

L5

A Rin Foster Space Adventure

by

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Part I

Revolutions

Chapter 1

The Rock

Sunrise came every three hours on the slowly tumbling rock. Roughly fifty kilometers by twelve, capped like a rough-hewn nail on one end, the artificial asteroid rotated around its long axis, always presenting its broadside to the sun. Many smaller chunks of planetary debris had been fused into this misshapen whole – the surface burned, pitted, scarred, crumpled and covered with an oily layer of poison dust left by the convict-miners who had slapped it together.

A small hill poked its summit into the harsh sunlight and the new day gleamed off Rashid ben Mous-Rabeen's helmet as he climbed carefully to the peak. Dawn swept quickly down the deeply scratched and dented surfaces of his dirty orange pressure suit, revealing well-worn joints and many tool pouches.

His faceplate tinted to deflect the sun's merciless light, Rashid took a moment, as always, to respect the view. The sun straight ahead. The quarter-disc Moon off to his right, a few bubble-cities gleaming in the darkness of its shadowed side. Between his hurtling perch and the Moon, the sun's harsh rays glittered off a diamond of white and silver – a large station of some kind. To his left (the Lieutenant had taught him enough of orbital mechanics to know that he and the tumbling accretion of stone that he stood upon were actually falling in a curved path toward it) hung the magnificent and blessed blue Earth.

As the weeks passed, he had watched that azure ball grow from a barely recognizable dot near the sun to an enchanting shimmer and then finally blossom into a glorious blaze of color and ever-changing patterns of clouds.

Few mustati had ever made the journey he was making: riding an asteroid from far outside the orbit of Mars back to Mother Earth.

Like everyone sentenced to the asteroid mines, Rashid had never expected to return. Like most, he survived by telling himself that he never wanted to return. Somehow, the past four months with the Lieutenant, with the others, including even the loud-mouth, Lunar-born Keller, had changed all that. Now he gazed upon the Earth, the home that he had once cursed and bitterly forsaken, and saw its blue seas and warm envelope of air and wished that he could find a way out of his darkness, a way back home.

The summit of the little hill was clear of dust; Rashid had made this pilgrimage regularly throughout the journey. He reached into the pouch at his side and pulled out his prayer mat. He laid it carefully on the naked stone. He looked up at the huge blue glow in the sky and thought: “No question in which direction the Holy City lies.”

He knelt for his prayers.

Deskili Balachandran-Singh attached a small grappler to an outcropping and clipped the other end to his belt. He told himself for the hundredth time that it wasn't necessary, but it didn't help. He stood on the rim of the Nail Head of the spinning asteroid and swore he could feel himself being literally hurled off into space.

“Dex? Where are you?” Mankowicz' voice buzzed in his ear, making him jump. His feet left the asteroid for a second; the grappler snapped him down.

“I'm on the edge of the goddamned world. Where do you think I am?” he shot back.

“Did you take your pill?”

Dex had taken his pill before he'd suited up and left the Shack. He had given half a thought to not taking the drug, but Keller had nagged at him until he gulped it down in sheer frustration. Maybe this time he wouldn't have had the inevitable panic attack, but Keller wouldn't hear of it.

“Come on, Dex,” the red-headed bastard had sneered, “you're groundhog through and through. Last time you and I had the duty, I had to carry you in.”

It wasn't true, the part about carrying, but everybody in the Shack watched until Dex took his pill. The truth behind what Keller had said didn't make Dex resent it any less. Three years turd-herding on the Belt and Dex still couldn't take the spin without the pill.

It was maddening, taking guff from that Lunie Keller, but one thought did occur to Dex as he angrily gulped the water down. In the years serving his sentence on the Belt, no one had

given a good goddamn if he took his pill or not, as long as he got the job done. But four months on this little spinning piece of crud with the Lieutenant and the others (including that bastard Keller) and everyone in the Shack was watching to make sure that he was properly dosed before going dryside.

So, he wondered for a brief second, as the sun visibly sank toward the impossibly close horizon, should that make him more angry, or less?

