Rodney Oldman

Daedalus Landing

Roman

I

Earth, U.S.A – 2065

Lieutenant John Foster chewed on his pencil while observing the endless columns of numbers and trajectory data on his three monitors. For over a year now, he had been reporting for duty every evening punctually at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston to stare at these stupid monitors. Originally, he had been assigned to a position at NORAD, where after years of training as a network analyst for communications technology, his job would have been to scan space for threats such as space debris or, well, little things like intercontinental missiles. After two months, he was loaned to NASA to monitor the data transfer of one of the now twelve Mars probes. Essentially, John's job consisted of watching a status light and contacting someone should the thing ever turn red instead of green. It was still unclear to John why military personnel were being loaned to a civilian organization. Since he couldn't change the situation for the time being, and the work was more than monotonous, he sometimes took on the tasks of some colleagues as well. After all, as military personnel, he was forced to endure at least eight hours at a stretch every day, while his NASA friends could more or less choose when to work. Since he usually took over the night shifts, the control

center was pretty empty except for Tyler, a communications technician who, by John's estimation, easily weighed 200 kilos and constantly stuffed chips and cola into himself.

"Hey John!" Tyler shouted across four stations. "I've got to join a conference with those damn Europeans, can I put my station on your area for an hour?"

"One more or less doesn't make any difference," John mumbled and signaled with a thumbs up that he expected the handover. A minute later, a new symbol appeared in his interface, which was responsible for transmitting broadcasts from various probes and moon stations. *I could actually run the whole place by myself*, John sighed.

Two hours later, Tyler, as could only be expected, still hadn't returned. John was already looking forward to the end of his shift, a couple more beers at Conny's, a small bar not far from the control center, would definitely be in order, but his relief was also already overdue. *Why does everyone here come and go as they please?* John was jolted from his thoughts by a signal tone and a yellow warning light from Tyler's station. *Great, just before the end of my shift, one of those damn failure alerts, just what I needed.* John clicked on the yellow symbol for incoming messages.

.... ID-CODE: M77-2055-P2... Start TX? "YES/NO"....

That was unusual; the probes and stations normally always sent data without prompting. John couldn't remember ever having to request a transmission in his year at NASA. *What the hell is M77-2055-P2?* John pondered. He simply clicked "YES" and initiated the data transfer from M77-2055-P2, whatever that thing was. The message that appeared after a few minutes was also strange: "TX Done EST: 10:52:19". A transmission completed with almost 11 hours of transmission time? Modern systems were capable of transferring several terabytes per second; at that transmission duration, it had to be either a huge dataset or an error.

Tyler, who had made it back from his conference after two hours, sat back down at his station. He stuffed the half-eaten, and by now hardened, donut next to his pad into his mouth and spoke somewhat unintelligibly. "Hrmpf... Thanks John, you can go now. Our relief should be here soon." John nodded, transferred his area completely to Tyler's interface, and stomped away. Conny's Bar awaited.

I

After three of the four soldiers assigned to guard,

all armed with assault rifles and in full combat gear, had completed their inspection of the old pickup at the entrance of the Johnson Space Center, Number Four looked at the display of the pad and scrutinized Hailey.

"Dr. Fox, you may proceed. You are expected in Building 44," the guard finally managed to say.

Hailey took a breath but couldn't get a complete sentence out, so she just nodded. She drove her somewhat antiquated and rust-eaten pickup through the gate. Nothing more than this old jalopy was affordable at the moment. The demand for xenobiologists, even for one with her unconventional methods, was unfortunately not very high right now. It was therefore more than right for her to finally be able to put some money into the rather empty coffers. *And if I have to examine microbes on space rocks for that, then so be it*, she thought.

Hailey parked as requested in front of Building 44. Her ARU displayed "Communications & Tracking Center" in her field of vision. She had completely forgotten that the device was activated. The Augmented Reality Unit, introduced to the market about 15 years ago by Elen Trap's rising tech company, had completely revolutionized the information age. These small devices, available as glasses or contact lenses, function as a kind of

heads-up display for the wearer. An ARU can retrieve information about objects, buildings, people and just about everything else in the vicinity from the net and display it directly in the field of vision of the person wearing it. Through earplugs, or, as is more common today, electronic tattoos on the ear, the ARU has also revolutionized communication. Hailey herself was not so keen on being permanently flooded with information and belonged to a rather conventional minority. She had gotten into the habit of turning off the ARU more than once, or doing without it altogether whenever possible. Too many painful memories were associated with this technology.

Chief Assistant Matthew Ling straightened his jacket and suppressed a nervous expression as he waited at the entrance to Building 44. He knew he looked exhausted. But who would have dreamed that something like this would happen, and now he's right in the middle of it—that's something worth losing sleep in the office for! Matthew suppressed the swallowing reflex as he spotted the tall, slender, and attractive figure stepping out of the rusty pickup. Her long blonde hair fluttered slightly in the wind, and her piercing blue eyes seemed to almost pierce him. He noted that the photo in her personnel file did not even begin to do her justice.

"Hello Dr. Fox. I'm Matthew, the Chief Assistant of

Project Daedalus. If you would please follow me," he blurted out surprisingly and without preamble. Hailey raised her eyebrows and briefly eyed Matthew.

"Daedalus?" she murmured as she followed the already striding Chief Assistant. Matthew turned around briefly, "Daedalus! Welcome aboard." He couldn't suppress a chuckle and continued walking.

Matthew led Hailey through a labyrinth of corridors. Each new security lock seemed even more imposing than the previous one. Her ARU had already ceased service some time ago—obviously any connection to the outside was blocked in this area. "I'm sorry about all the secrecy," said Matthew, as he swiped his access card through a scanner for the third time in two minutes. "But what you're about to see... well, let's just say it justifies the precautions."

The conference room was smaller than Hailey had expected. Her gaze immediately fell on the woman at the head of the table, and her body stiffened. Elen Trap. Of all the damned people on this planet, it had to be her. In her perfectly tailored designer suit and with the silver ARU brooch that had almost become her trademark, she sat enthroned at the head of the table—every inch the successful tech billionaire she had

become after Stanford. Memories of their time studying together shot through Hailey's head, and she felt her fingernails digging into her palms.

The other three people at the table, who were absorbed in a discussion, fell silent when she entered. "Ah, Dr. Fox!" A tall man with angular features and military bearing rose. "Commander Richard Coleman. Welcome to the team." He pointed to an empty chair. Right in Elen's line of sight. Hailey forced herself to breathe calmly. Whatever was going on here had to be important enough for her to endure Elen's presence for a while.

The door opened again and a young man in a crumpled NASA shirt stumbled in. Lieutenant Foster, as Hailey read on his name tag, seemed surprised to be sitting in this group. "Perfect," said a woman at the head of the table. Her tailored suit practically screamed 'private sector.' "Then we're all here." She rose and swept her gaze over those present.

"My name is Elen Trap. Each of you has been carefully selected, each for a very specific reason." She paused briefly. "What you will learn here today is subject to the strictest secrecy. The agreements you have signed are binding and without exception. I would like to ask you to listen to everything first, without asking questions. Trust

me, you will have many." A knowing smile flitted across her face. "Commander Coleman will now show you why we've asked you all to come here." She nodded to Coleman and sat down again.

Coleman activated a projector in the middle of the table. "What I'm about to show you is highly classified." He entered some commands. Above the table appeared the holographic image of a space probe. "The KEP—Kuiper Exploration Probe," Coleman explained. "Identification number M77. The probe was sent on its way about 50 years ago with the goal of exploring Neptune, Pluto, and the Kuiper Belt." The hologram showed the planned trajectory. "Contact was lost during the mission—somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn. The probe has since been considered lost, presumably destroyed by a microasteroid."

Lieutenant Foster sat up straighter. "M77-2055-P2," he murmured. "The transmission I received." Coleman nodded appreciatively in Foster's direction. "You were the one who recognized the significance of the transmission code, Lieutenant. Without your attention, we might have overlooked the signals. One of our surveillance satellites, which was recently repaired after a ten-year failure, picked up this data. At first, we thought it was a system error..." He paused meaningfully. "Until we saw the

content of the transmission."

The hologram showed a complex display of coordinates and measurements. "The probe unexpectedly reappeared in our solar system about ten years ago," Coleman explained. "But the only satellite capable of receiving its specific signal frequency was defective. Only after the recent repair could we receive the stored data from the last 50 years."

Elen leaned forward. "The data shows something incredible. The KEP not only survived—it reached a star that, according to our current knowledge..." She shook her head in disbelief. "The distance is hardly comprehensible. Over 40 light years from Earth. The question of how is just one of the many puzzles we still need to solve."

The last man at the table, who introduced himself as Chief Engineer Robert Pope, pushed a data chip into the middle of the table. "The initial analyses raise more questions than they answer. But see for yourself." The hologram switched to a video recording.

"This was recorded by the probe," Coleman said quietly. "On a planet that until now we only knew as one of many data points in our astronomical catalogs. And that's why you're all here."

Coleman straightened up and pointed to the holographic display now hovering above the conference table. "What you see here is a fragment from over ten years of recordings from the KEP probe," he explained, letting the images change slowly. The recordings showed streets with steam-powered vehicles, public squares with assemblies of the alien beings, and complex buildings that resembled a mixture of Victorian architecture and organic forms.

"According to our analyses, these life forms are technologically at about the level of our late 19th century," Coleman continued. "They have mastered steam power, primitive electricity, and seem to be just on the threshold of industrial mass production."

Hailey leaned forward and studied the recordings of the aliens more closely. Small, upright figures of about 1 to 1.3 meters in height waddled through the streets. Their bodies were completely covered with fur, although they did wear clothing—predominantly suits and long dresses reminiscent of Victorian fashion. What made Hailey smile, however, were their faces: flat snouts, large eyes, and characteristic, wrinkled facial features, combined with drooping ears.

"Forgive me," she interrupted Coleman with a suppressed laugh, "but has anyone noticed that

we've basically discovered a civilization of bipedal pugs? Just me?" She looked around the table. "My grandfather had a pug. Though his didn't wear top hats or drive steam locomotives."

A brief, tense silence followed before Foster also began to grin. "Damn, you're right! They're space pugs!"

Even Coleman couldn't suppress a slight twitch of his lips. "Be that as it may, Dr. Fox. The physiological similarities to Earth's dog breeds are... remarkable, but certainly a coincidence of convergent evolution."

"Of course," Hailey replied with regained professionalism, but still couldn't suppress a slight smile. "Please continue."

Pope tapped some commands into his pad, and the hologram changed to diagrams and analysis tables. "Despite the most advanced AI evaluation systems, we have so far only been able to fully analyze about five percent of the received data," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "The probe not only took video recordings but also recorded a whole range of other data, took atmospheric samples, conducted geological scans—the amount of data is simply overwhelming."

Foster shifted restlessly in his chair. "And the KEP did all this by itself? A fifty-year-old probe?"

"That's one of the aspects that give us headaches," Coleman admitted. "The programming seems to..." He searched for the right words. "...contain unusual elements. An expert has already analyzed the original code and will explain his findings later." He shook his head slightly. "That wasn't so easy, though. The source code is over 50 years old, written in programming languages that hardly anyone masters today. In a time when software was still written by humans and not by AI systems."

Pope nodded in agreement. "Our modern AI analysis tools had considerable difficulties fully decoding the code. There are... anomalies, jumps in logic that the AI cannot explain. As if someone had deliberately built in things that lie outside the usual programming patterns."

"And that's exactly why we needed someone with a deeper understanding of the mindset of the programmers of that time," Coleman added. "Someone who can think outside the standard algorithms that our current AIs use."

Elen Trap cleared her throat slightly, and all heads turned to her. "To get to the point," she said in her cool, businesslike voice, "SMI already sent an

unmanned probe with our experimental fusion drive toward the last known position of the KEP three months ago." Space Mining Industries, one of the world's leading companies for the mining of minerals on asteroids, the Moon, and Mars, was of course known to everyone in the room—as was the fact that it was only one of the many successful companies in Elen's impressive portfolio.

Hailey drew in a sharp breath. "Without international consultation?"

Elen smiled thinly. "With all the necessary approvals from the US government, Dr. Fox. The Quantum probe is expected to reach the region beyond Pluto, where the last signals of the KEP were recorded, in nine months." She leaned forward. "Without the constraints of human physiology, the probe can operate with much higher acceleration values—up to 15g in the main acceleration phase. Nevertheless, it must of course slow down in time to be able to take precise measurements." Elen tapped on her pad, and a flight path calculation appeared above the table. A glowing dot marked a position far beyond Pluto's orbit, deep in the Kuiper Belt. "The last contact with the KEP was here, about three months' flight time from Pluto. An area where there is practically nothing—or at least nothing we've known about until now." She looked

meaningfully at those present. "So far, this is a purely American operation. But we are aware that it's only a matter of time before other nations get wind of it."

"The discovery of an alien civilization cannot be kept secret forever," Coleman agreed. "We are already working on scenarios for an international announcement, but we want to gather more information before we trigger a global media frenzy."

Hailey stared incredulously at the representation of the alien planet and its inhabitants. "So what exactly is the plan now?"

"First of all, we need to understand how the KEP got there," Coleman replied. "The physical laws as we know them do not allow the crossing of such distances in such a short time. Whatever brought the probe there—we have to find it."

"And when we've found it?" Foster asked.

"Then," Elen replied with a gleam in her eyes, "we may have the greatest breakthrough in human history in our hands."

Pope projected a detailed diagram of the outer solar system onto the table. A blinking arrow

showed the approximate course of the Quantum probe. "The probe is already on its way, but we have not yet located the exact location where the KEP disappeared. We only have a rough region based on the last telemetry data."

"Once Quantum reaches the region, it will begin a systematic search pattern, scanning for energy anomalies and possible traces of the KEP. A main goal is to locate the exact position of the KEP and track its course backwards while simultaneously taking detailed measurements."

Coleman nodded. "Exactly. We need to understand what happened out there before we can plan further steps." He looked around the table. "And that's why you're all here."

Foster, Hailey, and the others exchanged skeptical glances. None of them seemed to know why exactly they had been invited to this top-secret briefing or what role the others were supposed to play. Only Pope and Coleman seemed to be fully in the picture, and of course Elen Trap, who was observing everything with the cool composure of a woman who was used to pulling the strings.

Coleman was about to continue when the door to the conference room was thrown open. Those present turned and stared at the newcomer.

In the doorway stood a man in his early thirties with a wild rasta hairstyle that stuck out in all directions. He wore a colorful Hawaiian shirt with flamingo pattern, knee-length cargo shorts, and—to everyone's astonishment—fluffy slippers in the shape of spaceships. On his wrist was an unusual-looking ARU controller—self-modified, with exposed circuits and colorful, blinking LEDs. In his hand, he held an oversized coffee mug shaped like a detailed miniature model of an ancient spacecraft from the 20th century, complete with steaming coffee emerging from the tiny nozzles.

"I'm here," the man said casually and shuffled to the conference table. "Just had a breakthrough in analyzing the protocol data." With a quick movement of his fingers over the ARU controller, he projected a complex hologram structure full of code lines into the air. He dropped into an empty chair and set down his curious coffee mug. Only now did he notice the astonished looks. "What? Do I have something on my face?"

Foster couldn't close his mouth fast enough, and even Hailey stared with raised eyebrows. Elen Trap looked as if someone had smuggled a rat into a five-star reception. Only Coleman and Pope, who were long accustomed to Liam's eccentric appearance, showed no surprise.

"Team, this is Liam Porter," Coleman introduced without batting an eye. "One of the few people on this planet who still write program code by hand instead of having it generated by AIs. He is the one who deciphered the anomalies in the KEP program code."

Liam nodded to the group and waved elegantly over his ARU controller, making the floating code lines disappear. He slurped noisily at his coffee. "So, should I directly explain what I found in the old code, or do you want to do the introductions first, Richard?"

Coleman cleared his throat. "We should indeed clarify why each of you is here first. I think an introduction is in order."

Elen Trap rose with the self-evident authority of a woman who was used to being the most important person in any room. Her tailored suit was immaculate, as was her silver-adorned ARU controller on her wrist—a prototype that was still years away from market launch.

"Let me explain why each of you is here," she said, without wasting time on a self-introduction. Everyone in the room knew who Elen Trap was. The woman who had revolutionized the way people interacted with information with her ARU technology. The woman who had earned her first

billion at thirty and since then had built an empire ranging from communication technology to space mining.

"Commander Richard Coleman," she began, pointing to the tall man at the other end of the table. "Twenty-five years in the service of the US Space Force, fifteen of them as head of tactical operations in Earth orbit. He led the rescue operation of Luna Station after the meteor shower of '58 and saved twenty-four lives. For the past three years, he has been project leader for special operations at NASA." Her voice was factual, almost clinical. "He will lead this project because he is one of the few people on this planet who has both the necessary experience and the security clearance."

Coleman nodded curtly, as befitting a man with a military background.

"Chief Engineer Robert Pope," Elen continued, moving on to the gray-haired man with the worn hands. "One of the leading experts on fusion propulsion systems. He has adapted the civilian versions of SMI drives for military applications. The man can literally repair anything that has a switch." A thin smile played around her lips. "They say he once got a failed mining station in the Clavius crater back up and running with nothing but a multi-tool and parts from a defective drone."

Pope grinned crookedly. "There was some luck involved."

"Lieutenant John Foster," she directed her cool gaze at the young man who was still trying to hide his surprise. "Network analyst for communications technology, currently assigned to NORAD and loaned to NASA. He was the one who received the transmission from the KEP and initiated the probing process. What his superiors don't know," here she raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow, "is that in his free time, he is one of the country's best ethical hackers, with a special talent for decrypting complex data structures."

Foster blinked in surprise. "How do you know...?"

"I know a lot of things, Lieutenant," Elen interrupted him coolly. "It's my business to know things."

She turned to the newcomer. "Liam Porter. Thirty-three years old, and already at fourteen part of the team that made the breakthrough in quantum computer models for AI use. A genius when it comes to code, but," she eyed his Hawaiian shirt and spaceship slippers, "with certain idiosyncrasies. Mr. Porter practically breathes zeros and ones and is one of the few people who still understand how to write software without AI support—a skill that is essential for this

project."

Liam raised his coffee mug as if in a toast. "I was classified as too strange for a normal career. Your words, not mine, Ms. Trap."

Elen ignored the comment and finally directed her gaze at Hailey. For a brief moment, something flitted across her face—a fleeting expression that only Hailey knew how to interpret.

"Dr. Hailey Fox," said Elen, and her voice was a shade cooler than before. "Xenobiologist with an... unconventional approach." She paused briefly, as if she had to consider how much to reveal. "We know each other from Stanford." A fleeting glance between the two women revealed more than a thousand words—a shared history that went far beyond a casual college acquaintance.

"What Ms. Trap politely omits," Coleman added, "is that Dr. Fox was involved in a top-secret government project a few years ago to analyze asteroid rock for extraterrestrial microorganisms. Although the project ultimately did not achieve its main goals, Dr. Fox developed revolutionary analytical methods that could be invaluable for our current situation."

"Additionally," said Elen with a hint of reluctant respect, "Dr. Fox speaks over twenty languages fluently. A natural talent she has never really used professionally." The unspoken accusation of waste swung in her words.

Hailey held Elen's gaze without blinking. Between the two women, the air seemed to vibrate with unspoken words. None of the others in the room could fully interpret the tension, but everyone sensed that there was more at stake here than academic differences.

Only Hailey knew what was behind Elen's smooth facade. How best friends had become bitter rivals. How the ambitious engineering student had secretly tapped intimate test recordings of Hailey and her then-boyfriend with an early ARU prototype. How these recordings, skillfully modified and anonymized, became the first popular "ARU experience film"—and thus the catalyst for the spread of the technology that made Elen a billionaire. Sex sells—a concept as old as the media itself.

"I also appreciate your... direct manner, Elen," Hailey replied with a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Very well," Elen turned back to the whole group. "Now that we all know who we are, we can move

on to the details." She nodded to Liam. "Mr. Porter, I think it's time you explain to the team what you found in the old KEP code."

Liam set down his coffee mug and activated a complex data stream with a flowing hand movement over his ARU controller, which materialized in the air above the conference table. Cascades of code lines, operating protocols, and system diagrams floated in a three-dimensional grid.

"So," he began and leaned back, "let me explain what actually happened to the KEP. It wasn't destroyed, as has been assumed all these years." He pointed to a holographic diagram showing the probe's original path through the solar system. "The records of the last telemetry data before the loss of contact show absolutely nothing unusual. All systems were functioning normally, power supply was at 97.3 percent efficiency, and the communication units were fully functional. And then—nothing. As if someone had flipped a switch."

Liam enlarged an area of the data streams with a finger movement. Sequences of numbers and operating states were highlighted. "The interesting thing is what happened after the probe became active again. The first data we received in the transmission package comes from a

diagnostic sequence that was initiated about a year after the probe disappeared."

He let the code fast-forward. "The probe suddenly found itself in a completely different location without any known reference points. Imagine this: a device programmed to determine its position based on known celestial bodies in our solar system finds itself in an environment where none of these reference points exist." He shook his head admiringly. "That would be difficult enough for a modern system with adaptive AI. But we're talking about an operating system from 2015."

Coleman frowned. "2015? How could a device with such primitive programming respond to such a situation?"

"That's the fascinating part," replied Liam, and his eyes lit up with enthusiasm. "In those days, there was no true artificial intelligence, no adaptive neural networks that could learn in real time. The programming was strictly rule-based: if-then structures, sequential command chains, predefined emergency protocols. The KEP did exactly what it was programmed to do—it initiated a deep system diagnosis."

He projected a new representation above the table showing the internal structure of the probe. "For about a year, the probe switched back and

forth between diagnostic mode, self-repair sequences, and backup systems. Again and again, it tried to determine its position, failed, reset, tried again. An endless cycle of diagnosis, restart, error."

"And then," Liam made a dramatic pause and tapped on a specific place in the code sequence, which then lit up golden, "something extraordinary happened."

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "We have Dr. Marcus Ramirez to thank for the fact that we now have this data."

Those present exchanged puzzled glances. "Ramirez was the chief architect of the mission control system. A brilliant programmer who was far ahead of his time. And," his grin grew even wider, "an absolutely dedicated 'Trekkie'."

Foster raised an eyebrow questioningly. "A what?"

"Trekkie. A fan of Star Trek." Liam looked at puzzled faces. "Oh, come on! Star Trek? One of the most influential science fiction series of all time? Ran from the 1960s well into the 21st century?" He sighed theatrically. "The cultural memory of humanity is getting shorter and

shorter. Star Trek was a visionary television series about the exploration of space by the 'Starfleet' spaceships. 'To boldly go where no one has gone before.' It was the ultimate exploration fantasy."

Liam tapped on his controller again, and an old two-dimensional image appeared in the air—a spaceship with a disc-shaped main part and cylindrical drive gondolas. "The USS Enterprise. The spaceship from the original series."

He brushed the image aside and returned to the code. "And here comes the genius part: Ramirez hid an Easter egg in the KEP's emergency code." Seeing the questioning looks, he added, "An Easter egg is a hidden feature, a secret in the code that is never activated under normal circumstances."

He zoomed further into the code structure. "After exactly 438 days of continuous error diagnostics—which, by the way, roughly corresponds to the runtime of the original Star Trek series—the system activated a hidden subroutine. This subroutine was buried so deep in the emergency protocol that it couldn't have been noticed in any of the usual checks. It was only supposed to activate if the probe remained in an unresolvable error state for more than a year—a scenario in which any normal mission would have been considered lost."

Liam stood up and began to walk around the table with lively gestures. "Ramirez's code took control and essentially reprogrammed the probe. From this point on, it no longer followed its original mission but became what Ramirez called an 'autonomous exploration and research apparatus'—or what I would call: a small Starfleet ship on its own mission."

He projected a complex diagram of stellar mapping routines. "The first thing the probe did under the new program was a complete astronomical position determination. The KEP was equipped with high-precision star sensors, which were actually intended for navigation in the outer solar system. Ramirez's program used these to calculate the position in galactic space by triangulating fixed stars like Sirius, Alpha Centauri, and other distinctive stars."

Pope whistled softly through his teeth. "That's impressive. The computing power of the KEP wasn't exactly overwhelming by today's standards."

"Exactly!" Liam pointed his finger at Pope. "Ramirez was a genius. He optimized the code to work with the limited resources. The calculation took almost three weeks, but the probe had time." He laughed. "And the result was astonishing: the KEP was in a star system about 40 light years

from Earth."

Liam switched to a display of the alien solar system. "The probe identified a planet in its flight direction, about a year and a half's flight time from its position. And Ramirez's program did exactly what Captain Kirk would have done—it ordered the probe to fly there and explore."

He returned to his seat and dropped into the chair. "The next data we have are the already known recordings from the planet with our furry friends. The KEP reached a stable orbit and began to do what it does best: observe and record."

Hailey leaned forward. "You said the last twenty years of activity are missing from the data received so far. What happened to the probe?"

"That's one of the big mysteries," replied Liam, scratching his head. "The last recording we have is from 2045. After that, there's a gap until 2055, when the probe reappeared in our solar system. The fascinating thing is: the KEP wasn't actively transmitting when it came back. It only transmitted its data when your terminal initiated a connection, Lieutenant Foster."

Foster blinked in surprise. "But why did the probe

leave the planet? And how did it return?"

Liam shrugged. "We don't know. Maybe Ramirez's program was interrupted by some external factor. Maybe there was a pre-programmed return routine that we haven't discovered yet. Or..." He left the sentence unfinished.

"Or?" asked Coleman.

Liam looked the commander directly in the eye. "Or something or someone sent the probe back."

A thoughtful silence fell over the room.

Liam shook his head in disbelief. "And the crazy thing is: a fifty-year-old piece of code discovered the first alien civilization in human history."

He looked up, and his gaze wandered from one face to another. "Ramirez died thirty years ago without ever knowing what his Easter egg accomplished. I tracked down his daughter—she's over seventy now—and she told me that until his death, her father firmly believed that humanity is not alone in the universe. He literally sent a part of himself, his conviction, into the stars. And was confirmed."

II

Liam's last words echoed through the silent conference room. For a moment, no one seemed to know what to say. The possibility that humanity was not only not alone in the universe but that a long-dead programmer with his secret code had enabled the first contact was too overwhelming to process immediately.

Coleman cleared his throat, breaking the silence. He exchanged a brief glance with Elen Trap, received a barely perceptible nod, and then turned back to the group.

"I think that's enough for now as an overview," he said, rising. "Before we proceed, I would like to once again explicitly point out the confidentiality agreements that you have signed." He let his gaze slowly wander over each person present, looking directly at each individual. "These agreements are legally binding and will be monitored and enforced with all available means. The security level of this project is above anything most of you have ever been involved in."

Foster shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Sir, what does that mean exactly? I mean, I already have an Omega-7 level security clearance through my work at NORAD."

"It means," Coleman replied in a voice that brooked no argument, "that everything you have heard in this room and will learn from now on must not leak out under any circumstances. Not to your families, not to friends, not even to other colleagues with comparable security clearance. This project officially does not exist."

He paused briefly to let his words sink in. "The discovery of an alien civilization, should it become public, would have worldwide implications whose extent we cannot predict. Religious, economic, and geopolitical consequences that could change everything we know. Until we know more and have found a controlled way to pass on this information, it stays in this room."

Pope nodded thoughtfully. He had experienced enough projects with the highest level of secrecy in his decades-long career to understand the situation.

"If any of you have concerns," Coleman continued, "you should express them now. But be aware: once you leave this room, you enter a life under constant surveillance. Your communication, your movements, your contacts—everything will be monitored for the duration of the project. This is not a threat, but a necessity given the magnitude of this discovery."

A nervous laugh from Foster broke the tense atmosphere. "So much for voluntariness."

Coleman shrugged slightly. "National security unfortunately allows only limited room for personal preferences, Lieutenant. I can only assure you that these measures will not remain in effect longer than absolutely necessary."

Hailey observed how Foster swallowed and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. She had had enough experience with government projects in her career so far to know that such security measures were not empty threats.

"I understand," Foster said quietly.

"So, is there anyone who wants to opt out?" Coleman asked, looking around the room.

Everyone shook their heads or muttered their refusal. Even if someone had doubts, the curiosity and scientific significance of the discovery were too overwhelming to withdraw.

"Good," Coleman said with a hint of relief in his voice. "Then we move on to the next point." He exchanged another glance with Elen Trap, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "As of today, you are all officially assigned to Project Daedalus. To

the outside world, you have been seconded to various special tasks—Lieutenant Foster, for example, has been reassigned back to NORAD, Dr. Fox received a fictitious offer for research at an underwater base in the Pacific, and so on."

"Wait," interrupted Hailey, eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean by 'officially assigned'? I only agreed to a consulting contract, not full-time employment."

