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The Silent Invader
By Reginald Thurman

Part I

Prologue

Deep in the vast reaches of space, a vessel set about a course, one it had for many months before, covering similar stretches of space in the same tedious manner. However, this day would not prove to have the uneventful conclusion of many before it.

This vessel, named the TSC Tesla, was on its 347th voyage from its homeworld of Earth, but only the third into this particular area of space. The TSC Tesla was a mid-sized deep space vessel, carrying a compliment of 78 restless crewmen. Although the exterior was refit, to mask its age and update certain technologies, the dated interior clearly emphasized its lengthy service. In spite of its small size, it had an impressive array of weapons, rivaling armaments on larger battleships. It had a top speed of 1.5 light-years per hour (or 150 Kliks), although presently it cruised at sub-light speeds.

The Tesla was one in a fleet of ships part of an organization collectively known as the Planetary Alliance of Colonizing Terrans, or the Pact. The Pact was originated on Earth, as an alliance formed by civilian colonists, in order to provide basic defense for themselves as they spread through the galaxy.

As time progressed, other, more helpless civilizations joined, pooling their resources, in order to defend themselves against the onslaught of the many powerful races in existence. Races such as the K'Nough; a furry, arachnid-like race, who have many times before attacked these worlds, including Earth. The race that occupies the

area of space the Tesla slowly cruises by.

Its captain was the ever patient Captain Mendeleev Kershaw. Although he was one the most experienced officers in the Terran division of the Pact Aerospace Fleet, one who has even ventured into K'Nough space dozens of times before, found himself still a little nervous. He paced the bridge, trying hard to maintain his calm composure, so as to avoid alarming his new, inexperienced bridgecrew. He occasionally stroked his thick, goldenrod beard, whenever he felt impatient. He reviewed his instructions in his head, making sure he had followed them to the letter. Each time he did, he came to the same conclusion: there must be some sort of delay in transmitting his next instructions.

As he sat down, this highly decorated officer had felt he was on a mission of no apparent relevance. While he never involved himself with understanding the motives behind an assignment, He was aware of the Pact's methods. He understood since the 'reorganization,' when the pact officially became a military entity, a double agenda became policy. Often his missions would have a less obvious benefit to the Pact. One which could potentially upset another race in the Pact, but benefit the humans.

When he briefly glances down at the barrel-shaped cylinder beside his chair, he could only speculate how the Pact benefit could benefit from his present assignment. He found himself anxious to know what he would be instructed to do next.

He continued to remind himself of how their distance from Earth would have weighted heavily in delaying an immediate response from any transmission. He reminded himself again of how the Pact Counsel members, many of whom he had served with on missions before, rarely had time to immediately respond to every deep space message coming their way. He recounted how, in many instances, counsel members may not be available to respond, possibly being in

a meeting, or taking care of another matter. Despite this, Kershaw still felt a message should have been here by then. He stroked his beard again.

He returned his hand to the armrest, as his meditation on the situation didn't quell the anxiety he felt welling up, more so on that trip than the two previous. He tapped lightly on the armrest of his chair, only then realizing he'd been staring blankly at the same bright point on the forward viewscreen for several minutes.

He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Time?" He muttered, seemingly for the four billionth time.

The helmsman, who sat before Kershaw, the one losing his fight with fatigue, quickly looked up and about. "Sir?" He asked, baffled by the simple request.

Kershaw put his hand over his eyes, and shook his head. "The time ensign," he said patiently, but his tone was hinting of a shortage thereof.

The ensign looked down at his console, still trying to shake off the effects remaining dormant. He saw the information the captain sought. "1930 hours sir." He frowned, looking at the console again.

"Then it's official," Kershaw announced as he stood from his chair and took a moment to stretch.

The ensign looked back. "Sir?" He asked in the same bewildered tone.

Kershaw smiled. "How long has it been since Earth last signaled us?" He asked as he turned to the communications officer, Lt. Cassandra Neilson, to his left.

She looked up from her crossword puzzle, aware Kershaw was addressing her. She lifted the pad off her console. “over 48 hours, sir,” she said as she returned to her crossword.

The other, more alert helmsman, to the right of the first, shook his head. “That’s exactly 10 hours longer than the last time they sent us out here!”

Kershaw sat down, then stroked his beard. “Yes. I’m sure there’s a good reason though.”

The drowsy helmsman looked back. “You’d think they’d tell us why we were out here, especially if they’re gonna keep sending us out here!” He slumped in his chair. “It’s like they’ve forgot we’re out here!”

Kershaw looked down despairingly. “I wonder...,” he muttered to himself.

Before he could finish his thought, a muted beep came from behind Kershaw. He looked back at his tactical officer, Lt. Susan Anderson, who looked intently at her console. He wrinkled his brow. “Problem Sue?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so...,” she said, her voice trailing off.

Kershaw stood again, to walk around to her position. She looked up, briefly intimidated by his sudden presence. “It’s probably nothing,” Sue stated, then pointed at the center screen on her console.

Kershaw looked down, noting the triangular blob at the top of the screen. He looked at Sue. “Sensor anomaly?” He inquired.

Sue shook her head. "I don't think so. There's something out there moving, but I'm not sure exactly what." She presses a few nearby buttons, that created a small yellow point below the blob. "Here's where we are in relation to it." She looked up at the main forward viewscreen. "It should be in visual range now," she noted, pointing up at the screen."

Kershaw looked up, fixating on a dark mass, darker still against the blackness of space itself. The nearby stars reflected clearly off its smooth surface. "Magnify the image by a factor of 10." Kershaw moved closer. "What is that?"

The drowsy helmsman, by then wide awake, looked upon his console. "Captain, I think it's accelerating," He said, trying to check his calculation with a small chart on his console. He looked back. "No, I'm certain it's accelerating!"

Kershaw walked to the edge of the platform, just in front of the panoramic forward viewscreen. "How long has it been moving towards us tactical?" He inquired, having begun to stroke his beard again.

"I'm not sure," Sue commented, somewhat entranced by the feedback her console was giving her. "It was only a moment ago I was tracking something on long range, but by the time I switched to short range to check for a sensor echo, I was picking up a different ..." She stopped.

Kershaw turned to see the color had left her face. "Sue?" Kershaw remarked, as he was hoping for a response. For a moment, he didn't receive one.

She finally looked up. "I-I can't believe it!" She stammers. "It's ... it's the same anomaly! It must have been going over 1200 Kliks!"

Kershaw was astonished. Since he knew no ship in the known universe was capable of more than 200 Klinks, he found her conclusion unacceptable. "Tactical, are you certain of this?" Kershaw insisted, his voice clearly hinting of doubt.

"I'm positive," She replied, then looked away from Kershaw back to her screen. Her voice rose slightly as she remarked, "Sir, it's within firing range."

Kershaw turned back to the screen, surprised to see the anomaly was now engulfing the entire viewscreen. "Ensign, could you turn off the magnification?" He calmly commented, trying not to hint of his trepidation.

The ensign, who also stared at the viewscreen, quietly responded. "I already did, sir."

