,’ but I’ve heard we already have one of those in our custody in Cana. So whoever you are, and Madame Speaker, please have a seat and fasten your seatbelts. Our flight will be departing momentarily for Algiers, where you will make a transfer to a Lunar-bound ship. For your convenience and the safety of our crew, I’ll be handcuffing you.”

He expertly cuffed Malinao and Lawrence to their seats and then to each other.

“I’ve been reading the display about flight announcements while I waited for you. I tried to keep mine as true to the original as possible. I hope you enjoyed it. Our flight will take us a few hours; I’m afraid I won’t be able to come back and check on you, as I’ll be flying the airplane. But do try to relax and enjoy the flight.”

Lawrence could barely see mustache man and another similarly dressed man drag the actual military pilot out of the cabin and dump him on the tarmac. Malinao could see nothing. The other man left the way they’d come in and closed the hatch door, leaving them alone on the airplane with their new pilot.

“Did he sound Venezuelan to you?” asked Lawrence.

“No. American,” snapped Malinao. “I’m more concerned with whether he really knows how to fly this thing alone.”

Suddenly Lawrence realized something. “These kind of aircraft require a pilot, a navigator, and ground control to fly properly. This guy only has one of the three.” His knuckles turned white as he gripped the armrest.

The flight went off without a hitch. Despite the handcuffs, Lawrence tried to enjoy the feeling of traveling in old-fashioned style, but it certainly wasn’t the way he had dreamed of doing it. They landed in a wide field outside what was presumably Algiers; the climate felt hot and dry enough for that to be true. They boarded a waiting interplanetary ship, where they were once again cuffed into much more comfortable wide leather seats in the back of a large commercial craft.

To keep their mind off the dangerous flight, Malinao and Lawrence had speculated quite a bit on who these people were. Now their theories got wilder. The organization would need to employ an expert in flying ancient airplanes and would need to have the wherewithal to operate an unlicensed, or at the very least secret, interplanetary commercial craft.

“Well, they can’t land anywhere in the UMC without attracting attention. Obviously, there are ways to bluff, but they’re very particular about getting confirmed departure credentials these days, and those are hard to fake.”

“Could they land in Cana?”

United Moon Colonies

“Possibly. The Cana spaceport is extremely small, so they’d be noticed, but they’re not too big for it. Cana’s just as strict as the UMC though. I doubt they’d have an easier time. Unless . . .”

“Unless what?”

“Unless they’ve infiltrated the spaceport staff. There was a lot of fear during the war that Cana would side with the Fundys. The Fundys had some pretty solid support. Even after the colony joined the alliance, they never did much. Just raised some funding and contributed a few peacekeeping troops. A lot of people felt the Fundys would be able to assimilate into Cana. You know, hide there and wait for their moment to strike. Nothing ever came of that. At least we didn’t think anything ever came of it.”

“All right, you two, shut up.”

An African woman came striding back down the aisle of the ship. “Look, I’m monitoring everything you say, and I have to monitor everything you say, and it’s painfully boring. So let me just give you a reason to shut up and give me a break. We’re landing in Cana. There’s no conspiracy: we have a license out of Algiers. We made a pit stop to pick you up, which we’re going to explain as a fuel inefficiency. Now, I don’t know who you are, fake president, but you better save your energy, because an interrogator is meeting us at Cana and he’s pretty psyched to practice his trade figuring out your identity and why you’ve been masquerading as Chong. Got me?” She smiled a severely insincere smile and walked back up the aisle.

“OK, then,” Malinao managed.

Lawrence kept fairly quiet after that.

19

Chong had been taken back to the shed, but this time he was locked in his room and given no friendly treatment. Carlos looked at him with hate now, and Benito with a tinge of disappointment and disgust. Because his meeting with Narang had been cut short, Narang still had no idea about Ford and their plan. But who knew where Ford was and who was dealing with him? Once Lawrence's disappearance was confirmed, Vice President Hashimoto could take over on an interim basis. In order to mitigate the security risk, Hashimoto had not been informed of very much of their plan. That meant Ford might be executed before any of this could become known.

Chong sat in his room for endless hours without food or attention. There was a toilet off to one side of the room, under the securely barred window. Eventually, he heard some noise outside his door. A muffled shriek and some cursing in Spanish preceded the door was flying open.

"We will take care of you as soon as the leader returns," snapped Carlos as he flung Lawrence and Malinao into the room and shut the door.

"Chong!"

"Mr. President!"

The sight of him alive seemed to wipe all their concerns away. Chong grinned. "Just as I planned. We all get captured in Cana."

Lawrence gasped as if Chong's brilliant secret plan finally made sense to him. Malinao grimaced at his gullibility.

"So your elevator scheme didn't pan out?" she needled.

"Uh, right, the diversion. It worked as far as it went--"

Malinao looked unimpressed. "Where's Ford?"

"Probably in a prison cell in Serenity."

"What happened?"

United Moon Colonies

Chong told the story of their capture.

“Stroganoff,” said Lawrence when he was done. “Ford got captured, all over a bowl of stroganoff.”

“Is that what it’s called? Not bad. Anyway, I was doing well here until I met with the head of the Fundys. I managed to--” Here Chong stopped. He wasn’t sure if the cell was bugged. The place looked pretty low-tech, but the monitoring devices could be easily hidden. He decided not to reveal the quantum dot, just in case.

“--get in the same room with him, and then he recognized me. It’s Minister Narang.”

“How in--?” was all Malinao could manage to get out.

“I haven’t a clue yet. All I know is, he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. Ford’s cover probably would have been blown if they’d found him, anyway, considering Narang’s his brother.”

“What about you two? What do you know from your adventures?”

They told him about their capture in Baghdad. He was impressed by their aeronautical adventure.

“They landed us in Cana and took us in a van here. And that’s the story,” Malinao finished.

“What happened with all the scuffling outside?”

“Oh, nothing. Just them being rough.”

Lawrence guffawed. “The speaker punched Carlos in the jaw after he made a remark about her gender. He’ll have a bruise tomorrow, I guarantee.”

Chong smiled. He started to get that feeling of speechlessness again.

Malinao started prowling around the room, looking for a way to escape. The door was locked tight, and Carlos and his men were just outside. The window showed some promise--if they’d had a sharp knife and about three weeks to work on it. There were no other windows, and the joints at the ceiling were heat-sealed. There wasn’t much they could use for tools anyway. They could break apart the nightstand for hinges and screws, but that would be noticed, and it just get the nightstand removed. Still, Malinao attempted unobtrusively to remove one screw from the rear of the nightstand. The bed and the toilet were the only other things in the room.

After several hours, Malinao had the screw, but no idea what to do with it. It wasn’t even a centimeter long.

“That’s it?!” she complained after she got it out. “All that threading for this? It hardly even held the stand together! Man. All that hard work and all I did was work up a stink.”

Chong took it from her and investigated. “I don’t think that smell is you. Seems like they’re cooking up something nasty out there.”

The door blew off its hinges and came hurling through the room, almost knocking Lawrence over.

Ford stood in the doorway, holding a handkerchief over his mouth. Carlos and a few others lay passed out on the ground behind him.

“Follow me before the gas gets us. Hurry!”

Ford led them out of the shed. They noticed others passed out along the way, including someone Chong thought for sure was Narang.

When they got outside, Ford stopped to catch his breath. He’d been holding it most of the way in and out of the shed.

“I slipped a canister of sleeping gas in the ventilation. I figured I might have to carry you all out one by one, but I guess that room was well sealed. Nice to see you, Chong. And you, Madame Speaker. Lawrence.”

They had no time to talk. Ford piled them into a tiny car meant for three people. Malinao wedged uncomfortably in with Chong in the rear compartment. For that, he was grateful. They rode in silence until they reached the main transport station.

Chong headed towards the Armstrong-bound trains, but Ford stopped him.

“We’re headed to Tranquility. I’ll explain on the way.”

Chong found this odd indeed. Tranquility was a small tourist colony these days. In fact, it wasn’t even a true colony; it was governed by Avalon. Only museum workers worked there, and most of them commuted from other colonies. It didn’t even have a spaceport. In pretty much every way you could think about, it was a dead end. The exact opposite of the kind of place you wanted to be if you were on the run. They found an empty car on the M Train to Tranquility and sat down for the rather long ride.

“Your man Hashimoto is pretty sharp,” said Ford. “I thought I was a goner when Cana extradited me. I suppose that was their plan. I’m pretty sure the Canaan government’s been usurped by the Fundys, but that’s for another day. Hashimoto personally visited me, and

United Moon Colonies

listened to my story. Can't say he believed me, but he followed up on it anyway. Then you two were captured," he indicated Malinao and Lawrence, "and he pieced it all together. Gave me leave to pursue you on my own, knowing he'd blow your cover if he came after you himself. You could tell it was a hard choice for him, though."

"My cover's already blown."

Ford seemed a bit taken aback. "Well, how the hell did that happen?"

"Your brother's now the leader of the Fundys."

"What? Oh, hell no, he's not. That's ridiculous. Narang? Why, he hasn't got a religious bone in his body!"

"Nevertheless, he's who they took me to meet, and he recognized me. So that's that."

"Huh." Ford considered this for a moment. "Did you get the Dot on him?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll figure this out when we catch him."

"So why Tranquility?"

"Because it was the only place Hashimoto felt he could build up a big staff of people near Cana without anyone noticing. I was to get you and either bring you to Tranquility or send word on your condition if I couldn't."

Chong was about to ask about the staff when the train suddenly stopped. They hadn't been riding for very long, but they were outside of the Canaan dome, and therefore somewhat vulnerable. The train tubes were thick, but many a hit disaster movie had been made about a dead train in an outer tube combined with a meteor strike. Stops like this always made people nervous.

An official came over the speakers with an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please do not be alarmed. The Canaan government has requested that the train stop while an official constabulary car connects. A search will be conducted, and we ask everyone to cooperate. This train is still within the bounds of Canaan colonial law, and as such, the Moon Metro service must obey Canaan law enforcement's instructions. We're sorry for the inconvenience, but with your cooperation, we'll get the train running again as soon as possible. Thank you."

Ford and Chong both looked at the emergency exit and then each other.

“You can’t be serious,” interjected Malinao. “There’s nowhere to go out there.

“It’s a long walk, I know. But if I’m right about Cana, we’re probably headed for death at this point,” said Ford.

“They wouldn’t kill the president of the Moon!” objected Lawrence.

“They’ve wanted to kill him since he went down for the peace conference. Now’s their best chance. Nobody but us knows where he is.”

The car lurched as the constabulary car hooked on to the end. It was three cars back. They needed to make a call right away.

“Follow me,” said Chong. He went away from the emergency exit and through a door near the other end of the car that led into a side compartment. Inside a rung ladder led up to a port in the ceiling.

“You’re not suggesting we ride on top of the train, are you?” Malinao asked.

“Shhh,” Chong shushed her. In a hushed voice, he said, “Lawrence, close the door behind you.” The light from the cabin was obliterated, and they stood in darkness. “We’ll wait here until we start moving, then investigate,” Chong whispered. They heard the door of the car inside open and heard Canaan policemen searching the car.

Chong felt a hand slide into his and was pretty sure it was Malinao’s. At least, he really hoped so.

The search lasted forever. They could hear conversations, but they couldn’t make out much of what was said. Eventually the main force finished, but left a sentry behind. Everyone got stiff and uncomfortable, but nobody moved a muscle. Even the sound of their breathing felt like a shout. After what seemed like hours but probably took no more than twenty minutes, they heard a large group of people enter the car. The commander had a sharp penetrating voice, and they could hear him distinctly through the wall.

“We’re diverting the train back to Cana for further search. Return to the car for disengagement.”

The group left, and Chong regretfully let go of Malinao’s hand.

Carefully, he opened the door. He could just barely see the Commander telling the sentry in the next car the new orders. When they were gone from that car, it would be safe to come out, but Chong stopped the others.

“We have to get off the train. We’ll just have to walk.”

United Moon Colonies

“Is there air in the tube?” asked Malinao.

“Just enough, yes. And there’s an emergency walkway that will keep us safe from other trains. Though the MM is the only line here, so the only train we’re likely to see in this Tranquility-bound tube is this one when it comes back.”

“Too bad we couldn’t just hail it,” joked Lawrence morosely.

“Well, sounds horrible, but if we must.” Malinao started to move past him towards the emergency exit.

“No,” Chong snapped, a little more sharply than he meant to. “If we open the emergency exit, they’ll know. A light goes on in the engine room. Normally, it might not raise a fuss, but since they’re being searched by police, they’ll notice. We have to go out through the top portal and climb back down the side.”

“Won’t they notice that?” asked Malinao.

“A chance we’ll have to take,” Ford interjected. “No light will go on in the engine room, at least. And hopefully they’ll all be headed back to their car and won’t look our direction. The other folks in the other cars won’t see us until the train moves.”

“Good point, Ford,” answered Chong. “We’ll have to stay low until the train is gone.”

The group moved back through into the compartment and started climbing the ladder out the top. Lawrence held the door open until the top porthole was cracked, so they would have enough light. Then he closed the door, so they wouldn’t leave an obvious sign that they’d been there.

They climbed out the top and down some handrails a third of the way down the car, then jumped back down on the floor of the tube that carried the train.

“There’s not much air, is there,” Malinao gasped. “I’m not that out of shape.”

Chong shook his head. “No, not much. It will be slow going.”

“Where are we going to hide?” asked Lawrence.

The tube was large, and there was a cement walkway along the side of the tracks, but that didn’t provide much cover. They squeezed into a small space between the cement and the curved tube wall and hoped nobody looked closely.

“The train will move fast enough so they shouldn’t notice us. At least after the first two cars go by. We’ll just have to press our luck, I guess,” said Chong

“Press what?” asked Malinao.

“Old Moon saying,” answered Chong.

Lawrence spoke up. “Actually, it comes from Earth--”

“Quiet, the train’s moving,” snapped Ford.

They squeezed down and Chong found his face centimeters from Malinao’s head. He had an almost irresistible urge to kiss her hair, but he held back. After ten agonizing minutes, the train passed, and they were able to stand up.

“Well, my friends, on with the march,” said Ford, cheerily.

Around seven hours later, several trains had passed by, and they'd become expert at squeezing into the space by the walkway. It seemed like they would be stuck in the tube forever.

"I think we're a third of the way there," Lawrence announced, estimating of their distance from Tranquility. Chong wished he hadn't.

Everyone sighed. That meant fourteen more hours of walking without food or water and with only minimal oxygen. Ford kept falling behind and looked pale and out of breath. They decided to take another break and sat down on the walkway.

"How are you doing, Ford?" asked Chong.

"I'll be fine," he said, and waved away the question.

Chong knew they would have to find another way to get out of the tube. Their phones hadn't worked earlier, but he checked again. There were supposed to be repeaters all through the tubes, but in the lines to and from Cana they hadn't ever worked properly. It was a frequent gripe brought before the Moon Colony Association.

This time he got something.

"I'm going to try to call Hashimoto," Chong said. "I've got a weak signal." Everyone brightened at the thought of getting a ride.

The signal was breaking up, but he heard the other phone ringing.

"Chong, is that you?"

Chong laughed. "Yes, sir, Rod, it's me. Listen, we're about halfway down the Cana-Tranquility Tube line. We need you to come get us."