Elen put her slender fingers together and regarded Hailey with a cool smile. "The conditions have changed, Dr. Fox. The security of the project requires your full attention and presence."

"It's not about conditions," Hailey replied sharply. "It's about the fact that I'm not—"

"None of you may leave the premises until further notice," Coleman interrupted in a voice that allowed no objection. "The security protocols require a complete quarantine of knowledge."

For a moment, there was stunned silence.

"You can't be serious," Hailey finally said. "That's practically false imprisonment."

"No, Dr. Fox, that is national security," Coleman

replied. "And if you had carefully read the contract you signed, you would know that you have already agreed to this measure."

Hailey opened her mouth, closed it again, and inwardly cursed her habit of skimming over the fine print. She shot Elen a sharp look, who only showed a barely perceptible, triumphant smile.

"I wouldn't do this for any other discovery," Hailey finally said, "but for the first confirmed alien civilization..." She sighed. "All right."

"Wise decision," Coleman nodded.

Liam, who had followed the entire conversation with an amused expression, spoke up: "Not much changes for me. I've been living here for three months anyway."

"Really?" Foster asked, surprised.

Elen gave Liam a look that fluctuated between disapproval and reluctant tolerance. "Mr. Porter has an... unconventional working arrangement with us. His special status is due solely to his undeniable abilities, not his questionable fashion sense or peculiar habits."

Liam only grinned more broadly. "I'm a package

deal, Ms. Trap. You don't get my genius without my eccentricity."

Elen barely twitched the corners of her mouth, as if she had bitten into an unripe lemon. "Anyway. Back to the topic."

"And what happens to our apartments, our things?" Foster asked with obvious concern.

Coleman nodded understandingly. "We have set up private quarters for each of you. In the next few days, we will make sure that you receive everything you need for a longer stay. For the start, the essentials should be available in your rooms."

"Wait—what about our personal belongings?" Foster asked, concerned.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant," Coleman answered matter-of-factly. "We will make sure in the next few days that you receive the most important items from your apartment. For the moment, standard equipment and clothing are available in your quarters."

Before anyone could protest further, Elen Trap took over. She stood up and stepped next to Coleman. "Ladies and gentlemen, I understand

your concerns. But let me assure you: the facility here is of the highest standard. There is a fully equipped fitness center, a library, several common rooms, even a small park under glass domes with simulated daylight. You will find that it feels more like an upscale research center than a prison."

Her tone was businesslike, but not without a certain pride. "This building was designed for demanding research work—an autonomous research complex that can operate completely isolated for months."

"Convenient for a billionaire who likes to control her own little world," Hailey murmured, just loud enough for Elen to hear.

Elen ignored the comment with the ease of a woman who was used to letting criticism of her influence and power roll off her back. Instead, she continued: "In addition to your private quarters, a main research area has been set up for the project. There, all previous data and recordings are available to you—several petabytes of information to be analyzed."

Coleman took over again. "Starting tomorrow morning, each of you will be assigned specific tasks and research areas. Tonight, you should settle in and familiarize yourself with the available

material. The next weeks and months will be intense, and the sooner you start sifting through the data, the better."

Pope raised his hand. "And the concrete goals? What are we working toward?"

"Two main goals," Coleman answered promptly. "First: Understanding how the KEP probe was transported through space—what technology or phenomenon transported it over 40 light years. Second: Learning everything we can about the alien civilization. The Quantum probe will help us gather more data and possibly investigate this transport phenomenon more closely."

Those present nodded; everyone was aware of the magnitude of the task.

"And what happens if we understand this transport mechanism?" Foster asked.

Coleman exchanged a brief glance with Elen Trap before answering. "We will decide that in due course, Lieutenant. At the moment, we are focusing on understanding what we already have."

Liam, who had been unusually quiet the whole time, suddenly grinned broadly. "The challenge

lies not only in the analysis of the data but in understanding a completely new paradigm of space-time manipulation."

Pope nodded in agreement. Hailey was also impressed by Liam's precise description of the scientific challenge. Only Elen Trap remained unmoved, her eyes coolly calculating, as if she were evaluating and assessing everyone in the room.

Coleman clapped his hands. "Good, if there are no further questions—please proceed to your quarters. Matthew will accompany you and show you everything. Tomorrow at 0800, we will meet in the main research area for the detailed task distribution."

As the group stood up and turned to leave, Coleman briefly held Hailey back. "Dr. Fox, one more moment."

Hailey stopped and felt Elen's gaze resting on her before the billionaire left the room.

"Dr. Fox, I've noticed that there's a certain... tension between you and Ms. Trap," Coleman said quietly when they were alone. "I don't know what happened in the past, and frankly, I don't care. But I need your word that personal

differences will not affect the work of the team."

Hailey held his gaze. "I'm a scientist, Commander. I can separate my personal feelings from my work."

"Good," Coleman nodded. "Because frankly, we need both of you. This project is too important for personal feuds."

"Don't worry," Hailey replied with a thin smile. "As long as Elen focuses on her financing and doesn't interfere with my research, we'll get along wonderfully."

Coleman didn't look convinced but nodded. "I have your word, Dr. Fox."

"You do," Hailey confirmed and turned to leave. As she reached the door, Coleman held her back once more.

"One more thing, Dr. Fox," he said. "What do you think of the beings we've discovered on this planet?"

Hailey smiled slightly. "The pug-like inhabitants? Fascinating. Their social structure, as far as we can discern it so far, shows amazing parallels to our own development during the industrial

revolution. I'm curious what else we'll learn about them."

"That's what it's all about," Coleman nodded. "Welcome to the team, Dr. Fox."

As Hailey left the room, she wondered what she had gotten herself into. One of the greatest scientific discoveries in human history, months of isolation with a handful of strangers and her former best friend who had betrayed her. And at the end perhaps a journey to the stars.

She sighed softly. It would be interesting months.

"I call it the Daedalus Labyrinth," Matthew announced with a pride that suggested he himself had been involved in the design of the research complex. He led the group through a long, curved corridor whose high-gloss polished walls glowed in a soft blue.

The peculiarly curved architecture seemed futuristic and at the same time organic. Nothing here was reminiscent of the typical rectangular government buildings with their pragmatic, unimaginative designs.

"The complex has an impressive infrastructure," Matthew explained as they passed high

panoramic windows that opened a view onto an indoor garden with exotic plants. "Its own power supply, state-of-the-art communication systems, and all the necessary facilities for longer research projects. The system is designed in such a way that it could theoretically function autonomously for months even in the event of a complete failure of the external supply networks."

"Theoretically?" Foster asked with a raised eyebrow.

Matthew smiled thinly. "Well, should it ever become necessary."

They reached a circular room with several branching corridors. In the middle stood a large, three-dimensional holographic representation of the complex, slowly rotating.

"This is the central hub," Matthew explained. "From here, you have access to all main areas—research laboratories, living quarters, recreation and dining area. Each of you has a personal access profile based on your individual biometric signature. The ARU you received upon entering the complex is synchronized with this system."

He pointed to his own plain gray ARU glasses.

"This version differs from commercial models. It functions in a closed network without external connections but has all the features you will need for your work."

Liam, who was already wearing his own modified ARU, shrugged. "I'll stick with mine. It's already cleared for the Daedalus systems."

Matthew hesitated. "Mr. Porter, for security reasons, all team members should use the standardized—"

"Matthew," Liam interrupted with a good-natured smile, but his eyes remained determined. "You know I'm not giving up my ARU. It's synchronized with my neurological patterns and has twelve function extensions that I've programmed myself. I've spent months optimizing it. Besides, nobody wears my underwear, and nobody wears my ARU. That's a package."

Pope suppressed a laugh, while Foster frowned in confusion. Hailey noticed that Matthew sighed but didn't protest further. Obviously, this was a battle that had already been fought.

"All right," Matthew gave in. "But remember that all activities are monitored, Mr. Porter."

"Of course," Liam replied with an innocent smile that made Hailey suspect he had already found ways to circumvent this monitoring. She made a mental note to speak with him later.

"Please follow me," Matthew continued and led them to one of the branching corridors. "I'll now show you the main research area before you go to your quarters."

They entered a spacious, open room that immediately reminded Hailey of the most advanced scientific facilities she had ever seen. Several workstations were arranged in a semicircle, each with at least six high-resolution holographic displays. On the walls were massive data visualization fields, currently showing a sluggish network of points of light that Hailey recognized as stellar mapping of the space between Earth and the newly discovered planet.

"Each workstation is adapted to your specific requirements," Matthew explained. "Dr. Fox, your station has the most advanced xenobiological analysis tools and direct access to all biological data that the KEP has collected."

He turned to Foster. "Lieutenant, your station is optimized for communication and data analysis, with special protocols for decrypting and interpreting alien signal patterns."

"Mr. Porter, your station..." He paused briefly. "Well, it doesn't quite meet the standard specifications, as you've made certain adjustments."

Liam grinned. "I've souped it up a bit."

This apparently consisted of several additional monitors, various blinking devices of unclear function and, as Hailey noted with surprise, a small collection of science fiction figures lined up along the workspace.

"Chief Engineer Pope," Matthew continued, "your station is equipped with the latest technical analysis tools and has a direct connection to the control laboratory for the Quantum probe."

Pope nodded appreciatively as he eyed the state-of-the-art equipment.

"In the center of the room is the main projection table," Matthew explained, pointing to a large round platform surrounded by holographic projectors. "Here you can work together on three-dimensional models, test theories, and visualize data."

He went to a wall that was completely covered with high-resolution screens. "Here we have

compiled all the important information about the KEP probe and the newly discovered planet. The currently available data has already been fed into the system and categorized, but as Commander Coleman mentioned, only about five percent has actually been analyzed so far."

Matthew looked at the group seriously. "Your task will be to navigate through this mountain of information and find meaning in it."

Hailey stepped closer to the screens and looked with fascination at the high-resolution images of the alien beings. The similarity to Earth's pugs was indeed striking, but there were also clear differences in the skull shape, the larger eyes, and the body posture, which was clearly designed for bipedal locomotion.

"How much biological data do we have?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, only visual and spectral analytical," Matthew replied. "The KEP could not take samples or conduct direct biological examinations. But the camera systems were remarkably high-resolution and have collected continuous observations for several years."

Hailey nodded thoughtfully. Even without direct

samples, a trained eye could derive much from visual data.

"I want to go to my quarters now," Foster said suddenly. His voice sounded tense, and Hailey noticed that he was still struggling with the situation. The flood of information and the unexpected commitment to months of isolation had apparently affected him more than the others.

"Of course," Matthew nodded understandingly. "I'll show you your accommodations now. Tomorrow at 0800, you will meet here again with Commander Coleman for the detailed task distribution."

As they left the research area, Liam turned to Hailey and grinned. "Exciting, isn't it? We're at the beginning of humanity's greatest journey of discovery."

Hailey couldn't help but return his smile. Despite all the complications—including the unexpected forced isolation and the presence of Elen Trap—this was a unique opportunity. Studying the first confirmed alien civilization was the dream of every xenobiologist.

"Yes," she agreed. "Exciting is exactly the right word."

As Matthew led them to their quarters, Hailey thought about the enormous amount of data. Somewhere hidden in these petabytes of information were answers to questions that humanity had been asking for a long time.

And she was determined to find them.

III

Hailey studied the holographic projection of the planet that had dominated her life for a month. The blue-green sphere rotated slowly before her, revealing a remarkable geological feature: unlike Earth with its many separate landmasses, this planet had only a single, massive supercontinent that wrapped like a wide band around the equator, flanked by a few tiny island groups. The poles were covered by enormous ice caps that made up almost a third of the planet's surface. Dozens of markings on the projection now identified cities, transportation routes, and special observation points. She rubbed her tired eyes and leaned back in her chair. A month of intensive data analysis had exhausted her, but also filled her with a sense of fulfillment she hadn't experienced in years.

"How long have you been staring at that globe?" asked a voice behind her.

Hailey turned and saw Liam, who was strolling over with his usual cup of oddly scented coffee. His dreadlocks were wilder than usual, suggesting another night shift.

"About three hours," she admitted, rubbing her neck. "But I think I've finally recognized a pattern in the settlement structure. The Canines seem to build their cities in concentric circles, with public facilities in the center and residential areas in radial sectors separated by green belts."

"Canines," Liam muttered, amused. "I still find it funny that we agreed on this name. Elen introduced it a few weeks ago and everyone just adopted it. It certainly sounds more scientific—you can't really talk about 'space pugs' in official reports."

Hailey smiled. "Well, their canine features are undeniable, so it fits. But back to the topic..."

Liam nodded appreciatively. "A natural evolution of their social structures. No wonder they never developed weapons—in a society so focused on mutual support and spatial proximity, violence would destroy the entire social fabric." He took a sip from his cup. "Speaking of patterns, I made some progress with the AI analysis of the video data overnight."

"Tell me," said Hailey, turning fully toward him.

"The fine-tuning is working better than expected," Liam explained with visible pride. "The AI can now track individual subjects across different recording sequences and assign social status, occupations, and even rudimentary emotional states. I fed it the biological markers you identified—fur patterns, facial wrinkles, ear positions, and so on."

He projected a complex neural network diagram into the air between them using his ARU. "The best part is: it

learns exponentially. The more data we give it, the faster and more precise the analyses become. I estimate we can have all the video data categorized in two weeks, not two months as originally assumed."

Hailey whistled appreciatively through her teeth. "That's impressive. Have you informed Coleman about this yet?"

"This morning," Liam nodded. "He seemed satisfied, but you know him—for real enthusiasm, you'd probably have to tell him we've found a way to travel there ourselves tomorrow."

Hailey laughed softly. During the past month, a surprising camaraderie had developed between her and the eccentric programmer. His unconventional way of thinking complemented her own scientific approach, and she found that she enjoyed his company. A welcome counterbalance to the carefully dosed encounters with Elen Trap, whom she avoided as much as possible.

The door to the main research area opened, and Lieutenant Foster entered, followed by Pope. Both wore expressions of suppressed excitement that immediately piqued Hailey's curiosity.

"Good morning, early birds," Foster greeted with an energy that revealed he had discovered something important. In the weeks since the project began, he had recovered from the initial shock and embraced his role as communications expert with growing enthusiasm.

"You look like you've found something," Hailey remarked.

Pope nodded as he exchanged his lab coat for the lighter type he wore in the main lab. "Double good news. First:

I've made some adjustments to the drive parameters of the Quantum probe. By reconfiguring the plasma focusing coils, I was able to optimize the thrust vector. The probe will now reach its target in two months, not seven."

"That's fantastic!" Hailey exclaimed. "Almost half a year earlier than planned."

"There's even better news," Foster added, activating one of the larger holographic projections. "I've finally fully deciphered the communication patterns of the KEP probe. What we previously thought were random signal bursts is actually a repeating pattern—a continuous loop of data that the probe has been transmitting."

He ran his fingers over the control surface, and a spectral analysis of various signal patterns appeared in the air. "The probe has been continuously broadcasting data about humanity—a kind of compendium of our history, science, culture, and biology. It's basically like a huge, complex version of the Voyager Golden Records."

"The Golden Record?" asked Hailey, her brow slightly furrowed.

Liam couldn't suppress a broad grin. "The Voyager probes—two unmanned space probes launched in 1977. Each carried a gold-plated copper record with images, natural sounds, music, and greeting messages in 55 different languages. Essentially a calling card for humanity in case the probes were ever found by extraterrestrial civilizations."

He sipped his coffee contentedly, visibly in his element. "The record contained everything from Bach and Mozart

to Chuck Berry to traditional music from around the world. Images of people of different ethnicities, anatomical diagrams, DNA structures, mathematical definitions—basically a crash course in 'Humanity for Beginners'."

"And the KEP probe is sending something similar?" asked Elen, who had entered the room unnoticed.

Foster nodded. "Only much more extensive and technologically advanced. Instead of a physical record with a few hundred images and sounds, the KEP continuously transmits terabytes of data—a complete archive of human achievements up to about 2015."

"Interesting," Elen murmured, stepping closer to the projection. "And how long has the probe been transmitting this data?"

"As far as we can determine, since its arrival in orbit around the planet," Foster replied. "That would be about three decades of continuous transmission."

Hailey felt a shiver run down her spine. "That explains a few things," she said, her voice taking on a thoughtful tone. "The technological development of the Canines has accelerated dramatically in the last twenty years. Not as quickly as our own, but with unusual consistency."

"You mean they received the signals?" asked Pope.

"It's more than likely," Hailey nodded. "Records show they developed their first primitive radio technology about ten years after the probe arrived. From then on, they could theoretically have received the signals, at least partially."

Liam leaned back thoughtfully. "A continuous stream of human knowledge straight into their early industrial society. Imagine if we had suddenly gained access to such information in the year 1850."

"Only with one significant difference," Elen interjected. "Their society seems to have a fundamentally different ethics than ours. No wars, no recognizable violent behavior. Even their primitive tools were never weapons."

Foster frowned thoughtfully. "But that could also be a hindrance to their technological development. If we're honest, many of our greatest technological breakthroughs were driven by military necessities—radar, jet propulsion, computer technology, the internet, even space travel itself. Without this pressure, their development should have been slower, not faster."

"A valid observation," Pope agreed. "Competition, whether military or economic, has always been a strong driver of innovation for us. Without it, a key motivator is missing."

"Perhaps they have other motivators," Hailey speculated. "Or the information from the KEP allowed them to skip technological intermediary steps and proceed directly to functional solutions."

Hailey turned back to the planetary projection. "I think the geography of their planet might have something to do with their peaceful development. Unlike Earth with its separate continents and isolated development spaces, the Canines have only this one supercontinent. No natural barriers that would lead to the development of separate, competing civilizations."

"A planetary version of Earth's historical Pangaea continent," Liam nodded. "Fascinating."

"Without isolated populations, the evolutionary pressure that promotes conflicts over resources and territory is missing," Hailey continued. "Instead, cooperation would become the dominant survival mechanism. Their society would have developed as a coherent whole, not as competing tribes or nations fighting over land and resources."

Coleman, who had just entered and caught the last part of the conversation, nodded in agreement. "Interesting theories. The geography and the resulting social structures could indeed have shaped their development. While our history is characterized by conflicts, partly caused by geographical isolation of different groups, they seem to have taken a completely different evolutionary path."

"Additionally," Hailey added, "the climatic conditions at the poles suggest another hypothesis. The extreme temperatures have likely led to settlement predominantly in the temperate equatorial band, which in turn has minimized resource competition. With sufficient living space for everyone along the supercontinent, there were fewer incentives for territorial conflicts."

Elen observed the discussion attentively but held back. In recent weeks, she had hardly participated in scientific debates and seemed more interested in monitoring the team's progress than contributing her own analyses.

"The central question is," Elen continued after a while, "how they dealt with this information. The KEP didn't establish two-way communication, did it?" She looked at

Foster.

The Lieutenant shook his head. "No, the probe only transmits but doesn't receive anything. At least nothing we can identify in the data. It's a pure broadcast."

"What strange beings we've discovered," Hailey murmured, her gaze returning to the slowly rotating hologram of the planet. "A species that receives information about a potentially dangerous, warlike civilization—us—and apparently decides to learn the best from it and ignore the worst."

Coleman cleared his throat. "This brings us to today's briefing. In light of the new information and the accelerated arrival of the Quantum probe, we need to adjust our strategy." He activated the central hologram, which now showed a detailed timeline. "I've informed Major General Richards about our progress. The Joint Chiefs are... let's say, very interested in the pacifistic aspects of Canine society."

Hailey felt a twinge of unease. "Why exactly is the military interested in a peaceful alien civilization?"

Coleman met her probing gaze. "For obvious reasons, Dr. Fox. A species that has never developed weapons would be extremely vulnerable in the event of contact. The Pentagon wants to ensure we've thought through all possible scenarios."

Elen raised an eyebrow. "You mean they want to make sure we don't become intergalactic colonizers subjugating a defenseless civilization?"

"I mean," Coleman replied with a slight hint of irritation,

"that caution is warranted. We've only analyzed a fraction of the data. It would be naive to assume we already fully understand the Canines."

Elen stepped closer to the central projection and contemplated the slowly rotating representation of the planet.

"Back to the topic of communication," she said, her cool, businesslike voice cutting through the tense silence after Coleman's words. "Lieutenant Foster, you said the KEP only transmits but apparently doesn't receive anything. Do we have any indication of what language this information was transmitted in? And is there any sign that the Canines have tried to communicate with the probe?"

Foster rubbed his chin, a gesture he always showed when thinking through complex data problems. "The KEP transmits in several terrestrial standard formats," he explained. "Primarily binary data, but structured according to the communication protocols of 2015. Images, texts in various languages, mathematical formulas, audio data—a comprehensive archive of human knowledge up to that point."

He activated a detailed display of the signal structures at his workstation. "As for return communication..." Foster hesitated and exchanged a brief glance with Pope. "We've now finally understood why all attempts to locate the probe since its return to the solar system failed."

"The receiver is dead," Pope interjected, palms turned upward as if presenting an obvious fact. "The diagnostic data shows that the KEP's receiving modules have completely failed. The system still transmits in broadcast mode, but it's no longer listening."

"What could have caused such a selective failure?" asked Coleman, stepping closer.

Pope pursed his lips. "Hard to say. The KEP was designed for an operational life of over a hundred years, with redundant systems and extremely robust components. Still, something unforeseen could have happened." He projected a technical diagram of the probe. "Possibly the phenomenon that transported the probe 40 light-years away damaged the sensitive receiving modules. The robust transmission facilities still work, but the more complex reception systems might have been affected by the transport process. Or it could be a software error, a slow failure of the memory system, or..." He shrugged.

"Or someone deliberately deactivated the receiving modules," Liam completed the sentence, earning surprised looks.

"Why would anyone do that?" asked Hailey.

Liam grinned crookedly. "If they don't want the KEP to receive commands from Earth? Or if they want to prevent it from transmitting messages from the Canines to Earth? A kind of... quarantine."

Foster frowned. "This theory has a critical weakness, Liam. If someone wanted to establish a quarantine, why was the probe sent back to the solar system at all? That doesn't make sense. Besides, our analysis data shows that the Canines aren't advanced enough for such manipulations. They don't even have significant space technology."

"And we have no indication of a third party," Pope added.

"The other planets in the system appear to be uninhabited, as far as we can judge."

"This is all speculation," Coleman said sternly, but the thoughtful expression in his eyes revealed that he wasn't willing to dismiss any possibility completely.

"Can we turn to the actual data for a moment?" Hailey interrupted. "I think it would be helpful to learn more about the star system itself. We know about the Canines' planet, but what about the rest?"

Foster nodded and activated a new display—this time of the entire star system. A bright, yellowish-white star appeared in the center, orbited by seven planets of various sizes and colors.

"The star system has actually already been cataloged," he explained. "It's HD 40307, a star system about 42 light-years from Earth in the constellation Pictor. The central star is a K-type main-sequence star—somewhat cooler and smaller than our sun, but very stable."

Hailey gazed fascinated at the display. "And which of these planets is the home of the Canines?"

"The one in the habitable zone," Foster replied, enlarging a blue-green planet with a clearly visible supercontinent and polar caps. "Astronomers know it as HD 40307g, but we've internally dubbed it 'Canis Prime'."

Pope took over the explanation, pointing to various points in the display. "Interestingly, according to our data, Canis Prime has about seven times the mass of Earth, with a gravity that must be significantly higher than ours. This explains the stocky, muscular physiology of the

Canines—they've adapted to this higher gravity. The orbit around HD 40307 is farther out than one would expect for a habitable planet, but the specific atmospheric conditions seem to create an effective greenhouse effect that keeps the planet warm enough for liquid water. A year on Canis Prime lasts about 320 Earth days."

"The day-night cycles?" asked Hailey.

"Amazingly similar to ours," said Pope. "A day on Canis Prime lasts approximately 26.3 hours. However, the planet's axis of rotation is less inclined than Earth's—only about 15 degrees compared to our 23.5 degrees."

"That would mean milder seasons," Hailey murmured. "Less extreme temperature differences between summer and winter."

"Exactly," Pope confirmed. "Combined with the supercontinent that extends around the equator, this results in a remarkably uniform climate in the inhabited regions. The polar caps remain frozen year-round, while the equatorial and temperate zones are constantly habitable."

Hailey nodded thoughtfully. "That explains some things about their development. No extreme climatic challenges, no geographical isolation... no wonder a peaceful, cooperative society developed. The evolutionary pressure mechanisms must have been completely different from those on Earth."

"What about the other planets?" asked Elen, pointing to the remaining six worlds in the display.

"The inner two are typical rocky planets," Foster

explained. "Too hot for life as we know it. The outer four are gas giants and ice worlds, similar to those in our own solar system."

"Do we have any indication of how far their technological development might have progressed by now?" asked Coleman. "The last recordings are about two decades old, after all."

Foster shook his head. "Even with the information from the KEP transmissions, the leap from an early industrial society to space travel in such a short time would be almost impossible. The video recordings from the late phase do show progress in their electrification and first approaches to more advanced communication technology, but they were at best at the beginning of a technological age comparable to our early 20th century."

"Interesting," Hailey murmured. "If the Canines have indeed received and partially deciphered the KEP signals, they might have made technological leaps that we haven't fully captured yet."

Coleman crossed his arms over his chest. "This brings us to another critical point. We must assume that if the Canines have deciphered the KEP data, they know about humanity. They might be familiar with our history, our wars, our technology—at least up to the state of 2015."

"Our good and bad sides," Hailey added quietly.

"Exactly," Coleman nodded. "They might view us as a threat—or as potential allies. We have no idea how they've reacted to the information."

Elen, who had remained unusually quiet during the

discussion about the star system, stepped forward. "This brings us back to the question of language. Lieutenant Foster, do you have any indication whether the Canines have tried to decipher our languages? Or how they communicate?"

Foster looked at his data. "The video recordings clearly show that they communicate—we see mouth movements, gestures, and facial expressions that clearly indicate a complex sound language. Their facial anatomy is similar enough to ours that they can probably produce a wide range of sounds. But without functional audio receivers on the KEP, we of course have no sound recordings of their language."

"That's my next project," Hailey interjected. "With my background in linguistics and xenobiology, I hope to identify at least basic patterns in their visual communication. I'm already working on adapting our AI analysis tools for this purpose."

"Wait," Pope interrupted with a skeptical expression. "How is that supposed to work without any audio recordings? We have no reference for their sounds or phonetic structures."

Hailey nodded acknowledgingly. "A valid question. My approach is based on current silent speech recognition technology. Since the 2030s, there have been visual speech recognition systems originally developed for deaf people. They analyze lip movements, tongue positions, and laryngeal vibrations to reconstruct speech without hearing it."

"With an alien species?" Foster asked doubtfully.

"With limitations, of course," Hailey conceded. "I'm working with comparative anatomy. Their mouth structures show surprising similarities to those of mammals on Earth. The AI can model physiological limits and possibilities of their sound production. We won't understand their language, but we could at least derive a basic sound inventory and possibly syntactic structures."

"Dr. Waseem's vibration pattern recognition from 2053 could help," Liam added. "The system was developed to reconstruct sound waves from microscopic vibrations of objects. The KEP recordings are high-resolution enough that we might be able to apply some of these techniques to the throat movements of the Canines."

"Time is of the essence," said Coleman, looking at the projection of the Quantum probe steadily approaching its target. "In two months, the probe will reach the target area. If all goes according to plan, we could obtain new data about the phenomenon that transported the KEP."

He turned to the team. "Until then, we need to know everything about the Canines that can be extracted from the existing data. Their physiology, their social structure, their technology—and especially their potential reaction to direct contact with humanity."

The words hung heavily in the room, and everyone knew what Coleman wasn't saying: Should the transport phenomenon indeed prove to be controllable technology, humanity might soon face the decision to make direct contact with an alien civilization.

Liam, who had followed the conversation attentively, nodded appreciatively. "That sounds like a fascinating project, Dr. Fox. I could contribute some of my

self-developed AI algorithms for visual pattern recognition. They were originally designed for analyzing programming languages but can be repurposed for visual communication patterns. With your xenobiological expertise and my AI tools, we might make faster progress."

Hailey smiled in surprise. "That would indeed be helpful, Liam. Especially if we want to extract recurring patterns from the thousands of hours of video material."

"The question is," Foster interjected, "whether we have any indication that they've tried to communicate with the KEP."

Pope shook his head. "Without functioning receiving modules, no signals to the probe could be registered. However, the optical recordings in later years show increasingly complex antenna systems on the planet. It seems they've significantly developed their communication technology, possibly inspired by the information they received from the KEP."

"They've learned," Elen murmured. "They've studied our technology and adapted it."

"Possibly," Pope agreed. "But without a functioning receiver on the KEP, we can't know if they've tried to speak to us."