Kershaw looked down for a moment, to assess the peril they suddenly were in. Kershaw knew he could effectively deal with his own personal fear, not allowing it affect his performance in such daunting situations.

Kershaw remembered much of his crew however, was fresh, young cadets from the Pact Aerospace Academy, this being only their third excursion into deep space. With no practical experience with such an imposing unknown, he could only imagine the fear and anxiety that overwhelmed his bridge crew. Kershaw looked up.

"Condition Yellow!" He barked as he quickly returned to his seat. The ensigns, somewhat surprised by their order, hesitated. Until they saw Kershaw glare as he sat down.

"Condition Yellow!" One responded.

"Energy shields up, blast covers in place!" The other informed.

Kershaw looked about, and saw his thoughts manifest regarding the crew. Each tried to focus on their assignment, but they got more frustrated and anxious by the moment. Kershaw offered some reassurance. "Remember your training. It'll help us get through this." Kershaw leaned forward on his armrests, propping his head with his arms. "Then we can be bored to tears again." He looked about, seeing he was able to get at least a smile out of his crew. "Comm, any signals from the ship?" He asked, his glance to his left stopping at her. She looked down at her console, then looked up and shook her head. Kershaw leaned back in his chair. "All right, then, we'll break the ice. Open the Comlink."

Kershaw awaited her response, but he could hear she having some trouble with the controls. He glanced over to her reassuringly. She looked up, seeing Kershaw, and let out a sigh of relief. "Online sir," she finally commented.

Kershaw fixed onto the viewscreen. "This is Captain Mendeleev Kershaw of the Terran Vessel Tesla, please respond." Kershaw weighed his next words carefully, to dwell on the 'code of first contact of alien species,' as outlined by the Pact Aerospace Counsel. He knew the code specifically dictated any vessel on a direct heading for them that didn't respond with any form of accepted communication, within 15 seconds after an initial transmission, was to be considered hostile. Kershaw scoffed to himself, imagining the many ways such a short-sighted rule could cause more problems than it may avoid.

However, he knew there was no choice in how the situation was to be handled, considering how textbook a scenario it was already proving to be. He broke the silence. "This is the Terran Vessel Tesla. Your failure to respond and movement to our position will be viewed as an act of aggression. Please respond or we will be forced to fire upon you." Kershaw signaled for the broadcast to end. He looked

over to the helmsman. "What are they doing?" He asked.

The helmsman looked down. "They've ... stopped, sir," he remarked, unsure of what was really happening.

Kershaw stroked his beard. "Ensign?" He remarked, in expectation of a more detailed second response.

The ensign was still looking down. "Sir! Ships are coming out," He quickly focused sensors on one. "They appear to be the size of a two man shuttle, sir!"

Tactical interjected. "Captain, they've got weapons, and they're arming them!" Kershaw didn't need to hear anymore.

"Tactical, bring weapons on-line!" Kershaw hit a button beside the armrest giving him access to the ships' internal intercom. "All hands to battle stations!" He boomed over the intercom. He pressed another that gave him a personal tactical view screen.

"Tactical offensives online, sir!" The tactical officer stated. "Secondary batteries fully charged, mains almost ready."

"The shuttles are firing-!" the helm cried just as the ship began to shake mildly.

"Open fire on the nearest ships!" Kershaw commanded. He looked down to his personal tactical screen, to see how the small ships were faring.

In a matter of seconds, the dozens of little ships that buzzed about the Tesla, quickly were reduced to a mere handful. Each of the ships only withstood one or two direct blasts from the secondary cannons before there were thoroughly obliterated. Seeing their numbers were dwindling, the small ships returned to their

mothership.

Kershaw frowned. “Damage report?” He asked, disappointed by the brief, one-sided nature of the melee.

The helmsman looked over his console. He looked up as he shrugged his shoulders. “None Captain. I don’t even think they penetrated the shields!”

Kershaw leaned back, stroking his beard. “Is that all they are capable of? I find it hard to believe that *this* was an offensive.”

The Tactical officer jumped up. “Captain, look there!” She yelled as she pointed just above his line of sight.

Kershaw glanced up to see a dim, pulsing light near the top of the vessel before them. “Tactical?” He said, stilling trying to focus on the light.

“I’m on it!” She responded, having entered requests for additional information on the phenomenon. “I’m noting a large power build up within the ship ... And it’s already off the scales!”

“I don’t think we need to stay here any longer,” said the Captain, as he realized the danger looming above them. “Helmsman, give me your fastest speed on your farthest heading from here!”

However, it was already too late. The dim light swelled into a large burst, leaping quickly at the Tesla. Immediately overwhelming their shields, the TSC Tesla imploded a few moments later.

A transmission finally came, but it didn’t reach the TSC Tesla. The Tesla was already laid waste by a silent invader, now moving away in the direction it came.

In the midst of the Tesla's debris, a small, barrel-shaped container was set adrift, patiently awaiting another vessel that would soon cross its path.

Chapter 1

CAPTAIN'S LOG:

34th year of King Mordecai A. Tyberius, the 6th month, the 4th day of the month.

Or...

STARDATE: 2178.06-04 (according to the Terran trade calendar, which most worlds at least know)

This is my first log entry as the "Captain" of this ship, the HMSV Spartacus, a ship recently decommissioned by the Tyberian Armada. It is little more than a glorified shuttlecraft, since it was originally the captains' yacht of another ship decommissioned, the HMSV Thor. Now THAT was a ship I would really enjoy buzzing around space in! Unfortunately, my Father, the King, said there was too much classified technology still left on it, so it was not an option. Oh well.

On the other hand, I am not complaining. This may not be the biggest ship in the fleet, but it is one of the coolest. It is probably the smallest ship built with a FAST light drive. Not this 80 to 100 Klikes nonsense. Nope. This naughty child is equipped with a 175 Klike drive! I can cruise with most capitol ships at that speed!

Of course, I know the point of a log entry is not to go on and on about the ship, even though I probably could. So I will try not to annoy you, the listener (or reader, if the voice copy of the log is destroyed) with any more details. You can look up the specs on this ship yourself in the

ships' computer anyway.

So since this is my first log entry as "Captain" (I like the sound of that) of my ship, let me formally introduce myself: My full name is Prince Richard Fitzgerald Tyberius, prince of the Tyberian Empire and heir to the throne. Technically, I am prince in the province of Allsophoria, on my home planet of Alexandria, but my family has been the leading authority for quite some time. My dad, the King, will be happy to tell you Alexandria is the most beautiful planet ever to be seen. But, he is trying to promote it as a tourist attraction.

I guess I could describe how I look, since the visual records could be lost. Well, imagine the perfect man. If you are a guy and do not care to envision that, just ask a girl. Well, you got an idea what the perfect guy should look like? Positive? Good. Well, forget it now, and I will tell you how I really look. I am about 6'3", medium light brown skin, I guess, with wavy dark brown hair, cut in a style I cannot remember the name of. A fade on the sides, not too short, and longer on top. I just got out of Military School for the summer, so I can assure you I am in excellent shape. Especially since 'Fitness, Stamina, Dexterity' class is required the first two years. I guess they want to make sure I will be fit when I start serving as a commander or something. Yeah. Sitting and giving orders can take a lot out of you.