"What!? I can barely hear you? You're where?"

"Tranquility-Cana tube line," Chong shouted.

"What about Tranquility? We're there. Are you here?" asked Hashimoto.

“No, we’re in the tube line!” Chong shouted.

Nothing. The call ended.

Chong shook his head. The signal was gone.

“Did he hear you?” asked Malinao.

“I’m not sure. He didn’t seem to be able to understand me.

Maybe he can trace the call.”

They hung their heads and resumed the steady march. They discussed whether they should stop hiding from the trains and start waving them down. Lawrence figured they were out of Canaan territory by now. They decided it was worth the risk, given the shape they were in. The next train they saw coming whipped past them. Lawrence thought he might have caught the eye of a young girl through a window, but he couldn’t be sure. The next one, twenty minutes later, showed no acknowledgement of their existence.

“Here comes another one,” yelled Malinao. She stopped, then started waving her arms and whistling.

“Whistling? They’re not going to hear you whistling,” teased Lawrence.

“You never know. Why shouldn’t I try?”

Lawrence grinned.

Chong felt an inexplicable pang as he watched the interchange between two people who’d grown familiar with each other after all they’d been through. Had Lawrence’s impersonation been too good?

The train began slowing to a stop.

“See! The whistling worked,” Malinao chuckled.

The train was a short, two-car, emergency version--the kind you’d send on a rescue mission. Everyone walked up to the main cabin to talk to the driver. There was only dark glass, but they could just barely hear him through it.

“Glad we found you. We got your call. Get on board.”

The passenger loading door opened. It was a little higher than the emergency sidewalk, but Chong was tall enough to boost up and help everyone else in. Malinao treated him to a grateful smile.

The door closed, and the train began to move.

“Uh . . . is it going back to Cana?” Lawrence asked.

“Yes. Damn. It is.” Chong realized. They’d been trapped.

A door opened at the end of the compartment and Narang walked through.

United Moon Colonies

He looked straight at Ford. "I'm so glad I found you. You would have perished out there. And we wouldn't want that, would we, brother?"

21

“How could you?” spat Ford.

“Very easy, brother. I’m the leader of Britain. As Mr. Chong here has discovered, when you’re the leader of a great power, you can do many things.”

“But you warred against the Fundys!”

“Oh yes, I warred against Touareg and all his religious nonsense. But this cloning thing caught my eye, it really did. And the Fundys who stayed loyal to Patel were much less extreme than Touareg’s men. Much more pragmatic. Well, can’t you see? Cana was willing to cooperate with a less extreme Fundy group. I was very interested in scientific technology that the rest of the world was too frightened to pursue. “

The train came up from underground and surfaced into the Lunar light. That meant they were in the part fo the tube near the Cana dome. Narang continued.

“My only obstacle was that pesky UMC army of yours Mr. President. As long as they were involved, things were difficult. I can influence all the other armies rather easily, I must say, but not yours, Chong, not yours. I tried diplomacy, but you were too stubborn for that. So then I tried manipulating my brother. We’d had him under observation and had cloned him already. But I see that backfired a bit, too. Now what to do Chong? What to do? What to do? You’re here, and you know my secret. I need you to withdraw the UMC troops from Earth, and your vice president has proved to be far more competent than any of us expected. It doesn’t look good for you, Chong. I can’t let you go--”

Suddenly the train stopped and the lights went out.

“Power outage,” muttered Ford.

United Moon Colonies

Nothing but the dim white light of the sun, unfiltered by an atmosphere, illuminated the cabin.

“Don’t move,” Narang commanded, sounding a bit shrill. “We’re in Canaan territory, and you wouldn’t get far before the power came back on.”

A distant rumbling filled the tube, as if another train were approaching from the Tranquility side.

“There shouldn’t be any trains coming if the power’s out,” stated Chong.

“Shut up,” barked Narang. “Carlos, take out the driver. You can drive this, no?”

Carlos nodded and moved towards the front.

“This was an honest-to-goodness rescue train, the only way I could get out here to you poor poor people. But now we have complications. Everyone into the front car.”

The rescue train was really two cars, but with the divider doors between them removed and widened to give extra space. Narang waved them all into the front car. He ordered Benito to uncouple the back car, and followed to help. Meanwhile, the rumbling got louder, and a soft glow began to come from the direction of Tranquility. Finally they heard a self-propelled train engine shut off and the sound of troops walking towards the rescue car.

“Rescue car, are you in need of assistance?” shouted someone through a megaphone.

“Over here!” yelled Narang. He opened one of the side doors in the back car, then scooted forward.

Hashimoto came striding into the rescue car, flanked by UMC guards. Narang had his disguise back on and stood at the edge of the first car, right behind where he had uncoupled it.

“Now, Carlos!” he shouted.

Decoupling bolts fired, and the rescue train began to move away. In a piece of luck for Narang, the power returned, and the train began to pick up speed. Chong realized that Narang’s plan had been to use the explosive decoupling to build momentum, then fire other bolts to keep them moving until the power returned. This plan would eventually have torn the train into bits. As it was, Cana had restored power to their end of the tracks, and Narang was speeding away.

So Chong grabbed Malinao and leaped out of the car’s rear door onto the tracks, rolling as he went, taking care as much as

possible not to let Malinao hit the ground. He heard shots, but couldn't tell if he'd been hit by one of them, with the ground beating him up at the same time. They rolled to a stop against one wall of the tube. Chong faced Malinao, their faces closer than they'd ever been. She looked flushed and amazing in the faint sunlight.

"You're amazing," he said in spite of himself.

She looked stunned. And whether it was the heat of the near-death escape or the fact that she finally saw his guard down she found herself saying "I love you."

Chong froze, but wouldn't have had time to respond anyway, as Hashimoto and the guards arrived right then.

"Good to see you, Mr. President."

"Thanks, Rod. Rod, I'd like you to meet Speaker Samantha Malinao from the USA. Speaker, this is Vice President Hashimoto."

Chong and Malinao avoided looking at each other and focused on talking to the Vice President as they walked back to the self-propelled vehicle that had brought Hashimoto and his troops.

"We got the frequency of your quantum dot from Ford. When he didn't return, we started tracing it. When it came halfway down the tube and then started going back the other way much faster, we had a pretty good idea what had happened."

"So now we need to get back into Cana and get him."

"Not as easy as it sounds," Hashimoto replied, wiping his brow. "Cana's been distancing itself again. They're saying the war is over and it's time for us to let them be. But I think there's Fundy influence."

"You're right," Chong agreed. "Not exactly Fundy, though. Minister Narang is leading a scientific cloning group of ex-Fundys. The group got kicked out of the Fundys by Touareg before the end of the war, and Narang's taken up their cause. They're not as ideologically extreme as the originals, except when it comes to cloning. That's their holy grail."

"Narang?!" Hashimoto said puzzled.

"So what do we do?" Malinao interjected. "Can't we inform the Canaan government what happened? Surely they'd change their minds, given the facts."

"We can try," said Hashimoto. "But they pretended not to believe me when I said Chong and you were captured in there. Just

blew it off. I think they must be farther in Narang's pocket than we'd like to believe."

"I've got it," Chong said, snapping his fingers.

"You do?" Malinao managed to look skeptical and impressed at the same time.

"Rod, can you get me three EVA units and a buggy from Tranquility?"

"Yes, of course, but what are you going to do with them? You can't drive from Tranquility to Cana in one of those. It would take days."

"I don't intend to drive all the way. I'll need a ship to land me outside Cana. Somewhere away from their outlying encampments."

"I don't understand." Malinao shook her head. "What's he talking about?"

Hashimoto shook his head too. "I think I know. Next you're going to need a nosedriver and a couple detrailers."

"You got it."

"A couple what? What's going on?" Malinao was confused. She knew that a detrailer was what had blown up in Versailles. "Are you going to blow something up?"

Chong looked confused, then laughed. "No, no. A detrailer is really meant for blowing a pathway in a mine. I'm going to use a couple to start a pathway."

"A pathway where?" she asked.

"Under Cana, right, Chong?" Hashimoto answered.

"Exactly. Right under Narang's feet. We'll track him with the dot."

"You're not worried about an international incident?" Malinao smirked.

"Not exactly. If they want to explain what three or four known Fundys and the British minister are doing holding my aide and John Ford in captivity in their colony, well, let them." Chong grinned, something he rarely did.

"Well, OK, then," said Malinao flatly. "What can I do to help?"

"Can you dig?" asked Chong.

22

The dark tunnel was full of dust and soot. Malinao could hardly see Chong through the gloom. Even the floaters barely cast any light. The dust was so fine, even underground, it clogged filters and blocked light.

“Where are we now?” she shouted to Chong.

“About to the center of the colony. I think Fifth Street and Prophet’s Avenue,” he shouted back.

Behind them, Hashimoto manned the device monitoring Narang’s quantum dot. A crew of about five operated the other parts of the machine from the forward compartment.

“Another hundred meters, heading seventy degrees north from current directional,” Hashimoto shouted down.

Malinao plugged her ears as the driller fired up again. It was extremely loud, but at least not as horrific as the detrailers. She was impressed by Chong’s skill with the driller. Most politicians she knew claimed to be men of labor to get votes, but they really couldn’t do much but talk. Chong proved that his stories about mining weren’t just stories.

The question of what to do once they arrived below Narang was still an open one. Chong was for just drilling through the surface, but Hashimoto worried him what might happen if Cana found the president of the UMC drilling up through the middle of their colony. The current plan was to drill close to the surface, then use a minidrill head to open up a small porthole. That was Malinao’s job. It was simple enough to operate and she was small enough to make her perfect for the job. In addition, nobody in Cana was likely to recognize her.

“OK, we’re here,” Chong yelled after another twenty minutes of drilling.

United Moon Colonies

“Check. He’s right above us. You ready, Speaker?”

Malinao nodded and set off to climb into the minidrill.

It was a single-person cabin attached to a rather hefty drill bit that clung to the side of the driller. Once inside, Malinao blew the clamps and maneuvered it out from the side of the main drill, following the cavern they’d made until she arrived beside the main drill’s nose.

“Within range,” she broadcast to Chong.

Chong moved the main drill back enough to give her room to slip in front. She bore the minidrill straight up through the rock until proximity sensors warned her she was near the surface. She gave the controls a tight turn, just like Chong had showed her. It opened a neat circular hole in the ground above her and turned the minidrill on its side, perfectly aligned to allow her to crawl out of the cockpit and up through the opening.

Chong whistled through her speakers. “Nice bit of driving. Where’d you learn to do that?”

“Charm school,” she answered back. The fact was she had never driven a minidrill before, but she had driven rock busters once in California and found the minidrill very similar. Her Uncle, Tito Jun, had a strip quarry, and she had spent a summer busting rocks for school money.

Malinao came out in a side street, which was a relief. They had been trying to pick somewhere unobtrusive, but you never know if your math is good until you see it in real life. Malinao climbed on up through the ground and pavement.

“Close the grill,” she broadcast back.

The main driller had a large grill behind it that could be closed to effectively shut off the tunnel it had made on its way in. This prevented the air from the colony leaking out through the tunnel they made. A leak would not only give them away but also might prove dangerous if left too long. Malinao felt the slight breeze going past her into the hole suddenly die.

Chong’s voice whispered in her ear. “Grill’s closed. Narang’s quantum dot is registering four meters behind you and two meters to the left. Be careful, just reconnaissance.”

Malinao walked back down the alley towards the location of the dot. She saw it on her reader now as well. There was a door in the alleyway that seemed to lead right to it. She listened at the door and

heard nothing, so she carefully began to open it. She slipped inside and saw only darkness. There was a large empty room. She heard nothing around her, so she risked whispering to Chong.

“I’m reading a meter away, but I’m in a dark room and there’s nobody here.”

“Shhh,” admonished Chong. “They might be there but hiding from you.”

“I’m going to try some light.”

“No, Malinao, it’s too risky.”

But Malinao had already triggered the light.

She looked around into emptiness. Not a soul was in the room, nor much of anything else.

“There’s nothing here,” she said back to Chong.

“What do you see?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, there has to be something; we’re getting Narang’s dot transmission.”

She caught her breath as she looked down.

“I think I found the source of the transmission.”

“What is it? Is Narang there? Get out, Malinao!”

“No, it’s not Narang. Well, not all of him, anyway.

She looked down at a severed arm she only could assume was Minister Narang’s.

Ford and Lawrence still weren't sure they trusted the girl, but she had gotten them out of Cana, and at the cost of Narang's arm.

"Sarah?" Lawrence asked.

"It's SEE-ra. What?" Sira replied.

"What do we do when we get to Armstrong?"

"What?" She turned away from the controls of her Moon Hopper, which made Lawrence very nervous. He turned to Ford, who didn't look so good himself, but for a different reason.

"Watch what you're doing," Lawrence barked.

"Well, stop distracting me. Gah!" Sira returned to the controls.

After they returned in the rescue train, Narang's men took Lawrence and Ford back to the shed. To Lawrence's way of thinking, this showed that the Fundys didn't have multiple bases to work from, since they kept going back to the same one. Narang took Ford for interrogation and returned him in a half-conscious state that hadn't improved yet. Then the guards dragged Lawrence and Ford out into the middle of the shed where Narang gave a hectoring speech, attempting to scare the living daylights out of the prisoners and did a good job of it, in Lawrence's opinion.

In the middle of the speech, a Moon Hopper, one of the self-sealed EVA units used to travel on the Moon's surface, came roaring through a wall, knocking down half the shed as it went. It was one of the big black models sometimes used in Lunar Truck Shows, where the audience stood in a comfortable atmospheric dome and watched huge vehicles, mostly Moon Hoppers and other EVAs, do stunts outside the dome in normal Lunar gravity.

As it burst in, a chunk of the metal sheeting used in the shed's wall came slicing through the air and neatly took off Narang's arm. He

screamed, bringing Carlos to his side. Sira had jumped out of the cab and grabbed Lawrence and Ford.

“I’m a friend. I’m taking you to Armstrong, come on!”

“Who are you?” Lawrence quite rightly asked.

“My name’s Sira. Come on, we have no time.”

Lawrence saw Narang’s men catching on to what was happening and decided it couldn’t hurt to go with her, so he did. They made it through the airlock out onto the surface without any trouble and were now bounding along the Moon’s surface on their way to Armstrong.

It looked like they’d found a smoother patch, so Lawrence tried again.

“What are we supposed to do in Armstrong, Sira?”

“I don’t know. I thought you would know. Call the president of the Moon or something, right?”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Why are you taking us to Armstrong then? All the president’s men are in Tranquility!”

“Well, I can’t rightly go there without being followed, can I?”

“Why are you going anywhere at all? Who are you?”

Sira sighed and brought the huge EVA to a halt in the middle of nowhere on the Moon’s surface. It was eerily quiet without the Moon Hopper’s engines straining away.

“Look. I’ll explain the whole bloody back-story to you, if you like, when we get there. But right now, I’m trying to drive. If you must know something now, ask him,” she pointed to Ford. “He’s the one who ordered me to do it. Well, not him, but another him. You know...” she waved a hand and trailed off.

“Ohhh,” was all Lawrence could manage.

“Right. Now, please let me drive.” She started up the motors and resumed propelling the EVA at somewhat reckless speeds across the rocky plain.