The group fell into thoughtful silence as the holographic representation of Canis Prime slowly rotated before them—an alien world populated by intelligent beings who might know more about humanity than vice versa.

"Alright," Coleman finally said, clapping his hands. "Let's

get to work. The next two months will be crucial."

His words marked the end of the morning briefing. As the group disbanded and everyone returned to their workstation, Hailey felt a mixture of scientific enthusiasm and quiet unease. The discovery of an alien civilization was every xenobiologist's dream. But the more they learned about the Canines, the more pressing the question became: What would happen if humanity actually found a way to reach them?

They sat in silence for a moment, letting the significance of their discovery sink in. Then Hailey turned to Liam, who was thoughtfully contemplating the floating projection.

"Liam, what's your theory on how the KEP got to this star in the first place?" she asked. "You've spent a lot of time with the data. Do you have a guess?"

Liam took a sip of his coffee and carefully set down the cup. His eyes got that slightly detached look that Hailey had come to know—it always appeared when Liam was deep in thought.

"There are several possibilities, all equally fascinating and improbable," he began. "The most obvious explanation would be a wormhole—a spacetime connection between two distant points in the universe."

He reached for a digital pen and drew in the air. A holographic representation formed: two points connected by a curved tube.

"Imagine the universe as a sheet of paper. Normally, you'd have to travel from point A to point B across the

surface—an enormous distance. But if you could fold the paper..." He made the corresponding gesture, and the holographic representation folded until the two points were directly adjacent. "...then you could take a shortcut."

"A natural phenomenon?" asked Hailey.

"Possibly," Liam nodded. "Physics doesn't rule out wormholes. Einstein and Rosen postulated them as early as 1935. The problem is stability. According to everything we know, naturally occurring wormholes would collapse instantly, unless..."

"Unless what?" asked Hailey. Physics had never been her specialty, but the idea of a cosmic shortcut fascinated her.

"Unless they're stabilized by exotic matter," Liam explained. "That's theoretical matter with negative energy density. Quantum field theory actually allows such states, for example in the Casimir effect. But the amount of exotic matter needed to stabilize a macroscopic wormhole..." He shook his head. "Astronomical."

"So not a natural phenomenon," Hailey concluded.

"Not necessarily. It could..." He hesitated and looked at her searchingly. "It could be artificial."

The implication hung heavily in the room between them.

"You mean someone created it?" Hailey crossed her arms. "The Canines aren't technologically advanced enough."

"No, but maybe someone else," Liam said softly. "There

are other possibilities. A spacetime distortion caused by an extremely dense gravitational field. A previously unknown quantum effect in the Kuiper region. Or..." He suddenly laughed. "...maybe it was Ramirez's Easter egg that somehow interacted with the natural phenomenon."

"This whole story with Ramirez," Hailey said thoughtfully. "Do you really believe he built this code just for fun? As a science fiction fan gag?"

Liam tilted his head back and forth. "From what I've researched about him, he was definitely a Trekkie through and through. His daughter told me he collected Star Trek models and had an impressive collection of memorabilia. The code itself contains comments with direct quotes from the series." He smiled. "But I don't think it was just a joke."

"What then?"

"An act of faith," Liam said seriously. "Ramirez believed in the possibility of intelligent life in the universe. His code was like a message in a bottle that he threw into the cosmic ocean—a 'what if'. He couldn't have known that his Easter egg would ever be activated."

Hailey stared into her coffee cup. "Was it ethically justifiable? The probe has been sending data about humanity to an alien civilization for decades. Without consent, without control over how this information might be interpreted or used."

"A complicated question," Liam admitted. "On one hand: No, it wasn't authorized and potentially risky. On the other hand..." He made a sweeping gesture toward the data floating around them. "Look what we've discovered

through it. A peaceful civilization that might show us there's another way besides eternal conflicts."

The irony of his words hung heavily in the room. Both had the scars of recent history clearly in mind—scars that still hurt even in 2065. The world whose knowledge the KEP probe had sent into the depths of space no longer existed as such.

The Great Crisis of the late 2020s had shaken the global order. What began as national-populist movements quickly mutated into something far more dangerous. The right-wing extremist shift swept across democracies worldwide like a wildfire—fueled by economic inequality, climate refugees, and the explosive spread of AI-generated misinformation. Even the USA hadn't remained immune as one of the major parties transformed from moderate conservative forces into an openly ultranationalist movement.

NATO stood on the brink of collapse. Russia tested new tactical nuclear weapons on the border with Eastern Europe. China and the USA played a dangerous game in the Pacific, with troop movements and fleet maneuvers that repeatedly nearly ended in direct confrontations. India and Pakistan were on the verge of a nuclear exchange. The Doomsday Clock stood at 10 seconds to midnight.

It had been the ominous alliance between human malice and artificial intelligence that had brought the world to the brink. The so-called "Hive Campaigns"—millions of individualized disinformation campaigns generated by increasingly sophisticated AI systems—had divided societies more deeply than ever before. The international legal reckoning after the crisis revealed how some

technology companies had knowingly driven the algorithmic radicalization of entire population groups.

What ultimately saved the world was an unlikely coalition: whistleblowers from the innermost circles of power, independent scientists, and a new generation of political leaders who came together across borders and ideological differences. The "Geneva Peace" of 2031 and the subsequent "Kyoto Protocols on Technological Ethics" marked a turning point. For the first time since World War II, almost all nations agreed on common principles—this time not just for politics and economics, but also for technology and communication.

The strict AI regulations that emerged then still served as pillars of global stability in 2065. Every AI system above a certain complexity level was subject to international oversight. The autonomous development of code was strictly limited—which also explained why Liam's handwritten algorithms were so valuable. He was one of the few people who still understood how to program outside the regulated systems.

In a way, the Canines were exactly what humanity had desperately sought after the Great Crisis: proof that intelligence didn't necessarily lead to self-destruction. That there was another way.

"What do you think about how the Canines dealt with the sudden flood of information from our world?" asked Hailey. "Imagine living in a society at the level of the 19th century, and suddenly you receive data about electricity, computer technology, space travel... maybe even weapons."

"It's like a technological shock," Liam nodded. "In human

history, such unequal encounters have rarely ended well. Think about colonization, about cultures suddenly confronted with superior technologies."

"But the Canines seem different," Hailey considered. "Their collaborative nature, their pacifistic social structure... perhaps they processed the information differently than we would. Not as means to power, but as tools for collective progress."

Liam rubbed his chin. "That would explain why they've developed so remarkably stable despite the technological boost. No power struggles, no exploitation of new insights for military purposes."

"If the Quantum probe reaches its target and we learn more—do you think we should try to make contact?" Hailey looked directly at Liam. "Or continue observing them from a distance?"

"I'm not an anthropologist, but I know that in field research there's the concept of non-intervention," Liam answered cautiously. "Observing without disturbing the natural course of events. Although... with the KEP probe, that ship has probably already sailed."

"And if one day we actually had the possibility to travel there?" Hailey asked quietly. "What would you do if you were standing in front of a Canine?"

Liam smiled broadly. "I'd shake their paw and say: 'Greetings from Earth. Sorry for all the unsorted data trash we sent you.'" His smile faded. "But they'd probably see us as gods from another world. With all our technology, our knowledge."

"A dangerous position," Hailey murmured. "Humans tend to abuse such power."

"Not all," Liam gently contradicted. "Maybe we could learn from them while they learn from us. A real meeting of cultures, not a conquest."

Hailey looked again at the floating data. "I wonder if Coleman and the others are even interested in a peaceful exchange? The military involvement makes me nervous."

Liam waved dismissively. "Coleman is alright. I've already worked with him on two projects. He may display the rigid military posture outwardly, but behind that is a man with principles and genuine scientific interest." He took a sip of coffee. "He was one of the few high-ranking officers who stood against the more extreme measures during the crisis. Almost cost him his career."

"Really?"

"Yes. He's more the 'diplomacy before violence' type. Believes in space exploration as a peaceful endeavor. The kind of military you want—one who uses his power judiciously." Liam shrugged. "Elen, on the other hand... I'm not so sure about her."

"What do you think they're planning?"

Liam hesitated. "I'm not sure. But I know there's more to the Quantum probe than they've told us. The specifications I've seen suggest systems that go far beyond simple research instruments."

"What kind of systems?"

"I couldn't decipher everything, but..." He broke off and shook his head. "Oh, forget it. That's probably just my overactive science fiction imagination."

Hailey suppressed a yawn and rubbed her tired eyes. The discovery of the synchronized communication pattern had been exciting, but the hours of concentration were taking their toll. The digital clock on the wall showed 02:38.

"I think that's enough for today," she said, standing up. "My brain needs a break, or I might miss something important tomorrow."

Liam nodded in agreement. "You're right. The Canines will still be there tomorrow." He didn't shut down the systems but put them on standby. The holograms of the communication patterns continued to float in the semi-darkness of the lab, like luminous constellations of an alien sky.

As Hailey walked to the door, she looked back once more at the shimmering data structures. Somewhere in these patterns and in the peaceful society of the Canines perhaps lay an answer to the question humanity had asked itself after the Great Crisis: Is there a better way?

"Good night, Liam," she said softly.

"Good night, Dr. Fox," he replied with a tired smile. "See you tomorrow."

The corridor to the residential area was sparsely lit as Hailey trudged tiredly toward her quarters. The discovery of the synchronized communication pattern had electrified her, but now exhaustion was taking its toll. She

turned a corner and noticed a figure coming from the opposite direction.

Lieutenant Foster nodded briefly to her as they passed each other. "Dr. Fox."

"Lieutenant," Hailey replied with a tired smile. "Still out so late?"

"Couldn't sleep," he replied curtly. "Thought I'd get something to drink."

They exchanged no further words. Hailey continued on her way while Foster continued toward the common area, his steps echoing softly on the polished floor.

The "Oasis," as the team had unofficially dubbed the common room, was located in the center of the residential area. The room was bathed in subdued light radiating from hidden LEDs in the high walls. The furnishings reflected the upscale character of the entire complex—a successful blend of functionality and comfort. On one side of the room was an elegant bar with highly polished surfaces of dark wood and metallic accents. Behind it stretched an impressive collection of bottles in illuminated shelves—all self-service, but clearly higher quality than the typical recreational areas in research facilities.

Chief Engineer Robert Pope sat alone at the bar, in front of him a half-full glass with an amber-colored liquid and an open pad. As he heard Foster's footsteps, he looked up and slightly raised his glass.

"Ah, Lieutenant," he greeted him with his deep, resonant voice. "Join an old man for a nightcap?"

Foster hesitated briefly, then nodded and sat on the barstool next to Pope. His gaze fell on the pad, which still displayed technical diagrams.

"Old habits?" asked Foster, pointing to the device. "Most people these days only use their ARU for everything."

Pope smiled and placed a hand on the pad. "For some things, there's simply no substitute for a physical surface, Lieutenant. Especially for complex technical drawings." He turned the pad slightly toward Foster, showing a complicated drive system. "ARUs are fantastic for overlays, quick information, and communication. But when you're doing precision work for hours, you don't want projected holograms in front of your eyes that change position with every head movement."

He tapped on the pad. "Besides, even in a world full of augmented reality, tangible things have their value. They can't be hacked or monitored remotely. Everything stored in this pad exists only here—not in the cloud, not on the network."

Foster nodded understanding. As a communications expert and hacker, he knew all too well about the vulnerabilities of networked systems. It was an unwritten law in security circles: The most sensitive information belonged on isolated devices.

The two men formed an interesting contrast: Pope with his gray full beard, weather-beaten hands, and the relaxed posture of a man who had nothing left to prove; Foster young, slim, and with the slightly tense vigilance of a soldier who is never quite off duty.

"What are you drinking there?" asked Foster, pointing to

Pope's glass.

"Karuizawa 1960, from the Cask Strength Collection." Pope gently rotated the glass and examined the deep amber color with golden reflections. "One of the last bottles from the long-since closed Japanese distillery. Priceless nowadays—one of the few advantages of working for a billionaire." His nose lowered to the glass. "Dried fruits, dark chocolate, a hint of spices, and that typical Japanese elegance on the finish. Some things truly improve with time."

Pope smiled. "The bar is surprisingly well stocked. Elen likes it when her teams are... satisfied."

Foster got up and went behind the bar. His gaze wandered over the bottles before he opted for a simple beer. He skillfully opened the bottle on the edge of the bar and returned to his seat.

"Not the whiskey type?" Pope asked curiously.

"Not at this hour," Foster replied. "Besides..." He shrugged. "Beer reminds me of home."

Pope nodded understandingly. A brief silence ensued, not uncomfortable, but rather contemplative.

"How long have you been working with Commander Coleman?" Foster finally asked, taking a sip of his beer.

"Almost fifteen years," Pope answered. "We met at Lunar Station Alpha. He was still a Captain then, freshly promoted and full of zeal." He smiled at the memory. "There was an incident—a malfunction in the life support system. Coleman remained calm when everyone else

was panicking. It was his decisions that bought us time until I could fix the problem."

Foster listened attentively while absently playing with the label on his beer bottle. "And SMI? How did you end up there?"

"After my time on the moon, I was assigned to the joint technology transfer program between Space Force and SMI," Pope explained. "My task was to adapt SMI's advanced civilian propulsion systems for military applications." He took a deliberate sip of whiskey. "I'm still Space Force, but I've been commuting between worlds for years. This gives me access to resources that the military alone couldn't provide."

He slowly rotated his glass between his fingers. "Elen may seem controlling and cold, but she understands innovation. The partnership with the military gives her access to cutting-edge technologies and test facilities, while the military benefits from her almost unlimited research resources. A symbiotic relationship, if you will."

He slowly rotated his glass between his fingers. "But enough about me, Lieutenant. What's your story? I know many NORAD technicians, but none with your... special abilities."

Foster winced slightly. "Elen has been chatting, I see."

"You're not the only one here with security clearance," Pope smiled. "The hacker thing was in your file. Pretty impressive, by the way."

Foster relaxed somewhat. "It began as a hobby. My father was a network administrator for the military, and he

taught me how systems work—and how to improve them for the better."

"For the better?" Pope probed.

"He called it 'ethical hacking'," Foster explained. "The idea of finding and fixing vulnerabilities before they can be exploited." He took another sip of beer. "During college, I developed a system that could protect military communication channels against certain types of attacks. That brought me to NORAD's attention."

"And then NASA," Pope added.

Foster snorted slightly. "Yes, then NASA. The 'loan' that somehow got extended." He shook his head. "I'm still not sure why they selected me for this project. Yes, I received the signal, but any competent technician could have done that."

"Perhaps not everyone," Pope said thoughtfully. "Sometimes it's important to recognize the right patterns. That seems to be one of your strengths."

Foster looked up in surprise. It was one of the few times someone had acknowledged his abilities, rather than just mentioning his lucky find of the KEP signal.

"What do you think about all this?" Foster asked, making a vague gesture that encompassed the entire project. "These Canines, the KEP probe, all of it?"

Pope took his time with his answer, taking a deliberate sip of his whiskey. "I think we're on the threshold of something larger than all of us. Something that could change humanity forever." He looked directly at Foster.

"And I think everyone on this team was chosen for a specific reason—not just for their technical skills."

"But?" asked Foster.

"For their character traits. Their values." Pope slowly rotated his glass on the counter. "History is full of discoveries that were misused because the wrong people were at the helm. Coleman has assembled a team he trusts."

Foster didn't seem convinced. "Even Dr. Fox and Elen Trap? Their tensions are hard to miss."

"That's precisely why," Pope nodded. "They keep each other in check. Coleman needs Elen's resources and technological know-how, but he doesn't trust her blindly. Hailey is his scientific conscience in this operation."

He emptied his glass and set it on the counter. "And what about you, Lieutenant? What's your role in this ballet?"

Foster hesitated, unsure how to respond. "I'm just a communications expert," he finally said.

Pope smiled knowingly. "Mhm. And I'm just an old mechanic."

He stood up and patted Foster lightly on the shoulder. "It's late. The answers won't get clearer by staying up too long." But instead of leaving, Pope went behind the bar and poured himself another sip of the precious whiskey.

"You know," he said, as he slid back onto his barstool, "in my forty years of service, I've seen enough big projects to recognize a pattern."

Foster waited patiently as Pope took a deliberate sip.

"There are always three types of participants," the older man continued. "The visionaries, who have an idea but rarely understand what's needed to realize it. The doers, who do the actual work—work out the technical details, solve problems, keep systems running." He paused briefly. "And then there are the guardians."

"Guardians?" asked Foster.

Pope nodded thoughtfully. "Those who ensure that a project doesn't go off the rails. Who make sure ethical boundaries are maintained, that everyone involved has the same information, that power isn't abused."

He fixed his penetrating gaze on Foster. "You're wondering why you're here. I think I know the answer."

Foster raised an eyebrow. He hadn't expected Pope to address his thoughts so directly.

"When you were at NORAD, wasn't there an incident with a faulty early warning system?" asked Pope.

Foster's posture imperceptibly stiffened. "That's not in my official file."

"No, it isn't," Pope confirmed. "But it's one of those stories told in certain circles. A young analyst who prevented a false alarm by disobeying direct orders and taking time to check the data."

Foster stared at his beer bottle. That was three years ago—a malfunction in the satellite system had falsely reported several incoming objects. The protocol would

have required an immediate alert level, with all the consequences. But something about the data had made him suspicious.

"I was just doing my job," Foster said quietly.

"No," Pope contradicted. "You did more than your job. You put your judgment above regulations because you knew it was right. That's rare, Lieutenant. Especially in the military."

Foster remained silent, unsure how to react.

"Soldiers are trained to follow orders," Pope continued. "Scientists are trained to test theories. Engineers are trained to solve problems. But who is trained to take a step back and ask: 'Should we be doing this at all?'"

Pope slowly rotated his glass. "When we developed the first fusion reactor for commercial use, we had to ensure not only that it worked, but also that it was safe, that the right controls were in place, that the power it represented wouldn't fall into the wrong hands."

"You believe the KEP discovery is of similar magnitude," Foster observed.

"I believe it could be the greatest discovery in human history," Pope replied seriously. "And as with any great discovery, there will be those who want to use it for their own purposes." He paused. "It's no coincidence that Coleman has called people with a strong moral compass to this team. People like Dr. Fox. And like you."

Foster shook his head slightly. "You overestimate me, Chief. I'm just—"

"An ethical hacker who's interested in protecting systems, not exploiting them," Pope interrupted. "A communications expert who spends more time listening than speaking. A soldier who's willing to question orders when necessary."

He emptied his glass and set it gently on the counter. "This project will challenge you, Lieutenant. Not just intellectually. It will force you to make difficult decisions."

"What kind of decisions?" asked Foster, suddenly alarmed.

Pope shook his head. "I don't know. Not yet. But I know they'll come." He stood up and regarded Foster with a penetrating look. "Coleman showed me your unofficial file before you joined the team. He told me that if things get complicated, Foster is someone you can rely on."

He stepped back from the bar. "The question is: Who will you feel obligated to when the time comes? To orders? To science? Or to your own conscience?"

Foster remained silent, but his gaze revealed that Pope's words had reached him.

"With all due respect, Chief," he finally said, "you're speaking in riddles."

A thin smile flickered across Pope's face. "Perhaps. Or perhaps I'm telling you exactly what you need to hear." He turned to the door. "Good night, Lieutenant."

"Chief?" Foster called before Pope could leave the room.

Pope turned around. "Yes?"

"This story about the early warning system. How do you know about it if it's not in my file?"

Pope smiled again, warmer this time. "Coleman and I have served together for a long time, Lieutenant. We've learned to judge people, not paper." With these words, he left the room.

Foster remained alone, the half-full beer in front of him, deep in thought. The conversation with Pope had raised more questions than it had answered. What exactly did Coleman expect from him? And what did Pope know that he wasn't saying?

He stared at the softly shimmering bottles behind the bar. The world he knew had changed the moment he clicked "YES" to initiate the data transfer from M77-2055-P2. And deep inside, he wondered if it would ever be the same again.

Commander Richard Coleman stared at the clock on the wall of his secured office in the basement of the Daedalus complex. 04:37. He had grown accustomed to getting up early—a habit from his active service time with the Space Force—but this call came unusually early even by his standards.

He rubbed his temples and activated the security protocol on his communications terminal. The holographic display lit up green: "Quantum encryption active. Connection security: Maximum."

Seconds later, Elen Trap's image materialized in perfect three-dimensional hologram in front of his desk, so real as if she were standing in the room. Her tailored suit was immaculate, her hair perfectly styled, no trace of fatigue

in her face. Only the slightly bluish shimmer of the hologram revealed that she wasn't actually present.

"A bit early for a workday, even for you, Elen," Coleman remarked dryly.

A thin smile flitted across Elen's face. "It's afternoon in Shanghai right now," she replied. "The SMI headquarters here is ideal for discreet conversations. The pretext of an investor meeting in the Asian market gives me a time window outside the usual surveillance routines."

Coleman nodded appreciatively. Typical Elen—always three steps ahead, always with multiple safeguards.

"What's up?" he asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Project Daedalus is making progress that could accelerate our timeline." Elen made a brief hand gesture, and detailed technical specifications and construction plans appeared in the air before Coleman. "The modifications to the Helios are seventy percent complete. Chief Engineer Kagawa believes we can undercut the original timeframe by four to six weeks."

Coleman examined the data floating before him with a furrowed brow. The Helios—originally conceived as a luxurious space cruise ship for the super-rich—had been SMI's most prestigious public project for three years. The official plan was for it to make its maiden voyage in three years, transporting wealthy tourists through the solar system. An orbital five-star hotel, with room for fifty passengers and every imaginable luxury.

What the public didn't know: Since the discovery of the KEP data, SMI had secretly begun to convert the ship in

collaboration with the Space Force—from a tourist cruiser to something entirely different.

"Lunar Base Alpha provides perfect conditions for the final modifications," Elen continued. "The far side of the moon shields us from prying eyes, and the materials and facilities available there have saved us two months of construction time."

"What about the propulsion system?" asked Coleman, zooming in on the corresponding schematics.

"The BIFR-4 reactor exceeds our expectations," Elen replied with undisguised satisfaction. "The Binary Isotope Fusion Reactor of the fourth generation delivers a power density that was previously only theoretically predicted."

Coleman whistled softly through his teeth. The BIFR-4 was an experimental prototype specifically developed for the Helios—a revolutionary advancement of conventional fusion reactors that had previously only been tested in strictly controlled laboratory environments. The fact that SMI had dared to integrate such a reactor into a spacecraft showed once again how far Elen was willing to go.

"The acceleration parameters?" he asked.

"Continuous 1.5g over a period of fourteen days with the current fuel reserves," Elen explained. "With several programmed phases of microgravity to reduce the physical strain on the crew. Theoretically, the ship could reach about 0.5 percent of the speed of light at the end of this acceleration cycle."

Coleman quickly calculated in his head. That

corresponded to about 1,500 kilometers per second—an enormous speed by human standards, but still only a tiny fraction of what would be needed for interstellar travel.

"The 1.5g acceleration is close to the limit of what a crew can endure for an extended period," Elen added. "We've developed a special training program, and the medical reports show that healthy adults with appropriate preparation and the built-in recovery phases can handle this strain."

"It's not about interstellar travel," said Elen, as if she had read his thoughts. "It's about being fast enough to reach and investigate the phenomenon. If we understand what transported the KEP..."

She left the sentence unfinished, but both knew what was at stake.

"The artificial gravity?" asked Coleman, switching to the corresponding diagrams.

"The rotation system is fully installed." Elen's voice took on a tone of scientific precision. "The main living areas are in the outer ring with a diameter of one hundred meters. At two revolutions per minute, this generates a gravity of one g—just like on Earth."

Coleman examined the representation of the ring-shaped ship section. It was an old, proven idea: A rotating ring created centrifugal forces that simulated gravity. The larger the radius, the more comfortable for human physiology, as Coriolis forces were minimized.

"The cabins have already been converted," Elen continued. "From fifty luxurious suites for tourists to

twelve functional quarters for the long-term mission. The rest of the space has been repurposed for extended life support systems, storage capacities, and the redundant systems required for a five-year autonomous operation."

"The supply systems?" asked Coleman, scrolling through the technical data.

"Completely overhauled," Elen nodded. "The water cycles have been optimized to 99.8% recovery. The hydroponic gardens can cover about thirty percent of the crew's food needs, with redundant systems and three separate cultivation zones that function independently of each other."

"And the remaining seventy percent?" asked Coleman.

"Long-term preserved foods, stored with multiple redundancies," Elen replied. "The ship has food supplies for the entire crew for seven years, even if the hydroponic systems should completely fail. The engineers have worked according to the triple redundancy principle—every critical system exists in triplicate with different failure modes."

"Reasonable," Coleman nodded. "A total failure of food production without a backup solution would be an unacceptable risk."

"Oxygen recovery is also secured multiple times," Elen continued. "Primarily through bioregenerative systems, secondarily through chemical processors, and as a last resort, classic lithium hydroxide cartridges."

"And the reactor?" asked Coleman. "Fuel range?"

"The BIFR-4 uses deuterium-tritium as primary fuel with a small helium-3 component for catalysis," Elen explained. "The tanks hold enough for seven years of continuous operation at standard load. At maximum acceleration, the supply lasts for eight months." She activated another diagram. "The Helios is equipped with shield systems that can collect interstellar hydrogen to a limited extent and use it as additional fuel. In theory, this could increase the range by up to twenty percent."

"The zero gravity area?"

"The central module remains unrotated and offers perfect microgravity conditions for certain scientific investigations. It also has a docking module for the two auxiliary boats that we can deploy if needed."

Coleman nodded appreciatively. The plans were impressive in their detail, a testament to Elen's meticulous approach and her ability to mobilize enormous resources. "The time window for the probe?" he asked.

"Quantum reaches the target region in six weeks," Elen answered. "Our best predictions assume that we will then have clarity about the phenomenon. The Helios could be ready to launch two months later—provided we receive the necessary approvals."

"That remains my task," Coleman said grimly. "The Joint Chiefs Committee meets next week. Admiral Cheng and General Rodriguez are on our side, but there's still significant resistance."

"From whom?" asked Elen, though her tone suggested she already knew the answer.

"Chief of Staff Harmon fears we could be opening a Pandora's box. His position is: We don't understand what happened out there, so we shouldn't send humans into it." Coleman shook his head slightly. "And then there are the concerns of the scientific advisory committee regarding a possible first contact scenario."

Elen made a dismissive gesture. "The Canines are peaceful and technologically significantly less advanced than we are. What risk could they pose?"

"It's not about the Canines," Coleman replied. "It's about what transported the KEP. If an advanced civilization is behind it..." He left the sentence hanging unfinished.

A brief silence ensued as both pondered the implications.

"How is it going with the team?" Elen finally asked, her voice suddenly more casual.

Coleman raised an eyebrow. "They're making progress. Dr. Fox and Porter have discovered an interesting communication pattern among the Canines. Foster is proving sharper than I expected."

"And Pope?"

"Loyal as always. He doesn't ask questions he shouldn't ask."

Elen nodded slowly. "And... Hailey?"

Coleman noticed the slight change in tone as Elen mentioned her former friend's first name. Beneath the cool, businesslike facade lay something he rarely experienced from Elen—a trace of genuine emotion.

"Dr. Fox is professional and focused," he answered neutrally. "Whatever happened between you two doesn't seem to affect her work."

"Good." Elen's face was again a mask of businesslike efficiency. "How much does the team know about the actual goal of Project Daedalus?"

"Nothing official," Coleman assured. "Pope knows some technical details about the Helios, of course, but not the full extent. For the rest of the team, the Quantum probe is the main project."

"And that should remain so for now," Elen emphasized. "Once we know more about the phenomenon, we can decide whom to bring into the inner circle."

Coleman nodded, but a shadow of doubt flickered across his face. "Hailey Fox would be an asset to the scientific side of the mission. Her understanding of xenobiology is unmatched. And Porter... well, his way of thinking might be exactly what we need when we encounter the unforeseen."

"One at a time, Richard," Elen replied with a thin smile. "First priority is to complete the Helios and obtain the necessary permits. Then we'll see."

She glanced at her watch—a small, elegant movement that reminded Coleman of her time at Stanford, long before she rose to billionaire status. This small gesture was one of the few remnants of the young, ambitious student she once was.

"I have to go. The investors are waiting." She looked him directly in the eyes. "Keep me informed about the team's

progress. Especially what Dr. Fox and Porter discover."

Coleman nodded. "Of course. Take care, Elen."

A barely perceptible smile flitted across her face. "Always, Richard. Always."

The hologram flickered and disappeared, leaving Coleman alone in his office. He stared at the empty spot where Elen had stood, his thoughts with the huge spacecraft being converted in secret on the far side of the moon.