By the way, I am out on summer break, partly because, being royalty, I am not yet required to go to Military School. But my Father, the King, thinks its a good idea, anyway. 'Helps build character,' he says. Yeah, well, I hope he was being sarcastic about that. Not that he ever is about anything ... oh, never mind.

I am also partly out in order to 'mentally' prepare for something I have dreaded since I was about 7. Trust me, I would not wish this on my mortal enemy, but this summer, I am destined to be the husband of Rebecca Maxia, princess of the Maxian Empire (groan). But it is a subject I do not care to talk about right now.

What I want to explain is the point of this little adventure. I am planning to round up a few of my friends from high school who are still

on Earth. I know it has been a couple of years, but I have been able to keep in touch with a lot of them since then, and I even managed to locate a couple I had lost touch with.

Right now, I have tracked down Joseph Pike, my best friend from high school. He works for some big industrial firm there ... but I cannot remember what is called. I got it wrote down here somewhere ... here it is!... Matterhorn Power, Industry, & Electronics. Hmm. I guess they make generators and electronics.

Anyway, I am in the process of landing right now on Earth, near the Matterhorn branch on the North American continent. That's where he said he was stationed at. He said he is working on some really top secret stuff, stuff I will not document here, to avoid espionage liability. After all, I am a prince of a foreign power. I do not have any business knowing their world's defense secrets, right?

This is Richard, signing off.

His Majesty's Space Vessel (commonly abbreviated HMSV) Spartacus touches down gently on the tarmac of the Nebraska Interstellar transit site, on the outskirts of the city of Omaha. The Gantry springs open for Richard to step from the Spartacus' side exit, and he takes a deep breath of the Terran air. He glances over the surrounding area, puzzled by what he sees.

While he is aware of the typical layout of a Terran Interstellar transit site, it still amazes Richard how sparse and uninviting an environment it initially presents of Earth. Stretching out for miles in all directions, as far as he can see, lay flat, smooth asphalt. Atop the asphalt, ships of varying sizes and shapes are resting quietly, awaiting the return of their respective passengers. Richard looks around again, not noting a single tree or shrub within view; only the occasional arching metal superstructure, primary supports for

environmental domes some species require.

The only other notable landmark on the landscape is the small building in the midst of the asphalt: the check-in station. Its design, resembling a small artillery bunker more than anything else, carries the same sparse theme as its surroundings in its construction, with plain concrete cinderblocks for walls, and an asphalt-coated cinderblock roof. Richard walks up to the concrete structure, noting its simple, straightforward design, and the unusually happy girl waving at him from inside an opening on the side.

Richard smiles as he approaches, seeing her appearance is one typical of Terran women (girls, really) working at such Interstellar transit sites. She has long, straight hair, in a shade of blonde with an iridescent quality. Her overall height couldn't be more than 5'6", since she is stretching herself over the counter to wave and get his attention. Her bright blue eyes, showing her genuine over-interest in assisting him, lock onto his. This forces Richard to nervously glance down, in fear her piercing stare is some sort of mind probe, a way to erase his mind with her unnervingly eager eyes. Though her clothes fit her properly, a white blouse, black vest and matching pants, Richard notes how waifish her physique is. Except for the trademark full bosom some Terran men are proud to point out on the women of their species. "There are over 750 transit sites on Earth," Richard thinks to himself, "Could they all have attendants with this appearance?"

"Hi and welcome to Earth, the diamond of the Terran Solar system!" She yells as he approaches, to present a more inviting perspective than her surroundings indicate Earth can offer.

Richard, who is carrying a small backpack, puts it on the counter in the side of the building from which the girl grins from. "Hello," he responds hesitantly, because of the alarmingly perky grin she bears across her face.

Before he can continue, the young lady initiates a brief interrogation. "Is this your first visit to Earth?" she asks. Richard shakes his head. She looks over to his ship. "It doesn't appear you have our new Earth Americas Parking permit! Would you like to order it now for your next visit?"

"Um, no," Richard replies. "I am a representative of the Tyberian Empire. I do not need one of those to park my ship here."

She smirks politely, then speaks with a hint of cynicism. "But that doesn't appear to be an Ambassadorial Shuttle? It looks more like the Captains' yacht of the recently decommissioned Viking class battle cruisers of the Alexandrian Empire."

Richard steps back, her remark astonishing him. "How do you know that? The Viking Class was decommissioned from service only a month ago!"

She smiles, finding his surprise flattering. "I like to know my ships!" She holds up a sheet of paper. "I'll need you to fill this out," she says with a polite firmness, and hands him the paper.

Richard takes the paper, looking it over. "What is this?" he inquires.

"It's the application for that parking permit I told you about! I'll need you to fill this out."

Richard lays the paper on the counter. "Listen lady, I told you I am a representative of the Tyberian Empire." He draws his ID from his inside jacket pocket, showing it to the skeptical girl behind the counter. "I am Richard Tyberius."

She looks down at his ID and then up at him. "Richard

Tyberius?” She remarks with skepticism. “I’m not sure I know that name ...” She slowly pushes the application back towards Richard. “I really can’t allow you to park there without the proper authorization, since that’s reserved for the Royal Tyberian Family of the Alexandrian Empire. So if you’ll just fill this out,” her smile intensifies, “it won’t take but a minute,” she turns her attention to the tarmac behind Richard, pointing to a distant edge, “and then if I could have you move your ship afterwards to the commons landing grounds, we can have you on your way!”

Richard folds his arms in disbelief at what is transpiring. “I am not sure you understand, Miss-”

She straightens up, pointing to the shiny name tag on the lapel of her vest. “Call me Amber!” She interjects.

“-Amber,” Richard pauses. “Well, Amber, I happen to be the crown prince of the Royal Tyberian Empire, and Vice-Commander of the Royal Tyberian Armada, second in command only to the King himself.” Richard unfolds his arms, leaning forward on the counter, looking straight into her cheerful light blue eyes. “So I suggest you answer my questions and let me be on my way.”

Amber, a little intimidated, but still skeptical, works to retain her bubbly composure. “I’m sure this can be cleared up. Let me have the security personnel come here, and you can-”

Richard waves his hands, seeing where this is going. “Listen. I obviously cannot convince you I am who I say I am.” Richard pulls out his identification again. “You should be able to recognize this contact code.”

She looks at the ID. “Of course, its the reach for the Royal Tyberian Information Network.” She looks up at Richard. “Everyone knows that.”

Richard hands her his ID. "Call the operator, and tell them Richard Tyberius wants to speak to his father."

Amber looks at the card, then Richard. She smiles, and mockingly responds, "Sure, why not? I'm sure this won't take long." She inputs the code into a terminal behind her in the building. A large video screen, above the terminal, briefly displays the seal of the Tyberian Empire, then the face of a male operator.

"Welcome to the Royal Tyberian Information Network, I am Sean," the operator relates, "How may I direct your call?"

Amber folds her arms, looking back at Richard. "I'm needing to speak to the father of Richard Tyberius," She asks, thinking she already knew the answer.

