

NECROTERRA

RIFT



SK BENTON

RIFT

**NOVELETTE ONE OF NECROTERRA
PREVIEW**

**BY
SK BENTON**

NECROTERRA: a neologism, combining the Greek prefix necro- (from nekros, meaning “dead,” “corpse,” or “death”) with the Latin terra (meaning “earth,” “land,” or “ground”).

In other words,

DEAD EARTH

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Further, this book is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice. The reader should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health, and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention, and most definitely not try to use magic of any sort because it really does not exist in our world - as far as we know.

If you are experiencing rotting of the skin and/or body parts, you are certainly not a vampire - it is most probably leprosy or flesh-eating bacteria, so go see a doctor—immediately. Avoid playgrounds and public transportation. Likewise, if you believe you change into a raging canine under the full moon then we suggest you go see a psychiatrist. Preferably one who prescribes ample quantities of antipsychotic medications.

If any of these symptoms imaginarily happen to you while you are role-playing at Comic Con® then you should be fine, so have a beer when you are done. You never know, we might join you.

"All great truths begin as blasphemies."

—George Bernard Shaw

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MAX

Córdoba

April 3, 2819 C.E.

Sideways rain seared through the lower atmosphere like blue steel razors, accompanied by howling, torturous winds that physically moved structures, shredded trees and buffeted bodies of water, without mercy or compunction.

Nature was in cleanup mode, purging itself of the weak. Anything unfortunate enough to not have been battened down became foodstuffs to the terrifying power of a weather system that, despite scientific advances, was still uncontrollable, insatiable, and always hungry—especially during the cold months. Those were the dark days and nights when any creature of even limited intelligence would hide away and wait out the screaming tempest in the relative safety of an underground hole, a cave, or even the middle of a hypercrete-reinforced warehouse located in a seedy and rather dangerous part of eastern Córdoba.

In such a structure, and nearly delirious from lack of sleep, a rather intelligent Max Gunnarsson, PhD was counting on nature's noisy tantrum and blaring rock music to keep him awake, and to perhaps provide him cover from

the unnatural: the cold embrace of mechanized death. He had been working frantically throughout the devil night for good reason, loading, lifting, welding, trying to put the final touches on his project: his forbidden mission.

Upon creating the Verneuil-fused connection between two crystals on a deuterium regulation component, the young scientist removed his welder's mask, revealing a rather prominent five-o'clock shadow, messy, greasy dark brown hair, a moderately tanned complexion and hazel eyes. Quite normal for someone of the Córdoba region—sans the gleaming greasiness of his hair, which was the result of working in a maniacal frenzy for thirty-six straight hours.

Before he could brush his overgrown bangs away from his eyes, a familiar, archaic ringing sound called out, barely audible over the noise, coming from a nearby computer console, notifying him that a call was coming in on his comm.

"Music off!" he yelled out over a screaming guitar solo.

Crap. Not her. Not now.

Rotating his left wrist upward, he removed the silvery mesh glove from his hand, initiating his comm's session protocol. He then pressed his middle and ring fingers into his palm, activating the call.

"Hey there. Kinda busy at the moment."

"Max, why can't you tell me what you are doing?"

Max stared blankly at the coral-tinted holographic comm interface floating above his wrist. Sighing, he said, "It's okay, Mom. It'll all work out."

He watched his mother's aged, yet still-beautiful face as it contorted at his answer, bordering on anger, the three-dimensional imagery of her head flickering, most probably due to electromagnetic atmospheric disturbances from the seasonal storms that raged outside.

"¿Vos sabés muy bien que me preocupás!"

"I—" Max gulped. He paused. Struggling for words, he continued, "I really don't mean to worry you. This is gonna work. I swear!"

"I know, honey. . . but what about your job? You have worked so hard for so many years. You could lose everything."

His head dropping slightly, he sighed. "Mom, when I'm done, not only will I still have my job, I'll get a promotion. Just. . . trust me, okay?"

"Okay. Te amo, nene."

"I love you, too. See you soon."

Deactivating his dermis-embedded holographic comm by lightly clenching his left fist, Max disconnected the call and went back to feeling alone. Then he heard a metallic squall outside, suddenly pounding the side of his warehouse. He needed a distraction from his sadness, as well as the cacophony mere meters away.

"Music on."

Quickly installing his home-made deuterium regulator, Max was nearly ready to dive into the deep, dark unknown. But time is an invisible, soulless master, and the one overriding and massively terrifying problem was that he didn't know whether he had hours or minutes left. Or even seconds.

He had chosen this particular day, April 3rd, very much on purpose. Baker Day was the second-most important holiday on the planet, after Constitution Day. So, with so many festivities happening worldwide, he was hopeful there would be enough distractions for the authorities, resulting in his project going undetected. The unforecasted storm outside merely assisted in his attempted stratagem. A bit of luck from the gods, if any indeed existed.

Almost done.

In the center of this rather unimpressive, yet thankfully sturdy building was the subject of (hopefully) secret controversy — an aged, medium-sized shuttlecraft, dull-gray, ten meters in length.

The shuttle itself was not slick or attractive by any means. It was built in the Rio Santiago Shipyard sixty-five years earlier, having been used as a cargo transport during bicentennial celebrations, ferrying supplies between various planetary locations and Luna, upon which a rather robust and thriving society had been built.