The Helios—originally conceived as a symbol of luxury and leisure—was secretly transforming into something entirely different: the true heart of Project Daedalus, a ship of discovery and possibly a bridge between civilizations.

Coleman activated his terminal and began making notes. The team would learn nothing of the true nature of the project—not yet. But he had to ensure that their research was going in the right direction without revealing too much.

It was a narrow ridge he was treading. Between military duty, scientific necessity, and the personal ambitions of one of the most powerful women in the world. But if there was anyone who mastered this balancing act, it was Richard Coleman.

IV

The second week of May in the Daedalus Complex

brought no notable changes to the research team's rhythm. The days began with the morning briefing at 0800, followed by intensive work phases on the respective special projects, occasionally interrupted by coordination meetings and the usual meals in the "Oasis."

On this Wednesday morning, Hailey had started particularly early. Her progress in analyzing Canine communication, supported by Liam's adaptive algorithms, had achieved a breakthrough. By combining her linguistic methods with his unconventional programming, they had developed a rudimentary understanding of about two hundred basic communication forms of the aliens – not a translation in the strict sense, but a conceptual framework that allowed them to categorize basic social interactions.

She was so immersed in her work that she barely registered Lieutenant Foster's entrance, who sat down at his own station with a cup of coffee. The lab was quiet, only the soft hum of the cooling systems and the occasional typing on holo-keyboards breaking the silence.

Suddenly, a penetrating, pulsating tone cut through the atmosphere of the lab. A shrill double signal that repeated every three seconds.

Hailey flinched. Foster jumped up, his cup of coffee forgotten on the station. Liam, who had been programming in a corner, turned around with wide-open eyes.

"What the–" Hailey began, but her question was interrupted by all the main screens lighting up. The holographic displays flickered briefly and then showed a

single message:

QUANTUM SIGNAL RECEIVED

PRIORITY ALPHA

TARGET LOCATED

The lab suddenly came to life. The door opened, and Coleman rushed in, closely followed by Pope.

"Status!" Coleman barked as he hurried directly to the main control panel.

Foster was already analyzing the incoming data. "Quantum probe has just sent a signal, Sir. Heavily compressed data transmission, I'm unpacking it now."

The displays at Coleman's station blinked hectically as the system processed the flood of information. Pope stepped beside him and stared at the columns of numbers.

"The probe has located the KEP," Foster said with a mixture of excitement and disbelief in his voice. "Position is being triangulated now... Confirmed. It's located at the edge of the Kuiper Belt, exactly in the target sector we had predicted."

Coleman nodded curtly. "Open a communication channel to the KEP."

Foster worked feverishly at his console. "Signals are being sent, Sir. Various frequencies and protocols, but..." He shook his head. "No response. The reception modules must still be defective."

"What about the KEP's course?" asked Hailey, who had joined the men. "Is it moving?"

Foster checked the data. "Minimal movement. It's practically drifting, following no recognizable course." He paused and checked more displays. "The data transmission to Earth seems to have stopped. No active telemetry detectable."

Coleman frowned. "Has the Quantum scanned all systems of the KEP?"

"Yes, Sir," replied Foster. "Energy signature is weak but present. Several systems appear to be offline, but the main transmitter is still functioning in broadcast mode, as well as some navigation systems. No signs of course corrections in recent years."

Liam, who had been observing silently until now, stepped forward. "Can we trace back the navigation data? The historical flight path data could show us exactly where it came from."

Pope nodded appreciatively. "Good idea, Porter. The Quantum probe is equipped with precise sensors that could do exactly that."

Coleman considered briefly. "Foster, reconfigure the mission parameters. The Quantum should attempt to trace the path of the KEP backward. Perhaps we can locate the phenomenon that caused the jump."

"Yes, Sir," replied Foster and immediately began to program the corresponding commands.

Hailey stepped beside Coleman. "What if the Quantum

experiences the same phenomenon as the KEP?" she asked quietly. "We could lose another probe."

Liam, working at a nearby terminal, immediately shook his head. "The Quantum was programmed specifically for this," he explained, while his fingers flew over the holo-keyboard. "I reviewed the emergency protocols myself. All the sensors are calibrated for spatial anomalies. Should an extreme position shift occur, the probe would automatically initiate a reversal into the exact entry path."

"A kind of safety line," Pope added, nodding. "The Quantum has advanced quantum navigation systems that can determine its starting point in relation to the galactic center at any time."

Coleman gave him a confirming look. "We still have to take the risk, Dr. Fox. The Quantum has more advanced sensors and recording devices than the KEP. Even if it meets the same fate, we will receive valuable data."

Liam snorted quietly. "Yes, in about forty years, when we're all retired." He demonstratively tapped his wrist, where an imaginary watch was. "I'd rather not postpone the publication of my research results for that long."

Foster suppressed a grin, while Pope cleared his throat to hide a laugh. Even Hailey's face showed a smile.

Coleman did not change his expression, but his eyes narrowed slightly. "Thank you for this insightful time calculation, Mr. Porter. Perhaps we could return to the matter at hand?"

Pope, working at another console, whistled softly through

his teeth. "I have the first deep scans. The KEP shows traces of... unusual radiation patterns on the outer hull."

"What kind of radiation?" Coleman asked sharply.

"Not classifiable by standard parameters," replied Pope, staring at the displays. "There are similarities to Cherenkov radiation, but the spectral signature is shifted. As if the probe had been exposed to some kind of... spacetime distortion."

The room went quiet as the significance of these words sank in.

"Is the Quantum probe protected against this type of radiation?" asked Hailey, her forehead wrinkled with concern.

Pope and Coleman exchanged a look before the Chief Engineer answered. "When we developed the Quantum, we didn't have a specific type of radiation to protect it against. We only knew that something unusual must have happened to the KEP."

"But we took precautions," Coleman added. "The Quantum features a multi-layered shielding made of experimental materials designed to provide protection against various types of radiation."

Pope nodded and activated a technical diagram of the Quantum probe. "Triple hull. The outer layer is made of an alloy with high tungsten and iridium content to shield conventional radiation. The middle layer contains superconducting elements that can deflect electromagnetic fields. The inner layer consists of a graphene composite matrix with embedded quantum dots

that can respond to specific particle energies."

"A kind of... universal radiation shield?" Foster asked skeptically.

"As universal as possible with today's technology," Pope confirmed. "The Quantum is also equipped with continuous self-diagnosis. At the first signs of unusual radiation, it would automatically strengthen its shields and program an evasive course."

Liam, who had listened attentively, shook his head slightly. "But if it really is a spacetime distortion, then we're not just talking about radiation, but about fundamental effects on physics itself. Even the best shielding won't help with that."

"Our best chance," said Coleman, "is not the shielding, but early detection. The Quantum is programmed to turn back and send data at the first sign of an anomaly, before it potentially suffers the same fate as the KEP."

"Like a canary in a coal mine," Hailey murmured.

"A very expensive canary," Coleman replied dryly. "But yes, essentially it is."

"How is the team doing?" asked Coleman, his eyes directed back to the displays.

Foster looked up from his console. "The new mission parameters have been compiled and are being transmitted now, Sir. Given the distance, the signal will take about six hours to reach the Quantum. We can expect confirmation of receipt in twelve hours at the earliest."

Coleman nodded grimly. "The delay is inevitable. Make sure all commands are programmed anticipatorily so that the probe can react independently to possible situations."

"Already implemented, Sir," Foster confirmed. "The mission algorithm contains adaptive decision trees for numerous scenarios."

"A devilishly complicated process," Pope added. "Like tracking a ghost that wandered through space years ago."

"How long will the entire process take?" asked Hailey.

Foster calculated briefly. "Once the probe receives the new commands and begins the backtracking, it needs to proceed cautiously to avoid erasing traces. With optimal performance... about three to four days for the tracking itself. With the communication delays, we should have first concrete results in about a week."

"Lieutenant Foster," Coleman turned to him with a serious expression, "I want you to set up continuous monitoring of all system parameters of the Quantum probe. Even the slightest deviation from the normal range could be significant."

"Understood, Sir," replied Foster. "I will implement an automated monitoring system that defines threshold values for each individual subsystem of the probe and immediately raises an alarm in case of anomalies."

"Good," Coleman confirmed. "Now there's a lot to do for all of us. Dr. Fox and Mr. Porter, focus on the data already received and develop theories about what might have caused these unusual radiation patterns. Chief

Pope, I need your expertise for an assessment of the possible effects of this radiation on our systems."

The team nodded and got to work, while the alarm slowly fell silent and the lab again lapsed into concentrated activity.

The "Oasis" felt like a small island of peace amid hectic activity in the late evening. The indirect lighting bathed the room in warm, muted light. In a corner of the common room stood a professional pool table, its green cloth almost seeming to glow under the focused lighting.

Liam bent over the table in concentration, precisely balancing the cue between his fingers. With a fluid motion, he struck the white ball, which perfectly pocketed the black eight in the corner.

"And that, my dear colleagues, is my third victory in a row," he announced with a broad grin and straightened up.

Pope, who sat in one of the comfortable leather armchairs with a glass of his precious Karuizawa, snorted in amusement. "Your fine motor skills are impressive for someone who regularly abuses his computer keyboards."

"Never underestimate a misspent youth," Liam retorted, as he put his cue back in the wall holder. "College time is perfect for perfecting useless skills."

Hailey, sitting at one of the bar tables with a glass of red wine in front of her, smiled slightly. "I wouldn't have thought one could play pool professionally without following a single rule."

"Rules are for people lacking creativity," Liam replied with a wink and dropped onto one of the bar stools next to Hailey.

The day had been long and intense. After the alarm in the morning, each team member had spent hours analyzing the new data, developing and discarding theories. The discovery of the KEP and the mysterious radiation patterns had raised a flood of questions but provided few answers. When Coleman finally announced at 2000 that they should call it a day, the exhaustion had been palpable in everyone.

"Has anyone seen Foster?" asked Hailey, taking a sip of her wine. "He was the last to leave the lab, but that was over an hour ago now."

Pope shook his head. "Maybe he went directly to his quarters. The boy is conscientious – probably still setting up the monitoring system Coleman requested."

"Or he's with the Commander in some secret meeting," Liam speculated, grabbing a handful of nuts from a bowl. "The two seem to be constantly talking in private since the alarm went off."

"Coleman values Foster's expertise," Pope said vaguely. "Understandable, considering that all our communication with the Quantum probe runs through Foster's systems."

Hailey regarded Pope with a thoughtful look. Pope was harder to fathom than the others. While Liam was an open book, with all his eccentric peculiarities, and Coleman was clearly recognizable as a military commanding officer, the older engineer remained a kind of enigma. His connection to the Space Force and to

SMI, his obviously close connection to Coleman – all this hinted at a role that went beyond that of a mere technical advisor.

"Speaking of Coleman," Liam interjected, fishing a pickled mushroom from a bowl on the bar table, "I haven't seen our Chief Matthew today either. Normally he's constantly fluttering around Coleman."

Pope took a deliberate sip of his whisky. "He's absent for a few days. Administrative matters."

Before anyone could inquire further, the door to the "Oasis" opened, and Foster entered. His face wore an unusual expression – a mixture of triumph, nervousness, and determination. Without saying a word, he went back to the door and locked it with his access card.

"Is everything alright, Lieutenant?" asked Pope with a raised eyebrow. "Is there a reason for this security measure?"

Foster turned around and let his gaze sweep over the small group. "What I have to say should stay between us," he explained, his voice quieter than usual. "I've discovered something."

The atmosphere in the room changed instantly. Pope put down his glass, Liam stopped chewing, and Hailey sat up straighter.

"And what exactly have you discovered?" asked Hailey, suddenly wide awake.

Foster stepped closer to the table, his movements careful, as if he feared being overheard. "It's about

Project Daedalus," he said. "I believe it's not what we think it is."

Hailey frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

Foster took a deep breath. "In the last few hours, I've conducted some... investigations. Sure, Coleman ordered the continuous monitoring of the Quantum, but I wanted to find out more about the probe and its connection to the overall project."

His gaze briefly slid to Pope, almost apologetically. "When I was setting up the monitoring algorithm, I noticed some unusual data flows in our network. Encrypted, highly secure, but with patterns I recognize from my time at NORAD – typical for large projects with military involvement."

"What kind of data flows?" asked Liam, visibly fascinated by the sudden secrecy.

Foster lowered his voice even further. "A ship is being built. A large one. And not just anywhere – directly on the far side of the moon, in Moonbase Alpha."

Pope's hand, which was about to pick up his glass again, froze mid-movement. His eyes narrowed slightly, but his face remained otherwise expressionless.

"The communication frequencies, the resource requirements, the personnel shifts – it all points to it," Foster continued, his words now faster, driven by the excitement of his discovery. "And here's the kicker: The ship bears the code name 'Helios,' but the actual project it belongs to is called..." He made a dramatic pause. "Daedalus. Our project."

Pope sat completely still, his face now a mask of professional neutrality. But Hailey, who was watching him closely, noticed a minimal change in his posture – a slight tension that hadn't been there before.

"Speculation," Pope finally said, his voice calm and controlled. "I would be careful with such conclusions, Lieutenant."

"They're not speculations, Chief," Foster replied with unusual determination. "I recognized the patterns. As an ethical hacker, I know how to extract information from seemingly unrelated data points. It's the same principle I applied at NORAD to..."

He interrupted himself and looked directly at Pope. "Wait a minute – you yourself told me about Moonbase Alpha when we were sitting in the bar the other day. About your work there, about the tests of the experimental propulsion systems..."

Hailey turned quickly to Liam. "You're the computer specialist here," she said with a penetrating look. "Did you know about this? Didn't you notice these data flows?"

Liam raised his hands defensively. "Hey, just because I write code doesn't mean I snoop around in all systems." He shrugged. "I was too busy with the AI optimization for the Canine analyses. Who would have thought that they would hide something from me – of all people!" He tapped his forehead theatrically. "Besides, we were all pretty occupied, and concentrated on the obvious: alien dog beings and mysterious spacetime distortions. Doesn't that sound like enough material for a quarter?"

Hailey looked at him skeptically but nodded slowly.

"I could of course at any time..." Liam made a vague gesture with his fingers, as if operating an invisible keyboard. "...check the data streams if you want. Foster overtaking me is just a temporary condition."

Pope sighed deeply and put down his glass. He tapped something on his ARU controller on his wrist – an almost imperceptible movement that only Foster noticed.

"You're contacting Coleman," Foster stated, not as a question.

Pope nodded curtly. "I think the Commander is better suited for such discussions than I am."

The door to the "Oasis" opened a few minutes later. Coleman entered, his face unreadable. He glanced briefly at Pope, who responded with a minimal nod, then let his gaze sweep over the rest of the team.

"Lieutenant Foster," he said in a neutral tone. "I hear you've made some... interesting discoveries."

Foster held his gaze. "Yes, Sir. About a spaceship named Helios and its connection to Project Daedalus."

Coleman closed the door behind him and stepped closer. "What exactly do you believe you've discovered?"

"Project Daedalus encompasses more than just exploring the phenomenon through the Quantum probe," replied Foster. "It's about a manned mission."

Coleman kept his facial expression carefully neutral, but his eyes narrowed slightly. "That's a far-reaching conclusion, Lieutenant."

"But correct, isn't it, Sir?" asked Foster.

A long pause followed. Coleman looked at Pope, who barely perceptibly nodded, then at Hailey and Liam, whose faces showed tense expectation.

"Yes," Coleman finally said. "There is indeed a spaceship named Helios. It's currently being retrofitted at Moonbase Alpha."

"For a mission to the phenomenon that transported the KEP," added Hailey, her voice a mixture of awe and disbelief.

Coleman nodded curtly. "The Helios was originally conceived as a luxury cruise ship for space. Space Mining Industries has repurposed the ship for... other purposes."

"A manned mission," whispered Liam. "You're actually planning to send people there."

"The planning phase is not yet complete," replied Coleman. "The retrofitting of the ship is underway, but we haven't made any final decisions yet."

"About the crew?" Hailey asked directly.

Coleman met her gaze without blinking. "Among other things."

"How many?" asked Foster.

Coleman hesitated briefly, as if considering how much he should reveal. "The Helios is being equipped for a long-term mission with twelve crew members."

Liam whistled softly through his teeth. "Twelve people who voluntarily let themselves be locked in a metal tube to fly to something that breaks the laws of physics? That's either incredibly brave or just plain crazy."

"It's a calculated risk," Coleman corrected. "No different from the first moon landings or the Mars expeditions."

"Except those weren't forty light years away," Hailey replied dryly.

"We don't expect the ship to cover the full distance conventionally," said Coleman. "The goal is to reach and investigate the phenomenon that transported the KEP. If we understand how it works..."

"...you could use it," Foster completed the sentence. "A revolutionary transportation technology."

Coleman nodded slowly. "The potential benefit for humanity would be immeasurable."

"And what's the timeline?" asked Hailey. "When is this mission supposed to launch?"

"The Helios is about seventy-eight percent complete," answered Coleman. "The original plan envisioned a launch in six to eight weeks, but after today's discovery..." He left the sentence unfinished.

"It will be accelerated?" Foster surmised.

Coleman didn't answer directly, which was answer enough.

"Why weren't we informed?" asked Hailey, a hint of

annoyance in her voice. "We're working day and night on this project, and nobody thought it necessary to tell us the full truth?"

"Information is shared on a need-to-know basis, Dr. Fox," replied Coleman. "That's standard protocol for projects of this security level."

"And now we know," Liam noted. "What does that mean for us?"

Coleman looked at each of them in turn. "This information is strictly classified. I trust in your discretion."

"But it means even more, doesn't it, Commander?" asked Foster quietly. "It means that we are potentially... being considered for the mission."

A tense silence settled over the room. Coleman held Foster's gaze for a long moment before responding.

"Your skills and expertise were selected with care," he finally said. "For the current phase of the project – but also with an eye toward possible... future developments."

"You've been testing us," said Hailey, a realization, not a question.

"Evaluating would be the more appropriate word," Coleman corrected. "As I said, no final decisions have been made yet."

Liam leaned back on his bar stool. "But you're planning to select crew members from this team," he noted. "Or was the whole 'Let's assemble a team of brilliant specialists' thing just a coincidence?" He rocked his head back and

forth. "What a cosmic coincidence that you picked exactly the experts who might be needed for a journey to an alien civilization." He put on an exaggeratedly contemplative face. "No, no, this must be pure coincidence. I mean, who would want to take a linguist, an AI specialist, and a communications expert on such a mission?"

Pope smirked slightly into his whisky, while Coleman regarded Liam with a penetrating look.

"Your assumptions are not unfounded, Mr. Porter," he finally said. "But I repeat: No final decisions have been made yet."

"And when they are made?" asked Hailey. "Who decides who goes?"

"A committee consisting of military and scientific advisors," replied Coleman. "Taking into account numerous factors – professional qualification, psychological suitability, physical resilience..." He paused briefly. "And of course personal willingness. No one will be forced into this mission."

Hailey, Foster, and Liam exchanged glances, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.

"What happens now?" Foster finally asked.

"You continue your work," said Coleman. "The discovery of the KEP and the analysis of the phenomenon are top priority. The more we understand before the Helios launches, the better our chances of success."

"And while we work here, the Helios is being completed for us," murmured Hailey. "Or for whoever."

"Chief Pope and I will withdraw now," said Coleman and nodded to Pope. "I expect all of you tomorrow at 0700 in the lab. Today's revelations don't change our immediate goals."

As Pope and Coleman left the room, silence reigned for a long moment. Then Liam began to laugh softly.

"What's so funny?" asked Hailey, irritated.

"The whole thing," replied Liam, gesturing around. "We thought we were just analyzing data about space pugs, and now it turns out we're preparing for an interstellar road trip."

"It's not certain that we'll be selected," Foster pointed out.

"Oh, come on," replied Liam, rolling his eyes. "They've had us under quarantine for weeks. They've tested our reactions to stress, our teamwork, our problem-solving skills. They've even let us live together in this nice, cozy cage to see if we'd go for each other's throats." He reached for a nut from the bowl. "If that's not preparation for a long-term mission in space, then I don't know what is."

"Liam is right," said Hailey thoughtfully. "The signs were there, we just didn't interpret them correctly."

"The question is," said Foster, turning his empty glass between his fingers, "what we do now."

"What do you mean?" asked Hailey.

"If they asked us – would you go?" Foster clarified. "On this mission? To something we barely understand, with

unclear chances of survival?"

A thoughtful silence followed. Hailey stared into her wine glass as if she could find the answer there. Liam had stopped grinning, his face unusually serious.

"I would go," Hailey finally said quietly. "The chance to explore an alien civilization is... priceless. A dream for any xenobiologist."

"Me too," nodded Liam. "In the footsteps of Captain Kirk, boldly going where no human has gone before." He grinned broadly. "Just imagine – the first time a human makes first contact with a species, and it's a bunch of super-intelligent space pugs. That's too good to pass up." He shrugged. "Besides, when do you get the chance to be the first human to take a selfie with a space pug?"

That brought a brief laugh from the others before seriousness settled over their faces again.

"Foster?" asked Hailey softly. "What about you?"

The Lieutenant was silent for a long moment before answering. "I'm a soldier," he finally said. "We go where the mission takes us." He looked up at the others. "But yes, I would go. Voluntarily."

They sat together in silence for a while longer, each preoccupied with their own thoughts, before finally saying goodnight.

In the secure communications room two floors below, Coleman stared at Elen's holographic image. Her face showed no emotion, but he knew her long enough to recognize the suppressed intensity in her eyes.

"So the Quantum has found both the KEP and traces of the phenomenon," she said, more a statement than a question.

"That's how it looks," Coleman confirmed. "We've instructed the probe to trace back the path. In three to four days, we should know what we're looking for."

"And the Helios?"

Coleman hesitated briefly. "The current retrofit status is at 78 percent. Chief Engineer Kagawa estimates we could be ready to launch in six to eight weeks."

"Accelerate the process," said Elen, her voice cool and precise. "I want the Helios to be operational in four weeks."

"That could jeopardize the safety margins," Coleman objected.

"Then we'd better balance very carefully, Commander." Elen's eyes fixed on him. "We stand at the edge of the greatest discovery in human history. I'm not willing to fail due to caution."

Coleman held her gaze. "Arrange for the elite trainers for the long-term mission to be transferred to the Moonbase. We need intensified training for potential crew members."

"Already initiated," replied Elen. "But we still don't have a final crew list."

Coleman nodded. "There's another problem. Foster discovered the existence of the Helios and the connection to Project Daedalus. Pope contacted me, and

I had to tell our three main candidates at least part of the truth."

Elen's gaze sharpened. "How did he find out?"

"Network analysis while setting up the monitoring systems for the Quantum probe," answered Coleman. "He discovered unusual data streams and recognized the patterns. It was really just a matter of time – his NORAD background makes him particularly sensitive to such details."

"And Porter, our alleged computer genius?" asked Elen with a hint of mockery.

"Claims to have been too busy with his AI optimization to examine the systems," said Coleman. "A credible explanation. He has indeed been obsessively focused on the Canine analyses."

"How did they react?" asked Elen, her voice now more neutral.

"Surprised, but not completely unprepared," answered Coleman. "I believe they all had already developed suspicions on a subconscious level. They are intelligent."

"And their attitude toward the potential mission?"

"I didn't ask them directly," said Coleman. "But their reactions indicate interest, even enthusiasm, despite the obvious awareness of the risks."

Elen leaned back in her invisible chair, her fingertips pressed together. "That's... unexpectedly early, but not necessarily problematic. In fact, it could save us time.

The psychological evaluations can now enter the final phase."

"We shouldn't rush anything," warned Coleman. "The disclosure was earlier than planned. We need to ensure they fully understand what they would be getting into."

"Of course," agreed Elen, her voice now businesslike again. "But it doesn't hurt to accelerate the process. Let me know when the Quantum probe delivers new data."

With these words, her hologram disappeared, and Coleman was left alone.

Pope entered the room a moment later. "How did it go?" he asked.

"She's not dissatisfied," answered Coleman. "She sees it as an opportunity to accelerate the preparations."

Pope snorted softly. "Of course she does. Ms. Trap has always mastered the art of turning every situation to her advantage."

"She didn't ask about your conversation with Foster in the Oasis?" asked Coleman. "About you telling him about Moonbase Alpha?"

"No," said Pope. "And I didn't mention it. Foster found out enough on his own to be credible. No reason to mention my... little indiscretion."

Coleman nodded slowly. "You like the boy."

"I like all of them," Pope admitted. "They're brilliant, each in their own way. And they have what will be most

important for the mission."

"What would that be?"

"Curiosity," Pope answered without hesitation. "Every time I stepped into a rocket or tested an experimental vehicle, it was about answers to questions no one else would ask." He turned to Coleman. "These three – Hailey, Foster, Liam – they are driven by the same curiosity. They want to understand what's out there. And that's a stronger drive than patriotism, money, or fame."

Coleman stepped beside him at the window. "So you believe they would go, even if they knew all the risks?"

"Yes," Pope answered without hesitation. "Just as we would."

The two men stood silently side by side as night settled over the Daedalus Complex, and somewhere in deep space, a lonely probe began to follow the trail of a secret that could change humanity forever.

V

It was 4:27 AM when the alarm siren blared through the Daedalus complex once again. This time, no announcement was needed – every team member arrived at the main laboratory within minutes, the last traces of sleep still on their faces, but with alert, alarmed eyes.

Coleman was already on site, bent over a console, together with Foster, who apparently hadn't gone to bed

at all. His face showed the characteristic signs of a sleepless night – slightly reddened eyes, a pale complexion, and a collection of empty coffee cups at his workstation.

"Status," demanded Hailey, as she rushed to her own station and booted up the systems.

Foster looked up briefly. "The Quantum probe initiated an unexpected course correction seven and a half hours ago and reduced its speed. We just received the data."

"Why would it do that?" asked Liam, positioning himself next to Foster and looking over his shoulder at the displays.

"Here," said Foster, projecting a three-dimensional representation of the Kuiper Belt into the center of the room. A bright point marked the position of the Quantum probe, a dimmer point the original position of the KEP. "The Quantum, while tracking the path of the KEP, discovered some kind of energy signature."

Pope entered the room, still adjusting his uniform. He immediately stepped beside Coleman. "What kind of energy signature?"

"Hard to say," replied Foster. "The data is unusual. Not in the electromagnetic spectrum, nothing our standard sensors would normally detect."

"Wait," interrupted Liam. "If it's not in the EM spectrum, how did the probe detect it in the first place?"

Coleman nodded to Foster, who projected a complex data diagram onto the main screen. Colorful lines showed

wave functions that crossed and overlapped in unusual patterns.

"The Quantum probe is equipped with experimental quantum field detectors," explained Coleman. "Originally developed to measure subtle fluctuations in the quantum vacuum that might indicate dark matter. They've recorded something... unusual."

"These wave patterns," murmured Hailey, who had stepped closer to the projection. "They almost look like..."

"Interference patterns," Pope completed the sentence. "But not from electromagnetic waves. More like interferences in the structure of space-time itself."

"That's impossible," said Liam, studying the data with a fascinated expression. "Quantum field fluctuations of this amplitude... that would mean..."

"That we've stumbled upon something that challenges the known laws of physics," Coleman explained calmly. "The probe automatically slowed down to take more precise measurements."

Foster typed some commands into his console. "The current telemetry shows that the Quantum has taken up a stable orbit around an... empty point in space. The sensors show nothing visible there, but the quantum field detectors register intense activity."

"Some kind of invisible object?" asked Hailey.

"Not exactly invisible," corrected Pope. "More like... not anchored in our normal space-time continuum. Like an echo of an object from another dimension or another

universe."

Liam had activated his own console by now and was performing complex calculations. His fingers flew over the holographic keyboard as he manipulated equations that appeared to most others in the room as incomprehensible mathematical symbols.

"This quantum signature..." he muttered, more to himself than to the others. "The amplitude of the fluctuations, the frequency patterns... They correspond to the theoretical models for an Einstein-Rosen-Köhler effect."

"A what?" asked Hailey.

"A hypothetical manifestation of a space-time fold," explained Liam, without looking up from his calculations. "Named after Einstein, Rosen, and Professor Köhler, who extended the equations in the 2030s. Theoretically, such an effect could enable a passage between two distant points in the universe."

"A wormhole?" asked Hailey, her voice a mixture of disbelief and fascination.

"Not exactly a wormhole in the classical sense," Pope corrected. "A wormhole would be a stable connection. What Liam is describing sounds more like a fluctuating, unstable weakness in space-time."

Coleman nodded slowly. "That would explain how the KEP could cover 40 light years without exceeding the speed of light."

Foster now projected a new image – the exact sensor readouts of the Quantum probe. "The quantum field

detectors show increased activity. Whatever is there seems to be... becoming more active."

"More active?" asked Hailey, alarmed.