Sean looks down at the console before himself. "I'm sorry," he replies. "The King is not available right now. May I direct your call to the Ministry of External Affairs? They would probably would be able to get a message to him?"

Richard speaks. "Sean, is my dad still in the Secondary Worlds Trade meeting? I forgot that was today."

Recognizing the voice, Sean grins. "Of course, your highness!" He comments convincingly. "At least until this afternoon, the way it's looking," he concludes.

Richard now eyes Amber, watching a reddish color enter her light-complexioned face. "I have already told you you can call me Richard," he remarks to Sean.

"You know the rules," corrects Sean. "I'm not allowed to address royalty informally over an unsecured channel. It's considered a

breach of protocol, your highness.”

Richard nods. “I know, I was just checking.”

Sean leans back in his seat. “Anything else?” Richard shakes head. “Then thanks for using the Royal Tyberian Information Network.” The image changes to the Seal again before going blank.

Amber, blushing a bright red, stares at the counter. “I am so sorry. I can’t believe I was so rude to such royalty!” She looks up. “Please forgive me!”

Richard smiles. “Forget it. You are doing your job, that is all!”

“I hope this won’t reflect badly on trade relations between the Terran Federation and the Tyberian Empire!” She pleads, with tears starting to stream down her face.

Richard shakes his head slowly, finding her reaction bizzare. “You are making too much of this incident. But I do have a couple of questions.”

Amber’s face lights up. “Of course! Anything for you, your highness!” She squeals elatedly, wiping her eyes.

Richard gazes critically at Amber. “Right. First of all,” pulling out a small digital assistant. “I need to find out where the Matterhorn P.I.E. branch is on this land mass.”

She looks down at her terminal, keying in the information. “Oh that’s in Wichita, just south of here!” She hands him a small data card. “This includes a detailed map to the headquarters, including interesting landmarks and sites along the way,” she bubbles, trying to cover over the previous incompetnce she has demonstrated. “Is there any other service I can provide you?” She implores, leaning

closer to Richard.

Richard grabs his backpack, slinging it onto his shoulder. “I do not see any trees around,” He comments, looking around. He looks over to Amber. “I would think trees would give this place a more inviting atmosphere. You know why there are none?”

“I don’t understand,” She says. “Why should there be trees here?” she shakes her head. “I’m sure they’d just get in the way.”

Richard nods, starting to walk away. “Yeah, I guess that is one way of looking at it.”



Richard cruises into Wichita three hours later. ‘Sure,’ he thinks, ‘I would have been here about an hour earlier, had I not gone east at Emporia!’

He moved his car through the streets, hovering by on a pocket of air. The sleek lines and high gloss give it a fluid look as his car flowed through the streets of Wichita.

They approach his destination, just outside of west Wichita. Richard then turns into the entrance of the Matterhorn Power & Industrial Electronics complex.

The complex, which nests on nearly 400 acres outside of Wichita, is unusually large, given the land restrictions enforced when the colonization of Mars began nearly 90 years earlier, Richard thinks to himself. But as he travels down the entrance road, he notes a sign remarking on the companies’ 175th anniversary in business, celebrated a year earlier. Richard finds this equally remarkable, since few companies on Earth predate the nuclear holocaust the experienced more than a 150 years ago.

The vehicle, elatedly content with being at Richard's service for this trip, purrs quietly. As it approaches the gate of the facility, however, the vehicle whines, aware the trip is coming to an end.

Richard looks up, preparing to negotiate entry into the complex. Staring back at him, however, is the perturbed mug of a tired, heavy security guard.

At ease with how well his girth fills the small guard station, he takes a moment to scratch a couple of areas on his body that itch, including his groin. Looking down at Richard from his high perching, he tips his bright orange hat back on his brow, scratching his thinning forehead, then settles his weight onto his thick forearms, the sleeves of his bright orange uniform rolled up to expose his rather hirsute arms. "What I can I do for you?" he asks sarcastically, knowing the sole purpose of the conversation he initiates.

Richard, smiles politely, although nervously, after absorbing the spectacle of the guards' conspicuous relief of an itch. He takes a moment to gather his thoughts. "I need to enter this complex. A friend of mine works here, and I-"

The guard waves his pudgy hand. "I'm afraid I can't allow you to do that." Leaning back, he reaches down for a belt, one which barely clings to his immense gut. As he takes a deep breath, he yanks up his bright orange pants. Satisfied with the result, he proceeds to relate a line of reasoning he's memorized for just such an occasion.

"You see, this is a restricted area. Not just anybody can come and go through here as they please. There's protocol, rules, regulations, and other bureaucratic nonsense governing this type of thing." He settles back onto the counter again, with a look of dissatisfaction on his face. "You see," he starts again, "they have

taken many precautions to insure these secrets remain just that: Secret.” He adjusts his hat. “I’m the first line of defense. With that being the case, I have the important job of keeping people like you,” waving a pudgy finger at Richard, “out on places like this,” pointing back at the complex.

Richard looks forward, in meditation. He looks up at the security guard. “How about if you could have Joseph Pike paged? I am sure he would be more than happy to clear me for entry.”

The guard feigns a smile. “I would hardly bother such an important and busy person as Mr. Pike for a matter like this.” He leans back in chair, knotting his fingers contentedly over his immense gut. “But I’ll gladly mention your name when he leaves this evening.”

Richard decides to change the angle of his approach. “Well then, what if I told you I was of royalty, and I have permission from the president of this establishment to enter and go where I wish?” The security guard thinks for a moment, scratching his head again.

“Interesting you should say that! You’re the fourth ... no, fifth guy to pass himself off as royalty this week! The first time was original. The second was cute. The third time was beginning to try my patience. The fourth time I was forced to chase the guy away!” He adjusts his pants again. “Now, unless you’re looking for a night in jail, I think you should leave!” He points demandingly in the direction of the road which leads up to the gate.

Just as Richard is about to plead for entry, he beholds, out of the corner of his eye, Joseph rounding the corner of a nearby building. Richard, seeing his chance, immediately jumps out his car and, after clearing the ‘no entry’ arm blocking his car’s path, runs over to him. “Joe!” he shouts, trying to get his attention, as Joe now rounds the corner of another building.

The guard, finding the recent turn of events agitating, waddles to a small electric cart behind the guard station, preparing to pursue.

Richard, nearly out of breath, barely catches up to his friend. "Joe!" he gasps.

Joe, finally looking up from some notes absorbing his attention, realizes Richard is behind him, bent over gasping for air. "Richard?" Joe says, finding it surprising to see him standing there. He looks around, trying to comprehend why Richard is suddenly manifest before himself. "How did you get in here?" He asks in amazement.

Richard, standing upright, but still short of breath, gestures toward the guard station. Joe looks over, seeing an agitated guard now approaching in a whining little cart. Joe smiles. "Oh, I get it," he comments nodding his head.

"Nice guard...", Richard finally gasps, "...real amiable..."

By then, the guard pulls up in his cart, the cart releasing a sigh of relief as it stops. "Do you even realize how many rules, protocols," he pauses to adjust his hat, on account of the sun's glare, "and laws, for that matter, you've broken!"