However, it wasn't the shuttle that was illegal, per se. Rather, what was bolted onto the top of the craft was the unlawful part.

When he had purchased the vessel, it was old and in a state of disrepair — barely making the voyage from Santiago to Córdoba, especially given the poor seasonal weather in the southern hemisphere.

But, after numerous weekend repairs and upgrades, he had acquired a good deal of affection for it, especially as it could communicate with him. And Max had questions that needed to be answered.

"Music off."

Only the elemental disharmony of the winter cyclone remained, along with the sounds of warehouse windows unwillingly bending to natural forces that would have caused the Titans to shield their eyes.

"Good afternoon, Alice. Ship status, please."

Wiping a trickle of sweat off his neck, he shook his head vigorously, trying to get the tinnitus-like ringing out of his ears as he waited on a response from his ship's artificial intelligence. Moments later, he received his answer in the form of the sultry female voice he had programmed into the system.

"Good afternoon, Doctor, I am pleased to report that all systems are functioning normally."

"Run an airlock test."

"Certainly, Doctor."

Thirty seconds. One minute. Max waited, impatiently.

"Doctor, the vessel is adequately airtight."

"Alice, please define adequate."

"Doctor, there is only a 0.087% chance that you will suffer a hull breach, which would result in having all the air sucked out of your body, followed by you drifting around the vacuum of space for all eternity as a freeze-dried carcass."

"Thanks for the visualization, Alice."

"You are most welcome, Doctor."

"Okay, open up the loading ramp."

The slight whooshing of escaping oxygen provided an audible acknowledgement of at least some sort of seal.

"Alice, please provide status on E-force."

"Doctor, we have an estimated internal gravity of 12m/s^2 , or one Ensminger."

"Perfect. That was an expensive add-on, but I don't want to be strapped in for any extended period of time."

"It was indeed a wise choice, Doctor."

Ready now more than he ever would be, Max did the 29th century equivalent of walking backward in the forest and using a tree branch to erase his footprints.

Pressing his thumb onto a bright green square on his main console, Max's DNA enacted a macro process meant for only one thing: destruction.

The main processor housing lit up in brilliant, almost neon sparks which traveled and jumped from sub-housing to sub-housing. Seconds later, all data storage and zeptoprocessors had melted; every bit of data irrevocably erased from existence. His secrets would be safe—as long as he wasn't captured, only to have his cerebral engrams painfully extracted during a torturous foray into the marvelous world of intelligence interrogation.

Quickly spinning around to avoid the billowing, caustic smoke that emanated from the mass of evaporating electronics, he deftly grabbed a duty bag from the floor and walked over to his little monstrosity, which he had named the *Machu Picchu*. Sympathetically running his fingers over the smooth outer surface, where he had spent six hours grinding off some rather gaudy

flames that had been painted onto the hull, he walked to the rear entrance of the shuttle. Before entering the transport, he pulled a jewelry box out of his bag and looked at the small cube while bearing a rather wistful expression.

He had no idea why his widowed mother had given him her wedding ring. He actually thought it was a silly, useless gesture. She had asked him to give it to his bride when he got married, but the only partner he would ever meet, he thought, was someone freakishly large and tattooed, in a jail cell in the Buenos Aires Penitentiary, if his luck didn't hold out, that is.

Max stuffed the jewelry box into his pocket and, taking one last look around, walked up the ship's loading ramp, which then slowly lifted up and created an airtight seal with a metallic hiss.

Running up through the cargo hold and into the cockpit, he dropped into the pilot seat, the newest part of the vessel, which he had installed post-purchase. He needed comfort for his trip, as this was no mere jaunt to Luna and back. Eyes scanning the control panel, he made a quick, final check on his boards. Just a scant overview—not a systematic flight list. There was no time for such a thing. Holding his breath, his heart pounded in his chest, his shirt drenched with sweat, the inevitable arrival of Federation authorities still an unknown factor.

Max pressed the ignition button on the control dash. Primers clicked one, two, then three times, finally lighting up with a throbbing chunk and causing the ship to violently lurch as the Machu Picchu's engines roared to life. Fortunately, nothing exploded.

So far so good.

A Transformers bobblehead figurine of Optimus Prime jiggled back and forth on the control panel. He had actually used his childhood toy as a rudimentary attitude indicator, being as none of the readouts on the instrument panel were properly functioning when he had first flown the vessel. Even though stalling was something long-ago eliminated from flight, he liked to know whether or not he was sideways while stealthily cruising through heavy cloud cover.

Concussion boosters whomped rhythmically, causing items on local workbenches to fly off in equivalent cadence. The warehouse base buckled. A long crack ripped along the aged concrete floor. Tools bounced off walls, the massive, metal benches themselves vibrating on their legs, erratically rattling away from the craft as if they were trying to escape impending doom. Two of the benches flipped over end on end, making loud, brain-shattering clanging noises. Max used his thumb to move the vertical thrust slider upward in the left handle of the yolk, which he had firmly in his grip. The shuttle started to slowly lift off. The warehouse roof mechanically parted down the middle, smoothly opening up and exposing a hellacious atmosphere of horizontal rain and raging winds.

And that was when things went wrong.