"The amplitude of the fluctuations is increasing," confirmed Foster. "About 23% higher than at the first discovery seven hours ago."

Coleman stepped closer to the main projection. "Could it be a natural phenomenon?"

"Hard to say," replied Pope. "We have no comparative data for such phenomena. The theoretical models for natural space-time distortions of this kind require extreme conditions – many times the mass of black holes or exotic matter with negative energy density."

"None of which should be found in the Kuiper Belt," added Liam, now looking up from his calculations. "That's like discovering a tropical rainforest in Antarctica."

"Could it be... artificial?" Hailey asked quietly. The implication of her question hung heavily in the room.

A long pause followed. Coleman exchanged a meaningful glance with Pope.

"We can't rule out that possibility," Coleman finally said. "If the Canines are more advanced than we've assumed so far..."

"No," Hailey interrupted decisively. "The Canines are a pre-industrial society with emerging electrification. They have no technology that's even remotely advanced enough to manipulate space-time."

"Then another alien intelligence?" asked Foster.

"Or a natural anomaly that we don't yet understand," added Pope. "The history of science is full of phenomena that initially seemed inexplicable and were later identified as natural processes."

Liam had turned his attention back to the incoming data. "The fluctuations show a pattern," he suddenly said. "It's subtle, but definitely not random. The quantum field disturbances are pulsating in a regular sequence."

He projected a waveform display that showed distinct rhythmic variations.

"That could indicate a controlled process," confirmed Pope after briefly studying the data.

"What about the KEP?" asked Coleman. "Do the data show a connection between its passage and the anomaly?"

Foster checked the navigation data. "The tracked flight path of the KEP leads directly through the area where the Quantum has now discovered the anomaly. And the radiation traces on the KEP hull could be from passage through this phenomenon."

"So we've found it," said Hailey. "Whatever transported the KEP."

Coleman nodded slowly. "The question is, what do we do now."

A silence fell as everyone weighed the implications. The discovery was more monumental than they had imagined

– not just a strange phenomenon, but potentially a gateway to the stars, a passage that seemed to overcome the fundamental limitations of physics.

"We should move the Quantum closer," Pope finally said. "Take more detailed measurements."

"Risk assessment?" asked Coleman, his eyes fixed on Foster.

The lieutenant considered briefly. "The Quantum was programmed with emergency protocols for exactly this scenario. At the first signs of a shift, it would automatically retreat and transmit back the data."

"Unless the shift happens too quickly," Liam interjected. "If the KEP was transported without warning..."

"The Quantum is technologically much more advanced," Pope countered. "Its sensors are more sensitive, its reaction time faster."

Coleman stood in silence for a long moment, hands clasped behind his back, as he examined the data. Finally, he turned to Foster.

"Prepare a new set of mission parameters," he ordered. "The Quantum should approach the anomaly slowly, with constant data transmission. At the first signs of instability, it should immediately withdraw."

"Yes, sir," Foster replied and immediately began programming.

"How quickly can we transmit the commands?" asked Hailey.

"The transmission itself takes only seconds," replied Foster. "But at this distance, the signal will take about six hours to reach the Quantum." He worked intently at his console. "And another six hours until we receive confirmation."

"Twelve hours delay," muttered Liam. "That's a long time for such a dynamic phenomenon."

"It's the best we can do," said Coleman. "We need to gather more information before the Helios arrives."

Foster glanced up briefly. "Mission parameters formulated, sir. The Quantum is instructed to approach the anomaly to within 5000 kilometers, continuously take measurements, and remain constantly data-ready." He projected the detailed command sequence onto a side monitor for review.

Pope studied the commands. "The approach speed is set very low. This gives the probe more time for measurements, but also more time to respond to changes."

"A reasonable precaution," confirmed Coleman. "Send the commands, Lieutenant."

Foster initiated the transmission. "Signals sent, sir. Confirmation of complete transmission received. The Quantum will receive the commands in about six hours."

"Then there's nothing left for us to do but wait," said Coleman.

The next seven hours passed in tense anticipation. The team remained in the laboratory, incessantly analyzing

the existing data and trying to extract every little detail from the measurements so far. Liam worked on theoretical models of the anomaly, Pope and Foster monitored the communication channels, while Hailey divided her time between supporting Liam and analyzing the biological data of the Canines, looking for possible clues they might have missed.

"Confirmation received," Foster suddenly announced. "The Quantum has received our commands and confirmed their execution. According to the telemetry data, it had already begun approaching the anomaly before our new commands reached it."

Everyone gathered around the main projection, which now showed the live telemetry of the probe – or at least as live as the six-hour signal delay allowed.

"The Quantum reports increased quantum field fluctuations as it gets closer," reported Foster. "The instruments show an exponential increase in anomaly values."

Liam observed the incoming data with a mixture of fascination and concern. "The mathematical patterns are impressive," he said. "It's as if space-time itself is... pulsating."

"Distance to the anomaly?" asked Coleman.

"7800 kilometers and decreasing," replied Foster. "The probe is approaching at minimal speed."

Pope studied the sensor data. "The radiation is increasing. The probe is now also registering gravitational anomalies – slight fluctuations in the local gravitational

field."

"That's concerning," remarked Hailey. "We should recall the probe before it gets too close."

"It's still in the safe range," Coleman countered. "We need more data."

The next half hour passed in tense silence, interrupted only by Foster's regular status updates.

"Distance 6500 kilometers... 6000 kilometers..."

At about 5500 kilometers distance, something changed on the display. The telemetry data suddenly showed strong fluctuations.

"The quantum field fluctuations are intensifying dramatically," reported Foster. "Values rising tenfold – no, a hundredfold compared to the baseline level."

"The structure of the anomaly is changing," added Pope, who was analyzing a different aspect of the data. "It looks like it's... expanding."

Coleman opened his mouth, instinctively wanting to give a retreat command, but closed it again. What they were seeing had already happened six hours ago. Any command they would send now would come too late.

"At these values, the Quantum's automatic retreat sequence should be activated," noted Pope. "The probe should change course any moment."

"I hope the thresholds are set low enough," murmured Liam.

The data on the main screen changed again. The curves and waves representing the quantum field fluctuations began to spike in unnatural patterns.

"This doesn't look good," Hailey said quietly.

"Distance 5200 kilometers," reported Foster. "The anomaly values now exceed all pre-programmed parameters. The Quantum should initiate automatic withdrawal any moment."

They watched the telemetry data, expecting the probe to change course. Instead, it continued its slow approach.

"Why isn't it responding?" asked Hailey, concerned.

"The anomaly values must be affecting the probe's sensors," Pope speculated. "Or the control systems are no longer responding correctly due to the space-time distortion."

"Distance 5000 kilometers," reported Foster. His face was tense, his voice controlled, but a hint of concern shone through. "The Quantum is transmitting data at an increased rate – apparently recognizing the extraordinary situation and increasing the transmission rate."

Liam, analyzing the incoming data, whistled softly through his teeth. "These values are... unprecedented. The equations I used to describe the anomaly collapse at such amplitudes."

"Can the Quantum return?" Coleman asked directly.

Pope slowly shook his head. "At these values... it's hard to say. The distortion could already be too strong."

"The telemetry shows further changes," reported Foster. "The gravitational anomalies are increasing exponentially. And... oh..."

"What?" Coleman asked sharply.

"The Quantum has initiated a course change," said Foster. "It's trying to withdraw. Maximum thrust, away from the anomaly."

A collective sigh of relief went through the room.

"Speed?" asked Coleman.

"Increasing," replied Foster. "It's accelerating with maximum force."

"Monitor the energy values of the anomaly," ordered Coleman. "If they continue to rise--"

"Sir," Foster interrupted, his voice suddenly tense. "The distance measurement... it's fluctuating. The position of the Quantum... it's wavering."

On the main display, the point marking the position of the probe began to tremble, as if jumping back and forth between different positions.

"What the hell?" muttered Liam, trying to interpret the incoming data.

"The probe seems to be oscillating between different spatial positions," explained Pope, his voice tense but precise. "As if it were jumping between different possible locations in space-time."

"How is that possible?" asked Hailey.

"Near a strong space-time distortion, the normal rules of space-time continuity could break down," explained Liam. "The position of the probe becomes... probabilistic."

The data transmission suddenly became irregular. Parts of the telemetry were still coming in, other data sets broke off in the middle of transmission.

"We're losing the connection," said Foster, his voice now clearly alarmed. "Data integrity is dropping rapidly."

"Last known status?" asked Coleman.

"The Quantum was on an escape vector, accelerating at maximum thrust," replied Foster. "Distance to the anomaly fluctuating between 4800 and 5200 kilometers, but the values were becoming increasingly unreliable."

On the main display, the point representing the probe flickered more violently until it finally disappeared completely. The telemetry data broke off completely, with only static noise filling the communication channels.

"Signal lost," reported Foster, his voice calm but with unmistakable tension. "All systems of the Quantum simultaneously ceased transmission."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the members of the Daedalus team stared at the displays, which now showed only static noise and blank spaces.

"Try to reestablish contact," Coleman ordered after a long moment.

Foster nodded and began activating various communication protocols. "Calling on all frequencies. No response."

"Has it been destroyed?" Hailey asked quietly.

"Or shifted," replied Liam. "Like the KEP before."

Pope stepped closer to the main console and analyzed the last received data. "The final measurements show a rapid increase in quantum field fluctuations, immediately before we lost contact. The patterns resemble those we found on the hull of the KEP."

"The data strongly suggests that the Quantum was also transported," said Coleman, his voice composed, but his expression serious.

"At least this time we have significantly better data," noted Pope. "The probe performed a much more comprehensive data transmission than the KEP did back then – including the detailed measurements during the final phase."

"And the emergency protocols," added Foster. "If the Quantum does indeed reappear in the HD 40307 system, it's programmed to immediately look for a way back and transmit the collected data."

Coleman nodded slowly. "Until then, we need to analyze every single byte of this transmission. I want to know exactly what this anomaly is, how it works, and whether it..." He paused briefly. "...whether it could be usable for the Helios."

The mood in the main laboratory of the Daedalus

complex was somber. Three days had passed since the Quantum probe disappeared, and despite relentless attempts to reestablish contact, the team had received no response. However, the enormous amounts of data transmitted during the last minutes before signal loss had provided them with weeks' worth of analysis work.

Foster sat in front of his terminal, eyes reddened from too little sleep. Since the Quantum's disappearance, he had barely left his lab, practically living on coffee and the energy bars that Liam regularly placed on his desk. He sensed rather than saw someone step behind him.

"You should rest, Lieutenant," said Pope in his deep, resonant voice. "An exhausted analyst misses details."

Foster shook his head without turning around. "I can't. The key to what happened to the Quantum is somewhere in this data."

Pope placed a hand on his shoulder. "The probe is probably where the KEP was – somewhere in the HD 40307 system. The difference between the quantum field fluctuations just before the disappearance of both probes is minimal. That suggests the same transport mechanism."

"If it's actually 40 light years away, it will be years before we hear anything," muttered Foster.

"Unless the phenomenon works in both directions," replied Pope. "The KEP came back. Maybe the Quantum will do the same."

Foster was about to respond when a shrill alarm sounded – different from the standard alarm, higher, more urgent.

His tired eyes suddenly widened. "That's the priority communication alarm!"

With renewed energy, he turned to his terminal, his fingers flying over the holographic keyboard. "A signal... on the Quantum's emergency channel!"

Pope stepped closer, his eyes fixed on the display. "Signal strength?"

"Weak, but constant," answered Foster. "Definitely our probe. Coordinates are being triangulated right now."

He activated the station communication system. "Lieutenant Foster to Commander Coleman. Sir, we're receiving a signal from the Quantum probe!"

Within minutes, the entire team had assembled in the main laboratory. Coleman stood at the main console while Foster worked feverishly to stabilize the weak signal and decode the incoming data.

"Status," demanded Coleman, his voice calm but tense.

"The probe is back in the solar system, Sir," reported Foster. "About 0.3 astronomical units from the position of the anomaly."

"When did it return?" asked Hailey, who stood next to Liam.

Foster checked the timestamps. "The signal began about... 47 minutes ago. The triangulation computers initially classified it as background noise until the pattern recognition algorithms kicked in."

"What's the condition of the probe?" asked Coleman.

Foster analyzed the incoming telemetry data. "Energy at 68 percent. Multiple subsystems offline or damaged, but the main transmitter is functional. The probe is transmitting in emergency broadcast mode – continuous data transmission with maximum bandwidth."

"As if it's expecting to disappear again soon," muttered Liam.

"Or as if it has important data that it absolutely wants to transmit," added Hailey.

"Main propulsion?" asked Pope.

"Offline," answered Foster after a quick glance at the status displays. "The probe is drifting. Positioning thrusters still work, but the main thrusters show critical damage."

Coleman stepped closer to the main display. "Can we establish a direct connection? Override the emergency protocols?"

"I'm trying, Sir," said Foster as he entered a series of complex commands. "Connection protocol initiated... the probe is responding... I have access to the primary control systems."

"Well done, Lieutenant," Coleman nodded approvingly. "Begin downloading all sensor data. Highest priority for recordings of the transport phenomenon and any data about the HD 40307 system."

Foster worked with concentration as the first data packets

arrived. "The Quantum is sending a massive amount of data, Sir. At the current transmission rate, the complete download will take about two hours."

"I want a first overview," ordered Coleman. "What happened to the probe after we lost contact?"

Liam had already positioned himself at a secondary terminal and was analyzing the first data segments. "I have the onboard time protocols," he reported. "After the signal loss, the Quantum experienced a massive space-time distortion. Its internal time synchronization system registered discrepancies in the nanosecond range that quickly rose to seconds and then minutes."

"A time dilation in the area of the anomaly?" asked Pope.

"More than that," replied Liam as he scrolled through the data. "It wasn't a uniform dilation. The time registers show chaotic fluctuations – as if time itself in the area of the anomaly was... fluctuating."

"And then?" urged Coleman.

"Then..." Liam paused, his eyes widening as he analyzed the next blocks of data. "A massive energy spike, a moment of complete sensor deprivation, and suddenly the probe was in a completely different star system."

"HD 40307," said Hailey, not a question but a statement.

"The Quantum's navigation sensors confirm it," nodded Liam. "It identified the system immediately using stellar cartography. The probe was about 0.8 astronomical units from the central star – at a similar distance as Earth is from our sun."

"How long was it there?" asked Coleman.

Foster checked the time protocols. "According to the Quantum's internal clock... about 74 hours."

"Three days," murmured Hailey. "That corresponds to the time that has passed here since its disappearance."

"Interesting," remarked Pope. "That suggests there's no significant time difference between the two ends of the phenomenon, despite the enormous spatial distance."

"What did the probe do during those three days?" asked Coleman.

Liam scrolled further through the data. "After the initial shock, so to speak, it activated its emergency protocols. First priority: position determination. The stellar navigation sensors identified the system and calculated the exact position in space. Second priority: environmental scan."

His eyes suddenly widened. "Oh wow... the sensor data is... remarkable. The Quantum conducted a comprehensive mapping of the entire star system. Not just astronomical data – it also captured all radio waves and electromagnetic signals it could receive."

"Signals?" asked Hailey sharply. "From the Canines?"

"It seems so," confirmed Liam as he reviewed the data. "Numerous radio signals emanating from the planet, as well as some from satellites in orbit."

"Satellites?" Hailey asked incredulously. "The last KEP data showed the Canines as a pre-industrial society.

They had just discovered basic electricity."

"The KEP data is over twenty years old," Pope reminded them. "And it continuously transmitted data about our civilization to the Canines. If they received and analyzed these signals..."

"...they would have had access to our entire technological knowledge," Foster completed the thought. "A perfect blueprint for their own development."

"Without the usual societal growing pains," added Liam. "No resource wars, no ideological conflicts. A peaceful society that simply adopts the best of our ideas and ignores the worst."

"What kind of signals has the Quantum recorded?" Coleman asked.

Foster turned to his console. "A wide range of frequencies. Many of them follow protocols that show remarkable similarities to our own communication standards." He looked up in surprise. "In fact, some of the digital transmission formats appear to be directly derived from our older terrestrial protocols."

"That makes sense," Liam nodded. "The KEP didn't just send cultural data but also technical specifications. Why reinvent the wheel when you have the blueprints for a working model?"

"Can the Quantum decode the signals?" asked Hailey.

"At least partially," replied Foster. "The image transmissions follow a protocol similar to our older HDTV standards. The compression algorithms are slightly

modified, but the Quantum's AI was able to reverse-engineer them."

He typed some commands into his console. "I'm trying to reconstruct one of the transmissions..."

A holographic image flickered in the middle of the lab – initially distorted and blurry, then gradually becoming clearer. It showed what was obviously a news broadcast. A Canine in formal attire sat behind a desk surrounded by holographic displays. His flat snout, large eyes, and wrinkled forehead showed clear emotions as he spoke in a fast, rhythmic pattern.

"Amazing," breathed Hailey. "That's clearly a news anchor. The cultural parallels are astonishing."

"The Quantum hasn't just recorded television broadcasts," said Liam, who was searching through more data. "Here are communication protocols similar to our internet – a planet-wide information network."

Another image formed – a view of the night side of Canis Prime. Unlike the twenty-year-old images from the KEP, the planet now showed a dense network of lights – cities, connected by glowing lines that stretched across the entire equatorial continent.

"An impressive civilization," murmured Coleman. "With technology based on our own, but apparently adapted for their own needs."

Foster continued working at his console. "The Quantum has also taken still images of the planet from orbit. The resolution isn't high enough for details – it was too far away for direct high-resolution images – but we can make

out larger structures."

He projected another image. It showed part of the continent with long, straight lines connecting various urban centers.

"Transportation routes," explained Pope. "Similar to our high-speed railways or hyperloop systems."

"And here," Foster zoomed in on another area, "these appear to be solar collectors. Massive installations."

"So they've also adapted our energy technology," remarked Coleman.

"That's not all," said Liam excitedly. "The Quantum has also received text data. We have access to the Canines' writing for the first time!"

He projected a series of symbols that resembled an alien yet strangely familiar script. The characters were curved and elegant, with recurring patterns.

"It seems to be a kind of syllabic script," said Hailey, who stepped closer to study the symbols. "With phonetic elements. The structure remotely resembles a mixture of our alphabet and logographic systems like Chinese."

"Could the Quantum decipher this script?" asked Coleman.

"Not completely yet," replied Liam. "But the linguistic algorithms have already begun to recognize patterns. With more time and data..."

A sudden warning signal interrupted him. Foster quickly

turned to his console.

"Sir, the Quantum's energy levels are dropping rapidly," he reported. "Several subsystems are showing critical failures. The radiation damage appears to be more severe than initially assumed."

"Prioritize downloading the remaining data," ordered Coleman. "We need to secure as much as possible before the probe fails completely."

"Already on it, Sir. About 83 percent of the main data storage has been transferred. At current transmission rates, we should be able to secure most of it before the connection breaks down."

Another alarm sounded, and several status indicators changed from yellow to red.

"Multiplex receiver failing," reported Foster, his voice tense but professional. "The bit rate is decreasing, but the main channel remains stable."

Pope stepped beside him. "How much of the critical data about the anomaly do we already have?"

"Most of it," replied Foster. "The Quantum prioritized it as highest priority and transmitted it first. What we're missing is mainly additional radio signals and some of the later surface scans."

"Good," Coleman nodded. "The anomaly's radiation patterns are the most important. We need to understand what stresses the Daedalus will be exposed to."

"Transmission quality is further deteriorating," reported

Foster. "The probe must be reducing its transmission power to save energy."

The indicators flickered, then stabilized at a low level. "Still there, but weak," said Foster. "The probe is using its remaining energy for data transmission."

"How long until we have all the critical data?" asked Coleman.

"At the current transmission rate... about thirty minutes," replied Foster. "Provided the connection remains stable."

Coleman nodded. "Lieutenant, you and Mr. Porter focus on securing the data. Dr. Fox, begin analyzing the linguistic data. Chief Pope, I need an initial assessment of the radiation effects and what that means for the Daedalus's shielding."

The next half hour passed in focused activity. Foster and Liam worked feverishly to secure the remaining data, while Hailey had already begun analyzing the first text fragments from the Canines. Pope had retreated to a separate console and was studying the radiation patterns that the Quantum had recorded during its passage through the anomaly.

"Download complete," Foster finally reported. "97.2 percent of the data secured. The rest is lost."

"And the probe?" asked Coleman.

Foster checked the latest telemetry data. "Critical energy level. Most systems are already offline. Main drive completely failed, but the position and maneuvering thrusters are still functioning at about 30 percent

capacity."

"Was the probe programmed to return?" asked Pope.

Foster nodded. "The emergency protocols stipulate that it should set course back to the solar system when system status is critical and after data transmission is complete. Telemetry shows this process has already been initiated."

"At what speed can it return?" asked Coleman.

Foster called up the calculations. "With the damaged systems and reduced power supply, it can accelerate at a maximum of about 5g, compared to the original 15g. At this performance, the return journey to Earth would take... about four months."

"Four months," Coleman repeated thoughtfully. "The probe wouldn't reach Moonbase Alpha until September."

"That's correct, Sir," confirmed Foster. "Even during its original journey with full acceleration of 15g, the Quantum needed several months to reach the anomaly's position. With only a third of its thrust, the return journey will take significantly longer."

"What do the preliminary data tell us about the Canines, Dr. Fox?" asked Coleman as he approached Hailey's station.

Hailey looked up from her analysis. "It's fascinating, Commander. The Canines have achieved remarkable technological progress in the last twenty years. They've adapted many aspects of our technology and optimized them for their own needs."

She projected some of the deciphered images. "Their society remains cooperative and peaceful. The news we've been able to decipher shows no signs of conflicts or wars. The focus is on scientific discoveries, cultural events, and community projects."

"And the anomaly?" asked Coleman. "Is there any indication they know something about it?"

Hailey shook her head. "Not so far. It's not mentioned in the media content we've been able to decipher. From everything we can see, they don't seem to know of its existence."

"That's strange," remarked Pope. "According to the data, they've received our knowledge of astrophysics and spacetime theories. They should at least have theoretical knowledge of such phenomena."

"Maybe they simply haven't explored that region yet," suggested Foster. "The anomaly is located far from the planet, deep in the outer area of their solar system."

"Did they notice the Quantum?" asked Coleman.

Liam shook his head. "Highly unlikely, Sir. The probe was specifically programmed not to emit active signals to remain undetected. Additionally, the signal travel time between the planet and the Quantum's position was about six minutes at the speed of light. At that distance and without an active search, the probe would be practically invisible to their sensors."

"Chief Pope," Coleman turned to the engineer, "what about the radiation effects?"

Pope looked up from his analysis. "The data is concerning, Commander. The Quantum was exposed to extreme radiation levels during its passage through the anomaly – both known types and novel ones that our sensors can barely classify."

He projected a complex diagram of the radiation patterns. "The probe's standard shielding was significantly damaged. The design specifications of the Daedalus must be fundamentally revised to withstand this radiation cocktail."

"How long will that take?" asked Coleman.

Pope carefully weighed his words. "Without physically examining the Quantum, it's hard to say. Based on the telemetry data, I would estimate at least three to four weeks for redesign and another two weeks for testing."

"Six weeks," murmured Coleman. "That significantly delays the launch."

"The safety of the crew is the top priority," Pope said firmly. "If we don't perfect the radiation shielding, we risk the life of everyone on board."

Coleman nodded slowly. "Understood. We'll wait until the Quantum reaches Moonbase Alpha. In the meantime, we'll focus on analyzing the collected data. I want every byte, every image, every signal thoroughly evaluated."

He turned to the team. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're facing the greatest breakthrough in human history. We have proof of an extraterrestrial civilization – a society that has adapted our technology without repeating our mistakes. A peaceful culture that we might soon get to

know personally."

His gaze wandered around the room. "I've been instructed that all core members of this team will be transferred to Moonbase Alpha. There, we'll continue our work and collaborate with the Daedalus technicians to make the necessary adjustments."

"Moonbase Alpha?" asked Hailey.

Coleman nodded. "The Daedalus – formerly known as the luxury cruiser Helios – is being prepared there for its historic mission. While the engineers work on improving the radiation shielding, we'll use the time to train the crew and analyze all available information about the Canines."

"When are we supposed to leave?" asked Foster.

"In three days," replied Coleman. "Pack everything you need for an extended stay. The moonbase is well-equipped, but you should bring personal items."

He let his gaze sweep over the team once more. "I want to inform all of you now that you've been selected for the Daedalus crew. At the moonbase, you'll meet the rest of the team and begin an intensive training program."

The news was received with a mixture of awe and nervousness.

"I won't conceal that we face enormous challenges," Coleman continued. "Adapting the Daedalus will take time. The training will be rigorous and demanding. And we must confirm the peaceful intentions of the Canines before we set out."

"But," he continued with a touch of pride, "if all goes well, the Daedalus will depart for the stars – with the best crew Earth has to offer."

The significance of his words slowly sank in. They stood at the beginning of humanity's greatest adventure – the first journey to a foreign star, the first encounter with an alien civilization.

The next few days passed in a whirlwind of preparations and data analysis. The team worked around the clock to process the enormous amount of information that the Quantum probe had transmitted. Each new insight into the Canines' society deepened their understanding of this remarkable alien civilization.

On the morning of the fourth day, the team boarded an orbital shuttle that would take them to Moonbase Alpha. The mood was a mixture of scientific excitement and the gravity of the responsibility that lay before them.

As the shuttle left Earth behind and began the short flight to the moon, Hailey stared through the window at the blue planet below them – humanity's only known home, until now. Soon they would travel to another star, to another world, where another intelligent species had built their own civilization.

The challenges were immense. Adapting the Daedalus would take months. Training the crew would be rigorous and demanding. And at the end stood a journey into the unknown, to a world full of wonders and mysteries.

VI

The gentle hum of the life support systems formed the constant background rhythm of Moonbase Alpha. Hailey had grown accustomed to it in the six days since her arrival, just as she had to the slightly reduced gravity that made each step a gentle bounce. Her quarters – functional but quite comfortable – were located in the eastern sector of the base, with a narrow window offering a breathtaking view of the rugged lunar landscape. Earth hung as a blue-white semicircle on the horizon, so close and yet already so distant.

When she entered the common area of the base, there was already bustling activity. The centerpiece of the room was a large oval table made of polished titanium composite, where several people were already seated, some with faces she had met in the last few days, others still new.

Liam sat in a corner, surrounded by holographic displays on which complex programming codes shimmered. Next to him, a young woman with short-cut black hair and alert eyes had taken a seat, watching his work with fascination.

"That's brilliant," Hailey heard the young woman say. "The nesting of the algorithms reminds me of the recursive patterns in Tetris Level 256."

Liam's face lit up. "Exactly! It's the same basic concept – when you reach the limit of the system, you simply create a new layer and overwrite the stack."

"Like the overflow glitch in Super Mario Bros.," the woman nodded. "I had a reconstructed version on my vintage console."

"You had a vintage console?" Liam asked with renewed interest. "Which one?"

"A restored Nintendo GX-4000 from the 2010s," she replied proudly. "With a complete set of emulated classics from the 80s to the 2030s."

"I'm impressed." Liam grinned broadly. "And a bit jealous, I must admit."

Foster, who was studying data at a nearby table, rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress a slight smile.

"Dr. Fox," Pope greeted her as he stepped out from an adjacent room. "Good to see you're here. The first modifications to the Daedalus have been completed. Captain Nakamura has called a meeting to finally bring the entire crew together."

As if the mention of her name had summoned her, the main doors of the common area opened and a middle-aged woman entered the room. She wasn't

particularly tall, but her bearing radiated a natural authority that seemed to fill every inch of the room. Her thick black hair, streaked with silver strands, was pulled back severely. Her uniform was impeccable, with the Space Force insignia discreetly gleaming on her collar.

Beside her walked Commander Coleman, whose own imposing presence did not diminish in the slightest next to Captain Nakamura. The two radiated a camaraderie that seemed to be based on years of mutual respect. On the other side of the Captain walked a man in the white uniform of a medical officer, who was carefully surveying the room.

The conversations fell silent as the three stepped into the center of the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Captain Nakamura began in a voice that wasn't loud but penetrating. "Welcome to Moonbase Alpha, the temporary home of the Daedalus crew. For those who haven't met me yet: I am Captain Mira Nakamura, and I will bear the responsibility for this historic mission."

She paused briefly and let her gaze sweep over those assembled. "Some of you have already been working together over the past few days, others are just arriving. But from today onwards, we are more than just a collection of scientists, engineers, and

specialists – we are a crew. A unit that will live and work together under extraordinary circumstances in the coming months."

She gestured for the man beside her to step forward. "Dr. Miller will serve as our medical officer. The next few weeks will be intense, with medical examinations, adaptations to long-term weightlessness, and special training for stress resistance."