The guard inhales, preparing to relate Richard's heinous transgressions, but Joe raises a hand. "That's quite all right," Joe states. "He's with me."

The guard, now very perturbed, scoffs as he backs away to return to his post. Richard, watching the guard leave, turns to his friend. "It has been a long time," he comments.

Joe smiles, nodding. "To say the least! I didn't think we would ever be on the same planet together again!" Joe gestures, directing

Richard to follow him to a door he is approaching. “With you being groomed to the throne, and me stuck in research all the time, it would seem there’s no time to visit friends.”

They reach the door of a vast building. The building looks similar to a vast, half-buried barrel on its side, the walls and roof on the sides being part of the same curve, the front of the building flat. A single door is in the center of the flat wall.

Joe pulls a small card out of his left pocket. Its surface is worn smooth in spots due to its rough life of use. Joe then swipes the card through a slot for it near the door. Joe shakes his head. “These have to be the crudest security measures ever used,” He looks up to Richard. “considering what kind of ‘secrets’ we’re supposed to be working on.” The heavy metal door groans, creaking slowly to the right. Joe and Richard step in, not waiting for the door to finish its task. Richard pauses a moment and looks around.

He is in shock by the sheer size of the interior. The high arching roof lets in natural light from 8 or 10 portals along the sides of the roof. This light, though bright, is complimented with 10 or 15 hanging lamps along the 4 arching roof supports.

Though the building is about 100 meters tall at the apex, the floor within is lowered about the same, creating a huge open space within the structure. The expansive floor area is consumed with various scale models of ships under design by Matterhorn.

Near each model is a group of energetic designers and engineers, pointing and gesturing at their respective models. The lively nature of their design process is surprising Richard. But this isn’t what surprises him the most.

Hanging from the arching rafters is a full scale, possibly working, version of a small Terran warship. Nearly 100 meters wide, twice

that in length, the ship hangs a few meters from the heads of the several Matterhorn personnel hard at work. The ventilation system kicks in, causing the behemoth to sway lightly, the rafters expressing discontent as it moves. Richard steps back to flee, but then notices how everyone else in the building is oblivious to the danger, ever-present, overhead.

Richard stares in awe. Joe taps his friend's shoulder. Richard looks back at Joe's smiling face. "I know what you're thinking, and don't worry!" Joe starts forward to the stairs ahead. "They say if you walk under it enough, eventually you'll forget it's there." He looks forward, casually moving down the stairs to the ground level.

"Right," Richard fears, cautiously following, but still glancing up at the ship hanging over his head.

When he looks down, he perceives, near each of the scale models are large, flat, stubby tables, appearing to be billiard tables. As they walk up the center aisle to a door at the other end, Richard can see the tables are level on top, displaying some type of drafting information on their smooth polished surface. People standing around each of them can directly manipulate the physical scale model designs near the tables by merely touching the surface of the table, sliding their finger from the criticized point, to the more desired one.

They continue down the middle the floor, treading down a wide strip of worn gray carpeting marking the aisle from the entry staircase to the staircase on the opposing end of the building. While the second staircase is joined to the first by a raised floor, circling the area Matterhorn personnel work in, it's obvious no one walks the perimeter of the building to get to the other side.

As Richard moves up the second set of steps, he looks back at the ship looming overhead. "No," he says resolutely, "I could never get

used to that being over my head!” Joe opens the door to a small office at the top of the steps, gesturing for Richard to enter. “Especially knowing how much those things weigh!”

Joe smiles, closing the door as he enters. “Don’t worry,” he lets out a sigh of relief, “I haven’t gotten that used to it myself!” Joe steps behind a desk across from the door. He sweeps away a small pile of paper on it into a desk drawer, sitting down behind the desk. He looks up at Richard, embarrassed. “Um, have a seat!”

As he sits, Richard now notices how the desk isn’t the only place papers are piled. Upon removing a small pile in a nearby chair, setting it on a larger one beside it, and sitting down, he summarizes there is hardly a spot where there is no paper. Richard smiles. “I guess that expression your people have, ‘old habits die hard,’ has proven itself.”

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Joe shakes his head. “You realize you’re only the second person to actually come into this room since it became my office?” He turns around, remembering a larger pile of papers on the desk behind himself, to immediately deal with the pile. “My bosses won’t come down here, because of that ship. So if they want an audience with somebody down here, we have to go to their office on the other side of the complex.” Joe proceeds to pile the heaps of paper into a bin behind the first desk, glancing at various pages as he did.

Richard leans back, enjoying the entertaining show before him. “If they do not want that ship hanging up there, why do they not take it down?”

Joe looks up at Richard, sweeping the remaining papers on the desk into the bin. “The engineers won’t have it.” He looks left, distracted by another huge pile of papers in a corner of the room. “It’s funny though. When they put the first ship up, the engineers protested.”

Richard sits up. “You mean,” Richard starts, “this is not the only one to hang from there?”

Joe smiles, moving over to the pile of papers he has spotted. “Nope. It was originally the second CEO of Matterhorn’s idea, I think. He put a Athena-class fighter up as a publicity stunt for this facility. He thought he would draw more seasoned engineers here after the war to help design ships.” Picking up the pile, Joe searches the room for a suitable home for the papers. “When they did a major redesign on that model, they decided to take the original down.” Joe notes a slightly ajar file cabinet drawer on the other side of his office, and starts toward it. “The engineers had gotten attached to the ship, and they demanded a model of a new mid-size corvette replace the old one. When management initially denied their request, the engineers made it part of the new union contract to replace the ship. The contract they happened to be negotiating that year.” Joe pulls the drawer open, letting out a sigh, seeing it is already full of papers. “They nearly went on strike over it.”

Richard stands up, looking to help his friend organize. “It seems they got their wish. I guess this means they will not be trying that stunt again.”

Joe pulls open a draw in the cabinet below the first. “Yes!” He exclaims, yanking out some papers. “I’ve been looking all over for this!” He dumps the others into the drawer, slamming it shut. He looks over to Richard. “Oddly enough, management don’t care much anymore about it being there. In fact they’re planning on moving a new ship into its place.” Joe lays the papers on his desk, then leans against it.

“I have never understood how you can find anything in this chaos,” Richard says, picking up a pile of papers.

Joe snaps his fingers, displaying a large grin. “See if you can guess what this is!” Joe goes back to the desk behind his own. It still has several books, not to mention papers, on it, but there is also something else on it. “This is what I wanted you to see.” Richard moved closer to the desk, to get a better look at what was on it.

“What exactly is this?”

Joe smiles proudly. “It’s a model for a Mass Displacement Drive. This could easily be the fastest engine for a Galactic Starship ever built.” Richard suddenly realizes the significance of the thing on the desk.

“Your senior paper was on this!” Richard looks down to recall a key thought. “You said in theory, we could cross the Milky Way galaxy in a matter of seconds instead of 5 to 10 years with conventional light drives. This is an incredible break thru!” Richard excitedly exclaims.