Before Max could get his shuttle out of the internals of the warehouse, dozens of armed, military-looking individuals dressed in black, full-faced

helmets and articulated body armor burst inside, firing projectile weapons at the Machu Picchu while she floated upward toward uncertain freedom.

A blaring loudspeaker projecting enough volume to be heard within at least a one-kilometer radius announced the official intent of the invasion:

"Attention, Doctor Gunnarsson. You are in violation of the Federal SSCC Non-Proliferation Act, and are to be taken in for questioning. Land immediately or we will be forced to destroy your craft."

Max heard the order. He also ignored it. To do otherwise would have meant abject failure.

The Machu Picchu kept slowly rising toward the tormented indigo sky, shrugging off the small arms fire being laid upon her hull, thanks to a very rare and special metal that covered the craft in a micro-thin layer. It was also very expensive. More than Max could afford, so he had stolen it from work over a period of months. In his mind it was all justifiable. It was for a better cause.

"Doctor Gunnarsson, if we do not leave this vicinity immediately, I fear we will suffer a hull breach."

"Jesus, how did they find me? The guy I bought this shuttle from said all tracking sensors were removed!"

"Doctor, you removed the mesh glove from your hand to receive a call, thereby exposing your comm location."

"Dammit! Hit it! Go! Go! Go!"

"As you command, Doctor."

The Machu Picchu shot up and out of the warehouse into the upper atmosphere at an instant Mach 10, violently blowing a good percentage of the invading army back into crumpled piles of unconsciousness. If it weren't for the quadrinium gravity dampeners he had installed as an upgrade, Max would have been crushed like a tomato beneath a commercial air truck, the sticky red muck of his corpse forever embedded into the grated steel deck of the cockpit.

Pieces of the roof, dislodged from the concussive blast, fell back to the ground and took out five more soldiers.

And Max watched it all happen real-time through his downward-facing camera display on the flight console.

"Shit!"

"Doctor, you are well aware that I am incapable of such an action."

"Shut up and go faster!"

Alice increased the Machu Picchu's velocity to Mach 13 without further complaint, causing Max to burst up toward the blackness of space, entering the deadly vacuum in under fourteen seconds.

Then the federation provided a nice surprise for the escaping madman. Five Draeder exo-atmospheric attack fighters pursued in tight formation, quickly catching up with his dilapidated craft. Weapons fire erupted from the Draeders, rocking and buffeting the small transport during its desperate exit from the atmosphere. Luckily, the precious metal he had used to cover the ship's hull also provided protection from the low-charge weaponry being used against it.

At the moment it seemed the Federation wanted him alive. But the effect that anything more powerful might have had was unknown to Max, and he didn't intend on becoming an unwilling physics experiment in the vacuum of space.

Suddenly and surprisingly, a loud, ripping sound from an accurately fired continuous-pulse beam to his ship's hull indicated that his pursuers didn't care if he were brought back in handcuffs or a hazmat bag.

Max banked hard and charged back toward the atmosphere in the desperate hope he could buy some precious seconds. Watching the passing Draeders scream by and then perform similar maneuvers, he knew what to do next:

It's time. Let's do this.

Skimming the atmosphere, Max pulled a lever back on his dashboard.

A mass of glowing machinery pushed out through the top of the ship, causing a rippling disruption in space that somehow tightly followed his flight pattern. This almost alien-looking equipment reached up and into the newly created rift.

His unlawful component was enabled. His crime had been completed.

The hull creaked and groaned, the titanium infrastructure wailing in what sounded like its last throes of death. He again increased his velocity and banked out into space again, perhaps to buy himself time and avoid dying in a horrific explosion as he left the last vestiges of waning atmosphere.

Then, as six individuals raced out of orbital perimeter, free from the suffocating gravity that had for so long kept humans bound to their terrestrial

mistress, Max and the five Draeder pilots simultaneously pressed buttons on their control panels. Fortunately for Max, his touch was a fraction of a second faster than the pursuing pilots. The Machu Picchu blinked out of sight and the local solar system.

Terminal Solution beam weapons flashed into space with silent, concussive force, reaching where the escaping ship was located only a moment prior, all failing to meet their target. To have not escaped their trajectory would have meant the instant atomization of the Machu Picchu and Doctor Max Gunnarsson: Traitor. Mad scientist. Fugitive.

Seated in the pilot's chair, an extremely lucky Max gripped the yolk as if it were his only link to existence. His knuckles turned white. Dripping with sweat, he tried to calm himself down by taking deep, slow breaths. His forward view screen displayed wild, shifting colors encompassing the entire visible spectrum, with energy currents whipping around in all directions, flashing like an obscene strobe that painfully penetrated his brain, creating utter confusion and nausea.

Flipping a toggle switch to lower the protective shield over his view screen, he took one last look upon pure chaos—a definite sign he was not in normal space. It didn't help that his vision sharpened immensely when he was in stressful situations, either. But he was on course. At least his computer told him so. And his ship was intact, carrying him along on a seven-day voyage to the world of his ancestors. . .

. . .Earth.



DRAAGH

The Hub, M 13,874,673.443003, second door on the left

"Lord Draagh, it appears all is going according to plan."

An older gentleman, possessing a medium-length gray beard with a long mustache stylishly braided within, responded by saying, "Yes, Socrates. So far, that is."