Dr. Sarah Miller nodded curtly. She was a slim woman in her early forties with short blonde hair and alert blue eyes. "I will have detailed conversations with each of you. My task is to ensure that we are optimally prepared for the mission, not just physically but also psychologically."

Captain Nakamura pointed to two more people who now joined her – a man and a woman in Space Force pilot uniforms. "Lieutenant Wilson and Lieutenant Taylor will be responsible for navigating the Daedalus and piloting the auxiliary craft. They will also lead the training program for emergency evacuations."

Jake Wilson was a tall man with sandy blonde hair and an open, friendly face that lit up with a broad smile as he nodded. Amber Taylor, on the other hand, was shorter, with a penetrating gaze and a tense posture that signaled constant readiness.

"I look forward to working with all of you," said Wilson in a deep, calm voice. "In a few days, we'll begin simulations for standard operations and various emergency scenarios."

"Flying the Daedalus will be unlike anything you've experienced before," added Taylor. Her voice was precise and clear. "The acceleration phase will be particularly challenging. We all need to be prepared for that."

A middle-aged man with a well-groomed appearance and alert, intelligent eyes stepped forward. "Dr. James Bennett, responsible for communication and diplomatic protocols. My role will be to coordinate our encounter with the Canines and make first contact as smooth as possible."

He smiled slightly and continued: "Based on the data so far, we are currently developing possible communication strategies. Dr. Fox," he nodded appreciatively to Hailey, "has already done impressive work in analyzing their language. We will work closely together."

Hailey returned his nod. Bennett appeared competent and methodical – qualities essential for his role.

"Although this is primarily a scientific mission, we must not neglect the practical aspects," Captain

Nakamura continued, turning to the next people. "Chief Engineer Pope will be supported by Emily Chen and Mike Rodriguez. Together they will supervise the technical systems of the Daedalus."

Emily Chen was the same young woman who had been talking to Liam about vintage video games. Next to her stood an athletically built young man with olive skin and alert eyes. Rodriguez looked like the kind of engineer who would rather solve a problem with a wrench than with theoretical calculations.

"And finally," Captain Nakamura looked at Matthew Ling, who was standing unobtrusively at the edge of the room, "Mr. Ling will serve as our Chief Assistant. He will coordinate daily operations and act as a liaison between the various departments."

Ling bowed slightly, obviously pleased to be officially introduced. Hailey, Liam, and Foster exchanged satisfied glances – after all the weeks of working together on Earth, it was good to have a familiar face on the team.

"Good old Matthew," Liam whispered with his typical grin. "From paper-pusher to space administrator – now that's how you build a career."

"I now give the floor to Commander Coleman, who will inform us about the current developments and

schedule," Nakamura concluded and stepped back.

Coleman stepped forward, his posture as always upright and militarily precise. "Thank you, Captain. First, I'd like to announce that we have reached an important milestone. The adaptations to the radiation shielding of the Daedalus are 78 percent complete. According to our current calculations, the ship will be ready for launch in about four weeks."

A soft, excited murmur went through the room.

"The mission will proceed in three phases," Coleman continued. "Phase One: Acceleration at 1.5g for fourteen days, until the Daedalus reaches approximately 0.5 percent of the speed of light. Phase Two: Free flight to the position of the anomaly, where we will attempt to activate the transport mechanism. Phase Three, if successful: Arrival in the HD 40307 system and controlled approach to Canis Prime."

Coleman activated a holographic representation of the target planet. "Based on the latest data from the Quantum probe, we know that the Canines have made significant technological progress. They now have a global communication network, advanced transportation technologies, and are beginning to develop their orbit."

"A question, Commander," Dr. Bennett spoke up. "If

the Canines have made such rapid progress – is there a possibility that they themselves might develop space travel technology that could lead them to the anomaly?"

"A valid question," Coleman nodded. "According to our analyses, they have begun to explore space travel. We have identified several satellites in their orbit. However, they do not appear to be undertaking interplanetary travel yet."

"Another important point," he continued, "concerns the command structure during the mission. Captain Nakamura has full command authority aboard the Daedalus. I myself will coordinate the mission from here, Moonbase Alpha, and serve as the connection to Earth."

A brief pause ensued as those present processed this information.

"You won't be coming with us, Sir?" Foster asked with a slightly furrowed brow.

Coleman shook his head. "No, Lieutenant. My role is to monitor the mission from the lunar control center. Additionally..." he hesitated briefly, "there are certain security protocols that require my presence here."

"What Commander Coleman modestly conceals,"

added Captain Nakamura with a slight smile, "is that someone must coordinate the diplomatic and military aspects of this mission at the highest level. The discovery of an extraterrestrial civilization has political implications that extend far beyond our scientific mission."

"But wasn't it your project from the beginning?" Hailey asked. "I thought you would lead the expedition personally."

A shadow flickered across Coleman's face, so brief that it was almost imperceptible. "That was indeed the original plan," he admitted. "But the Joint Chiefs have decided that I am... more useful here."

Pope, who had been following the conversation attentively, interjected: "The Commander will be able to support us better by staying here and forming our communication bridge to Earth. In case of an... unforeseen scenario, we need someone with his authority who can act immediately."

"Unforeseen scenario," Liam repeated with a crooked smile. "How diplomatically put for 'if we get stranded in a foreign solar system or are captured by pug-like aliens.'"

This remark elicited scattered laughter, but also a slight, nervous clearing of throats.

"A realistic risk assessment isn't pessimism, Mr. Porter," Coleman replied dryly. "It's good planning."

A soft beep sounded, and Matthew Ling stepped forward, a holopad in hand. "The connection to Ms. Trap has been established, Commander."

"Excellent," Coleman nodded. "Put her through."

Above the central table appeared the life-sized hologram of Elen Trap, perfectly dressed in a tailored suit. Her appearance was as impeccable as ever, despite the slight blurriness that even the most advanced holotechnology couldn't completely eliminate.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she greeted those assembled with her cool, precise voice. "I am pleased to see that the crew of the Daedalus is now complete."

Her gaze briefly swept over those present and lingered for a moment on Hailey before she continued. "Space Mining Industries has invested every available resource in this project. The Daedalus represents the pinnacle of human engineering – the first ship that might possibly travel to the stars."

She paused briefly. "I want to emphasize that this is not a short-term investment. The scientific and

technological value of this mission goes far beyond immediate commercial interests. The discovery of the transport mechanism could fundamentally change the future of humanity."

"So you won't be going to the Canines to negotiate mining rights?" Hailey couldn't resist asking, with a slightly mocking undertone in her voice.

Elen's face remained expressionless, but her eyes narrowed minimally. "The primary goals of this mission are scientific and diplomatic in nature, Dr. Fox. Of course, we will respect the Canines as a sovereign civilization."

"Generous," murmured Hailey, just loud enough to be audible.

"Ms. Trap," Captain Nakamura skillfully interrupted, "perhaps you could inform us about the latest technical adjustments to the Daedalus? I understand that the radiation shielding has been significantly improved."

Elen nodded appreciatively in the direction of the Captain. "Indeed. The data from the Quantum probe has provided us with valuable information about the nature of the radiation to which the Daedalus will be exposed during passage through the anomaly. Our engineers have developed a novel shielding consisting of multiple layers."

She activated a technical display that appeared next to her hologram. "The outer layer consists of a special tungsten-iridium alloy that blocks conventional radiation. The middle layer contains a network of superconducting materials that can divert electromagnetic fields. The inner layer, directly on the hull of the living areas, consists of a graphene composite with embedded quantum dots that respond to the specific frequencies of the anomaly radiation."

Pope nodded appreciatively. "Impressive work. The quantum dot technology is still experimental, but theoretical models indicate high effectiveness."

"What about exposure for the crew?" asked Dr. Miller. "Even with this shielding, there will be some radiation exposure."

"It will be a calculated risk," Elen admitted. "Our scientists' best estimate is that during the passage, the crew will be exposed to radiation equivalent to about a week's exposure in Earth orbit – significant, but within acceptable limits."

Dr. Miller made a note on her pad. "I will develop a special medical protocol for the passage. Preventive treatments that increase resistance to radiation damage."

"A wise precaution," Elen agreed. "We have also set

up an expanded medical laboratory aboard the Daedalus, equipped with all necessary devices for treating possible radiation effects."

"And the other medical equipment?" asked Dr. Miller.

"The medical department has a complete surgical setup, advanced diagnostic equipment, and an automated pharmaceutical synthesizer," replied Elen. "Theoretically, you should be able to handle almost any medical challenge, with the exception of the most complex neurosurgical procedures."

Dr. Miller nodded, satisfied. "That sounds adequate."

Coleman stepped forward again. "Let's move on to the schedule. The next four weeks will be intense. Each of you will undergo a special training program tailored to your specific role on board."

He activated a holographic timeline. "The first two weeks will focus on basic survival skills, team building, and adjustment to life in confined spaces. The second half of the training will be more specific – mission simulations, emergency scenarios, and intensive preparation for first contact."

"Dr. Fox, Dr. Bennett, and Dr. Miller will work closely together as a three-person team to develop a comprehensive first contact protocol based on the

data available so far," Coleman continued. "Lieutenant Foster will be entrusted with developing communication systems that may be compatible with Canine technology. Mr. Porter will further refine his speech recognition program to help us with translation."

"What about the latest findings about the Canines from the Quantum data?" asked Bennett. "I've heard detailed media recordings were received."

"Indeed," confirmed Coleman, signaling to Matthew Ling, who activated a new holographic display. "The Quantum probe recorded a considerable amount of television and radio transmissions. Our analysis teams are still working on deciphering everything, but we have already gained some fascinating insights."

The hologram showed various scenes from the lives of the Canines – their cities, transportation systems, public gatherings, and media broadcasts.

"The social structure of the Canines appears to be based on cooperative principles," explained Coleman. "They have developed a sort of decentralized government system that combines local autonomy with global coordination. Interestingly, there are no signs of armed conflicts or military structures, even in their historical records."

"How is that possible?" asked Lt. Wilson. "Even with a peaceful basic disposition, resource conflicts must occur."

"A good question," Coleman nodded. "Dr. Fox has developed a plausible theory."

Hailey stepped forward, grateful for the opportunity to talk about something that was her specialty area and distracted her from Elen's cool gaze.

"The geographic structure of Canis Prime plays an essential role," she began, pointing to the planet. "Unlike Earth with its separated continents, the Canines have a single equatorial supercontinent that offers ideal living conditions. There were never isolated populations that could develop different cultures or competing civilizations. Natural selection on their world favored cooperation over competition."

She zoomed in on a representation of Canine physiology. "Additionally, the Canines are naturally social beings. Similar to dogs on Earth – from which they evolved completely independently, but in fascinatingly similar ways – they rely on cooperation and clear social hierarchies."

"But no trace of wars or conquests?" asked Bennett incredulously.

"Not in the sense of organized military conflicts," confirmed Hailey. "They have resolved resource conflicts through complex negotiation systems, not through violence. Their entire evolutionary history seems to favor cooperation over conflict."

"And how did they respond to our information?" asked Captain Nakamura. "After all, the KEP probe has been sending data about humanity for decades – including our warlike history."

"That's one of the most fascinating aspects," replied Hailey. "They seem to have adapted selectively. Technological concepts were adopted and developed further, but the cultural model of competition and military confrontation was largely ignored."

"A remarkable case of cultural filtering," commented Dr. Bennett. "They adopted what fit their own worldview and discarded the rest."

"Or they simply didn't understand it," Rodriguez interjected. "If there is no concept for war in their culture, they might have misunderstood our historical conflicts."

"A disturbing possibility," Hailey agreed. "If they don't understand the concept of war, how will they react to visitors from another planet?"

"But their peaceful nature is an excellent prerequisite

for successful first contact," noted Dr. Bennett. "We can assume with high probability that we will be received in a friendly manner."

"That's my assessment as well," Hailey nodded. "The first impression will still be crucial."

"Speaking of first impressions," Elen chimed in, "how far along is the preparation for the actual first contact?"

"We have developed various scenarios," Bennett answered. "The most likely sequence begins with an approach via their orbit, followed by a communication sequence that signals our peaceful intentions. Only then would we land with one of the auxiliary craft, preferably at a remote but easily accessible location."

"Our protocol already takes into account that the Canines are presumably familiar with our forms of communication," he added. "Based on the data from the Quantum probe, they have modeled their digital transmission formats after our own protocols, which should significantly facilitate initial contact."

"One last question," Foster spoke up. "What do we know about the return? If we manage to travel through the anomaly – can we be sure that we can also return?"

A brief silence ensued. This question, which had lurked in the back of everyone's mind, had now been spoken aloud.

"The KEP probe returned, as did the Quantum, albeit damaged," Coleman finally answered. "This suggests that the phenomenon works in both directions. But..." he paused briefly, "we can't give any guarantees. The mission carries an inherent risk that we cannot completely eliminate."

He activated another holographic display. "To ensure communication, we have developed a system of relay probes. The Daedalus will be equipped with twelve special communication probes. Six of them will be deployed on our side of the anomaly before transit to serve as receivers. The other six can be sent back through the anomaly by the Daedalus to transmit data."

"So with these probes, we can send data to Earth six times?" asked Rodriguez.

"Exactly," confirmed Coleman. "Each probe is equipped with a high-performance quantum communication system. They are our lifeline to Earth – and in a sense also our way back, as they will provide valuable data that could be crucial for a safe return."

He looked directly at everyone in the room. "Each of

you was carefully selected. You are all experts in your field, with specific skills that are essential for this mission. But let me emphasize once more: Participation is voluntary. If anyone wishes to reconsider their decision, now is the time."

No one spoke up. Instead, a new determination seemed to fill the room, a shared awareness of the historic significance of what lay before them.

"Very well," Coleman finally said. "Then we should waste no time. Training begins tomorrow at 0700."

As the assembly dispersed, Hailey remained standing for a moment, her gaze fixed on the holographic image of Canis Prime. A world full of wonders and mysteries that would soon be more than just data and images. A real place she would see with her own eyes.

Liam stepped beside her, followed by Emily Chen. "Not bad for a space expedition," he commented with his typical grin. "A bunch of brilliant minds, a spaceship named Daedalus, and at the end of the rainbow, super-intelligent space pugs. Star Trek couldn't have written it better."

"Let's just hope it doesn't end like in the old science fiction movies," Hailey replied with a crooked smile. "You know – AI gone out of control, aliens wanting to eat us, or time-traveling killer fungi."

"Killer fungi? Seriously?" Liam laughed. "I must have missed that one."

"It was a B-movie from the 2020s," explained Emily. "'Spores of Time' or something like that. Pretty trashy, but cult."

"You know it?" Liam's eyes lit up. "I thought I was the only one who watches such junk!"

"Well, one must know one's classics," Emily grinned.

While the two fell into an animated discussion about obscure science fiction movies, Hailey noticed that Bennett was coming over to her.

"Fascinating theory about the social evolution of the Canines," he said appreciatively. "I'd like to hear more about it. Perhaps we could sit down later and discuss possible communication strategies?"

"Gladly," Hailey nodded. "I have some ideas based on the visual communication patterns we've observed in the recordings. There are recurring gestures that may represent universal concepts."

"Excellent," said Bennett. "I look forward to working together."

As Bennett walked away, Hailey sensed a presence

behind her and turned around. She was face to face with the hologram of Elen Trap.

"Dr. Fox," said Elen with her cool, controlled voice. "A moment, please."

Hailey tensed involuntarily. The voice of her former friend still evoked a mixture of anger and regret in her.

"Ms. Trap," she replied with a neutrality she didn't really feel. "How can I help?"

"I want to ensure that personal differences do not impair this mission," Elen said directly. "We both know that our past is... complicated."

Hailey raised an eyebrow. "Is that your version of an apology?"

Elen's face remained expressionless, but something flickered in her eyes – so briefly that Hailey almost missed it. "It is my version of acknowledging reality. You are indispensable for this mission, Hailey. Your xenobiological expertise is unmatched."

"Nice to know that my value to you is still measured by my usefulness," Hailey replied with a thin smile.

"That's unfair," Elen said quietly. "I didn't select you because of our past, but despite it."

For a moment they stood there in silence, a duel of gazes across light years – Elen's physical presence on Earth, her holographic image here on the moon.

"For this mission, I will remain professional," Hailey finally said. "I owe that to the team and the significance of what we're trying to achieve."

"I ask for nothing more," Elen nodded. She hesitated a moment, as if wanting to add something, but then decided against it. "We will speak again soon, Dr. Fox."

With these words, her hologram disappeared, and Hailey was left alone with the uncomfortable feeling that some wounds had still not healed even after all these years.

Coleman had observed the brief exchange from a distance. As Elen's hologram vanished, he walked over to Hailey.

"Everything alright?" he asked, his face a mask of professional concern, but with a touch of genuine sympathy.

"Of course," Hailey replied with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Just a brief exchange about professional expectations."

Coleman nodded, obviously not convinced, but

tactful enough not to press the issue. "May I speak with you briefly, Dr. Fox? It's about your collaboration with Dr. Bennett."

They followed him to an adjacent meeting room, where Foster and Bennett were already waiting. The walls were covered with complex diagrams of the Canine language – Hailey's work from the past weeks.

"We've made some progress in deciphering the Canine communication patterns," Bennett began as Hailey and Coleman took their seats. "The visual data suggests a language that is strongly rhythmic and tone-based, with a complex grammar not unlike our own."

Foster nodded and activated a holographic display with waveforms. "The quantum probe couldn't make direct audio recordings, but we were able to reconstruct an approximate audio model from the vibration patterns in larynx and mouth movements."

He tapped on the display, and suddenly a strange sound filled the room – like a melodic barking, interspersed with whistling and growling sounds, in a complex but clearly structured pattern.

"That's... remarkable," said Hailey, leaning forward, her earlier thoughts about Elen temporarily pushed aside. "The tonal quality is much more pronounced

than I had suspected. Almost musical."

"Exactly," confirmed Bennett. "We believe their language has at least four distinct tonal levels that mark grammatical functions. Similar to Mandarin or Vietnamese, but even more complex."

"And the best part is yet to come," added Foster with a touch of pride. "We've discovered a pattern in their digital transmissions that indicates a conversion system between their spoken language and digital codes."

"An alphabet?" asked Coleman.

"More of a syllabic system," corrected Bennett. "Each symbol represents a combination of consonant and vowel, modified by one of the tones. There are about 300 basic characters that can be extended by modifiers."

"That's an enormous breakthrough," said Hailey, impressed. "With this system, we could develop a basic translation matrix."

"That's exactly what we're working towards," Bennett nodded. "We already have an algorithm that can identify simple terms – mainly concrete objects and basic actions."

"How far are we from a functioning translation

system?" asked Coleman.

Foster and Bennett exchanged a glance. "For a complete translation of complexly nested concepts? Months, if not years," replied Foster honestly. "But for basic communication that goes beyond pointing gestures? With Liam's AI support and Dr. Fox's linguistic expertise, we could have a rudimentary system by launch."

"Good enough," Coleman nodded. "Focus on developing a functional translator for the first contact protocol. Priority should be given to peace declarations, basic scientific concepts, and questions about cultural norms."

"What about the media transmissions?" asked Hailey. "The contents of their broadcasts could offer valuable insights into their culture."

"We have a team on Earth working on that," replied Coleman. "But the results are... mixed. Many of the cultural references are difficult to decipher without context."

"I have an idea," Hailey said suddenly. "We should specifically look for patterns in their transmissions that might indicate they're trying to communicate with potential visitors."

"A worthwhile lead," Coleman agreed. "Set up a

small team on that – but don't lose sight of the main goal. We must be prepared for all scenarios, including one where the Canines have no idea what we are or where we come from."

As the meeting ended, Hailey felt a mixture of excitement and nervousness. The challenging task of deciphering a completely alien language had distracted her from her personal problems for a while. But the encounter with Elen had reopened old wounds.

As she walked through the corridors of the moonbase back to her quarters, she met Liam, who was coming out of one of the labs with a stack of datapads in his arms.

"Hey, alien whisperer," he greeted her with his characteristic grin. "How did it go with the diplomat type?"

"Promising," she answered. "Bennett is competent and methodical – exactly what we need. But there's still a lot to do."

"I can imagine," Liam nodded, carefully rebalancing the datapads. "I'm working on an AI optimization for the translation program. It's tricky – the Canine language has nuances that overwhelm our standard NLP algorithms."

Hailey noticed the dark rings under his eyes. "When did you last sleep?"

"Sleep?" Liam blinked, as if he had to process the concept first. "Oh, that. Sometime yesterday... I think."

She shook her head. "You should take a break. Training begins early tomorrow, and Captain Nakamura doesn't seem the type to accept excuses."

"You're probably right," he admitted. "But first I need to show these datasets to Emily. She has a brilliant idea for modulating the quantum dots in the radiation shielding."

"Emily and you seem to get along well," Hailey remarked with a slight smile.

A barely perceptible blush rushed across Liam's cheeks. "She's impressive. Not many people can discuss the recursive algorithms in Tetris Level 256 and at the same time understand quantum coherence in shielding structures."

"That sounds like the beginning of a wonderful friendship," Hailey teased.

"Or the nerdiest romance of all time," Liam countered, back with his usual self-confidence. "But enough about me. You look like you've been caught

in a conversation with Elen-I'm-perfect-Trap."

Hailey sighed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to someone who has read your face when her name came up in the last few weeks," Liam replied. "What did she want?"

"The usual. Making sure personal differences don't endanger the mission." She made a dismissive gesture. "As if I would ever let old history affect my work."

"Hmm," Liam said thoughtfully. "You know, for someone who pretends to be interested only in profit and efficiency, she invests a lot of personal energy in you."

"What do you mean?" Hailey asked, frowning.

"Just an observation," Liam replied with a crooked smile. "Whenever she speaks to you, her voice changes. Subtly, but noticeably. Almost... softer? It's a micro-expression that doesn't match her usual clinical precision."

"Now you're analyzing voice patterns?" Hailey asked skeptically. "Shouldn't you be deciphering Canine forms of communication instead?"

"Hey, I'm a programmer. Pattern recognition is my

thing," Liam shrugged. "And human patterns are sometimes the most fascinating."

Before Hailey could answer, an alarm sounded – not the shrill emergency tone, but a softer signal that echoed through the base's loudspeakers.

"Attention, Daedalus crew," Captain Nakamura's voice rang out. "The first orientation training begins tomorrow at 0700 in the simulation center. Bring your training clothes and a positive attitude. End of announcement."

"A positive attitude," Liam repeated, rolling his eyes. "Sounds like military speak for 'Prepare for hell.'"

"Probably not wrong," Hailey smiled. "I should rest. You should do the same – after meeting Emily, of course."

"Of course," Liam grinned and went on his way with his datapads.

Hailey continued on her way, her thoughts now directed toward the upcoming training. Whatever Captain Nakamura had prepared for them, it would certainly be challenging. But after everything she had already been through, she felt ready for the challenge.

The next morning, the crew gathered punctually at 0700 in the simulation center. The large, circular room was equipped with state-of-the-art technology – holographic projectors, gravity modulators, and reconfigurable physical structures that could replicate almost any environment.

Captain Nakamura stood in the center of the room, dressed in a plain gray training suit with the Daedalus emblem on the chest. Beside her stood Lieutenants Wilson and Taylor, as well as Dr. Miller, all in similar attire.

"Good morning," Nakamura greeted the group, her voice clear and firm. "Welcome to your first day of mission training. The coming four weeks will be intense. We will test your physical limits, challenge your mental endurance, and forge you together as a team."

She paused briefly and let her gaze sweep over the group. "The Daedalus mission is not just a scientific expedition. It is a leap into the unknown, with risks we cannot fully predict. Your survival skills – individual and as a group – could be decisive."

Lieutenant Taylor stepped forward. "Today we begin with an assessment of your physical fitness and basic skills. Each of you will receive a personalized training plan based on your role on board and your current fitness level."

"Don't worry," Wilson added with a friendly smile. "We don't expect scientists and technicians to meet the same standards as trained pilots. The goal is to bring each of you to your optimal performance level."

Dr. Miller nodded. "And I will monitor the entire process to ensure that no one exceeds their limits. Training yes, injuries no."

Captain Nakamura activated a holographic display that divided the room into different stations. "We'll start with basic fitness exercises, followed by specific skills tests. This afternoon will be the first team-building scenario."

Liam leaned over to Hailey and whispered: "Want to bet she'll strand us in a simulated emergency and we'll have to rescue each other?"

"Sounds like typical astronaut training," Hailey whispered back. "At least we don't have to do it in actual vacuum."

The first tests were as demanding as Hailey had expected. The standard fitness tests – endurance, strength, flexibility – were followed by various high-tech assessments: reaction time under stress, spatial thinking, adaptability to altered gravity.

To her own surprise, Hailey did better than expected,

particularly in the cognitive tests. Her years of field research in remote regions had kept her physically fitter than she had thought. Foster showed impressive results in the reaction tests, while Pope, despite his age, surprised with remarkable core strength and endurance.

Liam, despite his rather unathletic appearance, proved to be surprisingly skilled in the weightlessness exercises. "Video game reflexes," he explained, grinning, as Wilson praised his performance.

The two pilots, Wilson and Taylor, completed the tests with the effortless efficiency of professionals, while the young engineers Chen and Rodriguez delivered solid, if not spectacular, results. Dr. Bennett showed a surprising agility that matched his diplomatic presence, and even the somewhat nervous Matthew Ling mastered the basic requirements.

After lunch, the group reassembled in the simulation center, which was now completely transformed. The open area had been turned into a tight labyrinth of corridors and rooms that suspiciously resembled the interior of a spaceship.

"Just as I said," Liam murmured. "Emergency scenario."

Captain Nakamura promptly confirmed his suspicion. "This simulation represents a section of the Daedalus after a hypothetical system failure. Your task is simple: Work together as a team to restore the critical systems and find a safe path to the main reactor room."

She divided the group into three teams, each with a mix of technical and scientific skills. Hailey found herself in a team with Pope, Bennett, and Rodriguez.

"A deliberate decision," Pope murmured as they checked their equipment. "They've arranged us so that we have to work with people we've had little contact with so far."

"Classic team-building protocol," Bennett agreed. "Breaking up existing connections to create new ones."

The simulation began with a sudden power outage. The lights went out, with only dim emergency lighting illuminating the narrow corridors.

"Status report," Pope requested, immediately assuming his role as experienced engineer.

Rodriguez checked his diagnostic device. "Primary power supply failed. Life support on reserve. And..." he frowned, "there seems to be a leak in Section 4 that's letting the atmosphere escape."

"Priorities?" Pope asked, turning to Bennett.

"Life support first, then power supply," he answered without hesitation. "We need to locate and contain the leak before we can get to the reactor room."

"Agreed," Pope nodded. "Dr. Fox, you excelled in the spatial orientation tests. Can you guide us through this labyrinth?"

Hailey activated her handheld device and studied the fragmentary ship plan. "I think so. If we're here," she pointed to their position, "then the path to life support should lead through this corridor."

The team set off, carefully navigating in the dim lighting. The simulation was remarkably realistic – occasional tremors made them stagger, and in some places, steam hissed from damaged pipes.

"Caution," Rodriguez warned as they rounded a corner. "The atmospheric pressure is dropping. We're approaching the leak."

They reached a sealed door behind which, according to the ship's plan, lay the life support systems. Pope examined the control panel.

"Manual override needed," he determined. "Rodriguez, you take the control panel. Dr. Bennett, help me with the emergency protocol. Dr. Fox, keep

an eye out for signs of structural damage."

Everyone got to work, the roles naturally interlocking. Hailey was impressed by the calm efficiency with which Pope had taken the lead without seeming intrusive.

After several minutes of concentrated work, the door slid open with a hydraulic hiss. Behind it was a large room with complex machinery.

"The main life support module," Rodriguez explained. "If we can restart the oxygen generator, we'll gain time to repair the leak."

The next few minutes were spent analyzing and restarting the complex systems. Pope and Rodriguez worked hand in hand on the technical side, while Bennett coordinated the emergency protocols and Hailey kept an eye on the surroundings.

"Oxygen generator online," Rodriguez finally reported. "Atmospheric pressure stabilizing."

"Well done," Pope praised. "Now to the leak. According to diagnostics, it's in corridor B7, about fifty meters from here."

They set off, now acting with more confidence as a team. When they reached corridor B7, they saw the problem: a damaged wall panel from which air was

continually escaping.

"We need a temporary seal," said Pope. "The repair kits are in the storage room next door, but access is blocked."

Hailey looked at the situation and suddenly had an idea. "What about the coolant lines?" she asked, pointing to a pipe system above their heads. "If we redirect the coolant and let it escape at the leak, it could freeze upon contact with the vacuum and form a temporary seal."

Pope raised his eyebrows in surprise. "An unconventional solution, but it could work. Rodriguez?"