Joe lets out a sigh. “It will be, once I find something which can power it. All of our conventional power sources just aren’t concentrated enough to energize it for more than a few seconds. The amount of conventional fuel needed to power it for more than 5 or 10 minutes would fill this hangar, assuming we could get it into the thing fast enough.” He sits down in the chair. He lets out another sigh as he plops down. “I’ve run out of ideas and I don’t know where to go from here.”

Clearing a spot, Richard sits onto the edge of the desk. “How long have you been working on this?”

Joe leans back in the chair, his hand on the top of his head. “Ever since I got out of school. That’s how I got this job.” He leaned forward, reaching for a coiled up sheet of paper sticking out of a drawer. Pulling it out, he spreads it out a little on the desk. “When I

showed them the original design, they loved it! They wanted me to start immediately. About 3 months ago we ran into a problem with this.” Joe points to a sketch of a arrowhead-shaped piece. “We can’t get it to modulate at a high enough frequency to sustain this.” he moves to a T-shaped piece. Joe stares at the page, hoping for enlightenment that, thus far, eludes him.

Richard sees this as his chance to make his pitch, remembering it is the original reason he has come in the first place. “Well, “ he starts, “maybe you need to take your mind off of this for awhile. Maybe go somewhere, to loosen up. Then you can attack this with a new perspective on things.”

Joe folds his arms. “You know, you still haven’t told me why you’re here.”

Richard hands Joe the papers. “I was seeing if you might be free, to do a little traveling.” Richard leans on the desk beside Joe. “A bachelor excursion. One last adventure before our responsibilities reach critical mass!”

Joe looks up at the ceiling, letting out a longing sigh. “My friend, it may already be too late for me,” he remarks. “I mean, I’d love to go! In fact, I would go, if I didn’t have this to worry about,” pointing in disgust at his creation on the back desk. Joe took a deep breath. “What am I going to do?”

Richard looked down at the floor, in deep thought. Then it came to him. “Joe,” Richard said, turning to face him, “you said yourself the engine cannot run for any length of time on conventional fuels.” Joe looked up from his creation.

“Yeah, I tried everything! Even some things I was sure wouldn’t work. Nothing can give it enough power fast enough or long enough. Nothing.”

Richard began to pace around the desk. “What if,” he began, “What if you discovered an element, a gas, or some sort of plasma would work? You see, this is no ordinary engine, so the fact it cannot use ordinary fuels should not be hard to accept. Therefore, the fuel would power this would have to be as extraordinary as the engine itself.”

Joe was puzzled by Richard’s present line of thought. “I don’t see where this is leading.”

“Do you not see,” Richard said, spinning to face Joe, “In order to find that ‘extraordinary’ element, you have to look in unconventional places! You have to go to unconventional worlds, to seek out the unconventional! With an unconventional line of thought, you could easily locate that which is unconventional!”

Joe looks down, smiling, and shakes his head. “You really want me to go, don’t you?”

Richard sat down on the desk again. “Joe, it just would not be an adventure without you.” He pauses. “So, whaddaya say?”

“Well, I didn’t think I would get this job. And I never thought I could build this.” Joe leaned back slowly in his chair. “Asking for time off to do ‘research’ should be a cakewalk.” Richard grinned. However Joe cringes, apparently recalling an ominous thought. “But, Jen already thinks I don’t spend enough time with her. I already know how she’ll react to-!”

“Jen?” Richard blurts. “Are you referring to Jennifer Oswald?” Richard frowns. “From high school?”

Joe looks over to Richard. “Um, yeah,” he reluctantly responds. “Why?”

Richard jumps up. "Why?" He asserts. "You hated her in high school! Why, every time you two crossed paths, I was sure somebody was going to be maimed!"

Joe laughs. "'Hate' is such a strong word," Joe objects. "'Strong-willed' would better describe her. There are certain things she feels very strongly about. Once I realized that, well, we sorta hit it off."

Richard looks intently at Joe. "You desired her all along, did you not?" Joe smiles. "That explains why we were crossing paths with her so much." Richard grins. "You were trying to, how you say, 'hook up' with her?" He shakes his head.

Joe, somewhat embarrassed, looks down. "Well, it wasn't until after high school we connected though. But we've been dating for almost a year now." He stands up, his arms still folded, and steps behind his desk.

Richard's eyes follow his friend. "A year? You are probably close to..." He watches as Joe pulls a small box from the top desk drawer. The paper dust lightly covering the heavy black velvet on the outside of the box indicates to Richard the box may have been there a while. "... asking her?"

Joe slowly opens the box, peering at its contents. "I don't know," he sighs.

Richard steps closer. "You have doubts?"

Joe looks up, quickly closing the box. "No, it's not that," Joe corrects, "I'm sure she'll say yes. She's probably wondering why I haven't asked her yet." He pauses. "I'm just wondering if she'll be pleased with the ring."

Richard folds his arms again. “You are kidding, right?”

Joe puts the box into his coat pocket. “Well, I mean, I did spend 2 months salary on this, and although they got the setting right, I was hoping to get a diamond with a little more blue in it, to better match the sapphires.”

Richard stares in amazement. “You are worried about her not liking the color of the stones on the ring?” Richard walks over to his friend. “Give her the ring Joe! Do you not think she has waited long enough?”

Joe scratches the back of his neck. “I just want everything to be perfect, you know?” Joe starts for the door slowly. “The perfect ring, the perfect setting, the perfect moment.” Joe stops. “I don’t want to mess this this up, it’s just too important.”

Richard steps over to Joe. “Joe, the only way you will to mess this up is if you do not ask her!” Joe looks at Richard, letting his words sink in.

Joe looks away and nods. “Maybe you’re right.” He starts again for the door. Stepping through, he stops and turns back. “You coming?”

“Coming?” Richard inquires.

Joe smiles. “I have an idea of how I can get some time off!”



At the opposite end of the Matterhorn complex from the engineering area lies the corporate headquarters of Matterhorn. Within lie the various administrative departments which coordinate with the companies’ far-flung operations. While most other

departments are forced to use video conferencing as their principle means of quickly communicating with the Central Headquarters, the engineers were afforded the luxury of addressing their superiors in person. The engineers, including Joe, often take advantage of this unique privilege.

The corporate headquarters building is set on a particularly well-landscaped portion of the complex. Each of the three buildings, staggering in height (with the middle building being the tallest, the one to its left slightly shorter, followed by the third being the shortest), resembles the gothic architecture popular in the early twentieth century. Each building has heavy marble facades around the first two or three floors, in several muted shades. Each building is also decorated with ornate staggered masonry, including contrasting hued bricks on the corner edges and in the detailing around the windows. Each building tapers to a rounded point, having a large medallion-shaped picture window in each side. The window bears the nearly 200 year old logo of the company within. They enter the tallest building through one of the rotating doors into the huge lobby. Upon walking in, Richard pauses for a moment to take in the surroundings.

Richard takes note of the vast, though sparse, lobby within the middle building, noting only the large, ornate pillars of white marble supporting the building, and the expansive information desk in the center of the area as decor. The floor is covered with a heavy deep maroon plush pile carpet, to contrast with the white marble trim. Richard looks up at the nearly thirty foot bronze eagle perched atop the rear of the information desk, its wings spread as though preparing to take off through the third floor.