His long, gray hair rested nicely on broad shoulders covered by a dark cloak which gave him a rather medieval appearance.

Turning around, the old man looked at Socrates as it floated in midair, its visage composed of wafting, golden particles. More than a rather large face, Socrates resembled a comedy/tragedy mask of Earth's ancient past, but possessing neither Thalia's smile, nor Melpomene's frown. The artificial expression was more of concerned delight.

"Query: Now that events have been set into motion, what is to be your next action, Lord Draagh?"

"I shall need for you to set a target location for me, old friend."

"Query: And that would be, my lord?"

"I have a new destination. I shall enter primary coordinates shortly."

Draagh waved his arm out, inexplicably bathing the room in which he stood with a soft, yellow light, reminiscent of oil lamps, but without the inherent flickering, smoke or scent.

Resembling private chambers inside a grandiose castle, the mahogany-lined room was filled with mystical-looking objects; a globe with landmasses nowhere close to resembling Earth's, various compasses, dowels and test tubes, as well as books, unbound manuscripts and candles.

Draagh liked candles, even though he really didn't need them. They simply added ambience.

Waving his hand out to his front yet again, a glowing semitransparent display, bluish in color, appeared just outside his touch, hauntingly hanging in the air. He reached forward and tapped the tangible image. A keyboard came into view, having characters unlike any script ever created by humanity, but vaguely resembling ancient Georgian Asomtavruli. He typed, entering a long string of data into the panel. Once finished, he turned lazily to his left where Socrates floated nearby.

"Lord Draagh, please note that your staff has been updated with both the primary insertion point, and those of your requested destination of 6.3.4267 EP, for the previously specified geo-spatial coordinates. Query: Shall I verify?"

Draagh looked back at the floating face and nodded. He was always one to prefer safety over haste.

Socrates spun slowly, 360 degrees to the right and then stopped in place after completing a full rotation, with various trailing particles catching up to properly reform the face.

"All coordinates verified, Lord Draagh. Safe travels. Query: While I am familiar with 4267 EP, may I ask why you have selected this new primary insertion? It is sparsely inhabited, and mostly by superstitious nomadic tribes, as well as radically altered wildlife. It could be substantially dangerous."

Draagh grinned softly, the cycling light levels causing his blue eyes to sparkle and reflect the random, flashing imagery on the view screen.

"I am going to change the future, old friend!"

The face made what would be considered a wry smile. That is, if it didn't look like it was on the verge of dematerializing at any moment.

"Ever the mysterious one, my lord. As always, I am here to help. Please do remember, once you have left The Hub, there will be an access lag if you need to call on me."

"Of course, Socrates," said Draagh as he pulled his gray ponytail out of the way and lifted his cloak up over his head, revealing a lean and highly muscular physique covered in somewhat arcane-looking tattoos. Quickly changing his garb to a tunic made of a tawny, coarse fabric, black leather pants and a black, mid-length leather coat, he no longer looked like an old man covered in robes: he more clearly resembled an aged, yet fit Viking warrior of milenia past.

"Your outfit indeed suits you, my lord."

Draagh smiled. He was aware that Socrates' compliment, although sincere, had been programmed into it millions of years prior. Still, the old man was not without certain graces.

"Thank you, Socrates. However, I have one more favor to ask, if you could."

"Certainly."

"Please access view portal 94.2819 AC. I am entering the elevation, latitude and longitude coordinates now."

"Query: Why is that, my lord?"

"I wish to check up on the other actor in this grand production."

"Query: Are you referring to the female?"

"Yes, I am."

"Query: Would that not be peeping, my lord?"

"Nonsense! I do not. . . peep! I merely wish to make sure that all goes according to schedule. This is quite an undertaking, as you well know."

Draagh then watched a video display change from looking into a chaotic, sub-dimensional realm where a small space ship was being smoothly pulled along to its destination at unimaginable velocities, to a simple, antique alarm clock on a bedside table.



JENNIE

New Sydney, Oz, Azul

April 4, 2819 C.E.

"Jennie. . . Jennie, are you okay? I heard a loud thump."

It wasn't the fall that had woken Jennie up. It was the persistent knocking on her bedroom door that had, each knuckle tap making her brain feel like it was being smashed with an acid-coated quadrinium hammer.

She slowly opened both of her enormous, cocoa-brown eyes, which were surrounded by generous amounts of smudged eyeliner she had declined to remove the night before.

Her going away party was epic, as well as the top-shelf tequila she drank with a guy she liked a lot, so when she got back to her apartment she walked over to her bed and fell into it like a proverbial rock.

Now she was on the floor, horrifically hung over, her abnormal position only serving to accentuate her painful condition.

"Yah! Yah! I'm good, roomie. Stop knocking already!"

"Okay, sweetie. I'm making some brekky. Come out when you're ready."

Jennie softly closed her eyes; a thin veneer of black blocking out what little light was in the room. She could feel her heartbeat, which was prevalent, mostly because it matched the pulsating pain in her skull.

My. Poor. Brain. No more tequila. . . ever. Ack.

Opening her eyes, she had a sideways view of her bathroom. Actually, it was more of an upside-down/sideways view, being her legs were still up on the edge of the bed and her head was on the floor. Her contorted position more closely resembled a difficult yoga pose than an unceremonious face plant.