The young engineer nodded appreciatively. "Theoretically possible. We would need to modify the valve up there to allow a controlled release."

"Then let's do it," Bennett decided. "Dr. Fox, it was your idea – give us directions."

The next few minutes they worked as a well-coordinated team to implement Hailey's plan. The improvised solution worked – the coolant froze upon contact with the simulated vacuum and formed a stable seal.

"Impressive," Rodriguez praised. "Not by the book,

but effective."

"Sometimes 'not by the book' is exactly what you need," Pope smiled. "A valuable lesson for a mission like ours."

They continued their way to the reactor room, now as a well-rehearsed team. When they finally reached their destination and successfully completed the simulation, Captain Nakamura greeted them with a satisfied nod.

"Excellent work," she commented. "Especially your improvised repair of the leak. Initiative and adaptability are exactly the qualities we want to foster."

The other teams arrived shortly after, each with its own story of challenges and solutions. Liam, whose team with Foster, Chen, and Taylor had taken a different route, grinned broadly.

"Creative problem-solving, huh? We built a communication system from parts of a coffee machine and a modified ARU controller."

"It actually worked," Lieutenant Taylor confirmed, visibly impressed. "An unorthodox but extremely effective solution."

The third team, consisting of Captain Nakamura,

Wilson, Dr. Miller, and Matthew Ling, had also successfully found alternative ways to overcome their challenges.

"This is just the beginning," said Captain Nakamura when everyone was gathered. "In the coming weeks, the scenarios will become more complex and realistic. We'll simulate not only technical emergencies but also social dynamics, psychological stress, and finally first contact scenarios."

She let her gaze sweep over the group, a rare smile on her face. "But for the first day, you've all performed surprisingly well. Rest, analyze your performance, and be ready tomorrow at 0600 for weightlessness training."

As the group dispersed, Hailey felt for the first time a real sense of camaraderie. They were no longer just a collection of brilliant individuals but were beginning to function as a unit.

"Not bad for the first day," Pope remarked as they left the simulation room together. "Your solution with the coolant was clever."

"I once saw something similar at a research station in Antarctica," Hailey explained. "Sometimes extreme environments lead to unusual innovations."

"A trait that will surely be useful to us on the

Daedalus," Bennett nodded, who had joined them. "The Canines may be technologically advanced, but their solutions are based on our basic concepts. We'll need to think originally to deal with unforeseen challenges."

"Speaking of original thinking," said Hailey, "I had an idea regarding our communication strategy. If the Canines have indeed studied our languages, we might perhaps..."

As they walked along the corridors of the moonbase, deeply engaged in a discussion about communication theories, Hailey thought that this might indeed be the beginning of something remarkable. A group of people coming together despite all differences, united by the greatest adventure in human history.

The coming weeks would be challenging, but for the first time since the beginning of the project, she felt genuine hope for the success of their mission. They would travel to the stars, visit an alien world, and perhaps, just perhaps, lay the foundation for a new era of human history.

The days at the moonbase passed in a demanding but structured rhythm. Mornings were for physical training, daytime for simulations and specific skills training, evenings for theoretical instruction and team discussions. The Daedalus crew rapidly

developed into a close-knit community.

One week after the start of training, Hailey was sitting with Bennett, Foster, and Liam in one of the study areas, surrounded by holographic representations of Canine forms of communication. Their progress in deciphering the alien language was impressive, though slower than hoped.

"The problem is the context-dependent tone modulations," Bennett explained, pointing to a complex wave pattern. "They use the same basic sound, but with different tonal inflections depending on the social context."

"Like Mandarin, but with social rather than semantic distinctions," Hailey nodded. "The question is how we can incorporate this into a functioning translator."

"I think we need a two-stage process," Foster suggested. "First the basic word meaning, then a contextual adjustment based on social markers."

Liam, who had been listening silently for the last few minutes, suddenly snapped his fingers. "I've got it! What we need is not a simple translation matrix, but a neural network with sentiment analysis."

He activated his own holographic workspace and projected a complex diagram into the air. "See, we

could represent the various tone patterns as emotional and hierarchical vectors in multidimensional space."

"Speak English, Porter," Foster commented dryly.

Liam grinned. "Ok, simpler: Imagine each sentence has not only a meaning but also a 'social signature' – whether the speaker is polite or commanding, what status they claim, and so on. We train the AI to recognize these signatures and adjust accordingly."

Bennett nodded slowly. "That could work. We have enough media material to recognize such patterns – especially in formal addresses and news broadcasts."

Hailey looked at the equations Liam was now projecting. "And how long would it take to train such a system?"

"With the available computing resources and continuous training during the journey?" Liam considered briefly. "We could have a rudimentary translator before launch, and by the time we arrive, the system should be advanced enough for basic communication."

"It's still a shot in the dark," Bennett warned. "Without direct feedback from a native speaker, we can never be sure if we're getting it right."

"Welcome to xenolinguistics," Hailey smiled. "Always a leap into the unknown."

Their work was interrupted by a knock at the door. Captain Nakamura stood there, accompanied by Pope and Chen.

"Am I disturbing?" asked the Captain.

"Not at all," replied Bennett. "We're just discussing translation algorithms."

"Good. I thought you'd like to know that the structural modifications to the Daedalus are complete. Chief Engineer Pope and Ms. Chen have good news."

Pope stepped forward, visibly satisfied. "The improved radiation shielding has been successfully installed and tested. The simulations show a reduction in radiation exposure by 86 percent compared to the original design."

"That's impressive," Foster said appreciatively.

"It was Ms. Chen's idea to arrange the quantum dots in a double helix structure," explained Pope with a nod to the young engineer. "A brilliant solution that dramatically improves absorption efficiency."

Emily Chen blushed slightly under the praise. "I

remembered a paper on DNA-inspired quantum dot arrays. The biological structure offers optimal distribution for energy absorption."

"Either way, it means we can keep to the schedule," said Captain Nakamura. "The Daedalus will be ready for launch in three weeks."

An excited whisper went through the room. The launch, until now an abstract goal on the horizon, suddenly became tangibly close.

"Commander Coleman would like to see all of you tonight at 2000 in the main briefing room," Nakamura continued. "There are some developments regarding the anomaly that he wants to share with you."

After the Captain and the engineers had left, the team returned to its work, but concentration was harder to maintain. The prospect of new information and the approaching launch filled everyone with a mixture of nervousness and anticipation.

In the evening, the entire crew gathered in the main briefing room. Commander Coleman stood in front of a large holographic display showing the complex data from the quantum probe.

"Thank you all for coming," he began. "In the last few days, our analysts on Earth have made important

progress in evaluating the Quantum data. What you see here are the detailed radiation patterns of the anomaly during transport."

He enlarged an area of the display showing complex wave patterns. "We have found that the quantum field fluctuations are not random but follow a regular cycle – with a periodicity of about 73.2 hours."

"A natural rhythm?" asked Pope.

"Possibly," Coleman nodded. "Or an artificially generated pattern. The important thing is: If this pattern is predictable, we can calculate the optimal time for transit."

He projected a timeline. "Based on the data from the Quantum and the KEP, we have calculated that the anomaly reaches a peak of activity every three days – a state in which transport is most likely to occur."

"And we plan to be there exactly in this time window," concluded Pope.

"Exactly," confirmed Coleman. "This means we must adhere precisely to our flight plan. The Daedalus will be programmed to reach the anomaly exactly at the peak of the next cycle."

"What happens if we arrive too early or too late?"

asked Lt. Wilson.

"In the worst case, nothing – and we would have to wait for the next cycle," answered Coleman. "But we don't want to waste energy by unnecessarily orbiting around the anomaly. Each day near the anomaly means additional radiation exposure, even with our improved shielding."

"Do we have any indications of what exactly causes this transport?" asked Hailey. "Is it a natural phenomenon or something artificial?"

Coleman hesitated for a moment. "Opinions are divided. The regularity of the cycle suggests an artificial origin, but we have no direct evidence of deliberately created technology."

"What about the Canines?" asked Bennett. "Are there signs that they know about the anomaly or use it?"

"None in the data we've deciphered so far," replied Coleman. "Their media transmissions mention nothing that could be interpreted as interstellar transport technology. Either they know nothing about it, or they don't speak about it publicly."

Liam, who had been listening quietly so far, spoke up. "Or it's something else entirely."

All eyes turned to him.

"What do you mean, Mr. Porter?" asked Coleman.

"Just a theory," said Liam, suddenly unusually serious. "What if neither we nor the Canines created the anomaly? What if it comes from a third party – someone who might be observing both species?"

A brief silence followed this speculation.

"An interesting hypothesis," Coleman finally said, "but currently without evidence. We should focus on the measurable facts."

He switched to another display. "Let's move on to the concrete schedule. The launch is set for July 15. The acceleration phase will last 14 days, followed by an intensive journey to the outer solar system. The 0.5 percent of light speed we will reach is still only about 1,500 kilometers per second – which means we will need several months to reach the anomaly. With our continuous acceleration of 1.5g, we should reach the anomaly on October 1, exactly during a peak of activity."

"And how long will the transit take?" asked Dr. Miller.

"Based on the data from the Quantum, practically instantaneous," replied Coleman. "The actual

transport seems to take place in less than a second. However, the effects on the ship's systems and the crew will persist for some time – possibly hours."

Lieutenant Taylor frowned. "Control during transit?"

"Impossible," Coleman explained directly. "The quantum field fluctuations will temporarily disrupt all electrical systems. The Daedalus will essentially be offline for the duration of the transit and will only reboot afterward."

"That's a significant risk," remarked Bennett. "We'll be transported blind and deaf through an unknown phenomenon."

"That's precisely why we've invested so much in redundant systems and automatic recovery protocols," explained Pope. "The Daedalus is designed to come back online quickly even after a complete system failure."

Coleman nodded. "And that's exactly why each of you is trained for multiple positions. When the transit is complete, everyone must know what to do – regardless of who is in which part of the ship or which systems are functioning."

He let his gaze sweep over the crew. "Any further questions?"

"What about the return?" asked Rodriguez. "Have we calculated when we should come back?"

"An excellent question," Coleman nodded. "Based on the data from the KEP and the Quantum, the anomaly appears to be bidirectional. We have set a preliminary return window six months after arrival, which gives us enough time for the scientific mission but not so long that resources become scarce."

The meeting continued for about another hour, with detailed explanations of the various mission phases and responsibilities. When it ended, Hailey and Liam stayed behind for a moment.

"What did you mean by 'a third party'?" she asked when the others had left the room.

Liam shrugged, but his usual lightness was missing. "Just an idea. But think about it – a phenomenon that pulses precisely every 73.2 hours? That doesn't sound like a natural event. And if the Canines didn't create it and we definitely didn't..."

"...then someone else must have," Hailey completed the thought. "But who? And why?"

"Those are the million-dollar questions, aren't they?" Liam smiled weakly. "Maybe we'll find out when we get there. Or maybe..." He left the sentence hanging.

"Maybe what?" Hailey pressed.

"Maybe we're part of an experiment," Liam said quietly. "Two species brought into contact without their knowledge. A cosmic sociology project."

Hailey stared at him. "That's..."

"Crazy, I know," Liam grinned, now more like his usual self again. "Too much science fiction, probably. Forget it."

But as they left the briefing room, Hailey couldn't shake the thought. As fantastic as it sounded – it explained certain aspects better than the alternatives.

The following weeks passed in a demanding but structured rhythm. The days began early with physical training led by Captain Nakamura and the pilots. Even for those already fit like Wilson and Taylor, the exercise sessions were challenging – a balanced program of endurance, strength, and flexibility training, complemented by specialized routines to prepare for weightlessness and increased G-forces during the acceleration phase.

One morning after a particularly strenuous training run, the crew found themselves back in the simulation center, where Captain Nakamura had gathered them for a new type of exercise.

"Today we'll try something different," she explained. "Dr. Miller will lead the scenario."

The ship's doctor stepped forward, her face more serious than usual. "So far, we've focused on physical abilities and professional competence. But on a mission lasting several months, with twelve people in very confined spaces, the psychological aspects will be at least as important."

She activated a hologram field that showed a detailed model of the Daedalus, with colored dots for each crew member.

"This simulation will test the social dynamics and stress factors on board. You have all been assigned different roles and secret tasks – instructions can be found on your personal pads."

A palpable tension spread through the room as everyone checked their pad.

"Some of these tasks will conflict with those of other crew members," Dr. Miller continued. "Some will be deliberately disruptive. The purpose is to test your ability to deal with social conflicts, isolation, and group dynamics."

Hailey checked her pad and frowned. Her instruction read: "You have discovered indications that a crew member might be sabotaging the mission. Gather

evidence without making your concerns public."

She looked up and saw that others were also studying their instructions with thoughtful expressions. This promised to be interesting.

The simulation began normally – a routine "week" aboard the Daedalus during the travel phase. But soon patterns began to form. Lt. Taylor suddenly became dismissive and isolated herself from the others. Rodriguez began having aggressive discussions with Pope. Matthew Ling seemed to be secretly gathering information.

Hailey observed the dynamics closely, trying to figure out who might be acting as a potential "saboteur." The most difficult part was that she couldn't directly suspect anyone – an accusation could endanger crew morale and was to be avoided according to her instructions.

After two hours of intense role-playing, Dr. Miller called the exercise to an end. The relief was palpable in everyone as they could slip out of their assigned roles.

"Excellent work," she praised. "This kind of psychological pressure will inevitably arise during a long mission. Now I'd like each of you to describe the dynamics you observed and how you dealt with them."

A lively discussion followed. It turned out that no one had actually acted as a saboteur – it was an exercise in perception and trust. Some, like Taylor, had been instructed to isolate themselves. Others were to deliberately create conflicts or pretend to have secrets.

"The point was that your perception was colored by the information you received," explained Dr. Miller. "In the isolated environment of a spacecraft, misunderstandings and false assumptions can quickly escalate. Open communication and building trust are crucial."

After the debriefing session, Hailey and Bennett went to their regular meeting in the linguistics lab. The work on the Canine translation system was making steady progress, thanks to Liam's innovative algorithms and the intensive analysis of the media data.

"Our biggest problem is still the lack of direct feedback," sighed Bennett as he studied a complex translation matrix. "We can only guess whether our interpretations are correct."

"The good news is that their digital communication protocols are actually based on ours," replied Hailey. "That at least gives us a solid foundation."

They worked for several hours until a knock at the

door interrupted them. Dr. Miller stood there with a pad in her hand.

"Sorry for the interruption," she said. "I wanted to tell you this personally – the medical clearances for all crew members have been completed. From a medical perspective, you are all approved for the mission."

"That's good news," Bennett smiled.

"There is one thing I wanted to address, though," Dr. Miller continued, turning to Hailey. "Your biometric data during the stress simulation showed increased tension when you interacted with certain crew members."

Hailey stiffened slightly. "Is that a problem?"

"Not necessarily," Miller answered carefully. "But on a long mission, suppressed tensions can lead to problems. If you want to talk about anything – my door is always open."

After Miller had left, Bennett looked at Hailey questioningly. "Everything all right?"

Hailey hesitated, then sighed. "It's complicated. Elen and I have history – not the friendliest."

"That was hard to miss," Bennett remarked dryly.

"Fortunately, she's not coming on the mission."

"Yes," Hailey nodded. "Fortunately."

Time passed faster than anyone had expected. Two days before the planned launch, Coleman gathered the crew for a final briefing at the moonbase.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began with unusual solemnity, "the day after tomorrow, you will make history. The Daedalus is fully prepared, all final tests have been passed. You are the best-prepared crew ever to undertake a space mission."

He activated a hologram showing the complete flight route – from the moonbase to the anomaly and beyond.

"After leaving the moonbase, the Daedalus will accelerate at a constant 1.5g for fourteen days until it reaches about 0.5 percent of the speed of light. This phase will be physically demanding. After that follows the travel phase to the outer solar system, which will take several months. During this time, you will be able to live and work under normal gravity in the rotating ring."

He pointed to a spot at the edge of the solar system. "Here, the first six communication probes will be deployed. These will serve as receivers for the data you send back later."

His finger moved to another point. "The Daedalus will approach the anomaly during a peak of activity and will have six more communication probes ready to be sent back to transmit critical data."

He looked at each individual. "In less than 48 hours, the greatest expedition in human history begins. A journey to the stars and to an alien civilization. I wish I could accompany you – but my role is to maintain the connection from here and transmit your discoveries to Earth."

The mood in the room was solemn but full of anticipation. No one had expressed doubts about their decision to participate, despite all the risks.

After the briefing, each crew member went about their own preparations. Some spent the time in personal meditation, others checked their equipment one last time or conducted final simulations.

Hailey found herself on an observation platform that offered a spectacular view of the rugged lunar landscape. The contrast between the white desolation of the moon and the sparkling starry sky above had something hypnotic about it.

"Impressive, isn't it?" said a voice behind her. Liam stepped beside her, for once without his usual exuberance. "And soon we'll go even further."

"It's hard to comprehend," Hailey admitted. "40 light years. A distance that none of us can really understand."

"And yet we'll cross it in an instant," Liam nodded. "Thanks to a phenomenon we barely understand."

They stood silently beside each other, each lost in their own thoughts.

"You know," Liam finally said, "as a child, I dreamed of flying to the stars. But I always thought it would remain in the realm of fiction." He smiled. "And now I'm standing here, one day before the launch of humanity's first interstellar mission."

"Are you afraid?" asked Hailey.

"Of course," Liam answered straightforwardly. "But not enough not to go. You?"

"Me too," Hailey admitted. "But as you say – not enough to stay behind."

A gentle beep from their wristbands reminded them that it was time to retire. Tomorrow would be a long day – final preparations, medical checks, and then, the day after, the launch.

"Well then," said Liam, "to the journey."

"To the journey," Hailey agreed.

As they returned to their quarters, Hailey took one last look at Earth, hanging as a blue orb on the horizon. In all the excitement and preparation, she had hardly had time to think about what it meant to leave her home planet for so long.

But now, just hours before the conclusion of the preparations, she became aware of the magnitude. They would be the first humans to travel beyond the solar system, to a foreign star, another world.

Whatever awaited them there – be it scientific discovery, an encounter with a peaceful alien civilization, or unforeseen dangers – it would forever change the history of humanity.

With this thought, Hailey went to bed, her mind filled with stars and alien worlds, and the certainty that the greatest adventure of her life was just beginning.

VII

The transition from the lunar space dock into deep space had proceeded smoothly. The launch itself - a moment of utmost concentration and suppressed excitement - now belonged to the past. The Daedalus

had begun its continuous acceleration phase, and the crew was gradually getting used to the constant pressure of 1.5g, which made every step a conscious effort and even made breathing seem more laborious.

Three weeks had passed since leaving the moonbase. The initial acceleration phase was now complete, and the Daedalus had reached its travel speed - about 0.5 percent of the speed of light, or around 1,500 kilometers per second. From now on, the ship would glide through the outer solar system with its main engines shut down, conserving energy for the long flight to the anomaly.

Hailey Fox leaned back in her chair and observed the faintly blue-shimmering stars on the large main display of the command center. In the weightlessness of the central, non-rotating ship segment, her hair floated gently around her head as she checked the current course calculation. It wasn't her actual task - Lieutenant Wilson or Taylor would do a more thorough check later - but after three weeks on board, each crew member had begun to take on small responsibilities outside their primary specialization.

"I didn't think the return to weightlessness would be so welcome," remarked Foster, who came floating through the central access shaft into the command module.

Hailey smiled. "After three weeks under 1.5g, it feels like liberation."

"Good old gravity," Foster nodded. "You never appreciate it until you have either too much or too little." He floated to his communications terminal and routinely checked the incoming signals. "Still twelve hours until the next scheduled transmission to the moonbase. The delay is now almost an hour in each direction."

The hatch opened again, and Captain Nakamura glided in with the elegant precision of years of experience. Unlike the others, she wore specially designed magnetic boots that allowed her to adhere to the metal floors instead of floating freely.

"Status?" she asked without preamble.

"All systems nominal, Captain," reported Foster. "We're maintaining course and speed."

"Dr. Fox?" Nakamura turned to Hailey. "I thought you would be in the main laboratory."

"I was on my way there, Captain," replied Hailey. "I just wanted to quickly coordinate with Lieutenant Foster on how we can integrate the latest findings about Canine communication into the next report to the moonbase."

Nakamura nodded appreciatively. "Initiative is welcome, as long as primary responsibilities are not neglected."

"Of course not," Hailey assured. "Dr. Bennett and I have made significant progress in deciphering the Canine communication patterns. The new algorithms are currently running through a final testing phase."

"Excellent. I expect your report at the next status meeting."

As Hailey left the room and headed for the central access tunnel, she couldn't help but notice how smoothly the crew was already working together. The initial adjustment difficulties - the inevitable consequence of twelve people living together in confined space - had subsided more quickly than expected.

The central access tunnel - a cylindrical shaft that ran through the middle of the ship - was the main passage between the non-rotating core and the outer ring, which rotated to generate artificial gravity. Hailey grabbed one of the handrails and skillfully pulled herself forward, a movement that had become second nature after three weeks of training.

As she reached the transition to the rotating ring, she felt the gradual build-up of artificial gravity. It was a strange feeling - not like the sudden onset of gravity

after a moment of weightlessness, but a gentle, increasing pull that grew stronger the closer one got to the outer hull. In the transition zone, one had to adapt to a combined force of rotation and forward movement - something that had cost the entire crew effort in the first days of the journey, but which they now managed routinely.

Her first stop was the laboratory, where she expected to find Bennett working on their linguistic project. But on the way there, she was distracted by a call from the communications room.

"Dr. Fox!" Rodriguez waved. "Have you seen Liam? He was supposed to be here an hour ago to complete the protocol optimization for the transmission to Earth."

Hailey shook her head. "Not since breakfast. He mentioned something about an idea for the translation algorithm, but that was it."

Rodriguez sighed. "Typical Liam. He probably lost track of time while working on some brilliant code."

"I'll check his quarters," Hailey offered and made her way to the residential area of the rotating ring.

The corridors of the Daedalus were wider and brighter than one would expect from a spaceship - a remnant of the original design as a luxury cruiser.

The conversion for the scientific mission had changed many things, but the basic generosity of the layout had remained.

When Hailey reached the door to Liam's quarters, she knocked twice. No answer.

"Computer, Liam Porter's location?" she asked.

"Liam Porter is at the medical station," answered the calm voice of the ship's computer.

Hailey frowned. At the infirmary? She changed her direction and made her way there, concerned.

When she entered the medical station, an unexpected sight greeted her: Liam was sitting on an examination couch, dramatically holding out his right arm, while Dr. Miller stood beside him with an impassive expression. Emily Chen was also present, her expression fluctuating between concern and suppressed smile.

"I'm not saying it's threatening my life," Liam explained with theatrical seriousness, "but imagine, Doctor - what if this is the beginning of a space-specific skin reaction? What if the strange blue spreads? What if it extends to my fingers and impairs my programming abilities?"

Dr. Miller rolled her eyes as she ran a small medical

scanner over Liam's arm. "Mr. Porter. For the third time: It's ink. Your pen leaked in your pocket."

"But how do you know?" Liam persisted. "It could be a novel form of cosmic radiation that has reacted with the melanin in my skin. Have you ever heard of Van Allen Belt Dermatitis?"

"That doesn't exist," Dr. Miller replied dryly.

"Exactly! Because I could be the first documented case!"

Hailey couldn't suppress a laugh, which drew the attention of the three.

"Dr. Fox," Miller greeted her with a relieved expression. "Perhaps you can convince Mr. Porter that a leaking pen doesn't justify an emergency medical consultation."

"Liam," said Hailey with feigned sternness, "Rodriguez is looking for you. The protocol optimization?"

Liam blinked. "Oh. Oh! I completely forgot about that." He jumped off the couch, suddenly ignoring the allegedly dangerous blue spot on his arm. "Thanks, Doc! If I die, you'll know what caused it!"

With these words, he rushed out of the infirmary,

winking at Emily as he passed, which she returned with a suppressed smile.

"That man," sighed Dr. Miller, shaking her head, "is simultaneously the greatest genius and the biggest child on board."

"He doesn't mean any harm," Emily gently defended him. "He was just so excited about the breakthrough with the adaptive learning algorithms that he crushed the pen in his hand."

"A breakthrough?" Hailey asked, interested.

Emily nodded. "He's developed a method to better identify the contextual tone patterns of the Canine language. It's really brilliant - I only understand half of it, but it seems to work."

"And for that he got himself covered in ink?" Dr. Miller smirked. "Well, as long as he doesn't sustain any real injuries..."

Hailey and Emily left the infirmary together, while Dr. Miller returned to her regular duties.

"He likes you," Hailey remarked casually as they walked down the corridor.

Emily blushed slightly. "We get along well. He's... different from anyone I've ever met."

"He definitely is," Hailey agreed. "But in the best way."

They reached the communications room, where Liam was already deeply engrossed in his work, his fingers flying over the holo-controls. Rodriguez stood beside him, visibly relieved at the arrival of the programming expert.

"The adaptive protocol is almost finished," announced Liam without looking up. "With this modification, we can increase the data transmission rate by 22 percent, even with increasing distance and interference."

"Just in time for our next transmission to Earth," Rodriguez nodded appreciatively.

"And how is your... medical emergency?" Hailey asked with a barely suppressed smile.

Liam waved it off. "Oh, that. Just a minor cosmic radiation spot. Nothing an experienced space traveler like me would worry about."

Emily laughed softly, while Rodriguez furrowed his brow in confusion but didn't inquire further.

"I should return to the engine deck," said Emily after a moment. "Chief Pope wants to perform a complete diagnosis of the fusion systems, now that we've

completed the acceleration phase."

"Sounds like fun," Liam grinned.

"For engineers, it is," Emily replied with a smile and set off.

After Emily had left, Hailey turned back to Liam. "So, a real breakthrough with the translation algorithms?"

"Oh yes," Liam nodded, suddenly completely focused again. "I've completely revised the pattern recognition routines. Instead of looking for direct word-for-word correspondences, the algorithm now focuses on semantic fields and contextual meaning patterns."

"That could finally give us the breakthrough we need," Hailey said excitedly. "I should tell Bennett."

"Tell him I'll release the first version for testing this afternoon," Liam called after her as she left the room.

Down in the engine deck of the Daedalus, the atmosphere was quite different from the upper decks. Here, the deep, rhythmic sounds of the life support systems and the muffled humming of the power lines dominated. Chief Engineer Pope stood in front of a large holographic representation of the

fusion reactor, surrounded by diagnostic displays and performance graphs.

"The plasma chamber shows a slight asymmetry in the magnetic containment field," he explained to Emily, who had just arrived. "Nothing concerning, but we should recalibrate the coils to ensure optimal efficiency."

Rodriguez, who was working at a nearby console, nodded. "I've already started a series of simulations to determine the ideal parameters. First results in about twenty minutes."

Pope noticed Emily's arrival and nodded to her. "Ah, Ms. Chen. Just in time. I want you to take a look at the cooling lines of the secondary energy converter. The temperature values are within tolerance, but I see a pattern I don't like."

"Right away, Chief," Emily replied and got to work.

The three engineers worked with the quiet efficiency of a well-rehearsed team. While Rodriguez performed the extensive calculations and simulations, Emily took over the precise fine-tuning of the systems. Pope himself maintained the overview and made the crucial judgments when it came to compromises between performance, efficiency, and safety.

"You have a good eye for system patterns," Pope remarked appreciatively as Emily identified a subtle anomaly in the cooling circuits that confirmed his initial suspicion. "That's not something that can be learned - either you have it or you don't."

Emily smiled at the rare praise from the experienced engineer. "My father was a circuit designer. He taught me that there's a rhythm in every complex system - and when the rhythm is disturbed, something isn't right."

"A wise lesson," Pope nodded. "Too many young engineers just stare at the numbers and miss the bigger pattern."

Rodriguez came over with a datapad. "The simulation results are in. We can reduce the magnetic field strength by 2.3 percent without compromising containment stability. That would lower energy consumption and correct the asymmetry."

Pope studied the data, then nodded slowly. "Good. Implement the changes, but gradually - one percent per hour. I don't want any sudden adjustments in the plasma field."

"Understood, Chief," Rodriguez confirmed.

"Ms. Chen," Pope turned back to Emily, "after

you've adjusted the cooling lines, I want you to check the data from the last diagnostic cycles of the transition modules. Since we brought the rotation of the habitat ring up to full speed, they've been showing slight fluctuations."

As Pope turned to return to his own station, Emily held him back. "Chief? May I ask why you volunteered for this mission? With your experience and reputation, you could have retired long ago."