Lawrence decided to check on Ford. He seemed to be coming around a bit.

“You all right?”

Ford shook his head. “But I will be. I just need some time. Ever been beaten with a bag of oranges?”

“Is that what it feels like?” Lawrence asked.

“No, that’s not what it feels *like*. That’s what they did. They beat me with a bag of oranges. Doesn’t leave a mark.”

United Moon Colonies

“I see. Look, do you recognize this girl?”

“What’d she say her name was?”

“SEE-ra.” Lawrence intentionally emphasized the correct pronunciation.

“Sira, huh. No. Can’t say I do.”

“She implied one of your clones sent her.”

Ford looked up groggily. “She did, did she? Well, that’s damned odd. I wonder how one of them even got up here. Travel papers would be difficult. And as far as I know, none of them have personal lives. But . . .” He waved his hand and closed his eyes. The speculation was evidently draining him.

Lawrence went back to watching the Lunar surface roll by. It reminded him of being a kid, riding out to the outlying colonies with his dad. They had gone to visit the work being done at the then-planned Ambrosius colony. The UMC had failed to start any new colonies of their own yet. They could only bring together the existing ones. However, Moon population was stable, so the pressure wasn’t great. His dad had big dreams of making the colony a success. He remembered listening to descriptions of what the Ambrosius colony would look like and what kind of buildings it would have. It always sounded wonderful, but the dream died with his dad. Now Ambrosius was the site of a small mining operation. The huge colonial dome wasn’t even in proper working order, and few buildings had been built. Instead, miners lived in self-enclosed small encampments, and a tourist company brought folks out in a Moon Hopper to take tours of the “ghost town on the Moon.”

“Almost here,” Sira said, breaking the silence. Lawrence realized he had nodded off to sleep. He could see the glow of Armstrong on the horizon.

“Great. Now what?”

“Well, since you don’t know, and you won’t shut up about it, I guess I’ll take you to Ford’s place. The other Ford.”

“Won’t that cause a stir?”

She looked over at the original Ford briefly.

“No, not really. They don’t look all that much alike at this point. You’ll see.”

They made it through the airlock at Armstrong without any trouble and wound their way to the EVA storage lot. It wasn’t far to the other Ford’s place.

The difference between Cana and Armstrong was striking. People in suits walked confidently in the financial capital of the Moon. The buildings looked older than Cana, but somehow more distinguished and brighter. Of course, there were also restaurants that didn't need to hide the fact that they were restaurants.

Sira led them to a bright white block of flats off a main artery of traffic where important people whizzed by on personal transports that consisted of little more than chrome pipes and wheels. That was another difference. Personal transports were outlawed in Cana; every other Moon colony was full of them, and Armstrong was full of the expensive stylish kind. Inside the block of flats, they walked up one short flight of stairs to a round orange door. Sira typed in a code, and the door rolled open.

Inside was a sparse, almost entirely white room. What little clutter there was came from piles of reading material left strewn about the white furnishings.

“Johnny? I’m home. I got them.”

Lawrence heard a rustling sound in a back room, and around the corner came a John Ford clone. He looked to be all of thirteen years old.

“Hello, Father,” he said.

Narang muttered and groaned, scratching at his recently cauterized arm. He knew he could get a new limb off a clone, but the circumstances and the pain still nettled him. He'd almost lost everything. He regretted ordering them to leave the arm and clear out quick. But none of the bargaining chips were in his corner any longer. The colonial governor of Cana was cooling on their arrangement, given the damage at the shed. He needed something good to happen, and he needed it now.

Carlos marched into the small office wearing his usual grim look of determination. It sometimes looked to Narang as if Carlos were about to belch.

"We've word from Armstrong," he said. No belch.

"What is it? Out with it." Narang did not feel civil today.

"They've gone straight for the young clone."

Perfect, thought Narang. Now they had a foothold. The young clone's psyche was specifically tuned to win the original Ford's trust and affection. Plus the young thing came with a bonus tracking device. Originally, Narang had been meant to present the boy as a gift after the completion of Ford's mission. After Ford had gone rogue, they modified the young clone to be a lure. Hopefully the original Ford wouldn't be too suspicious of its origins. It was not one of the clones Ford had generated himself in his lab in Oakland.

"Benito brought news from Patel, as well."

"Well, man, how many times do I have to say this? Don't beat around the bush."

"It's ready."

Narang's eyes lit up. Finally good news arrived, right when he needed it and well ahead of expectations.

"Let's get over to the lab," Narang ordered.

“Are you OK to move?”

“Quite, quite.”

Carlos drove the car, and they took a circuitous route to the lab to ensure they weren't followed. Someone had been digging below the shed and Narang still hadn't learned whom. He had his suspicions, but you still couldn't be too careful, especially with the Canaan government leaning away from supporting them.

They arrived at a low-slung dark black building nestled in an industrial area near the hydration and air plants. It had once been a suite of offices for the energy officers of Cana before they were moved into the main civic building. It was separated from the other buildings around it by a tall wire fence. The windows were darkened, dating back to the paranoid times when Cana thought the UMC might try to sabotage its energy works.

It sat derelict for several years before Patel and Narang had approached the Canaan government and arranged to lease it. A guard let Narang and Carlos in at the fence gate, and they walked up the cement path lined, somewhat ironically, with Moonflowers. They had been almost withered from lack of care when Narang took over the place, and he had ordered them restored. He didn't know why. He just liked the look of them. He took a simple joy from seeing them now. Finally he broke away from the flowers and raised his eyes expectantly to the dark black front door of the lab.

Patel and Benito met him in the reception area. Both men's brows knitted in seriousness but Patel had an excited spark in his eyes.

He led them all down a pastel blue hallway beyond reception. “My assistants are finishing the procedures. It should be ready to meet you as soon as they're done. We can wait in my office.” He came to a yellow door with the number “300” on it and let them enter before him.

Patel's office was bare: a desk, a few pieces of office equipment, and a large picture of the first Earthrise from the Moon that had been hanging in the office before he occupied it. The only hint of Patel's personality was a bust of Francis Crick he had carried with him since school.

“I took the liberty of accelerating the project. I hope you don't mind, Leader,” Patel said as he sat down.

“No, it is most necessary at this point. Will it damage the integrity of the specimen at all?”

United Moon Colonies

“I should think not. I’ve discovered a way to cut out a large swath of incubation time.” Patel warmed to his subject. “The interpolation sequences we had been using were hiding an inefficiency, churning through useless information. By cutting these useless sequences out, we’re able to reduce production time by a third without any harm to the expressed qualities.”

“I see,” said Narang. He got slightly annoyed when Patel talked over his head and did not like to admit it. “So it’s guaranteed?”

“As much quality as any of them.”

“Fantastic. When can we have a look?”

“I should say it’s just about ready--”

At that moment, a young woman in a lab coat opened the door and announced that the procedures were complete and a success.

Patel led the group down the hallway, through a large set of gray steel doors, and into a wide open area where several offices had been merged by knocking walls down. Bright lights lit a laboratory floor, and several technicians gathered around a gurney far to the right.

The group approached, and Patel asked the technicians to remove themselves. A body lay on the gurney. Patel poked and prodded it and shined a flashlight in its eyes. He then grabbed a hypospray from a side table and gave the body an injection.

It woke and shakily sat up, shaking its head.

“Hello,” said Narang, moving closer. The body looked up skeptically at him, trying to place the voice. “I’m Minister Narang. And who might you be?”

The body looked as though it was trying to remember something long forgotten. It winced as if in pain, then muttered, “Chong. I think-- I’m Richard Chong.”

25

Chong took over the operation of the minidrill on Malinao's return. He wanted to be sure the hole was properly closed up so no leaks would occur. It gave Malinao and Hashimoto about half an hour to discuss what to do next. They could search for a one-armed British man throughout the UMC fairly easily, but if he stayed in Cana, they wouldn't get any help. Hashimoto had tried to send back a description to the UMC police, but the unit guarding the entrance hole hadn't answered.

When Chong finished, he was covered in sweat and Moon grime, but satisfied that the hole wouldn't leak and give away their activities. They all agreed the Canaan authorities would probably not investigate the shed too closely.

"Have you puzzled out what happened, Samantha?" Chong asked as he toweled off.

Malinao found herself extra-charmed, not only by this unusual use of her first name, but also by the brawny, sweaty man who used it.

"Not really. There were car tracks in the building, so whatever it was came in a hurry and broke right through the door. There was no sign of Narang's men, but they left a lot of stuff there. It didn't look like they evacuated the place, just left in a hurry."

Hashimoto finally heard from the force at the end of the hole. An emergency call had come in from Tranquility, so Hashimoto ordered them to return and assist. That meant that Chong and friends would have to drill all the way back, rather than surface and fly. Hashimoto ordered the drill to reverse course and begin heading back from whence they came. They had to speak up over the rumbling.

"I wonder why they left the arm? Do you think they discovered the dot?" shouted Chong.

United Moon Colonies

“Not likely,” Malinao shouted back. “They probably were in a hurry to clear out of there. None of the really incriminating stuff was there. Even their relationship with Cana probably can’t survive too much scrutiny.”

“What did you do with the arm?” Chong yelled.

“What?”

“What did you do with the arm?”

“I left it there!” Malinao was almost screaming now. “Why is the drill running so loud?”

“I don’t know.”

The rumbling, which had been getting progressively louder, grew into a groan and a shriek, and then suddenly the drill went dark. A tearing scream of metal, possibly mixed with the screams of men, died down into the sickening thuds of rocks falling in from the tunnel ceiling, burying the drill.

“What happened?” Malinao whispered into the eerie silence that followed.

“I don’t know.”

The barest glow of the few working emergency lights lit their way to Hashimoto, who lay under a fallen piece of metal, impaled during the accident. He stared lifelessly upwards. Chong reached over and closed his eyes.

“Dear lord,” he whispered.

Malinao couldn’t speak, but reached out to grab Chong’s hand.

“What do we do?”

“Let’s see if everyone else is OK, then check the minidrill. We might be able to leave in it. It can move a lot faster than the nosedriver.”

The other crewmembers were all stationed in the forward compartment of the large drill. Chong wrestled with the mangled cockpit door, now partially embedded in rock that had fallen through the ceiling.

“It looks like the whole tunnel roof just fell in. It’s not unheard-of, but we were extremely unlucky.” Chong finally wrested the door far enough apart to move into the dark cockpit. No emergency lights glowed in there.

“Hello! Everyone OK?”

They heard nothing but a deadly silence.

“I . . . I need a light,” Chong said.

“I’ll get one.” Malinao got a light from the emergency locker, and brought it to Chong.

What they found inside the cockpit made Malinao stumble backward and Chong retch. Rock, metal, and man mixed into an indistinguishable pile of partly organic rubble. Chong closed the light.

“We’re all that’s left,” he whispered.

Malinao sighed. “Well, do you think the minidrill’s working?”

Chong admired her resilience.

“It’ll be a tight fit if it is.”

“Tight fit’s better than nothing. Let’s go, Mr. President.” She grimly patted him on the back as they made their way towards the minidrill.

Chong climbed in and tried to execute a manual start but couldn’t get the engine to fire up. He tried several times, raising their hopes each time as lights turned on and engines whined, only to have it all sputter out and die.

He got out, shaking his head.

“It’s not sparking the engine on its own. I’m not sure why. We haven’t run it manually all trip. Even all my work just now sealing the hole was done when we were connected to the ship’s energy and control. I’ll have to open up the engine and have a look.”

“Can you do that?”

“Well, I’m not an actual mechanic, but I know enough about how these engines are supposed to work that I might be able to luck into figuring something out.”

“Won’t someone come looking for us, I mean after awhile? If it takes you too long to get it going?”

Chong knew why she hoped. He had sealed the hole at the Cana end, and the rocks in the cockpit looked to have sealed it pretty well in front of them. Even with the grill open, air wouldn’t last forever.

“It’s a covert mission. If we don’t come out, they’re not supposed to alert anyone. That was the risk.”

“That was stupid,” Malinao pointed out.

“Well, that’s the only way we could even get this harebrained scheme done. We had to man it ourselves and pretty much not tell anyone. Our best bet is to get this drill going. If we can do that, we can at least get far enough to call and tell them to come get us. Right now,

they wouldn't know if we got captured and killed in Cana or anything else.”

Malinao just shook her head.

Chong decided he should try to keep her mind off it. “I have a job for you too, so don't feel like you're left out.” He grinned.

“Oh, and what's that? Moral support?” She was obviously not in the mood for jokes.

“No, the release bar for the minidrill will have to be undone manually once I get the engine going. It's pretty badly bent. I need you to work at it and see if you can get it to move. If I get the engine going, and you can undo the release bar, we'll be golden.”

She grudgingly accepted the assignment, marching off to the mangled supply cabinet to look for usable tools.

Chong watched her go and let the wind out of his lungs. He had no idea how to fix a minidrill engine and no idea if there was enough air to even survive the hour. There was nothing to do but work and hope.

26

Sira brought out a tray with steaming bowls of noodles.

“That ought to stem your hunger for a bit,” she said as she placed the bowls in front of Ford, Lawrence, and the younger Ford.

“Are you sure you don’t remember?” the elder Ford prodded.

The young Ford furrowed his brow. “No, I don’t. I’m sorry, Father. My only memories are of you.”

Ford knew they had been experimenting with memory implants, but this was amazing. The young Ford clone had been made to believe he’d grown up in Omaha, been taken to the Moon by Ford’s wife, and then abandoned by her. He remembered living in an orphanage until he was captured and brought to this apartment.

That still left Ford and Lawrence wondering whether they should trust Sira. She had explained that an anti-Fundy group she belonged to had been contacted a week ago by an unnamed source. That source had delivered the captured Ford clone to them, and had later fed them information on how to rescue Lawrence and the original Ford.

Ford looked into the boy’s adoring eyes. The way he said “Father” truly reminded him of his own children, whom he missed dreadfully.

“How do you know you can trust your sources?” asked Lawrence.

Sira dropped a spoon in the kitchen and exhaled. “I told you, we don’t know, but they’ve come through every time. My bosses say they have reasons to trust them. I don’t know what they are. Why are you so suspicious?”

Lawrence didn’t know where to begin, after all he’d gone through.

United Moon Colonies

“Because they’ve made a perfect clone son for me, and that was never a part of their plan that I knew of,” said Ford, muttering.

The clone-child looked as if he was about to cry. “What do you mean, Father?”

Ford’s heart almost broke.

“Look what you’ve done!” Sira defended the young Ford with the care of an older sister. She had been taking care of him for weeks in this apartment. “He’s a boy. He’s real. He’s you! He’s not a thing.” She came in from the kitchen and handed the boy a tissue.

Ford knelt down in front of the young version of himself. “Son, your memories aren’t real. I know that’s very difficult for you to grasp, but they’re not. They were implanted. You *are* my son, in a way, and I can’t help but care for you. You were made from my genes, from my flesh. But you were not born to me. You never knew the woman you think was your mother. It will be painful for you, but if you think hard, those memories will fall apart.”

“No!” The young clone threw his soup bowl across the room, smashing it against the wall. “Why do you hate me, Father?! Why?! After all I’ve been through, why do you reject me, too?!” He ran off into the bedroom.