As they walk up to the receptionist counter, Richard notes how the the counter is made from the same white marble. A young woman, sitting behind the counter typing away, stops, seeing the pair had approached her. "Can I help you?" she asks politely.

Joe looks down to her, smiling. “It’s me! I’m here to see Mr. Matterhorn,” he causally remarks.

“Yes, that’s the only reason you ever come up here, anymore,” she sighs, pushing a button on a nearby console as she lifts the handset to a communications console. Joe pulls back from the counter, caught off guard by the cold remark. She looks up at him. “You can go up. He’s in a meeting, but he’ll be finished by the time you get up there.” Joe grins nervously, then darts quickly to the bank of elevators directly behind the information desk. He presses a button with an arrow pointing up.

Richard follows, putting his hands behind his back. “What was that all about?” Richard asks, trying to act as if he didn’t just ask a personal question.

“Oh, well,” Joe says, rubbing the back of his neck, “I apparently gave her the impression I was interested in her, or something like that.” Richard looks over to Joe. A green arrow above one of the elevators elatedly dings, signaling the arrival of an elevator. Joe turns, noticing the polished brass doors of a nearby elevator pop open.

“You weren’t? She looked pretty attractive to me. I certainly would have!” He remarks sarcastically. They step in to the velvet-lined elevator, Richard noting his reflection in the smooth brass trim framing the sheets of velvet.

“If Jen even suspected that, she would be up here in my face within the hour!” he replies, looking over to Richard. Jen can get very jealous very easily!”

“Oh!” Richard says, smiling at this revelation. “I think I see a love triangle forming!”

“No! No you don’t! I don’t want you to even mention this to anyone else! Richard leans against the side the elevator, staring at Joe. Joe looks back, seeing Richard’s mocking grin. “I know what you’re thinking! You think she backed me into a corner and threatened me with bodily harm if I even thought something like that!”

“She must have, since I can’t see you making that up,” Richard said frankly.

“Well, she did, but that was before we talked,” he clarifies. “But I did tell her I didn’t enjoy her getting jealous of every girl walking into my line of sight, and I still wanted to pursue my career. She understood, and agreed to try not to be so jealous.” Joe folds his arms. “In fact, she isn’t even here, to show you how much she trusts me! She’s in Egypt, on a archeological dig in some pharaoh’s pyramid,” he says in his defense.

“Well, I just hope if I fall in love with somebody, they will not get as jealous as she does!” Richard turns back to the doors, but notices now they did not immediately close. Joe looks up for a moment. “Um, you did pick a floor, right,” Richard sarcastically remarks.

“Yes-!” Joe pauses, suddenly grabbing for his pocket. “-sorry, I just remembered something!” He pulls out his worn badge card again. Richard now notices the panel left of the doors, neatly framing the buttons to various floors. The topmost button, which was already lit, bore a small slot beside it, into which Joe quickly jabs his badge. The doors finally close. “Always forget that when I’m going to the top!” He states, then sighs.

“How often does she call?”

Joe heaves a heavy sigh. “Up until a couple of weeks ago,

everyday! But she said she may not be able to call for a couple of weeks, since she won't be near a phone." He looks up to the ceiling. "Thank goodness!" he says under his breath. Richard shakes his head.

As the elevator makes its ascent, Richard admires the intricate etchings on the smooth brass trim. When he reaches out to touch it, he is surprised to find the surface actually smooth, as if there is a transparent film protecting the etching. Richard touches the velvet. "When was this building built?" He inquires to Joe.

Joe thinks for a moment. "Well, actually, I think about 70 years ago."

"I did not think this style of architecture was popular on your world then," Richard comments

Joe nods. "That's the advantage of owning your own company: you can design your buildings however you want! I think one of the previous CEOs 'relished' gothic architecture." He folds his arms. "But, personally, I think the marble and brick here are just to make people jealous of how stupid rich this company must be!"

Richard looks down to his watch. "This is a long elevator ride."

Joe leans back onto the back of the elevator. "Sometimes they're in a meeting with certain 'sensitive' customers, and the customers don't want their identity publicly known. So they hold the elevators to that floor until they leave."

"That would make me wonder what they have to hide." Richard runs his fingers across the thick velvet again. "They certainly went to a lot of expense on this elevator, considering Earth's labor costs," Richard comments.

Joe shakes his head. “Most of the fixtures in this building weren’t manufactured on Earth.” Richard pulls his hands away from the velvet. “Whenever possible, Matterhorn out sources to the lowest bidder.”

Richard finds this revelation surprising, preparing to inquire further. However, the delay in the elevator trip comes to an end, the doors popping open on the topmost floor.

The room Joe and Richard step into is clearly on the topmost floor, Richard notes, since the silhouette of the original Matterhorn logo is visible on the wall before them. In front of the inlaid solid wood wall is a desk, at which a young man sits. He stares intently at a flat pane of crystal, noting his various inputs as they display on the flat pane. The plush, almost shag carpet covering the floor looks almost new, save a small path beaten to the desk from the elevator, and to a nearby set of plush leather furnishings.

Joe walks up to the young man at the desk. Richard remains in front of the elevator, not sure if he should proceed. He notes Joe gesturing toward the double door just behind the young man. The young man looks over to Richard briefly, then back to Joe. The young man nods, looking down at his crystal display. From his vantage point, Richard is able to see the face of a gentleman, possibly about his father’s age, displayed on the screen. The young man makes a few brief remarks to his crystal screen, then waits briefly for a response. The gentleman nods, responding, then the screen dims. Joe starts for the door. Richard prepares to follow. The young man quickly stands. “I’m sorry, your majesty,” he politely protests, “but I can’t allow you to enter.” Richard stops, looking at Joe.

Joe smiles. “Don’t worry. This won’t take but a minute,” He assures, quickly entering the neatly framed door on the inlaid wood wall.

The young man raises a hand toward the nearby leather furnishings. “If you would prefer, you may have a seat here,” He offers. Richard nods, meandering over to the furnishings, plopping down onto a particularly overstuffed leather couch.

“Yeah, I am sure this will take a lot more than a minute,” he mutters to himself.



Joe steps through one of the two doors, closing it quietly behind himself. Within, was a small, square hallway with three doors. To his left and right were the boardrooms, where the chairpersons meet for their many meetings. However, just in front of Joe, was the door he was heading for. As he started for it, he looks up at the shiny lettering across the door, spelling out ‘Zachariah Barclay Matterhorn, C.E.O.’ in a fine script font. Joe shakes his head, imagining the headache laying out each of those letters on the door must have been.

Joe enters the office. Stepping through the door, Joe looks around the room, seeing the three individuals at a long white marble desk. The first is a woman, with reddish hair, who appears to be in her mid 30s. The one in the middle is a man who appears to be in his early 50s wearing a strikingly bright lavender and violet tie, which stands out to Joe. The one on the far right of the desk from Joe is also a woman, in her late 20s, with Brunette hair. The man raises his hand, gesturing for Joe to sit in a chair before himself. Joe sits down in the large maroon velvet plush chair.