Pope paused and looked at the young engineer thoughtfully. Finally, he smiled slightly. "The same curiosity that brought you here, Ms. Chen. The difference is that I've already seen enough to know how much I still don't know." He looked at the complex systems of the engine room. "Besides - what engineer would turn down the chance to look after humanity's first interstellar spaceship?"

With these words, he returned to his work, while Emily and Rodriguez exchanged glances - a silent agreement that beneath the rough, pragmatic shell of the Chief Engineer, they had found a man with deep respect for the wonders of the universe.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Wilson and Lieutenant Taylor had gathered in the simulation chamber of the navigation segment. The two pilots were running through a complex maneuver scenario that simulated approaching the anomaly under various conditions.

"Your angles are too steep," Taylor commented as she watched Wilson's virtual steering maneuver. "At this approach speed, you risk getting into the edge turbulence of the anomaly."

Wilson adjusted his course with calm, precise movements. "Better like this?"

"Much better," Taylor nodded, her eyes never leaving the holographic display. "Remember - we only have one chance to get this right. The simulations indicate that the anomaly is sensitive to impulses. Too aggressive a maneuver could have unpredictable consequences."

Wilson completed the simulation with a perfect positioning of the virtual Daedalus at the edge of the anomaly. "We can hardly be this precise in the real mission. Too many unknowns."

"That's why we train for every possible scenario," Taylor replied. "When the moment comes, our reactions must be instinctive."

The door to the simulation chamber opened, and Captain Nakamura entered. The two pilots automatically stood a little straighter, an unconscious reaction to the natural authority of their commander.

"Captain," Wilson greeted. "We're currently running through the anomaly approach scenarios."

"So I see," Nakamura nodded. "Progress?"

"We're refining the approach angles and velocity parameters," reported Taylor. "The latest data from the moonbase suggests that the anomaly might have a kind of... tidal effect that affects maneuverability in close proximity."

Nakamura stepped closer to the simulation and examined the data with an expert eye. "A kind of gravitational pull?"

"Not exactly gravity," Wilson corrected. "More like a distortion of the local space-time fabric that produces similar effects. The quantum field fluctuations seem to become stronger the closer you get to the center."

"What does this mean for our approach?" Nakamura asked directly.

Taylor activated a new simulation sequence. "We need to perform a balancing act - close enough to be caught by the transport effect, but not so close that we lose control before the effect kicks in."

"Can you calculate this optimal point?"

"Theoretically, yes," Wilson nodded. "Based on the data from the Quantum probe, we've defined a target area." He pointed to a shimmering green ring around

the virtual anomaly. "If we can position the Daedalus within this ring, the chances for a successful transit should be maximal."

Nakamura looked at the display thoughtfully. "I'm counting on both of you. When we reach our target, the precision of your control will determine success or failure."

"We will be ready, Captain," Taylor assured with calm confidence.

After a few more minutes of observing and targeted questions, Nakamura departed again, while the two pilots continued their intensive exercises.

Late in the evening, after the end of the regular shift, a large part of the crew gathered in a special area of the community deck. The room bore the unofficial name "The Little Oasis" - a loving allusion to the common room in the research station on Earth, where the original core group around Hailey, Foster, Pope, and Liam had spent so many hours.

The similarity was not coincidental. Pope and Liam had insisted that certain elements of the original Oasis be reproduced here - from the warm lighting to the arrangement of the seating groups. Even the bar with its polished surfaces and selection of drinks was a miniature version of the original.

"Not quite as good as the old Oasis," Pope remarked as he placed a small glass of his precious Karuizawa on the table, "but it serves its purpose."

"I think we did a good job," Liam grinned, sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs with one leg casually draped over the armrest.

"And the view of the sky," added Hailey with a slight smile as she sipped her glass of wine. "Although..." She pointed to the large viewing window through which one could see the deep black of space and the countless stars, "...this view has its advantages too."

Foster, who had just joined them, surveyed the assembled group. "An unofficial meeting?"

"More like a much-needed moment of relaxation," replied Hailey. "The last few weeks have been intense."

"They have been," Bennett agreed, who had been engaged in conversation with Dr. Miller in a corner. "The continuous acceleration, the constant exercises, the scientific breakthroughs - a lot has happened."

"And more will come," added Captain Nakamura, who entered at that moment with Lieutenants Wilson and Taylor. In this informal environment, without the strict posture she maintained during duty, she

seemed more accessible, almost relaxed. "But for tonight, a break is appropriate."

The next hour passed in pleasant sociability. The crew members mingled, conversations flowed, and for the first time in a long while, the ship's hierarchy seemed to recede somewhat into the background, replaced by the simple camaraderie of people sharing an extraordinary adventure.

Pope had, to many people's surprise, brought a small bottle of his precious whisky and offered everyone a tiny tasting sip - "Just a thimbleful, for purely ceremonial purposes," as he emphasized. Even Captain Nakamura accepted the offer.

"Karuizawa," she noted appreciatively after a careful sip. "From my homeland. A rare specimen - this vintage was bottled just before the distillery closed."

"You know your stuff, Captain," Pope replied with a respectful nod. "A gift from an old colleague, saved for special occasions."

Liam told of his "medical emergency" of the day, which elicited general laughter, especially when Dr. Miller supplemented the story with dry comments. Emily blushed slightly as the amused glances briefly turned to her as well, but her smile revealed that she didn't find the attention unpleasant.

"By the way," Pope turned to Nakamura, "the calibration of the magnetic field coils is complete. The reactor's performance efficiency is now at 97.4 percent - better than the original design specifications."

"That's excellent work, Chief," Nakamura praised. "How about the cooling lines?"

"Ms. Chen found a remarkable solution for the temperature anomaly," Pope replied with an appreciative nod in Emily's direction. "A creative adaptation of the flow pattern that I wouldn't have considered myself."

Emily, not used to such public praise, smiled embarrassedly. "It was just a small modification of the control algorithms."

"Never underestimate the value of 'small modifications,' Ms. Chen," Pope replied. "The history of space travel is full of critical missions that were saved by precisely such 'small' adjustments."

"Speaking of modifications," Liam spoke up, "the new translation algorithm is showing promising initial results. We can now correctly interpret about 35 percent of the Canine communication patterns with high probability."

"A significant advance," Bennett nodded

appreciatively. "If we can maintain this progress, we'll have a functional basic vocabulary by the time we arrive."

"Let's talk about the Canines," said Lieutenant Taylor, leaning forward. "I've thought a lot about our simulations and technical challenges, but less about the actual goal. What do we actually expect to find?"

"All the data so far gives us good indications," replied Bennett. "The communication structures point to a highly organized society."

"We will be careful," assured Captain Nakamura. "First contact will proceed according to a strictly controlled protocol, with a small team and only one of the auxiliary craft."

The conversation continued to revolve around the upcoming encounter, theories were exchanged, hopes and mild concerns expressed. The mood remained positive, carried by the shared anticipation of the upcoming historic event.

As the late hours approached, the gathering gradually dispersed, the crew members returning to their quarters to find the necessary rest for the coming day.

Foster was one of the last to stay, along with Hailey and Liam.

"A pleasant tradition," he remarked as he took his last sip of beer. "These unofficial gatherings boost morale more than any formal team building."

"The old Oasis on Earth also welded us together," Hailey nodded. "There's something special about spending time together without an agenda."

"Except maybe the secret agenda of not talking about work - and then only talking about it anyway," Liam laughed and stretched. "But at least with a drink in hand."

As they finally said goodbye, each returned to their quarters with their own thoughts. The Daedalus continued to glide through the darkness of space, a tiny point of light in the infinite blackness, on its way to a destination that could change humanity forever.

The days aboard the Daedalus followed a carefully planned rhythm. Each crew member had their fixed tasks and responsibilities, but also enough flexibility to respond to unforeseen situations.

Two months had passed since the launch. Earth had long since shrunk to a pale blue dot in the sky, barely visible to the naked eye. Communication with the moonbase now took place in carefully planned,

compressed transmissions, with delays of several hours in each direction.

Captain Nakamura sat in her quarters, reviewing the latest navigation calculations. After all the weeks in space, the crew had found a rhythm that allowed them to work efficiently while maintaining the psychological well-being essential for a long-term mission.

A soft knock at her door interrupted her thoughts.

"Enter," she called.

Lieutenant Wilson entered, a datapad in hand. "Captain, the latest course projections. We're approaching the first marker for deploying the communication probes."

Nakamura took the pad and studied the data. "In three days, then. Good. Prepare everything for the deployment. I want Lieutenant Taylor and you to perform a final function check on all six probes."

"Already arranged, Captain," Wilson nodded. "Taylor is currently checking the quantum communication modules."

Nakamura eyed the pilot with an appreciative look. "You've done remarkable work in the past few weeks, Lieutenant. Your adaptability to changing

gravity conditions during the exercises was impressive."

Wilson smiled slightly. "Thank you, Captain. The training at the moonbase helped, but the key is finding your inner balance, independent of external conditions."

"A wise insight," Nakamura nodded. "Applicable to more than just gravity."

After a brief moment of reflection, she continued: "After deploying the probes, we'll prepare for the approach to the anomaly. The data from the last briefing from the moonbase indicates that the activity cycles of the anomaly have remained stable."

"That's reassuring," said Wilson. "The cyclical nature gives us a clear time window for the approach."

"Exactly. Once the probes are placed, we'll send a final status report to Earth and request clearance for the transit attempt. Inform the department heads of a meeting tomorrow at 0900."

"Aye, Captain," Wilson confirmed and left the quarters.

After his departure, Nakamura turned back to the

data, her thoughts already on the complex maneuvers that lay ahead. The deployment of the communication probes would secure their connection to Earth even after transit through the anomaly - a thin but crucial link to home.

On the engine deck, Pope, Rodriguez, and Chen were working on the final preparations for deploying the probes. Launching six highly complex communication relays required precise calculations and flawless execution.

"The probes' power modules are calibrated for optimal efficiency," reported Emily as she ran the final diagnostics. "The quantum communication systems are functioning within all specifications."

Pope nodded with satisfaction. "Excellent. Rodriguez, how are the deployment mechanisms?"

"All six launch shafts show green, Chief," replied Rodriguez. "The sequencing is programmed. As soon as we reach the optimal position, we can deploy the probes in a controlled sequence."

Pope stepped up to one of the maintenance hatches that provided access to the compact but powerful communication probes. The cylindrical devices, about a meter long and thirty centimeters in

diameter, contained some of the most advanced communication technologies humanity had ever developed. Each probe was equipped with an independent propulsion system, solar collectors, and a quantum position sensor that allowed it to locate the anomaly and traverse it precisely.

"These little marvels will be our lifeline," Pope said thoughtfully. "Once we've crossed the anomaly, they will represent our only connection to Earth."

Emily stepped beside him. "Coordinating the probes requires precision," Emily explained. "According to the calculations, each probe will emit the special quantum relay signal as soon as it's sent through the wormhole. That allows for stable communication between the systems."

Pope nodded. "By transporting through the anomaly, we can bypass the time delay that conventional transmission over 40 light years would mean."

"Six messages to Earth," Rodriguez said quietly. "Six opportunities to report on an alien world."

"Six is better than none," Pope replied pragmatically. "And if all goes well, we can send more probes on a later mission."

The three engineers continued to work on the final checks, each secretly impressed by the technological

masterpiece they were looking after.

In the "Little Oasis," Foster and Bennett sat over a chess game, while Dr. Miller comfortably studied professional literature in one of the armchairs. The quiet moments between shifts had become rare as they got closer to the anomaly, and thus all the more valuable.

"Checkmate," announced Foster with a triumphant smile as he moved his bishop to the decisive position.

Bennett looked at the board with a frown, then smiled appreciatively. "An unexpected strategy. I was too fixated on your rook maneuvers and underestimated the bishop."

"A lesson in diplomatic deception," Foster grinned. "Sometimes the greatest threat isn't the most obvious one."

"A lesson I'll keep in mind during our first contact," Bennett nodded as he reset the pieces. "Although I hope that with the Canines, we can rely less on deception and more on openness."

Dr. Miller looked up from her pad. "Speaking of first contact - how much progress has been made in

translating the Canine language?"

"Considerable," replied Bennett. "Thanks to Liam's unconventional algorithms and Dr. Fox's linguistic expertise, we can now understand about 40 percent of basic communication. Not enough for philosophical debates, but sufficient for basic understanding."

"That's impressive," Miller said thoughtfully. "Especially considering that we've never had direct audio recordings of their language."

"The reconstruction from the visual data was a challenge," Bennett admitted. "But the simulation of their sound formation, based on larynx and mouth movements, has allowed us to develop a phonetic model."

Foster made his first move in the new game. "And how will we structure communication on site? I doubt we can perfectly articulate the Canine language."

"That's correct," Bennett nodded. "Our approach is a hybrid system. We'll use translator pads that can both convert our language into Canine sounds and translate their communication for us."

"Sounds like a solid plan," said Dr. Miller. "Provided, of course, that they even want to talk to

us."

"All signs point to an open, curious species," Bennett replied. "And don't forget - they've been receiving data about us for decades. They probably already know of our existence, at least theoretically."

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Captain Nakamura, who held a datapad in her hand.

"Good evening," she greeted the small group. "In three days, we will reach the deployment point and begin placing the communication probes in the Earth system. After that, we'll set course directly for the anomaly."

Bennett straightened in his chair. "That means we'll reach our destination in about two weeks?"

"Correct," confirmed Nakamura. "After deploying the probes, we'll send a final comprehensive status report to Earth and request clearance for the transit."

"And then the real adventure begins," murmured Foster, with a look that revealed both excitement and a trace of nervousness.

"Exactly," Nakamura nodded. "I've scheduled a full briefing for tomorrow at 0900. Please inform your respective departments."

With these words, the Captain departed again, while the remaining group lingered for a moment in thoughtful silence.

"Two weeks," Dr. Miller finally said. "In two weeks, we could be in another star system."

Bennett and Foster exchanged a glance, the chess game forgotten for the moment, their thoughts on the historic event that was imminent.

The three days passed in a flash, filled with intensive preparations and final checks of all systems. When the moment came for deploying the communication probes, the entire crew gathered in the control room to follow the event.

Captain Nakamura stood in the center of the room, surrounded by holographic displays showing the progress of the operation. Lieutenant Taylor sat at the main control console, her fingers ready over the controls.

"Initiate deployment sequence," Nakamura ordered.

"Deployment sequence initiated," Taylor confirmed. "Probe one will be deployed in three, two, one... deployed."

A slight vibration ran through the ship as the first probe was ejected from its launch shaft. On the main display, a small point of light appeared, slowly moving away from the Daedalus.

"Probe one successfully deployed," reported Taylor. "Telemetry shows nominal status. Propulsion systems activated, course correction in progress."

In the next few minutes, the other five probes were deployed following the same pattern, each in a carefully calculated trajectory that would ensure optimal coverage for communication.

"All six probes successfully deployed and functional," Taylor finally announced. "They are taking up their intended positions."

"Excellent work," Nakamura praised and turned to Foster. "Lieutenant, prepare the comprehensive status report for the moonbase. I want to transmit all details about the successful deployment and our plans for approaching the anomaly."

"Immediately, Captain," Foster confirmed and got to work.

Transmitting the extensive data to Earth would take several hours, even with the optimized protocols that Liam had developed. The response - the hoped-for clearance for the transit - would not arrive until the

next day.

The hours of waiting stretched as the Daedalus continued its flight toward its destination. The crew used the time for final preparations and system checks.

Hailey and Bennett worked feverishly on the final adjustments to the translation system, supported by Liam's continuously improved algorithms. In the engine deck, Pope and his engineers checked every critical system one last time to ensure that the Daedalus was optimally prepared for the upcoming transit.

After almost eighteen hours of waiting, Foster's communication console lit up.

"Captain," he reported, "we're receiving the response from the moonbase."

Captain Nakamura, who had been notified immediately, entered the communications room. "On the main screen, Lieutenant."

The message appeared on the display - a long series of encrypted data that Foster quickly deciphered.

"Moonbase Alpha confirms receipt of our status report," he reported as he scrolled through the data. "They have registered the successful deployment of

the communication probes. And..." He paused as he came to the crucial part of the message. "They grant official clearance for transit through the anomaly."

A soft sigh of relief went through the room. Although no one had seriously doubted that the clearance would be given, the official confirmation was still an important milestone.

"Additional instructions?" asked Nakamura.

"Yes, Captain," Foster nodded. "Commander Coleman is sending detailed instructions for post-transit transmission. We are to send back one of the remaining six probes immediately after arrival to confirm our successful transit."

"Understood," said Nakamura. "Call an immediate meeting of all department heads. The countdown for the transit begins now."

The final days before reaching the anomaly passed in a state of utmost concentration. Each crew member knew their tasks during the transit and was prepared for various emergency scenarios.

When the Daedalus finally came within range of the anomaly, the tension on board was almost palpable. The sensors began to register the first signs of

quantum field fluctuations that marked the edge of the mysterious phenomenon.

Captain Nakamura entered the bridge, her face a mask of professional calm. "Status," she demanded.

"We're approaching the anomaly, Captain," reported Lieutenant Wilson from the control console. "Distance: 500,000 kilometers. The sensors show increasing quantum field fluctuations, but still within safe parameters."

"All defensive systems?" Nakamura asked, turning to Taylor.

"Shields at full load, Captain," replied Taylor. "In passive mode to avoid generating unnecessary signatures."

"Engine status?"

Pope, standing at the engineering console, answered promptly. "All systems nominal, Captain. Reactor at 97 percent efficiency. Ready for any energy requirements."

"Communication systems?"

Foster looked up from his terminal. "Fully functional, Captain. Last transmission sent to and confirmed by the moonbase twenty minutes ago.

The first return probe is prepared and ready for deployment."

"Science department?"

Hailey, who was working with Bennett and Liam at the scientific console, stepped forward. "All sensors recording at maximum capacity, Captain. We've already collected more data about the anomaly than ever before. The initial analyses confirm the cyclical nature of the activity."

"When do we reach the next activity peak?" asked Nakamura.

"In about three hours," replied Liam. "The measurements indicate a continuous increase in quantum field fluctuations, exactly as predicted in our models."

Nakamura nodded and addressed the entire bridge crew. "This is the moment we've been preparing for. In three hours, we will attempt to traverse the greatest mystery in human history - a shortcut to the stars that none of us fully understands."

She took a deep breath. "I expect the highest concentration and perfect execution of tasks from everyone. Wilson, Taylor - bring us on approach course."

"Aye, Captain," the two pilots answered in unison and got to work.

The Daedalus moved slowly towards the invisible anomaly, guided by the increasing quantum field measurements that revealed its presence. Time seemed to stretch, each minute felt like an hour as the tension on board steadily increased.

Two hours passed, filled with continuous measurements, course adjustments, and system checks. The anomaly was now more clearly visible on the sensors - a shimmering, pulsating pattern of quantum fluctuations that stood out against the dark background of space.

"One hour until the predicted activity peak," reported Liam. "The measurements match perfectly with our predictions."

"Begin the final preparations," Nakamura ordered. "Shut down all non-essential systems. Maximum energy for shields and sensors."

The crew worked with the quiet efficiency of a perfectly coordinated team, each focused on their task, but aware of the bigger picture.

As the final half hour began, preparations intensified. The Daedalus had now reached an optimal position at the edge of the anomaly, ready to

dive into the predicted activity peak.

"Anomaly activity increasing dramatically," reported Hailey. "We're approaching the peak."

"All crew members to their stations," Nakamura ordered over the ship's intercom. "Secure loose objects. Prepare for possible system failures. Transit in T-minus 20 minutes."

Time now seemed to pass at a snail's pace, each second stretching into a small eternity. With only ten minutes remaining, a concentrated silence prevailed on the bridge, interrupted only by occasional status reports.

"Transmitter probe ready," reported Foster. "Ready for deployment after successful transit."

"Understood," confirmed Nakamura. "All stations, report final status."

One after another, the department heads confirmed the readiness of their systems and teams.

"Five minutes until the predicted peak," announced Liam. "Anomaly activity reaching critical values."

Wilson and Taylor worked hand in hand at the control consoles, their movements so coordinated as if they were a single organism. The Daedalus was

gently positioned, precisely at the calculated entry vector.

"Three minutes," reported Liam. "The quantum field fluctuations exceed all previous measurements."

The ship began to vibrate slightly as the first tendrils of the anomaly effects reached the Daedalus.

"Two minutes. Structural integrity at 98 percent. All systems holding."

The vibration grew stronger, accompanied by a deep, barely audible humming that seemed to run through the entire ship.

"One minute. Activity peak will be reached in 57 seconds."

Captain Nakamura gripped the armrests of her command chair, outwardly calm, but inwardly more tense than ever before in her long career.

"Thirty seconds. Sensors show massive quantum field distortions directly ahead."

On the main screen, something was now actually visible - a kind of shimmering ripple in space, as if reality itself was becoming fluid and reshaping itself.

"Ten seconds."

Time seemed to stand still.

"Five."

Wilson and Taylor exchanged a brief glance.

"Four."

Hailey and Bennett involuntarily held their breath.

"Three."

Pope and his engineers monitored the energy values with utmost concentration.

"Two."

Foster threw Liam a quick glance, who responded with a barely perceptible nod. Unnoticed by the others, Foster activated a special transmission sequence on his terminal.

"One."

"Initiate transit," Captain Nakamura commanded with a firm voice.

The Daedalus glided forward, right into the center of the shimmering distortion. For a brief moment, the entire universe seemed to flicker and blur. Then a

blinding brightness enveloped the ship, followed by absolute silence.

Time did not exist. Space had no meaning. Each crew member experienced a moment of complete disorientation, a feeling of falling into infinity and at the same time of complete stillness.

And then, just as suddenly as the phenomenon had begun, it was over.

The Daedalus floated in the blackness of space, surrounded by a completely alien star pattern. All systems were offline, the emergency lighting bathed the bridge in a faint red glow.

For several seconds, absolute silence prevailed as the crew tried to regain their orientation. Captain Nakamura was the first to move, instinctively reaching for the emergency communication system.

"Status report from all departments," she commanded, her voice calm and firm despite the extraordinary situation.

Gradually, the systems of the Daedalus began to automatically boot up, as specified in the recovery protocols. The regular lighting flickered back, followed by the primary displays.

"Main power being restored," reported Pope from

his console. "Reactor initializing restart sequence, secondary systems switching over. Time until full power: about five minutes."

"Ship structure?" asked Nakamura.

"Integrity sensors report no critical damage," replied Rodriguez. "Some micro-fractures in the outer hull plates, but the sealing systems are already working."

The communication channels activated one after another.

"Science department reporting complete," came Hailey's voice over the intercom. "All present, no injuries. Sensors booting up."

"Engineering department complete," confirmed Pope. "Chen and Rodriguez with me, all systems being checked."

"Medical department ready," reported Dr. Miller. "No serious injuries reported, some mild disorientation symptoms."

Gradually, all crew members reported in, none with serious injuries.

Foster worked feverishly at his communications console. "Communication systems being restored. Long-range scanners initializing."

"Navigation systems online," reported Lieutenant Wilson. "I'm trying to determine our position."

The main screens flickered back to life, showing a breathtaking view of the surroundings. Stars, alien constellations, and at a relatively short distance - compared to cosmic scales - a star that, according to its spectral type, could be identified as HD 40307 in the Earth's catalog.

"I think it worked," Liam said quietly, his usual joviality temporarily displaced by awe. "We're actually here. 40 light years from Earth."

"Confirmation from stellar navigation," reported Wilson, his voice infused with professional excitement. "The star constellations match the projected patterns. We are in the HD 40307 system."

A collective sigh of relief went through the bridge. They had made it - the transit had been successful.

"Complete system diagnostics," ordered Captain Nakamura. "I want to know if anything was damaged. Science department, begin data collection on the system immediately. And Foster - prepare the first communication probe for return transport."

The next few hours passed in a state of controlled chaos. The crew worked feverishly to check all systems, collect data, and prepare everything for the

transmission to Earth.

In the engine room, Pope directed the restoration of the full power supply. "The reactor's magnetic coils have survived the transit surprisingly well," he reported to Captain Nakamura via the intercom. "We'll have full power in about an hour."

"Good. Prioritize sensors and communication systems," replied Nakamura.

In the scientific department, Hailey and Bennett coordinated the intensive scans of the star system. The Daedalus's advanced sensor array collected more data about the HD 40307 system in minutes than astronomers on Earth could gather in decades.

"Six planets confirmed," reported Hailey. "And there it is - HD 40307g. Canis Prime." On the main screen appeared an image of a blue-green shimmering planet. "Distance: about 0.7 astronomical units from our current position."

The first detailed images of Canis Prime streamed in - the continental structure, the atmospheric composition, signs of cities on the day side of the planet.

"It's beautiful," murmured Bennett as he reviewed the data. "And there are clear signs of technological activity - satellite traces, atmospheric changes

consistent with industrial development, urban concentrations along the equatorial band."

Liam, scanning the communication bands, nodded enthusiastically. "And they're talkative! I'm detecting hundreds of communication frequencies - broadcasts, digital transmissions, everything. It's a veritable storm of data."

"Mind the security protocols," reminded Captain Nakamura. "No active transmission, only passive observation until we have a complete overview."

"Understood, Captain," confirmed Foster. "We're staying in passive mode."

After four hours of intensive data collection and system checks, Captain Nakamura called a meeting of the department heads.

"Status," she demanded.

"All ship systems are functioning within acceptable parameters," reported Pope. "The reactor is stable, life support fully functional. Some of the secondary systems show stress symptoms after the transit, but nothing we can't fix."

"The scientific data confirms that we are indeed in the HD 40307 system," Hailey continued. "Canis Prime is about 0.7 AU away, with clear signs of

technological civilization."

"The communication probe is prepared for return transport," added Foster. "All data collected so far has been compressed and prepared for transmission."

Captain Nakamura nodded. "Very good. The priority now is to send back the probe and inform Earth of our successful arrival. After that, we'll set course for Canis Prime."

"The anomaly?" asked Wilson. "Will we be able to use it for returning the probe?"

"The measurements show that the anomaly also exists on this side," replied Liam. "And it follows the same cyclical pattern. The next activity peak will be reached in about 17 hours."

"Perfect," said Nakamura. "That gives us enough time to collect all relevant data and prepare. Foster, make sure the probe contains all available information about our condition, the system scans, and our preliminary plans."

"Will be done, Captain," confirmed Foster.

The crew spent the next few hours collecting more data about the alien star system and preparing the communication probe. The entire ship vibrated with

suppressed excitement - they were the first humans to enter another star system, 40 light years from Earth.

As the time for the activity peak of the anomaly approached, the bridge crew gathered again.

"Probe ready for launch," reported Foster.

"Anomaly activity rising as expected," confirmed Liam. "We're approaching the peak."

"Deploy probe," ordered Captain Nakamura.

With a barely perceptible jerk, the first of the six remaining communication probes was ejected from its launch shaft. On the main screen, the crew could watch as the compact device moved away from the Daedalus, directly towards the invisible anomaly, which was detectable only through its quantum field measurements.

"Probe approaching the anomaly," reported Foster. "Telemetry stable. All systems functioning nominally."

"Ten seconds until the activity peak," said Liam.

The crew collectively held their breath as the probe plunged into the shimmering distortion that became visible for a brief moment - a fleeting flash in space,

and then it was gone.

"Probe no longer on sensors," confirmed Foster. "Transit appears to have been successful."

A quiet cheer went through the bridge. Their connection to Earth had been established, albeit a thin, one-way connection for the moment.

"If everything goes according to plan, the probe will be received by the relay stations in the solar system in about 17 hours," said Foster. "Commander Coleman and the moonbase will know that we have arrived successfully."

"Good," nodded Captain Nakamura. "And now, Lieutenants Wilson and Taylor - set course for Canis Prime. Standard speed, cautious approach."

"Aye, Captain," the two pilots replied in unison and got to work.

As the Daedalus activated its engines and initiated a gentle acceleration towards the distant planet, Hailey couldn't help but reflect on the monumental significance of this moment. They were actually here - the first human ship in another star system, on its way to an alien world, inhabited by an alien civilization.

The view on the main screen changed to a detailed

representation of Canis Prime, the blue planet that slowly grew larger as the Daedalus approached its destination. The supercontinent that stretched like a broad band around the equator was now more clearly visible, as were the cloud formations in the atmosphere and the glittering polar caps.

"Next contact with Earth before reaching orbit around Canis Prime," announced Captain Nakamura. "We should reach the planet in about two weeks. Until then, we collect as much data as possible."

The Daedalus glided moderately through interplanetary space, on its way to its historic encounter with an alien civilization. Each crew member was aware of the enormous responsibility that rested on their shoulders - they were not only explorers but also ambassadors of all humanity.

With a final course correction, the ship stabilized on its path to Canis Prime, the systems purring contentedly as the Daedalus continued its journey - no longer to the stars, but now to a new world waiting to be discovered.