Grabbing the edge of her bedside table, she used it as leverage to pull herself up, unfortunately knocking her ancient alarm clock over in the process. Tiredly squinting one eye, she then picked up a semi-transparent paper screen lying next to the lamp, her skin contact with the device causing the header text to come into focus: It was addressed to Lieutenant Jennifer M. Escalante, ADF Naval Armada (ADF being the abbreviation for Azul Defense Forces).

As she held the paper screen in her hand, the plastic-like material turned rigid and opaque, and a scrolling list of text appeared, with block paragraphs taking their places on the page. Dated on the day prior, and signed by Rear Admiral Luigi Bagatelle, the orders placed her on the newest, most advanced spacecraft in the Navy—the ADV (Azul Defense Vessel) Revolution—a massive battle cruiser that just happened to have something very special partially installed within.

Her eyes lit up as she came out of her sleepy state. Just like all of her previous transfers since graduating from the Naval Academy, she was going

with Bagatelle. She had mixed feelings about the admiral, but Revolution was the pinnacle of technology, and someone special was also assigned to the crew. That much made her feel good.

Her stomach, however, felt entirely the opposite.

She dropped the paper screen and fell to her knees. Luckily, there was a solid waste bin next to her bed.

Once she had settled her stomach and had dumped the contents of the trashcan into the toilet, she felt significantly better, save for the throbbing in her temples. Stumbling a couple of meters over to the bathroom mirror, and wearing nothing but a pair of pink panties, she grabbed a bottle of painkillers from the medicine cabinet, popping two into her mouth, and then stuck her face beneath the faucet, gulping enough water to down the capsules. Then she stood sideways in front of a tall, wall mirror, scanning her figure up and down in the reflection, wondering if her gravity-defying breasts would ever start to sag.

They wouldn't, but she didn't know that. She had no idea.

Dropping her panties, she climbed into the shower, just to let the hot water soothe away her discomfort. She could have sworn she was dancing the limbo the night before, using muscles long ignored, perhaps never used. Her glutes seared with pain and her lower back felt like it had been repeatedly hit with a cricket bat. She directed the water nozzle onto her affected parts in a desperate attempt to relieve her aching muscles. She didn't care about going over her

water allotment. It was connected to the apartment anyway, so Becky's annoying boyfriend would have to bathe at his own place.

Once she finished her shower and dried off, her stomach and head were feeling much better, so she activated a playlist on her paper screen. She then started going through her morning dental ritual. Her teeth were pearly white and perfect. She intended to keep them that way, too. She had never required dental implants or even corrective braces, and something she remembered her dentist telling her when she was young was to *only floss the teeth you want to keep*. It was meant to scare her, and it did.

Done with her oral care routine only minutes later, she danced around her room with the music blaring in the background. While she sang, she envisioned the song's vid that she had seen at least a hundred times. She wasn't a very good singer. Actually, she was terrible and was barely on key, but she loved that band and found it a shame she would never, ever meet them. They were long dead; their bodies reduced to dust, entombed beneath two meters of dirt and rocks on a distant, unreachable world.

At the end of the second song, she pulled her military dress whites out of her closet and carefully set them down on her bed. She had already packed her duffel for transit to the Revolution, but, being an officer, she was always required to show up to a new duty assignment in her ceremonial uniform.

Slipping into a tank top and panties, Jennie left her room and went straight for the living area, sauntering along to her music which she had turned down a tad, just to be polite.

"Morn, Jennie!"

"*Buenos días*, Becks."

Jennie greeted her roommate, Becky Branson, the same way every morning—when she wasn't out on deployment, that is. Also in the military, Becky worked in the scientific division.

The woman wasn't stunning like Jennie. She was rather dowdy, of Caucasian extraction and with too many moles on her face and neck. Plain. So was Becky's boyfriend, also present.

Josh Mannheim was a skinny, tech-type with poorly groomed hair and a tendency to snort whenever he laughed. Jennie always envisioned Josh wearing glasses, which no one wore anymore thanks to prenatal gen-mods. Of course, sunglasses were worn, even though surgery could give anyone the ability to tint their vision via a thin layer of nano-computerized, transparent sclera that could be applied over the cornea, but most people still liked to accessorize. Retro was considered cool in 2819 Azul.

Jennie didn't mind Josh so much, but she did find it annoying when he talked to her for one simple fact. He never looked her in the eyes. He focused on her breasts, which were painfully hard to miss that morning, almost screaming to be released from her barely opaque, white tank top. And her sultry, nearly copper-colored skin made them all that much more visible. As was his luck, Josh was good at hiding his stares from Becky.

Despite his creepy gazes, Jennie was certain he loved Becky very much. They fit each other well, and Jennie was sure the two would get married one day—in

a geeky wedding, and probably in some sort of costume theme with a fake, bouncy castle, vaguely reminiscent of the medieval period on ancient Earth.

Jennie wanted to get married one day too, but not to a science geek. She wanted someone rich, powerful; she wanted someone with connections. Somebody like Ryder Johnson, the man with whom she had been sharing copious amounts of tequila the night before.