Sira glared a hole in Ford. “I hope you’re happy.”

Ford sighed and sat back down. “Yes. In some ways I am.”

Before he could explain, Sira laid into him. “How can you say that?! That boy has been through a war, pulled into a totally different world, abandoned by his mother, captured by the Fundys, sold to black market operatives and then brought to us, only to have his father treat him like a science experiment! You’re heartless, and I’m sorry I ever brought you here!”

“Sira, please listen to me. What our young John Ford just experienced is known in brain programming as a psychic break. It’s painful to learn that memories have been implanted. But the procedure is not so good that it can’t be broken by the subject.”

“There you go again,” she yelled. “He’s not a thing . . . a . . . a *subject*! He’s your son!”

“No, Sira!” Ford raised his voice as well. “He’s not my son, he’s me! Every cell, every genetic bit, everything but his mind is me. You haven’t known that, but I have--ten times over. And the bond is very different than that between a father and son. I *am* him, and I know what he is going through, here. He must get angry. It’s part of the

process of freeing him from his programming. If you want him, the other me in there, to be truly free--free to hope, free to feel honestly, free to love--then you must let him hurt first. If that means you wish me to leave, then I'll go!"

Someone knocked at the door.

Sira froze. She didn't know what to do about Ford, and she couldn't deal with both his argument and an unexpected caller.

"Hide! Go!" She shoed them off down the hall and went for the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Chong. Is Lawrence there?"

Sira risked opening the door. "The President? President Chong?"

"Yes."

"Get in here, quick."

Lawrence came running out from the other room. "Mr. President! We're so happy to see you! We're so glad we found you!"

Chong smiled and hugged Lawrence, which Lawrence found odd, but what the heck. Chong shook Ford's hand.

"It's good to see you, Ford. We've been through a lot together."

"Yes, we have, Chong," Ford said, smiling.

"Who's this behind you?"

Ford turned to see a tear-streaked face behind him. "This is my son, John Ford Junior."

Ford smiled a bit at being introduced that way and shook Chong's hand. They paused just a moment longer than normal as they shook, staring deeply into each others' eyes.

"A pleasure to meet you, Junior," said Chong.

"A great honor to meet you, Mr. President."

Lawrence noticed they blinked three times synchronously.

"What happened to Malinao?" Lawrence interrupted.

"She's fine," said Chong, turning. He looked uncertain as he faced Lawrence. "At least as far as I know." Chong looked as if he were trying to remember something. "We got back to Tranquility, and Vice President Hashimoto and Speaker Malinao headed back to Cana to look for you. I headed back to New Canaveral to try diplomatic channels Sira's group contacted me to let me know you were here. I sent word to Tranquility, but I haven't heard back." Chong smiled when he got to the end of the explanation.

United Moon Colonies

“Where are the guards? Outside?” Lawrence prodded.

“No,” Chong answered, more quickly this time. “I came alone this time. I didn’t want to attract undue attention to Sira’s group. It was part of the deal.”

“Risky, Mr. President.”

“You know me.” He smiled in the way only Chong could. Lawrence still felt puzzled by something.

Meanwhile Ford had been whispering to his young clone self. He finished and turned to Chong.

“I’m so pleased you’ve come now, Mr. President. Sira, your young friend here is a marvel. Tell them, Junior.”

“I heard what Father said about the psychic break, and I channeled my anger against my memories. And they broke. They were gone. They were, you know, flimsy, like I read them in a book, not like I actually lived them. So I understand, now. And I want to live with my father, even though he’s my clone-father.”

Ford turned to Chong with the widest smile anyone in the room had ever seen on him. “You have a brilliant chance here, Mr. President, a chance to whip the rug out from under the Fundys. With Junior and I as a test case, you have the chance to enact the first clone laws ever. To move cloning out of the realm of forbidden practice and into the realm of regulated responsible activity. And we’re your poster family: loving father and clone son. This is the face of cloning, here.”

Ford looked down on his junior self, beaming. Sira had tears in her eyes, touched by the scene. Chong rubbed his chin, pondering the idea. Only Lawrence looked worried.

Chong spent several hours attempting to make the minidrill work. Malinao got the release bar undone rather easily and moved on to the cockpit to see if she could raise communications.

To get to the com system, she had to face the pile of dead men. She dragged what remains she could out of the cockpit and covered them. She had the macabre thought that the bodies might need to be burnt before they began to smell, and then had the even more ghoulish realization that burning the dead could remove what little oxygen they had. She noticed that her breath was coming more heavily, but she didn't mention it to Chong.

The radio equipment was barely accessible in between chunks of rock and a little meat. Malinao found part of a hand over the controls. She breathed deeply and used an axe from the tool cabinet to hack the hand away. She had to tourniquet the dead arm to stop the blood seeping out into the control board.

She had faced bad conditions before, which gave her a strong stomach, but this was pushing her limits. In her youth she had been shipped down to Texas to her Lola Josie's ranch outside Austin. Her Lola was a mean old woman who seemed to have no connection to Samantha's family other than giving birth to Samantha's father. In her stubbornness, Lola Josie had refused to leave her ranch, but she needed someone to care for her. Samantha had eventually been coaxed into volunteering.

Lola Josie was brutal. She made Samantha slaughter cattle, herd goats, and do all manner of the most disgusting chores a young girl from Chicago could possibly do. At the end of the summer, Lola Josie died. That was the worst. Samantha had come upstairs to give her Lola the morning sponge bath she demanded. Instead of complaining about how late Samantha was, she only breathed heavily. When

United Moon Colonies

Samantha had asked her if she was OK, the old lady had spit on her and had called her several bad names in Tagalog. Still, Samantha had sensed that the end was drawing near and stayed with her, holding her hand. The only other words she spoke were a quiet prayer and a demand that Samantha run and get Oliver. Josie's husband Oliver had died twelve years earlier. After hours sitting by the old woman's bedside, Samantha received what at the moment she felt was fitting thanks. Lola sat bolt upright in bed, turned, looked directly at Samantha, screamed, vomited blood all over Samantha, and then lay down dead.

The only consolation for that torturous summer had been the box she found set out on a chair in her Lola's bathroom. It was marked "For Samantha" and contained Lola Josie's personal diaries, plus two million dollars in cash. Her parents had banked the cash in Samantha's name and had had quite a few fights with others in the family over the money's proper disposition. In the end, it had paid for Samantha's college. The diaries described a long life from a youth to old age, and they did more to explain her Lola's condition and attitude toward the world than anything that could have been said at the time. Samantha had taken it as an apology and felt at peace.

All those memories came flooding back to her as she worked on clearing the blood-spattered communications console. She finally found an unplugged power router and got power back to the main console board. There was still no signal generation, and she suspected the antennae were all crushed and not serviceable. She thought she'd have a look to see if she could somehow jam some kind of makeshift antenna into a port on the hull somewhere just to see if they could pick up anything.

As she walked back toward the minidrill, she heard Chong coming.

"Any luck?" she shouted.

He appeared in the doorway, ten times as sweaty and attractive as he had looked earlier before the cave-in.

"No. I can't get the motor to engage. It's not damaged, but the actuators won't fire. The power's not the issue. I think it's unrelated to the cave-in--somehow, the sparks just decided to stop firing right now. I was going to look around and see if we had any spare parts. How's the cockpit?" He had a look of concern.

“Messy. But don’t worry, I’ve seen worse. I’ll tell you about my summer in Texas sometime.”

“Can’t wait--I think,” said Chong.

“I got the console cleared and powered, but there’s no signal generation. I was about to have a look around and see if there’s anywhere I could jimmy up an antenna connection.”

“There’s a port-hatch midway back from the cockpit console where you might find a place. I’ll help you look after we eat.”

Malinao looked surprised. “Eat?”

“Yeah, why not? We can’t breathe or leave, so we might as well eat. The refrigeration unit is stocked and undamaged.”

Chong walked over and swung open a small white door in the wall.

“What’ll you have?”

“What’s on the menu?”

“Chicken salad. Chicken breast. Fried chicken and tofu supplement B15. And grape juice to drink.”

“Who the hell is your cook? I’ll have the chicken. I mean the chicken breast.”

“And of course the grape juice.”

“Of course.”

They sat down at a fold-down table and ate.

“It seems strange to have a perfectly normal sit-down meal in the middle of all this,” Malinao said between hungry bites of chicken.

Chong agreed.

“I should never have volunteered to give you a ride to Omaha!” Malinao chuckled.

“I’m glad you did,” Chong ventured.

Malinao gave him a long look and smirked.

“At the risk of having one of those dramatic confessions at a dying moment, I think you’re something else, Richard Chong.”

Chong blushed. He honestly blushed.

“Why are you blushing?” she teased.

He looked down. “It’s very difficult for me to be with someone.” Malinao started to reply with a snappy comeback, but Chong stopped her. “No, don’t. Let me get this out. It’s not because I’m the president--being single hasn’t helped politically. Voters usually want a family man. It’s something I’ve had to overcome. It’s something about me. I can’t settle for someone who’s less than what I

hope for, but anyone I've found who fits is either already taken or not interested. I don't wish to compromise. I don't want someone to lie to me, so I go it alone. I just . . ." His eyes were tearing a little bit. "I just never could find the right person. I could never trust someone, I guess."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Malinao murmured.

"Because with one look at you, all my will vanished. I stopped caring about having the right person. I knew if I could be . . . if I could be with you, none of my other concerns would matter. It wouldn't be settling, it would just be right. And I live in deadly fear that you won't feel the same. So now I've gone and done it and told you and probably put you off and ruined everything, but there you have it."

Malinao looked down and tried to hide a smile. "Well, you sure put a girl in a hard position. I mean, don't I have enough to think about what with the life or death situation here?"

Chong looked stricken. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You shouldn't be. And I shouldn't play with you like that," Malinao whispered, truly taken aback by how sad he had just looked. She took his hands in hers. "Chong, look at me."

He gazed up at her with a blank expression. No emotion crossed his face.

"I feel the same. I promise. I don't even know exactly why, but I do. It's a feeling that's been a long time coming. And maybe that's why I know it's real. Because I have no explanation but it's always been there since the first time I met you. It just took all this to make me take it seriously. I can't hide behind excuses about what I really want, or why it doesn't make sense. Not anymore. I feel it. It's true and logic and reason be damned. And when we get out of here I promise I will still feel the same. And if you want to do something about it then, I highly encourage it. So don't get me wrong when I say that right now, we need to worry about getting out of here."

"Promise?" Chong said. Malinao was struck by his tone. It was not the tone of a little boy asking for reassurance from his parents. It was a threat. It was a challenge.

"You can bet on it, boy. Now, finish your chicken, and let's get your bucket of bolts drilling again."

Chong agreed and went back to the minidrill, stone-faced, but happier than he'd ever been in his life. Malinao found the hatch Chong had mentioned. She found the antenna ports and wires and played with

them for half an hour but didn't have any luck. Her breathing was getting very heavy, and she knew they needed to conserve oxygen, so she decided to take a break. She was just closing up the hatch when she heard an explosion from the other end. She went running back through the other compartment and found the minidrill smoking and Chong lying face down on the floor in a pool of blood.

She screamed.

Lawrence met with Chong for several hours, satisfying himself that this was, in fact, Richard Chong. There were things he knew that Lawrence felt sure a brainwashed clone couldn't know. Lawrence had asked Ford his thoughts and had shared his own fears, which Ford had dismissed immediately.

"First, that's not really the Fundy style. I don't think they would have put as much effort into getting me or my clones to kill Chong if they thought they could replace him."

"But what if they kept it secret?" Lawrence had asked.

Ford shook his head. "I know clones pretty well, Lawrence. My son shows certain signs of being a clone that are obvious. I don't see those signs in Chong. I know it's odd that he showed up here, but it's just not likely he's a clone. In fact, he's our best chance of winning rights for the clones."

Lawrence had noticed how Ford had abruptly become obsessed with clone rights since his son had turned around. Ford took a certain amount of pride in pointing out how well his son had adapted to his role as clone. Ford Junior beamed with every compliment, and that in turn reinforced Ford's love for him.

It was such an abrupt personality change that Lawrence decided not to trust Ford's judgment alone; hence the probing conversation with Chong.

"I get the sense you've been trying to get something out of me, Lawrence. What is it?" Chong finally asked.

Lawrence couldn't quite figure out how to phrase it. "Well, sir, I had to be sure."

"Sure about what?" Chong raised an eyebrow.

"Sure that you weren't a clone sent by the Fundys."

Chong looked legitimately surprised. “Really? You think they could do that?”

“Well, they seem to have done a number on Ford with Junior. Don’t you find that odd? How thoroughly devoted he has become to Junior in such a short time?”

Chong rubbed his chin. “Well, I hadn’t thought about it that way. I suppose you’re right. But I’m not sure Ford is dangerous now. Except maybe as a lobbyist.”

Lawrence laughed in spite of himself.

“I’m impressed, Lawrence. You haven’t laughed at one of my jokes since we were on that overland trip to Tranquility.”

The summer after the one they had spent in the mines together, Chong and Lawrence had taken a trip from Trudolubie colony in a Moon Hopper all the way out through Ambrosius Settlement and down between Cana and the UMC to Tranquility. It was the Moon equivalent of the great road trip, though far more dangerous, since riding in a Moon Hopper you were out of colonial domes for most of the trip. In fact, the idea had been to see if they could make the entire trip without setting foot inside a dome. They cheated a little: they stopped inside Rafiki for supplies and spent a night in Armstrong. But it was still a thrilling time that Lawrence would never forget. Chong’s fond memory of it was a clincher. Lawrence wasn’t sure why he had ever doubted.

They returned to the main room to find Sira setting out a dinner of Palak Paneer and rice.

“You people are eating me out of house and home,” she said as she ladled the food onto a plate for everyone. Lawrence suspected she was enjoying having people to cook for. Lawrence had suggested they run out to get food from a restaurant, but Sira insisted it was too dangerous and that she should cook.

Over dinner, Ford broached the subject of clone rights again.

“Don’t you think, Mr. President, that we could make the United Moon Colonies the leader in this space?”

“What are you proposing, Ford?” asked Chong.

“You have the advantage now. The entire Earth sees the UMC as the saviors of the world. Seize that stage while you have it. Speak to the world while they’ll listen.”

“And say what?”

United Moon Colonies

“Tell them that clones are people and that cloning research should not only be allowed but advanced--and funded. That clones should be responsibly integrated into our lives. That “cloning” is not a word to fear, but a technological marvel that creates a community of people to be embraced. Make life for me and my son not only legal but exemplary.”

“I’m sorry, Ford, I can say all that, but it won’t change people’s minds.”

“Then don’t wait for them to change. Make it a presidential order. Cloning and cloning research will be funded by the UMC. Cloning rights will be enshrined in law, and a new UMC laboratory for cloning research will be opened in New Canaveral for the purpose of responsible research in cloning. I have the equipment to get us started. I know who to contact to start filling positions.”

This last bit startled Lawrence.

“You mean the people who cloned you against your will and set your clones to kill Chong here?” Lawrence interjected, in spite of himself. “You mean the Fundys?”

“I’m surprised at you, Lawrence,” Chong chided. “You usually let me make the blunt objections. But he’s right, Ford. Is that who you mean?”

Ford sighed and shook his head.