Straight before Joe sat the man himself, above him the massive Matterhorn logo towering for another 50 meters above his head. The huge picture window gives Joe a clear view of the rest of the Matterhorn facility, even a glimpse of downtown Wichita near the horizon. Joe back looks down at the gentleman behind the desk,

noting his warm smile. “Joseph, it’s good of you to visit me. How is your project coming along? Have you gotten the results from the Alpha testing?”

Joe sits, kneading his fingers together in his lap. “Yes, and the results, so far, are positive.”

Mr. Matterhorn stands, turning to take in the scenic view his office offers behind himself. “Excellent work! Your research into fold technology has always looked promising. It is good to see such consistent, positive results from your efforts.” He pauses. “How do you propose we proceed with the Beta testing?”

Joe looks down at the mahogany desk. “I have reason to believe I may be able to beta test the device once I’m able to locate a power source or fuel suitable for it. Once this is done, I propose a test in actual space, under controlled conditions, to be conducted, to test range and long term stability.”

“Really?” Mr. Matterhorn comments, looking up into the sky. “I thought the Generator Engineering department was already working on a power solution for you.” He looks down, shaking his head. “However, I am surprised they have yet to produce a suitable test fuel or a reliable power source.” He steps closer to the window. “Was there something you had in mind?”

“Well, I was wondering if I could take some time to research the power problem myself. I was thinking of checking on some experimental power sources, or to try and locate an element which would prove suitable for testing applications.”

Mr. Matterhorn glances to his left, at a nearby grove of trees. “Is this a practical venture?” He blindly inquires.

Joe looks to his left, recalling Mr. Matterhorn’s two executive

assistants. Joe finds himself wondering how much 'assistance' he actually needs, since he seems already well-informed. However, they are dispensing to him their advice on matters of concern to him.

The first woman, to Joe's left, is presumably who Mr. Matterhorn is addressing. Her mane, a striking crimson, is drawn back from her face in a loose ponytail, a subtle way of taming her large curls, save a chosen few. These curls carefully frame her otherwise ordinary-looking face. Ordinary, except for a few faint freckles dotting her cheeks and nose. As she keys on the console, Joe notices she has freckles on the backs of her hands. "From the specifications available, the present design will require a sizable test platform." She looks up at Joe, the same odious look she gives him each time he visits. "It would require a ship of at least our Excelsior series. And at that, it would barely qualify. Of, course this is all assuming an element we could test can be found, which would require it to go through a refinement process, as well as applications testing. All of which could take months, and could possibly bring us back to this point."

Mr. Matterhorn turns back to the scenic view before him. "The Excelsior series. Hmm, that certainly is a sizable 'test platform.'" He releases a brief sigh. "Certainly not one we normally build for even demo purposes. It would seem a special fuel, and a special ship may need to be built just to complete the Beta testing." Joe groans. Such a suggestion implies a minimum 3 month wait before a ship design could even be approved, and 2 year wait before it would be completed. And that's far longer than he would want to wait, under any circumstances.

"However," she notes, "I don't believe the head of the Fold Technology project would be the best person to choose to do such field research, in any case." The man in the middle turns to the red head.

“What makes you think he would not be suitable?” Mr. Matterhorn inquires.

“Well, I feel the head of a project of this nature, considering he is the mastermind of the original design, should remain here to oversee the continued testing from other power methods. Also, there is a certain level of inherent danger involved in conducting such research. It’s possible he could meet with an adverse fate.”

Joe looks over to the slightly younger brunette. “I would have to disagree,” She interjects. “First of all, as the project lead, he would be the best person to conduct such vital research, since he best understands the power requirements of this design.” She adjusts her wire-framed glasses, smiling at Joe. “And there is a certain level of danger in life. He could just as easily face death in testing a new fuel or something else on his design while here.” Mr. Matterhorn nods.

“But I think we may be overlooking another option,” the brunette continues. She gives Joe a look of reassurance, as though she sought to salvage what remains of his project from the bureaucratic siege it is subject to. “I believe since this project will ultimately offer a multipurpose solution, this may be a good time to bring a third party into the picture.”

Mr. Matterhorn shutters at her words. Joe knows this means he has serious reservations. “Hmm, most ‘third parties’ we would approach normally prefer to exert a higher level of ‘influence’ on projects than what I am comfortable.” He steps closer to his scenic view, resting his hands on a rail marking the edge of the floor. Opposite the rail, if he chooses to, he can look down on other execs busily working away, who share his scenic view, far below himself. After some moments of deliberation, he shakes his head. “No. Neither of these options are suitable. Without question, another option must present itself.”

Joe sits up. "I think there is still another option to consider sir," he respectfully interjects. Mr. Matterhorn turns to face Joe. Joe clears his throat. "There are others we could call upon to assist in this."

Mr. Matterhorn steps slowly toward Joe. "Go on," he beckons.

"I believe the Tyberian Empire can offer assistance, with the level of autonomy the Matterhorn Company's reputation with them deserves."

Mr. Matterhorn smiles, nodding his head. "Is there anyway you can be certain of this?" He inquires.

"I can get assurance from the royal house, and we can begin testing in the next few weeks," Joe quickly responds, picking up on Mr. Matterhorn's interest.

Mr. Matterhorn raises his hand. "Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," he replies, noting Joe's eagerness. "What is the Pact's official position on the House of Tyberius?" he remarks as he glances to the scarlet-haired woman.

"The Terran government is neutral toward the House of Tyberius." She looks up, her voice hints of cynicism. "They look at them as neither an ally or an enemy."

The brunette turns back to Mr. Matterhorn. "A cooperative project with the House of Tyberius wouldn't affect the remainder of our contracts with the Terran Military."

Mr. Matterhorn nods. "This does sound promising," he comments as he looks down for a moment. "I believe this option would be worth investigating." He moves back to his desk. "Joseph, I hope this relationship you have with the Alexandrian Empire is as good as you indicate." Mr. Matterhorn moves around the desk,

extending his hand to Joe, who immediately stands. “I look forward to hearing from you soon.”

Joe looks down at Mr. Matterhorn’s extended hand, almost dumbfounded. He then quickly grabs the hand, shaking it eagerly. “I won’t let you down sir!” He assures.

Mr. Matterhorn smiles. “I know you won’t, Joseph. Have a safe trip.” Joe steps back, starting for the door. Mr. Matterhorn moves back around his desk. As Joe exits the room, Mr. Matterhorn takes his seat. He leans forward, leaning his head on his hands. He releases a mild sigh. “Hmm...”

“Is this wise sir?” The red head inquires. “Typically, the Terran government takes a neutral stance on worlds they feel will threaten their sovereignty. Especially worlds they can’t easily defeat.”

“I am well aware of the nature of the Terran stance. I am also fully aware of the threat the Tyberian Empire poses.” He glances to the red head. “But if the Terran Military is to offer us what such a technology is worth, an effective demonstration of its potential is required.” He looks back to the door Joe left through. “I’m certain this arraignment will do just that.”