Becky smiled while Jennie whirled around the living room of their small, shared apartment, but seemed to display a touch of sadness at the same time. While many women were jealous of the lieutenant's looks, Becky loved Jennie just the way she was. She had said so on more than one occasion, mostly when they were out drinking. People are most honest when inebriated, and the previous evening was no exception.

"Jennie," said Becky, "your party was a ripper!"

"Good timing, having it on Baker Day," said Josh.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Jennie. "There were a lot of parties going on all around the system, but don't you think Baker Day's a bit creepy?"

"How so?" asked Becky.

"I mean, it celebrates mass murder-suicide," Jennie responded with a snort.

"Come on, Jen," Josh retorted. "Captain Thelonius Baker was a frikin' hero. If it wasn't for him spacing himself and all those corrupt politicians on the Exodus capital barge, we'd be living in an eternal dictatorship."

"Like we're not already," Becky said with a snort.

"Fine, let's agree to disagree," said Jennie. "Anyway, Josh, anything new in the geek factory these days?"

"Naw, just doing nerdy things in a nerdy way. You know us dags, always on the cutting edge."

"Josh has been trying to get into the SSCC department," said Becky, "but they keep telling him to wait."

"Aw, keep trying, and you'll get there," said Jennie, her voice conveying a smidgen of unexpected compassion. "To be honest, I can't wait until they put that stuff on a ship, and we can get to other planets. Now *that* would be cool! As it is, my new ship was built so whenever the Feds give the word, the engineers can install SSCC tech in space. No more docking planet-side. In fact, half the equipment is already in." She paused briefly, looking at Becky, and then at Josh and then back again at her roommate. "Look, I didn't tell you this, okay? But I heard a rumor."

Becky's eyes lit up. The woman absolutely loved any sort of gossip or uncorroborated news.

"Yeah, what's that, bestie?" she asked.

"Well," started Jennie, "I kinda heard that all of the SSCC equipment has already been installed and we're. . . kinda going somewhere."

"Betcha it was Ryder," said Becky, to which Jennie smiled and made a zipping motion with her fingers over her mouth.

"I'd imagine if you're going anywhere, it's to the Orbis system," said Josh.

"Why is that?" Jennie asked.

Josh shrugged, saying, "It's a single star and has a planet in the Goldilocks zone. You know, would have enough heat to have an atmosphere and liquid water."

"You think?" Jennie said bluntly. "Why would we want to go there? A single planet, probably a dead world. Plus, when the Artusians get here I'm sure they're gonna give us all their star charts and stuff. Ryder says we'll be a part of some intergalactic community." She paused, a guilty grin forming on her pouty lips. "Oops! Did I say that?"

Shaking his head, Josh diddled around with the food on his plate. It was common knowledge that Jennie, although beautiful, wasn't much of a creative thinker. She was a naval officer, and fully accustomed to following orders without question.

"Nah, Jen," said Josh. "Remember that three of the Exodus barges were lost when our ancestors came here? There's lots of talk that they might've ended up in Orbis."

Jennie lightly nodded her head side-to-side, saying. "Well, that sounds dumb. Official word is they're all dead."

Josh looked up briefly, eyes scanning her up and down. In return, Jennie gave him her death stare. He turned his glance elsewhere. She didn't know what he was looking at, whether it was the wall or the entrance to the toilet. She didn't care, as long as it wasn't her chest, even though she tended to flash it around whenever possible.

Becky held out a plate of food. "Jen, sweetie, here's your brekky. You probably won't eat for a while."

Licking her lips, Jennie took the plate with a hungry smile.

"Hey, have you two been practicing your Castellano?" she asked.

Josh raised his hand, proudly stating, "*¡Si! ¡Ya comí mi desayuno!*"

"Oh my gosh, lovie, your pronunciation is getting so good! My man!" Becky said with possessive affection. "But you haven't finished your breakfast yet."

"Oh," said Josh, who then went back to finishing his morning meal.

"Not bad, Josh," added Jennie. "Just remember that *no* isn't pronounced like *naur*, which is what all you Ozzies do. It's just a flat *no*. Kinda like how that pretty American girl said it at the party last night when your geek buddy asked her to dance."

Josh looked like he had just had the wind taken out of his sails, but Jennie continued, this time with a bit of kindness. "That being said, y'all flat-out have the coolest accent. Well, in English. Much better than the Americans, who talk like they're spitting words through a bleach-coated colander."

"Well, Schweizerdeutsch is worse, " said Josh, to which Jennie nodded in total agreement.

"Jen, your brekky. . . I mean, your *desa*," said Becky. "Eat before it gets cold. We promise we'll practice more while you're away."

"Down the hatch!" squealed Jennie, holding the plate up to her face at an angle and sliding the contents into her mouth as if she hadn't eaten in a week. But she *had* recently eaten. In fact, she had a delicious (and extremely

expensive) cut of skirt steak the previous evening before heading off to her party. She just inexplicably had a hyper-metabolism.

Josh looked at her again. However, this time he wasn't looking at her breasts. He had more of a bewildered, almost mortified expression as he watched her barely chew the food before chugging large gulps and washing it down with this bitter tea she mysteriously liked.

Jennie was completely devoid of table manners. It was her one fault as a pretty girl. She tried to use a bit of elegance when dining out, but usually refrained from eating on dates, knowing that any rational man would look upon her with horror as she shoveled food down her throat like a starving quadrinimum miner. To her, eating was a required function, not something to be used to impress people.