“Is that who made me, Father?” asked Junior.

“You’ve had dealings with the Fundys directly?” Sira looked shocked.

“Settle down, everyone. I know what I’m proposing is complicated.” Ford winced and waved his hands as if to wipe the hanging questions out of the air. “Yes, Sira, I’ve had direct dealings with the Fundys. I was their captive. They made clones of me without my approval. I eventually won their trust, took some cloning machines of my own, and broke away from them. Only a faction of the Fundys remain, and they are a cloning faction. And here’s where it gets tricky: not all of them are bad. Some of them are just scientists, forced to cooperate with the Fundys to continue their research because they would be persecuted anywhere else. I’m saying Chong could make it safe for them to conduct research here--take them away from the Fundys.”

“Like Minister Narang?”

“Narang, if that wasn’t a clone you saw, isn’t a scientist. I’m talking about their clone researchers. The ones this faction employed against Touareg’s wishes, because they were too secular. They don’t have any loyalties to any one ideology.”

“Doesn’t sound like they have any morals either,” quipped Sira, as she got up to clear the table. Lawrence rose at once to help.

“What do you say, Chong? Will you give it a chance?”

“I’ll think about it,” Chong finally agreed. “I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

Lawrence and Chong shared a room in Junior’s apartment, while the two Fords slept in the other bedroom. Sira slept on a couch, insisting she didn’t mind at all.

“What do you think of Ford’s plan, Lawrence? I don’t like it much, but I see his logic.”

“Sir, there is no reason to rush something like this.”

“What do we do with his son, though? According to the convention, all clones are supposed to be destroyed.”

This caught Lawrence by surprise. It was true that the century-old cloning convention required any government with knowledge of any cloning meant for human reproduction to destroy the cloning materials, viable or not. However, that had been agreed on when cloning humans had been almost unfathomable and when destroying cloning materials would likely have meant destroying Petri dishes, not people. Moreover, the UMC had not been recognized by other nations at the time, and so they had not signed the treaty. They had abided by it nonetheless, but they were not technically bound by it.

“You don’t aim to kill the boy, do you, Mr. President?”

“Of course not, Lawrence, but it gets tricky if I don’t. If it gets out, which it will, that I knowingly harbored even just this one clone, then I’ll face questions from within and without. That forces you to make a stand, but then you look defensive.”

“And people are less likely to listen. I see where you’re going with this, Mr. President.”

“Since we’ll face those questions anyway, wouldn’t it be better to raise them ourselves, preemptively?”

“Yes, and make an example of Ford and Ford Junior. Make them the heartwarming reason why we are bucking the law.”

“Exactly, Lawrence. The public all over both worlds will side with us. Nobody will want to see the boy killed.”

United Moon Colonies

“But then we’re left with the Fundy ties.”

“I’ve thought of that, too. If the Fundy faction comes above ground in the UMC, we could be seen as aiding Fundys in this.”

“So, what choice do we have, Mr. President?”

“We have to steal the initiative there, too, Lawrence. Establish this research facility just as Ford suggests, to take the wind out of the Fundy faction. Get their scientists to come over to us, and quiet the Fundys forever.”

“What if it doesn’t quiet them, though? What if it’s what they want, and it helps them infiltrate us?”

Chong thought it over. “I don’t see what choice we have. Plus I don’t think it’s likely. If that was their plan, I don’t think it would work. But keep your eyes open, just in case.”

“Yes, sir,” Lawrence said. “I’ll make the arrangements tomorrow morning for a policy speech in New Canaveral. I’m going to get ready to go to sleep. Do you want to use the restroom first?”

“No, Lawrence, you go ahead. I’m going to go out to the kitchen and get some more water.”

“Thank you, sir. I won’t be long.”

Lawrence took his things into the bathroom and closed the door. Chong got up and went out to the kitchen. As white as the room was in the daytime, it was dark at night. The lights sprung on as they sensed him coming but stayed dim in their nighttime mode. Chong grabbed a glass from the counter and turned to find Ford Junior there.

“Good evening, Chong. Getting some water? Memory Release Code Alpha Wipe Center Gold Devil Fawn Beta Two Minutes Information Only Complete.”

Chong started to reply, but then his eyes went blank and his grip slackened. He dropped the glass, but Ford Junior caught it.

“That wouldn’t do at all. I’ll have to file a bug on that.”

Chong’s eyes fluttered and then he spoke in a dull, not quite monotone voice. “Basic system accessed, ready for information retrieval.”

“Very good. Have you made the request for the policy speech on cloning?”

“Yes,” the dull voice replied from the clone Chong’s mouth. “Speech will be arranged tomorrow morning.”

“Excellent. Shut down and wipe memory back to my water interrogative prior to access code.”

“Affirmative, memory wipe to semantic request prior to access code. Control returning to biological imprint in five seconds.”

Chong stood slack-jawed, and Ford Junior placed the glass on the counter next to him. He hoped it didn't cause too much cognitive dissonance. After a few blinks of the eye, a normal expression returned to Chong's face.

“Yes, rather . . . thirsty. Why'd I put that down? Anyway. I'm rather tired, too, I guess.”

“Well, I understand. Are you going to help my father?”

“I hope so, Junior. I hope so. Good night.”

“Please, Mr. Chong. Please help him if you can. Good night.”

Chong nodded and walked back to the bedroom.

Ford Junior went out the front door of the apartment and opened a small communicator woven into his shirt.

“Yes, this is Ford 18. Tell our leader that the speech is approved. Proceed to New Canaveral.”

Ford 18 closed the communicator and went back into the apartment.

Narang lifted the robotic prostheses Patel had supplied him. It felt like a real arm, it worked like a real arm, but Narang knew it wasn't a real arm. He seethed inside against the minuscule girl who did this to him. Once Ford 18 had seen the Chong clone on its way to New Canaveral, Narang would take care of the girl. She was a nuisance.

Patel and Carlos came through the door of the cavern. The Canaan authorities had turned against Narang, and they had all been forced to hole up in a cave in Armstrong. There were several near the edge of the Armstrong dome in a crusty part of the surface that had never been developed or formed into any kind of usable terrain. It was a low point in Narang's leadership. They had never before been forced to crouch in such squalid circumstances. He decided to make a point of the irony.

"Look around you, gentleman, for this is an illustration of the principle 'it's always darkest before the dawn.' We are on the eve of our greatest triumph, so it is no mistake that we are laid into our humblest surroundings. Don't you think?"

Patel looked uncomfortable. Carlos looked reverent. Narang knew he would have to do away with Patel one day, but first he needed to have Patel train a brilliant scientist. Perhaps another Chong? The Ford clones were too unpredictable. Perhaps a Patel clone. Patel had resisted the idea vociferously, but there were ways.

"What have you come to tell me?" Narang inquired, knowing the two opposites wouldn't pair up to pay him a social call.

"Ford 18 contacted us," Patel recited. "He initiated a successful vocal probe on the Chong clone. It is programmed and responding as expected. Lawrence has bought the programming. I'm quite proud of that. He's a tough one to convince."

Carlos jumped in with some annoyance at Patel's self-congratulations. It was not the Fundy way. "They are headed to New Canaveral in the morning to make a policy speech."

"Excellent," Narang agreed. "We must make for New Canaveral ourselves. I may need to fine-tune the clone's programming before the big speech."

Patel balked at this. "What fine-tuning would be needed? I've laid in all the instructions we need, and there's no cause for suspicion."

"I have my reasons," Narang growled. "Do you doubt me?"

"No, sir, of course not."

"What news from Tranquility?"

Carlos jumped in. "Sir, the president, speaker, and vice president have not been heard from since the cave-in. They are presumed dead. The tunnel has been sealed at both ends."

"And the UMC government?"

"They await word. Only a small cadre of staff and military were aware of the operation, and they have been neutralized."

Narang raised an eyebrow. How enterprising of Carlos. "Very good. Then make the arrangements for travel to New Canaveral and bring the necessary equipment. We can leave the base here for now."

Carlos turned to go.

"Wait with me for a moment, Carlos."

Patel stopped too.

"You're dismissed, Patel."

The scientist looked aggrieved at the slight but turned on his heel and left. Carlos approached his master with a look of blank obedience.

"You have served the Fundys for many years, Carlos."

"It is true, sir."

"You even served for a time in Touareg's household itself, no?"

"An honor that I was lucky enough to have, yes, though I was never on the Great Man's staff." Carlos's words had the rhythm of litany, of ritual. But Narang knew it irked him to hear Touareg's name said plainly rather than with a title, or else replaced by "the Great Man," as Carlos himself had put it.

"You have seen much. You have served well. Will you do one last thing in the name of the Great Man?"

The fires of passion lit within Carlos's eyes. "Anything!"

United Moon Colonies

Good, Narang thought. He had provoked Carlos with just enough blasphemy to get just the right amount of obedience when he reversed it. This was precise psychological programming and needed just this kind of finesse.

“Take out your knife, please.”

Carlos unsheathed his knife quickly, without reluctance.

“Cut a three-inch gash in your belly.”

His hand stalled.

“The Great Man issues a test through me. You will only win his glory through obedience.”

Carlos’s hand shook, but he did as commanded, then fell with a grunt.

Narang rose and walked past the fallen man as he bled.

“Do not move, Carlos. It is a test of your faith.”

Narang knew Carlos would die within an hour.

He found Benito outside the cavern chamber.

“Carlos asked to be allowed to stay inside in meditation, Benito. He had an odd look in his eye, but I granted his request. Do not disturb him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will accompany Patel and me to New Canaveral.”

“Yes, sir.”

Narang wondered why he had given into his whim regarding Carlos. He knew it was a strike against the Fundys of old, but he instantly regretted losing such a strong man. Still, the stain of Touareg’s mistakes and failure could not persist in this new incarnation. Narang would see to that. This was greater than all of them.

30

Malinao still wasn't sure she hadn't permanently damaged Chong when she moved him. She wasn't sure she hadn't permanently damaged herself either. Plus she had apparently used up a tremendous amount of oxygen in the effort. The air was dangerously thin now.

Chong lay on a gurney. He breathed heavily in the thin air. She hadn't gotten a response out of him, and she'd lost all track of time. She sat on a stool next to him, holding his hand, just muttering now and then.

"You don't know how you looked when I first met you on Air Force One all those years ago. I've never seen a man so self-important and shy all at the same time. I wanted to torture you. You know, the flirty kind of torture. So I did. Remember when I asked you if it was true that all Moon Men carried their bathrooms with them?" She chuckled and sighed. "Oh the look on your face. Outraged but careful and a bit embarrassed I think all at the same time. But the way you responded. Just looking me straight in the eye, cutting through all the emotions playing havoc on your face and telling me you didn't think everything that came out of you smelled of roses, so you preferred to leave it somewhere else. Ha! So rude and yet just shy of offensive. And I knew what offensive could be like, even when someone cared. I guess I've been rewarded in the past for putting up with rudeness. I think you captured me right there without my even knowing it. So I've bugged and teased and tortured you ever since. Well any chance I got. I'm not that forward with men, usually. I'm rather distant, as a matter of fact," she chuckled again. "I made my career off it. But you always had a look about you. Soft and gentlemanly, but strong, and . . ." She gasped for breath. "I don't know."

"Are we going to leave now?"

"Chong?"

United Moon Colonies

The president squirmed a bit and opened his eyes. A slight smirk was on his face.

“Between letting the minidrill run and playing true confessions,” he paused and gulped some more air, “you seem to have used up all the air. So maybe we should go.”

“What?” Malinao looked at the minidrill and for the first time noticed the soft humming and the low ready lights. Chong had got it started: that had been the explosion. She could have been halfway to Tranquility by now. How stupid!

He tried to sit up but couldn’t quite make it.

“I’m so incredibly dumb,” Malinao said as she helped him up from the gurney.

“You were just worried. Nice story, though.”

“How much did you hear?”

“Just the last part. Something about wanting to torture me?”

“Dream on, Mr. President,” she laughed.

Between the thin air and Chong’s bulk, Malinao’s lungs almost burst. But he was getting his legs back, and once she had him up, he was able to stand on his own. They folded themselves into the minidrill quite snugly and Chong took the controls.

“You OK to drive?” she asked.

“I’m fine. Just don’t wiggle too much, you’ll distract me.”

The closeness of the cabin had put them in such a position that Malinao could see what he meant.

“I’ll try to just torture you a little,” she snickered, which turned into a cough in the depleted air.

“Here we go.”

The minidrill lurched over the barrier of junk from the main compartment and began boring its way back towards Tranquility.

“I’m going to try to get us up close to the surface where the dirt is more loosely packed. That way the drill won’t have to work as hard and we’ll save energy. Keep an eye on the depth meter for me, though. We don’t want to pop up on the surface. That could be bad for a number of reasons.”

Malinao wasn’t sure she wanted to know why. Chong had turned on the oxygen generators in the minidrill as soon as they had begun moving, and she felt herself reviving quite a bit. They bumped along in silence, punctuated by Malinao’s depth updates whenever

they came within a meter or two of the surface. Finally, she couldn't resist anymore. She had to ask.

"How much longer?"

"Well, I think we have enough juice to make it if we don't hit any obstructions. We didn't hit anything on the way in, so I don't see why we should on the way out. Another half-hour?"

"Why didn't we just go down the empty tunnel?"

"That would have been a lot slower. The minidrill propels itself by drilling. It has small wheels to maneuver in open spaces, but it's not meant to go long distances like that. Well, it's not meant to go long distances at all. I hope we don't break the bit."

"The what?"

"The drill bit. The part that's churning through the rock. I did quite a bit of work with it already. As long as I keep it straight, we should be OK."

After about twenty minutes, Chong began to slow down the minidrill, and eventually they came to a stop, with Chong muttering a quiet curse word.

"What's wrong?"

"We're just outside Tranquility."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Malinao was puzzled.

"Yes, but I forgot something. The colony dome is sunk down in a nice thick wall of heavy barrier rock, not the Moon dust we've been plowing through on the way here. If we try to cut through it, the minidrill will either run out of juice or break a bit trying. We're just not strong enough to get through it."

"How did we get out?"

"The main drill could cut it, plus there was already a tunnel for it that led to the surface from the airlock."

"So, we just cut into that tunnel."

"If I can find it. It's not mapped and I'm not seeing it anywhere."

"What happens if we surface?"

"Well, if the glass doesn't break and we lose all our air, I can nose us up. If I don't put us all the way out, I can use the maneuvering wheels to get us back down under. But I'm not really confident that we won't decompress."

"If you can get us a peek, I might be able to tell you where the tunnel is."

United Moon Colonies

“How’s that?”

“When we were going below to board the main drill, I noticed the flag from the first moon landing outside at the Tranquility Monument. It’s my country’s flag, you know, so it caught my attention. I can figure about how far we were at that point if I can see the flag.”

Chong wasn’t sure. He had noticed some pretty shaky seals after the cave-in.

“All right, but if we break a seal, we won’t have any time. You’ll just have to point, and hope you’re right. It’s a big risk.”

“If you don’t think we should, I understand.”

“I just wish we had suits. Let’s do it.”

Chong started the minidrill forward and tilted up. The drill bit poked out into a brilliant black sky. Everything in the cabin turned silver in the reflected light. Chong got them just far enough up to see over the ground. The seals held.

“I don’t see it,” Malinao groaned.