After (figuratively) inhaling her breakfast, she popped over and kissed Becky on the cheek.

"I gotta get dressed. New duty assignment starts today! Woohoo!"

"Okay, roomie. You go get 'em! And message me about you and Ryder."

She smiled and gave Becky a wink, knowing her roommate loved salacious details about her adventures with guys. Jennie had dated a lot of attractive, successful men, but she had never accepted any proposals, of which there were many. She was waiting for the big one, and she thought that maybe Ryder would be the right guy.

"Yeah, hun. I'll let you know. But don't expect anything too descriptive. Not my style, got it?" She grinned and then turned around, slapping Josh in the back of the head.

"Take care of her. *¿Entendés, boludo?*"

"Yeah, yeah. I understand. You know I always take care of her, Escalante. Just. . . be safe, okay?"

Jennie left the living area, going back to her room while looking back and winking at Becky before she shut her door to change.

Once she had put on her uniform, which consisted of a white, collarless jacket and a pair of slacks with orange stripe accents—her world's colors—and a white slouch hat, left side pinned up in the classic Australian bush style of centuries before, she grabbed her duffel bag and used her private door to the hallway.

She preferred to not go through a tear-laden goodbye with Becky, which was usually the case whenever she left on assignment. Then, taking the stairs down to the first level and bursting out the exit door, she hailed a cab by hitting a request function on her paper screen. She looked up into the pink sky. Azul's twin suns shone brightly on her face. The weather was nice in the northern hemisphere during the month of April, unlike in Nueva Argentina, where that particular month was basically Hell on Azul.

Moments later, a utilitarian-looking aircar floated down and a door opened vertically, beckoning her to enter.

Taking a seat in the cab, she quickly fastened her seatbelt. "Blue Mil Spaceport, please. Entrance Delta."

The driverless, automated transport then dutifully zipped up into the overhead traffic and went straight to her requested destination.



Fifteen minutes later, Jennie was standing on the tarmac at Blue Mil, the largest military installation on the planet, encompassing roughly 10,800 km² of land. Looking down a long line of Draeders, it took her only moments to identify hers. Emblazoned on its vertical stabilizer was the craft's serial number: A0058N.

Walking toward the fighter, she was approached by an aircraft electronics technician. He wasn't an officer, but an enlisted sailor, and an experienced one at that. Not all enlisted personnel were without college degrees, university being free on Azul system. Some had advanced educations but didn't desire the increased responsibility of an officer rank. But, degree or not, AETs were a smart group. Nothing got by them. Lives depended on their work.

Offering a sharp salute, which Jennie quickly returned, the tech said, "Good morning, Lieutenant. I'm Chief Petty Officer Rodriguez. Five-eight November is fueled and ready to go."

"Thanks, Chief," she said, handing her duffle to him right before climbing up the ladder and dropping into the cockpit.

The chief tossed her bag up, which she caught and set on the empty co-pilot seat behind her, and threw her slouch hat on top of it as the canopy slowly closed and sealed with a light hiss. Pulling her ponytail back, she grabbed her pink flight helmet and slipped it over her head. She then reached up and lowered her visor, exposing her call sign, GHOST, which was printed across the front of the helmet. As soon as the visor snapped into place, a glowing heads-up display instantly activated, providing instantaneous flight and locational data. Given her destination, and the fact that she wasn't to engage in any sort of tactical maneuvers, the fighter would practically fly itself out of the atmosphere and auto-dock inside Revolution.

But that wasn't much fun. Not much fun at all.

Jennie toggled the concussion boosters on and used her thumb to move the vertical thrust slider upward, at the same time disabling her transponder. She had a plan, and it didn't involve being tracked.

The Draeder smoothly lifted, the characteristic whomping sound droning as Rodriguez stood back outside the lift area, shielding his eyes from the masses of dust pummeling his face.

Jennie reached down to her left, gently pulling on the throttle lever, causing rear thrusters to slowly glide the craft toward the launch zone. Once there, she was required to radio the tower, and then, upon clearance, slowly move upward to 600 meters in altitude before engaging her atmospheric thrusters at full burn. She touched a square, flat button on her right yolk handle, enabling her to establish radio contact with air traffic control.

"Blue Mil Tower. This is five-eight November, runway two niner, requesting permission for departure."

"That's a go, five-eight November. Runway two niner, winds two five zero at six. You are clear for takeoff."

"Tower, do we have any craft on approach?"

"Negative, five-eight November. Skies are clear. Good journey, Ghost."

"You got it. Later, boys!"

Jennie hit her main thrusters and took off. Fast. Way too fast. Within seconds she was out over the ocean, and then cut around 180 degrees, heading back to Blue Mil and screaming over New Botany Bay.

"Five-eight November, slow down!"

Lieutenant Jennifer Escalante made sure her radio was transmitting as she laughed like a teenaged girl while buzzing the tower, just shy of Mach 1. She flew by so close she would have blown out all of the ATC module windows, if it weren't for the charged quadrinium mesh that lined the glass. Seconds later, and once clear, she pulled back hard on her yolk, going vertical toward space and her duty assignment with her commanding officer.



BAGATELLE

"Five-eight November, this is Revolution. Come in."

"Revolution, this is Five-eight November."