“I do, it’s off to my left.”

“Let me look.”

They struggled around each other, which at another time and situation would have proved very distracting.

“I see it. The tunnel should be that way.”

Suddenly they both heard a hiss.

“Seal’s loosening. Try to plug it with something; I’ll back us down.”

The hiss grew more insistent as Chong backed the drill down into the tunnel.

“Plug it up, Sam!” Chong yelled.

“I’m trying, I can’t get hold of it.”

“Don’t touch it, your skin will freeze. Use anything you can flatten over it or plug under it.”

The hissing became a screaming as the minidrill lurched back down and turned in the direction Malinao thought the tunnel was. The screaming kept getting worse.

“Dammit, use this.” Chong ripped off a piece of his shirt and thrust it at Malinao, who was still fumbling with various loose items, trying to plug the seal. It had widened into a lip that screeched a death call at them.

Malinao grabbed the bit of canvas shirt and stuffed it in the screaming hole's mouth. It muffled into a mumble.

"Make sure it stays there," Chong said. "We don't want it to pop out and break the glass."

"Did you call me Sam?"

"What?"

"Just now, did you call me Sam?"

"I . . . maybe . . . I don't know. I was in a panic."

Malinao smiled. "Nobody calls me Sam."

The seal popped out twice more before they reached the tunnel, but Chong didn't call her "Sam" again, and the glass didn't break. Finally they broke through into the main train tunnel, where there was an airlock that kept the colony from losing air into the tunnel. Chong raised the airlock operator on the radio; he wanted them to go through a long authorization procedure before he'd let them in.

"If you want to be responsible for murder, make us go through the checks now," Chong gasped. "We're out of air. We'll answer all your questions once we can breathe again."

A burly, gray-haired, dark-skinned man climbed down from the airlock controls, shouting.

"Now, what kind of ridiculous prank are you kids pulling, riding out on the open Moon in a goddamned minidrill of all things? You two should be--uh--Mr. President?"

"Yes, I'm President Chong. This is United States Speaker Samantha Malinao."

The man stopped cold. "Well, of all the mercy in God's worlds. They said on the news you were on your way to New Canaveral for a big speech. What happened to you? You two look awful."

"Well, thank you," Malinao quipped.

"No offense intended, ma'am. I'm . . . I'm at a loss."

"What do you mean, I'm supposed to be in New Canaveral?" Chong asked.

"That's what the netcasts all are saying, sir. You're supposed to give some groundbreaking speech on cloning rights."

Chong and Malinao exchanged glances.

"We've been trapped in a drill hole between here and Cana," Chong risked revealing. "Wasn't anybody going to check?"

"I don't know, sir. I had no orders for the airlock. I figured whatever you were up to, you made it to Cana and left from there."

United Moon Colonies

“Never mind. We need to get to our headquarters. Please alert the Tranquility folks that there was a cave-in and all hands but us were lost. They’ll want to salvage the drill and tend to the dead.”

“Wasn’t the vice president on that drill?”

“Yes, he was.” Chong replied softly.

“Oh, my,” the man said. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry. Well, you need medical attention, Mr. President.”

“Not now!” Chong was already leading Malinao up some side stairs. Their lungs filled greedily with dome-generated oxygen. They ran through the Tranquility museum out onto the road and down to the Colonial building where their headquarters had been. There was nobody there but automatic sentries. Chong used his identification to try to get into the second-floor assembly room where the staff was supposed to be.

“This area is closed by presidential order,” replied the pleasant female voice of the sentry.

“Override that, I’m the president,” Chong barked.

“Dual confirmation security protocol requested.”

A tray slid out where Chong was expected to touch a blood tester with his finger to confirm his identity. He did so.

“Presidential identity confirmed. Override authorized.”

The doors slid open to a macabre scene of slaughter. Ten UMC guards and a dozen of the vice president’s staff lay dead in pools of blood and gore. The stench was overpowering. Chong almost puked.

Malinao asked him to close the door. She had tears in her eyes, from the smell or the carnage or both.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“I think I may have a clue,” Chong said. He asked for a picture from the room’s internal camera. Even without the smell, the picture was shocking.

“Focus in on the upper corner,” Chong told the monitor.

“Lower right. A little lower. There.”

Written in blood on the wall near the corner were the words “And the sinners shall be smote.”

“That’s a Fundy slogan,” Malinao gasped.

“And not a scientific clone faction one, either. A devoted follower of Touareg did that.”

“You’re correct,” came a voice from behind them.

Friedrich, one of the friendly night guards who had held Chong in the shed in Cana, stood behind them.

“And now I must finish my job,” he said, raising a knife.

Lawrence found the leader of the Colonial Assembly in Chong's office in New Canaveral.

"Thank god you're here," Assembler Catherine Hamala said. "We've had no word from Vice President Hashimoto. They were about to swear me in today."

Lawrence decided to skip the normal dig he'd make at Hamala's pretended lack of ambition. "What do you mean, no word?"

"Perhaps you'd better tell me what's going on, Lawrence," Hamala said, sternly.

"President Chong is on his way up. Maybe we should sit down outside his office to talk," countered Lawrence.

Hamala inclined her head and came out from behind Chong's desk. "Very well."

Lawrence had patience, but he didn't need it. She began to spill all she knew as soon as they sat down in the outer reception room.

"When the president's abduction was reported, Hashimoto was sworn in as acting chief executive of the UMC. He wasn't going to be given the title of president until we knew what had happened for sure. He received some intelligence but wouldn't share it with me. The last I heard from him, he was in Tranquility. He told me he had sensitive information on the president's whereabouts but that I needed to assume a ready position in case something happened. Which I did." She looked a little put out, as if Lawrence had been accusing her of something for being in the president's office. "I've heard nothing since. Hashimoto was very secretive. He gave out no information for fear he would put the rescue at risk. He ordered everyone to stay away from Tranquility for now. That's all I know. We were about to countermand his order and issue a search group to go there. If they couldn't find him, I was going to be sworn in as acting chief. That's

when I heard from you that Chong was on his way. The opposition is having a field day, asking all kinds of questions about who's running the country and why the president and vice president have been so secretive. What's happened to the vice president?"

"We don't know," Lawrence admitted. "Hashimoto rescued President Chong and Speaker Malinao, and I was rescued separately by an underground group in Armstrong. The president met with me there before proceeding here. Apparently the vice president and the speaker had other business to attend to in Tranquility, but we haven't heard from them either."

"Well, it's the president's call now, but I think he should allow the group to go to Tranquility and investigate."

"I agree. I'll inform President Chong of your advice."

"And what's all this about a cloning policy speech? Is this the right time for that? It seems incredibly out of place."

"Does it?" asked Chong, as he came into the reception area.

"Mr. President." Hamala and Lawrence stood up.

"I know there are a lot of questions. I'll have a briefing for the cabinet and key Assemblers right away. But the policy speech is more important now than ever. You'll see why when I brief you. For now, suffice it to say that the Fundys aren't gone, and they're involved in cloning."

"And you want to make it legal?!" Hamala cried.

"We want to prevent them from having any advantage in it being illegal," Chong explained. "As I said, you'll see why in the briefing."

Hamala just shook her head. "I hope you know what you're doing, Chong. The opposition is calling for your head. There hasn't been a president recalled by the Assembly in seventy years, and I'd rather not fight a recall vote under my leadership."

"You won't. The briefing will take the wind out of their sails."

Hamala didn't look convinced, but she took her leave of the president anyway.

"Lawrence, set up the briefing in time to give me an hour or so to sit down with Ford Junior and prepare the speech."

"Yes, sir--uh--Ford Junior? You mean Mr. Ford, don't you, sir?"

"No, I want Ford Junior," Chong sighed. "Just do it, Lawrence. I have my reasons."

United Moon Colonies

Lawrence was taken aback. That was not Chong's usual style. If he didn't want to explain himself, he usually just kept quiet. He never admonished anyone like that. It was one of the reasons Lawrence loved working for him.

"Very good, sir, I'll see to it."

"Thank you. Close the door on your way out."

"Sir?"

"The door."

Lawrence shut the door. That also was way out of character. Chong made a point of never closing his door. If he really needed privacy, he asked Lawrence just to keep people out of earshot. He wanted the symbolic transparency to be dead clear. It was dogmatic. Why the sudden change? Unfortunately, Lawrence didn't have time to speculate. The president had been through a lot. No doubt it had shaken them all up and knocked themselves out of their usual routines. He had work to do. He needed to get the Assembly leaders and the cabinet together for a top-level meeting on short notice. He'd better get to it.

As he left the office, he thought he saw someone in the hallway duck out of sight.

"Hello?"

He definitely heard whispers.

"Who's there?" Lawrence strode down the hall, ready to call security. He found Ford Junior hiding behind a plant.

"Junior? What are you doing here?"

"Please don't be mad, I was just so curious. I know I'm not supposed to be here. I just wanted to see."

"No, it's all right. The president will want to see you in a few hours. Come with me and I'll give you a badge so you don't get tossed out."

"Can I meet you there? I have to go to the bathroom."

"There's a bathroom on the way. I need to stay with you until you're properly credentialed."

Ford Junior looked worried. "Uh--OK. Let's hurry, though."

Lawrence started to lead him back down the hallway.

"Oh, wait, I dropped something behind the plant. I'm sorry, I'll be right back."

Lawrence waited impatiently while Ford fished around for something on the floor.

As Ford Junior leaned down behind the plant, Narang hissed at him from the dark at the base of the pot. “Go. He’ll get suspicious. We’ll finish this later.”

Ford Junior nodded and picked up a small plastic trading card of an Ahsaas Colony movie star he had purposely left behind the plant.

“Found it!” he yelled to Lawrence.

“Come on, then,” Lawrence shouted.

Ford Junior gave one last look at the hidden Narang and ran back up the hallway.

“That was quick,” said Chong, looking down at the body of Friedrich on the floor. Malinao had delivered a kick to the head just as Friedrich had finished his last sentence. He had fallen to the ground in a heap.

Malinao was holding her side. “I think I pulled a muscle. I haven’t really been stretching lately.”

Chong was on his knees examining Friedrich.

“Who is he?” Malinao asked.

“His name was Friedrich. I saw him briefly when they had me in the shed.”

“Was?”

“He’s dead,” Chong said.

“Oh.” Malinao had never killed anyone. She blanched.

“Good kick.”

“I . . . guess so.”

“Look, you did what was necessary. You saw what he did in that room.”

“You’re right, it’s just that--”

“Never mind that right now. Let’s get to the communication center.”

Chong led them back downstairs and into a large locked room full of electronic equipment.

“I need to get a coded message to New Cav right away.” He paused. “Um . . . would it be weird if I asked you to wait outside?”

Malinao laughed, breaking some of the tension she’d felt ever since she drop-kicked Friedrich.

“Of course not, Mr. President. I guess I sort of forgot our roles there for awhile.” She moved closer. “Don’t be long.” She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Chong could only manage a whisper. “Yes, Madame Speaker.”

He turned back to the equipment, hearing the whoosh of the sliding door closing and locking behind him. He activated the coded emergency line to New Canaveral and entered his personal code. He was hoping they hadn’t revolved off the previous formula because of his capture. The line activated and he heard Lawrence pick up.

“Tranquility, this is New Canaveral. It’s about time we heard from you. The president’s been worried.”

Chong found this rather odd. “Yes, I have been worried, Lawrence,” Chong replied.

“Who is this?” Lawrence snapped.

“It’s me, Lawrence. We just got out of a mining tunnel between here and Cana. Hashimoto didn’t make it, but the speaker’s OK.”

“I repeat, identify yourself.”

Lawrence sounded scared and confused. “Lawrence, this is your boss, the president of the United Moon Colonies. Richard Chong. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know who you are, but the president is with me here, so it’s not going to work. I’m cutting the channel.”

“Wait!” Chong yelled. “Lawrence, you furball, what do I have to do to prove it’s me? Remind you of why you don’t want to be president? All those eyes you see in your dreams? Or should I finally break my word and tell Laurie at the Station Stop in New Cav you have a crush on her?” Chong had thrown out as many of the secrets only he could know as he could come up with.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’m Rich Chong, that’s how. Who’s pretending to be me?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but the real President Chong is here in New Canaveral, and he also knows all those things you just said. So however you got your information, I commend you, but it’s not going to work. Investigators will be there shortly; stay where you are. Channel cutting now.”

Chong received nothing but static as the channel protocols refreshed. That also meant all his security codes would expire in moments. He needed to get out of the building before he got locked in. He ran out of the communications room and grabbed Malinao by the elbow.

“We have to run!”

She didn’t ask why, trusting him, and sprinting along beside him. They made it outside in time to see a small group of security coming up the street.

“They haven’t spotted us yet. Around here.”

Chong dragged Malinao into a side alley next to the building.

“Care to tell me what’s going on?” Malinao asked in a whisper.

“Shhh.” Chong listened to the footsteps. Once the guards went inside, he risked looking. One stood in front of the building. If Chong and Malinao came out of the alley and turned left immediately, they could get away unseen.

“I’ll tell you in a minute, just follow me fast,” Chong hissed.

They raced out and around the corner. Chong didn’t hear anyone shout after them, so he guessed they hadn’t been seen.

“We have to get to the train station and get to New Canaveral as fast as possible.”

“What happened?” Malinao asked.

“Someone stole my identity, I guess.” Chong wasn’t so sure himself. “I tried to contact Lawrence, and he said I’m already there in New Canaveral, and he didn’t believe it was me. He claimed the imposter knew things that only he and I know. That’s one hell of a clone, if that’s what it is.”

“So you’re not you anymore.”

“Not in the eyes of the government. As soon as Lawrence cut the channel he would have changed all the codes and put out an alert for an impostor.”

“Why aren’t we going to the Capitol in Serenity?”

“During the war we opened a presidential office in New Canaveral because it was closer to the military. We really haven’t moved out of it yet. Shhh.”

Chong pulled up short and ducked down behind a corner. They heard the man from the airlock coming towards them.

“I swear it was him. He was a dead ringer. And he had someone with him he claimed was the speaker of the USA or something,” the airlock manager said.

“Possibly another clone. We’ll check into it. They murdered the vice president and possibly more. We’re getting reports of a slaughter at headquarters here,” said another voice.

“I can’t believe I let him in.”

“Not your fault. You couldn’t have known. Don’t worry. We’ll catch him.”

They passed by, and Chong and Malinao raced off in the other direction. They made it to the train station and Chong blessed the inefficiency of the private train lines.

“Better hurry, folks,” said the woman at the gate. “I’m hearing they might shut the trains down for some damn reason. I’m going to make sure the next line gets out, but that may be it.”

Chong thanked her and kept running, hoping she didn’t look too closely at him. They jumped on a waiting Lunar Link train. “Thank god it’s an L,” said Chong. “It only has one stop in Chang-Ngo. An M would have at least three stops.”

“Your train system needs work,” Malinao needled Chong as they boarded.

“Thankfully. Let’s hope they don’t stop the train in Chang-Ngo for inspection. My guess is they won’t.”

The train lurched forward, taking Chong towards a meeting with himself.

Lawrence waited in the president's office. He had immediately ordered Tranquility armed forces to search for a Chong impostor, but for some reason he had stopped before changing the access codes or putting out a general alert. Something nagged at the back of his mind. When Chong had showed up in Armstrong, he'd had nagging suspicions, a feeling that something wasn't quite right. Now, against all reason, Lawrence had the opposite feeling about this call. The cadence and tone of the man calling from Tranquility had sounded real. Lawrence briefly wondered whether it might be some sort of temporal disturbance, but that was the stuff of fantasy and highly unlikely.

Before his doubts could take him further, Chong entered the office.

"What's this I hear about an impostor in Tranquility?" he asked.

Again Lawrence got the nagging feeling that what Chong had said just didn't sound like Chong. "Probably nothing, sir. I believe it to be a prank. I've asked the museum security staff to look into it. If they report back anything worth knowing, we'll be sure to follow up."

"Very good. I've asked Ford Junior to meet me down here in a moment. Do you mind if we have some time alone? I want to get his advice on a few things from the clone's point of view."

"Of course, sir."

Lawrence headed down to the cafeteria. He ran into Junior on his way out.

"Go right on in, Junior. He's waiting for you."

Ford Junior nodded and headed in. As soon as Lawrence was out of earshot, Ford 18 opened the door and let in Narang. They locked the door, and Ford 18 led the way into the president's office.

“Hello, Junior.” Chong smiled and stood up, then stopped seeing Narang. “What are you doing here?” Chong’s tone was deadly, but he found himself immobilized.

Narang smiled. “Good to see you again, Mr. President. Memory Release Code Alpha Wipe Center Gold Devil Fawn Beta Indeterminate Reprogram and Restart.”

Chong’s eyes glazed, and he dropped a pen he’d been holding.

“You’re right, Ford 18. We will have to see to that muscle response system, won’t we? I’ll remind Patel about it. Chong?”

Chong’s eyes fluttered, then he spoke in a dull, not quite monotone voice. “Basic system accessed. Reprogram stream spooling. Ready for further instruction.”

“Excellent. We’ve heard a little trouble may be coming our way. I want to know I can count on you. Sometimes if a clone sees himself cloned or sees the original, it can break programming. We don’t want that to happen. If you saw a duplicate of yourself, what would you do?”

“Error.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. This clone mind control is tricky business. But we’re going to give you a patch, Chong.”

Narang pulled a small flat metal box from his pocket and held it front of Chong’s glazed eyes.

“Please look deep into the light, Chong.”

The glazed eyes focused on the box. Narang pressed a button on the side and Chong’s eyes began to dart back and forth. In a moment there was a low chime from the box and Narang removed it and put it away.

“Thank you, Chong. Return to instruction state.” Chong’s eyes glazed over again. “Now, Chong, let’s see what happens here. If you saw a duplicate of yourself, what would you do?”

“Assess danger and eliminate duplicate target unless counter-instructed by handlers,” Chong droned.

“Excellent. Did you see that, Ford 18? The patch took in a jiffy. Ocular reprogramming works. It bloody well works. Patel will be overjoyed.”

“Was I ever like that?” Ford Junior asked, fascinated.

Narang raised an eyebrow and turned. “Like what?”

“All slack and programmed like that.”

United Moon Colonies

Narang looked sympathetically at the boy. It had really been only a few days since his programming had been broken. He was starting to doubt. Narang needed to stop this kind of thinking at once.

“Never. You were programmed, yes, but only a false program that could easily be broken so that they could be taken in. I’m sorry we had to fool you in that way at all, my boy.” He patted Ford Junior in a fatherly way.

Junior smiled. “It’s OK. I understand it’s for the greater good.”

“That’s the spirit. Now. One last thing before I go. Chong, self-diagnose and identify fundamental mission layer.”

Chong closed his eyes for a few seconds then opened them.

“Diagnosis complete. Normal. FML is strategic integration of Fundamentalist Union officials into UMC government, starting with research institute for cloning.”

“Excellent,” Narang stood to go. “Ford 18? You can carry on from here? Reactivate him, I assume?”

“Of course sir.”

“Excellent, excellent. Be sure to back step him a frame or two so he doesn’t remember me walking into the room. It will give him a momentary jolt, but it’ll pass.”

“Will do, sir,” Ford Junior acknowledged, and accompanied Narang until he was safely out of sight in the hallway. He returned to the office and approached Chong.

“Affirmative, memory wipe to semantic request three frames prior to access code. Control returning to biological imprint in five seconds.”

Chong blinked a few times, then appeared startled. “What? What just happened?”

Ford Junior bent to pick up Chong’s pen. “You dropped your pen, sir. Here.”

“Is that all? Thank you. I could have sworn--but anyway. Where were we?”

“You had called me in to consult about the cloning speech.”

“Yes, of course. Have a seat. I want your unique perspective on this. I’m not a clone, after all.”

“Of course not, sir.” Ford Junior grinned.

34

The train pulled into New Canaveral on time, without a hitch. Chong and Malinao had braced for a search of the train in Chang-Ngo, but it hadn't happened.

"So what are we going to do now?" Malinao asked.

"The announcement is happening in one hour at the official plaza. We'll get there and look for an opening to talk to Lawrence. If I show Lawrence I'm with you, I think I can convince him."

"You're not going to walk around looking like that, are you?"

"Like what?"

"Like the president of the freakin' Moon, Chong. You won't get three strides dressed like that."

"Good point."

They went to an Army surplus store and got a coat and hat to keep Chong under cover. The clerk speculated that Chong looked familiar, proving Malinao's point. They left in a hurry and walked over to the public plaza.

"Not much of a crowd," Malinao noticed.

"The president talking on cloning isn't likely to draw folks in person," Chong replied. "But they'll all see it on the news."

They easily positioned themselves close to the stage and kept a lookout for the president's staff, especially Lawrence. After half an hour, the staff arrived. Ford and Ford Junior accompanied Lawrence.

"Who's that?" Malinao pointed at Junior.

"I have no idea. He looks like Ford, though. Did they find Ford's son maybe?" Chong wondered.

Malinao decided to take the initiative.

"We're going about this all wrong, Chong. I'll approach Lawrence alone. He'll be thrilled. I'll get him to meet us over at that café across the street. Go wait for us there."

United Moon Colonies

“Brilliant.”

Malinao walked towards the staff members and started introducing herself. They looked at her a little strangely. She hadn't had a chance to clean up, but they still took her over to Lawrence.

“Madame Speaker!” Lawrence looked more than thrilled to see her.

“Lawrence,” she said tenderly. “It's so good to see you.”

“I'm so happy to see you alive. We thought you were--well, we feared the worst. What about the vice president?”

“Look, Lawrence, can you break away for a few minutes? There's something I want to talk to you about.”

“Of course,” Lawrence said. “There's something I need to talk to you about, too. I just need to take care of one quick thing.”

“Great. Meet me over in the café across the street.”

Malinao returned to the café and sat down at a table with Chong. Lawrence appeared a few minutes later and tentatively approached.

“Who's this?”

“A friend. Sit down, Lawrence.”

Lawrence looked suspicious but sat down anyway.

“Hi, Lawrence,” Chong blurted out. Malinao shook her head.

“The clone!” Lawrence almost shrieked, standing back up again.

“Sit down, Lawrence. This is not a clone. It's me, Malinao.”

“What if you're a clone?”

“What if you are? Sit down!”

Lawrence had no real suspicions that Malinao was a clone, so he decided to sit after all. He kept his eyes on the stranger with Chong's voice.

“Now, Chong, shut up and let me talk,” Malinao chided.

“Lawrence, when we got separated on the train we went on to Tranquility and met up with the vice president. We attempted a rescue mission by drilling under Cana, but we got there too late. On the way back, there was a cave-in that killed the vice president and several other men. We survived and got back to Tranquility, only to find that an impostor has taken Chong's place as president. I've been with Chong the entire time. You haven't. This is the real president. You have to trust me.”

Lawrence looked at Chong, and Chong removed his sunglasses so Lawrence could get a better look.

“It is you, isn’t it, Mr. President?”

“Damn right.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“So how many people are on the lookout for a duplicate Chong now?” Malinao asked.

“None,” Lawrence said. “I couldn’t bring myself to put out the alert. Something in me knew this other Chong wasn’t right. I could even tell you were the real president over the comm line from Tranquility.”

“Funny way of showing it,” Chong said.

“That’s just the thing, though. It goes against all logic. I was suspicious of the clone Chong from the moment he arrived in Armstrong, but I talked to him for hours. He remembers everything we--you and I--ever did together. How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. I imagine they must have somehow scanned my brain in Cana and transferred memories to him. I don’t know how that’s possible, but it’s the only explanation.”

Malinao leaned in. “What’s his version of the story?”

Lawrence told them how Chong had showed up in Armstrong and how he had explained his arrival and separation from Malinao.

“And the young Ford you’re with?” Malinao asked.

“It’s a clone that Sira’s group liberated. He’s a young version of John.”

“I doubt that.” Chong shook his head. “My bet is he’s another plant. The Fundy faction is very good at all this. I’m starting to wonder if the Narang leading them is even the real one.”

“So how do we do this?” Malinao asked.

Lawrence thought it over for a moment. “I’ll lead you two into special VIP seats behind the stage. After the speech, we’ll--”

“Before the speech,” Chong said. “I can’t let an impostor deliver an important policy presentation.”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing binding, sir,” Lawrence said. “I already have a spin draft prepped in case we need to backtrack and change our minds.”

“You’re the best, Lawrence.” Chong smiled.

“So you sit in the VIP seats. After the speech, Chong is scheduled to have a reception and some one-on-one meetings with

United Moon Colonies

Cabinet members and Assemblers. I'll put Speaker Malinao top of the schedule and get you in alone with just him and us."

"Good work, Lawrence." Malinao patted him on the back.

"Don't thank me yet. I've got some juggling to do. Give me fifteen minutes, then come on over and I'll see you to your seats."

Lawrence left, and Chong and Malinao soaked up the bright lights of the New Canaveral Plaza.

"The black sky above," Chong pointed out. "That's the sky I grew up with. You wanted to see it. There it is."

Malinao looked up and felt the incongruity visitors from Earth always commented on. Bright sunlight filled the plaza, but it came from sunlight concentrators that took the natural light of the sun, collected it, mixed it with extra machine-generated light, and delivered a balanced white that was attuned to the perfect mix needed for human and plant life. But past those lights was the black, starlit dome of space beyond.

"A couple of the domes, like Avalon and Septendecim, give a false blue, but it doesn't look like Earth. I don't like it. I grew up here in New Canaveral. This is where I feel at home."

Malinao held his hand and looked up into the black.

They eventually got to the plaza where more of a crowd had gathered. Chong got a first glimpse at his clone double and felt a lurch of something close to vertigo. Malinao noticed it too.

"He's not as cute as you," she said. "They got the jaw all wrong."

Lawrence greeted Malinao and paid almost no notice to Chong. They were seated in the VIP section at the rear of the stage. Malinao made small talk with some surprised-looking Assemblers and cabinet members and refused to introduce the real Chong no matter how hard they hinted. Eventually all the commotion settled down, and the clone Chong took the stage and began to speak.

Chong watched him, watched his mannerisms, and saw what Lawrence saw. It wasn't him. How could this idiot fool people? It looked like him and maybe had false versions of his memories, but it wasn't him. Chong had led the UMC through the war. He had toiled in the mines right below this cement. He had watched his father die. This Chong now pretending to make policy for the UMC had done none of those things, even if he thought he remembered them. His personality had not been shaped in the same way.

It disgusted Chong.

He knew Lawrence had a backup policy plan that would work. He knew the safest way to accomplish this was in a closed room after the speech. But he couldn't let it go on, he couldn't allow someone to speak for him. No matter how irrational it was, he couldn't help himself. He stood up, threw off his hat, glasses, and coat, and yelled.

“That is not the president of the United Moon Colonies. I am!”

The crowd gasped and then cheered. They thought this was a ploy! A demonstration of cloning at its most dramatic. Chong boggled to think that if they'd planned something so outrageous, it would have worked.

The clone Chong swiveled and saw Chong. Rage filled his eyes. He forgot his speech and leaped over towards the real Chong.

“You will die,” the clone said.

Chong decked him. The crowd's enthusiasm waned. This was in poor taste. What was the president trying to demonstrate? They didn't get it.

The clone started to crawl back to his feet and Chong kicked him. Ford Junior started to race towards Chong, but Chong saw him and socked him as well. This was really too much for the crowd. Hadn't that young boy been the whole point of the speech? That's what all the press releases said. Why was he hitting a young boy?

John Ford was outraged and started to join in himself, but Lawrence held him. “Don't interfere.” Ford raged at him but held back.

By now, Chong had kicked the clone Chong again and was about to go in for a knockout. The clone Chong scooted away to buy extra seconds. He reached inside his suit coat and pulled out something metal. Blood spilled out of his lips, and he could barely speak. A tooth fell out as he rasped at Chong, “I can be made again. You're going to die.” With that, he leaped up, and as Chong prepared to deflect him, he realized what the metal thing in his hand was.

Malinao did, too. “Chong, it's a detonator! A bomb!”

It was too late: the handheld flesh-tearing personal detonator went off as soon as the clone Chong touched the real one. The difference between the two became hard to distinguish as they were torn apart by the explosion.

United Moon Colonies

Malinao and Lawrence were at his side in a heartbeat, Lawrence ordering staff to get emergency medical assistance immediately.

“Which one’s him?” Malinao cried, tears streaming down her face. There was a pile of body parts in a massive pool of blood. Amazingly, one of the heads still had a neck with a pulse. Malinao sat bawling over it, when Narang appeared behind her. Malinao couldn’t see him, but Lawrence could. He was dressed so as not to call attention to himself, but he had a hypodermic needle in his hand. He was bending down as if he were a doctor. Nobody was paying attention to him, and Malinao was crying too hard to notice.

Lawrence acted without thinking. His body took over before he could decide if it was a good idea or not. He reached into the holster of a nearby security guard, grabbed a gun, released the safety, and fired without saying a word. Narang fell over dead, blood gushing from a head wound. The guard grabbed at the gun, not understanding what had just happened. Lawrence let it go easily. Through the crowd that moved in front of him, he thought he saw Malinao kick Narang’s dead body. The emergency vehicles flew in just then and blocked out the rest of the view. The guards threw him to the ground then anyway. He would be able to explain. Malinao would vouch for him. He knew he had done the right thing, but he felt sick to his stomach. He had never killed a man before. Even if Narang wasn’t a man, it was still killing. Lawrence vomited. The security guards backed off. Then Lawrence passed out.

35

“You can see him now, Speaker,” the doctor said. “He’s just coming around.”

Lawrence had come with her. He looked rather tough with the bandaged head from where the security guards hit him. It had been more difficult than she had expected to get them to understand that Lawrence had shot the leader of the Fundys, not the minister of Britain. Though, in truth, he had shot both.

Chong lay on a bed in the military hospital’s VIP ward. The doctor stopped them just short of the threshold.

“Speaker, before you go in, I have something to say.”

“Say it, Doctor.”

“We don’t really know who he is. I mean to say, there was enough left of the two men that we were able to piece one back together. The body is technically two people made into one. But because of all the confusion, we don’t know which brain lived and which died. Security has been advised. If you make any determination, either of you,” he looked at Lawrence, “that this is the clone, you’re to alert us at once. Of course if it’s the real Chong, we’d like to know that, too.”