"Escalante, this is Bagatelle."

"Hiya, Admiral!"

"Lieutenant, where the hell are you? Why is your transponder off?"

"Oops...on approach, sir. No worries! Almost there."

"What's taking you so long?"

"Umm... weather?"

"That's a big negative, Lieutenant. New Sydney's sunny and warm, and Blue Mil Tower already notified me about your little fly-by stunt. So, move your ass.

We're leaving orbit as soon as you dock."

"Roger. Going manual. Five-eight November out."

At forty-five years of age, Rear Admiral Luigi Bagatelle was the youngest person ever to have attained his current rank in the history of Azul's navy.

He had dedicated himself for years to get to where he was at that very moment—standing on the bridge of his massive, Juggernaut-class ship, the ADV Revolution, also the newest in the fleet. And, without prior indication or

warning, his command was assigned the responsibility of going where no Azul-born human had gone before.

Looking around the bridge with pride, he admired the pinnacle of Azulian engineering that went into creating his vessel. Unlike previous builds, Revolution's main deck had three-meter-high ceilings: ample headroom. The bridge housed not only senior officers, but also roughly a dozen lower-ranking officers of particular technical skills, in an area of approximately ten meters, port to starboard, and a length of twenty meters, fore to aft.

The main view screen was nine meters wide by six meters in height, surrounded by brilliant white bulkheads constructed of carbon fiber-enhanced polyethylene, which also included a slightly charged netting of quadrinium, which increased hull integrity by a factor of 500.

There were also elevators between the fourteen interior levels; another first for the vessel.

As Azul had no known enemies, Revolution was built for comfort, as well as incredibly long voyages.

Still, it was not built to run from danger; it was a massive, flying city of potential doom, armed with thousands of fusion missiles and two main beam cutters, able to create kilometer-deep devastation on any planetary body in the system.

It also possessed the newest technology available to humanity:

Knowing full well that the hook drive had yet to be tested on such a large ship, Bagatelle could have been bringing hundreds of men and women to their

doom, but it was his job to make sure that the technology didn't fall into the hands of anyone—Azulian or otherwise. He wondered what would happen if Gunnarsson reached Earth and found intelligent society still existed there. He imagined, in gut-wrenching horror, a scenario in which Earthers captured SSCC technology and invaded his world, all of the advances made by Azul's colonists and their descendants wiped out in a single blow. The Earth they had left was by no means a paradise. In fact, it was the opposite, and Bagatelle had no reason to believe things had improved over the centuries.

But things were good on Azul, and only getting better. Scientists claimed the system would reach status as a Type 1 civilization within half a century. Bagatelle wanted to be around when that happened. And, with the median Azulian life expectancy hovering around 115 years, he was sure he would be there to see it:

As long as a certain, maniac scientist was stopped.

Bagatelle turned to his bridge officer, Commander Alicia Vásquez, and asked, "Commander, are our stragglers on board?"

Vásquez, an attractive dega with a Mediterranean complexion and black hair, who also happened to be Bagatelle's executive officer, affirmed. "Lieutenant Johnson docked thirty minutes ago, Admiral. And. . . let's see about Jennie. . ."

She touched a blue light square on her control dash, bringing up the camera for the flight deck.

"And there she is. . . um. . . yeah."

Both Bagatelle and Vásquez watched unbelievably as Jennie perfectly slid her Draeder into its slot on the deck— sideways and way too fast— causing multiple techs to scramble for their lives due to her unorthodox docking procedure.

"Damn that girl!" bellowed Bagatelle.

"Sir, that *girl* is probably the best pilot on this ship."

Bagatelle growled, not at all impressed with Jennie's apparent expertise.

"Well, she's not flying while she's under my command. I only let her take five-eight November up so she'd shut up about doing recons."

"Yet a certain someone always makes sure that five-eight is psionically licensed to her," Vásquez muttered while wearing a slight smile.

"What was that?"

Vásquez lost her smile. "Nothing, sir. We're ready for departure."

Bagatelle adjusted his jacket and squared his shoulders, ready to make history.

"Take us through, Commander," he commanded stoically.

Vásquez nodded and slowly pulled back a large, orange lever on her control panel. Techs on the flight deck scrambled, hearing a loud alarm made specifically for the activation of the frightening, barely tested new technology. Bagatelle maintained a firm grasp on the back of Vásquez's chair, his dego-dark knuckles white from his involuntary death grip. A resounding thud sounded throughout the vessel as the top of the massive warship's midsection opened and locked in place. Huge, protective panels slid back, allowing hook drive

machinery to assume its place at the top of the hull. A massive framework of tubing and pipes pushed up out the top of Revolution, lighting up with a brilliant glow while the fusion-powered core energized. Moments later, the glowing increased and tore open a sub dimensional rift approximately ten meters above the machinery. The most beautiful part of it all was the sudden visibility of millions of colorful energy strands that wildly weaved around and through each other. They glimmered and raced about, making the rift look like a supernatural gash in the sky.

Then, what appeared to be a massive, backwards-facing spear, littered with electronics, craned up and into the energy field. This was the hook, dragging into the Side Space field and quickly making a connection with the proper current frequency. Seconds later, the ADV Revolution soundlessly disappeared from sight and screen.

It was on its way to Earth.