“That may not be easy, Doctor,” Lawrence said. “The clone was able to fool me after hours and hours of conversation.”

“I’ll be able to tell,” Malinao said. “Thank you, Doctor.”

They walked in the room. Chong lay with his eyes open staring straight up. His face was empty and pale. They were both next to him before he finally acknowledged them.

“Speaker Malinao, Lawrence, how very nice of you come.” He coughed a bit. They could tell he was still extremely weak. He barely showed an expression. Lawrence wasn’t even sure he was happy to see them. “Mr. President,” Lawrence finally whispered.

United Moon Colonies

“President Chong, is it?” Malinao smirked.

“You can still call me Chong.” The barest hint of a smile crossed his face.

“Well, isn’t that pleasant. Do you remember anything of what happened?”

“I blew up.”

“You could say two of you blew up.”

Chong rolled his head back and raised his eyebrows. “So that’s it? You looked like you were attending my funeral, not my get well party. Mixed up the heads, did they? Typical Moon medicine.”

Lawrence laughed. He had written that line for Chong during the campaign to help impugn his opponent’s record on health care.

“You were supposed to improve health care, Mr. President.”

“No, you,” and he coughed again as he tried to lift himself up a bit off the bed, “*you* were supposed to get it fixed. I was supposed to take credit.” A little blood was coming back into his face, and he propped himself up higher on his pillow. “You were also supposed to be able to tell the difference between your boss and some cock-eyed clone.” He coughed again, deeply, making Malinao wince. “I’m writing you up for that.”

Lawrence chuckled.

Malinao leaned closer again. “They were able to mend you, but parts of you are from the clone and parts are from the real you. You’ll always be a mix. But we need to check your memories. Do you remember being kidnapped in Cana?” Chong nodded. “The memories you had up until that point were imprinted on the clone. What do you remember after Cana?”

Chong winced. “Honestly, even Cana’s a little blurry. I half-remember making a jump for the clone. I sort of remember talking to Lawrence at a café.” He shook his head. “It’s all there, I just can’t reach it.”

“Do you remember the nosedriver?”

“The drill?” he asked. “Yeah, I remember that.”

Malinao was worried. So far everything he’d mentioned could be deduced from what she had said. She had to maneuver him into revealing something only the real Chong could remember. Something after the tunnel collapsed, but before the speech in New Canaveral. Something nobody else knew of.

“Do you remember the collapse?”

His eyes brightened, and then he shuddered. “Hashimoto.”

“Yes, Hashimoto died in the collapse. Do you remember anything else?”

“We fixed the minidrill. I remember that.”

That was pretty good, but still not conclusive.

“Do you remember what we ate?”

“Chicken. They always stock those things with chicken.”

Good, but still not quite good enough. By his own admission, they always stocked chicken. It could have been a guess.

“Do you remember what we talked about?”

“Sure, you promised. But now I’m a Frankenstein. Are you still going to keep your promise? Do you still feel the same way?”

Lawrence looked away, embarrassed. Malinao began to cry.

“Yes, Chong. Yes, I do. You remember that?”

“Of course I do. You said if I wanted to do something about it after we got out of the tunnel, you highly encouraged it. Well, get over here, I want to do something about it.”

Chong pulled her down towards her. He wasn’t very strong yet, but she let herself be pulled into a sweet, gentle kiss. Despite the medical setting, it was the sweetest kiss she had ever known. Tears of joy trickled down between her lips. She cried some more and kissed him again.

When she stood up straight again, Chong was holding her hand. She turned to look for Lawrence, but he was gone.

Lawrence sat on the floor against a wall in the hallway, weeping. He had had no idea how he felt about Malinao until he saw her reach down to kiss Chong. He felt horrible about how he felt. He had no right to want her. Chong was one of his best friends, one of the few people he had known all his life. But the pang of jealousy he felt was unavoidable.

He walked down the hallway and out the doors. He eventually found himself sitting on a park bench across the street from the hospital. His heart felt empty. He was a killer and a traitor to his friend. It was too much for him. He had thrived as a lieutenant, but the recent events had forced him to take a leadership role, and he had found he had a taste for that. Now he had killed a man, and unfortunately he found he had a taste for that too. The thought made him shudder. Who was he becoming?

It was dark now. The dome lights had been dimmed, and silvery sunlight was drifting in from above in the perpetual twilight Lawrence had grown up with. He thought about Sira. Why had he not fallen for her? He had lived closely with her in that small apartment for several days. She had saved his life. She was very attractive, but somehow her attachment to Ford Junior had sealed her off from him, made her into a motherly figure he could not fall for. He wondered if things would be different if he found her now. Maybe his position in the government would prevent her from wanting to see him, or even being able to.

A man approached out of the twilight and sat down next to Lawrence. Lawrence was annoyed; he wanted to be alone now. The man wore an overcoat and a hat. Lawrence had gotten used to that kind of outfit when he was disguised as Chong, and he suddenly grew suspicious.

“Can I help you?” he asked the shrouded man.

“You are Lawrence?”

That jolted him even more.

“Who’s asking?” He sounded like a cheap mystery character, but he meant it.

“You’ve met me. If I tell you, will you promise to keep our meeting a secret?”

Lawrence’s first impulse was to say “no” and call hospital security. He could hold the man long enough for them to get there. Security was high with the president in there. But instead, his despair took control of his voice and answered for him.

“All right.”

“My name is Patel. I am a cloning scientist.”

Lawrence leaped up.

Patel grabbed a corner of his shirt and looked up at him, pleading. “You promised!”

“That was before I knew who you were.”

“I am not a monster. I was paid to do work. Your government could pay me to do work too.”

“I don’t know if you realize this, but one of your clones was killed trying to get that plan in place. I don’t think it will work any better now.”

“But I don’t need to do anything malicious. I will do whatever you order me to do. If you hire me, you can keep me out of the hands of more evil people.”

Lawrence looked at him with pity, but a feeling grew within him. Now he knew why he was so conflicted. His feelings for Malinao were genuine, but meaningless. They were merely the human urge created by his proximity to her. His loyalty to Chong was an example of something higher. It was what separated them from the Fundys, what drove humanity to a better place. Manipulating Patel might serve a need, but it would be letting the ends justify the means. That always led to degradation in the end. Ultimately, the ends never justified the means. They couldn’t. Because the means would always end up affecting those ends.

“You don’t understand, Patel. You’re not a device. You’re not a tool. You’re a person. You have a choice, a moral choice over what you do. You can stop yourself from working for evil men all on your own. You’re asking me to be less than what I can be. Let me do the

United Moon Colonies

opposite. I'm asking you to be more. You want to work as a scientist? Choose a discipline. Work in public. Deal with the pressures of public life and help change science for everyone, not just yourself. Go aboveground and share your great talents with the world. If you're truly willing to do that, come see me, and I will make introductions for you at the UMC Science Institute. That's the best I can do."

Patel stood to go. He took a few steps away and then turned.

"Genius is never understood or appreciated." He spat, and then he walked off into the twilight.

The door opened in Jamaica Bay to great applause.

President Richard Chong exited the elevator car alone.

“President Chong, where is the rest of your party?” asked President Torres, who greeted him personally. Speaker of the House Samantha Malinao stood beside Torres, beaming at Chong.

“Coming along in the next car. They had business to attend to, and I did not wish to keep you waiting,” said Chong.

“Show-off,” said Malinao. In front of the reporters and the attending dignitaries, she rushed up and kissed him. The reports of their romance were now not only known but a sensation in the news. They were called “the couple of the universe” and “a bridge between two worlds” and all matter of ridiculous metaphors. The fact was, both worlds needed this. After the long war and the scare of a Fundy resurgence, the people of both worlds needed a good storied romance, and Chong and Malinao had provided it.

A car whisked them up to Manhattan, where Chong was scheduled to deliver a speech to the United Nations, his first in quite awhile. It had taken months for him to recover. He had had to battle with the idea that some of the parts of his body were not his. He was a patchwork man with one DNA profile, but two body sources. He sometimes thought he could tell which parts were the clone’s and which were his, though the doctors said there was no way of knowing. It was pure dumb luck that his head had survived and been saved. The doctors could only tell him that his neck and most of his upper torso went with that head. Everything else had been a jumble.

During his recovery, Malinao had stayed with him as long as she could, but eventually she’d had to return to the US. Even after she had left, she had flown to the Moon as often as possible. When the doctors approved Chong for space flight, she had negotiated a

dedicated landing bay at ISS 5 for the UMC so she could visit him. Finally he had been approved for Earth gravity. She had wanted him to come to Earth for a vacation, but he couldn't. He had promised something to the victims of the war, and he intended to deliver personally. He would speak to the UN about his promises to rebuild and withdraw as soon as possible, but he would also tell them what he had learned about the clones. He wanted to tell them why the Fundys survived and what was engendered by a repressive attitude.

Malinao watched proudly as he delivered his speech. The leaders of the world finally accepted the Moon as a true leader in both worlds. The tales of President Chong's adventures were epic. A few video serials had already been produced, over-dramatizing the already dramatic events. Chong had been disappointed by the actor playing Malinao.

"She's not as good-looking," he said.

But now he was being the statesman, thought Malinao. Now he had the ear of the world, and they were finally learning the wisdom of this man. Her man, she dared to think. He was measured, and thoughtful, and even though he would disagree, he was wise.

He looked her way and imperceptibly smiled as he came to the final part of his address.

"So I leave you with this. When you wish to put a stop to something, study it first. When you wish to help, don't harm. And most of all, don't fear doing the right thing. Don't compromise. Make the hard choices when needed, and life will be easier for all of us. Like free markets, like slavery, like stem cells, cloning is an issue that requires hard choices. We must change the way we think. The old rules do not apply. Let us all come together and do the right things. Thank you."

The applause was uproarious. Every single one of the world's most influential leaders was standing. Britain's chair was empty, however. Minister Narang had been reported murdered in his home. Lawrence might never know whether the man he had killed was the real Narang or a clone. A new minister had been chosen, but the chair had been left empty in remembrance. Ford was in mourning for his brother; he wore black and sat behind the empty chair. Narang's role had not been fully disclosed, and Chong had chosen to allow his memory to stay spotless. It wasn't a lie, but a presumption. Chong hoped the Narang he had met in Versailles had been the real Narang.

But now was Chong's moment. As he stepped down from the podium, he was mobbed by well-wishers. He could have ruled two worlds now, had he chosen. He could do no wrong. He finally pushed his way through the crowd to Malinao.

"Madame Speaker. Would you care to join me?"

Malinao had not been expecting this. There was a night of social events for all the dignitaries. It was quite bold of Chong to ask Malinao to be on his arm for all that--something the US hadn't planned on, in any case.

"Join you for what? There are so many parties. I'm not sure my staff could allow it," she teased.

"Oh, I'm not attending those. Come with me, please."

Suddenly he was pulling her away from the crowd, and with the aid of a few UMC guards, he whisked her out of the UN building and into a private car. They were whistling through the night air before she knew it.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Well, I'd love to take you to the Moon, but that's a bit far. So I'm just going to the West Coast."

They were there in thirty minutes. Chong played coy the whole time, refusing to answer questions from Malinao as well as refusing to answer his phone, which was ringing off the hook.

They landed in Oakland, California, alongside Lake Merritt. It was dusk, and a soft glow lit up the lake, while lamps and a string of lights were becoming visible as well. Malinao thought it was gorgeous.

Lawrence met them at the car.

"Everything is ready for you, sir." He gave a sad smile to Malinao and bowed his head.

Malinao was touched. She sort of suspected Lawrence might have had a crush on her, but she knew his loyalty to Chong would never be broken. She wasn't sure how to respect those feelings except to be grateful and try not to call attention to them.

Chong led her down to the shore of the lake, where a gondola waited, surrounded by a whole crowd of Fords. Malinao went straight up to the elder, original Ford and gave him a big hug.

"How are you, John? You must feel horrible."

Ford looked down for a moment. "Yes and no. I got a son out of it, after all."

United Moon Colonies

Malinao saw Ford Junior pulling the gondola up for boarding. “He looks big.”

“Yes, the clones grow at an accelerated rate. And this one is special. He needs me. He’s been through a lot.”

Malinao furrowed her brow. “Will . . . will you all stay together?”

Ford chuckled. “So far, nobody has called for their destruction. You know, a lot of what I told the clone Chong was the right idea, even though they were using me. Rich and I have talked about it a lot. I helped him write the UN speech. Sort of felt like I was putting things right.”

“It’s great to see you, John. Thanks for all this.”

“You’re welcome. Now get going. We’re not here for you to talk to me, right, Richard?”

Chong nodded and took Malinao’s hand, walking her toward the gondola.

He helped her in and took the pole himself, steering her out onto the water. They reached a point in the middle of the lake where the lights from the shore and the light from the setting sun balanced in a dazzling play of sparkles off the water. The Moon was just beginning to rise above the horizon and looked huge.

“This is one place where our worlds meet, Samantha,” Chong said, turning towards her. “The twilight is what I know; the silvery light from above comes from my world. The blue sky melting into it is yours.”

Malinao waited, breathless.

“Like the sky melts into the Moon at sunset, will you marry me?”

Chong held out a ring. It was two stones set together. One brilliant diamond and one gorgeous polished Moon gem.

Malinao, for once, could barely speak.

“I promised, and I meant it,” she finally managed.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”

38

In a dark shed outside Queenstown, New Zealand, Patel finished feeding the sheep. He was disgusted by the animals, but his care of them paid the bills for now. It also got him an independent generator, undetectable from the normal power grid. As long as he could keep it fueled, he could use as much power as he wanted and no one would know the difference. He trudged back inside the shed, past the cramped closet where he kept his bed.

His remaining equipment filled the main area of the shack. He took off his sheep boots and jacket and donned his familiar lab coat, now worn to threads.

He had partitioned a section of the main room and locked it off behind steel. He showed his palm and retina and unlocked it. Walking inside was like entering a metal box. His most recent work was kept in a case at the back of the box, wrapped in coils. He stepped up and pushed several buttons, releasing the lid of the case.

Today was the day he had been working for since leaving the Moon. He felt his pulse quicken with excitement. He entered the activation sequence and waited. Inside the case a man began to stir. It wasn't the first time he would wake, but it was the first time he would wake with any knowledge of who he was. Patel had brought the clone out on the ranch to help with a few things, but that was before personality and memory imprints. It had understood only the barest minimum to get the job done. Patel had used the exercise merely to prove the health of the clone body.

But today it had been imprinted with a full personality and complete set of memories. If all went well, it would be able to live a complete active life under Patel's control, believing it was the original person at all times.

United Moon Colonies

Patel led the clone to a seat and gave it water. It drank thirstily. "I'm dry," it said.

"That's normal," Patel reassured. "Perfectly normal, given the operation. That was a very close one. We almost lost you. Do you know where you are?"

The clone shook its head "no."

"We're in New Zealand. Just outside Queenstown on a sheep ranch."

The clone wrinkled its nose. "New Zealand. Great rugby. Awful country."

This was a good sign.

"Please don't be offended, but I have to ask. Do you know who you are?"

"Of course I do, Patel. I'm Minister Narang. Who do you think I am?"

Patel leaned back and smiled.

THE END

United Moon Colonies