He knew, logically, that the motion-sickness drug had taken effect by now, but he swore he couldn't feel it. He hated pulling survey duty and he particularly hated standing where the centrifugal force of the tiny rotating asteroid was at its maximum. At this moment, his helmet was the fastest moving object on the Rock; he was the most likely bit of mass to be sent pinwheeling into empty space. The stars swirled around him like sparks from a funeral fire at midnight.

"Goddamnit, Dex. Did you take your pill?" Manko growled again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Dex managed to answer. "I took my pill. Let's just get this over with."

Fifty kilometers away, standing on a rise at the Ass End, Tadeusz Mankowicz chuckled.

"Mr. Spaceman. Just raise the beacon. In a minute you can close your eyes. I'm about ready. You're at Yellow 8, right?"

"Yellow 8. Roger. Spaceman, my ass. Groundhog all the way. Proud of it."

Dex pulled the collapsible pole from its pouch and tipped forward from his ankles in order to look down at his feet. A bright yellow number 8 painted on the rock indicated a drilled hole. He inserted the pole and clicked the release switch. The pole tripled in length and a small, bright beacon at its tip switched on. Dex glanced up quickly to see that the beacon was operating, felt the almost instant vertigo as the star field swept past his faceplate, and snapped his eyes back across the expanse of the asteroid.

"O.k.," Manko mumbled, setting up his gear. "I see your light. I'm about ready. Got it. Can you see me?"

The ground far below the cliff edge at Dex's feet went black so suddenly it was as if the asteroid simply vanished. Night had fallen down there. A bright green pin-point of light revealed Manko's laser spotter at the far end of the Rock.

“I see you, Manko. Let’s get the measurements and get outta here.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, Spaceman. It’s like standing on the outside of a Ferris wheel up there. I don’t need the space-wacky drugs, but man, I could sure use a cigarette. You know how long it’s been since I had a damn cigarette?”

“Just take the shot, all right?”

“Working on it. Close your eyes. Those stars aren’t really moving. Close your eyes.”

Dex was going to close his eyes, but a movement caught his attention. In the almost total shadow on the plain far below him, probably twenty clicks away, suit lights suddenly appeared, bouncing with incredible speed through the darkness. Long, low bounds covering dozens of meters per step. The thought of moving that fast, that recklessly across the surface of the planetoid made Dex’s stomach lurch with nausea. It could only be the Lieutenant; the Skipper was the only person on the Rock crazy enough to move like that.

“Two years,” Manko sighed. “Two years since my last cigarette.”

“Yeah, no kidding. It’s been three since I felt real gravity.”

“Makes you a little crazy.”

“Crazy. I’ll tell ya crazy. I’ve got lights on the blue sector ‘way down below me. Skipper out for a jog. Movin’ like a snap-boat around the middle of the Rock.”

“Damn. Hard core,” Manko chuckled, then his voice changed. “Wait a second. I got some weird readings here. This can’t be right.”

Dex squeezed his eyes shut. Something spread its wings wide in his stomach and tried to take flight.

“Just record it and let’s get back in, all right?”

Behind him, the daylight still gleamed brightly on the flat plane of the Nail Head. A fissure gaped open and a gigantic geyser of ground glass particles erupted silently from the asteroid. The glittering fountain plumed into space, leaving a corkscrew trail of rainbows behind them as they spiraled toward the sun.

Lieutenant Rin Foster bounded in thirty-meter leaps through the pitch-black mini-landscape of her planet. She was going for speed, circumnavigating the asteroid in a long spiral toward the Nail Head, trying for record time. The problem was less speed than control. Escape velocity on a rock this small could be achieved with the kick of a thigh. She had a small belt

thruster stored in her leg pouch and could jet back to the surface (and had done so on occasion), but in her mind that was cheating.

She kept her leaps low and fast, her chest armor nearly touching the ground. At this speed and in this total darkness, her helmet lights were nearly useless, serving only to pick out major features of the terrain. She had made the run so many times, however, that was enough.

Her cleats were filed to razor sharpness, her work gloves padded and taped for extra protection. She used the heavy plating on her left shoulder to bounce off a smooth rock face and launch herself down a narrow cleft. She adopted a swimming motion to give her legs a bit of a rest and add some work-out for her arms and upper body. She needed perfect timing and focus to dodge a spiking rock out-thrust – there! Past it!

Inside her out-dated P-38 hard-plate pressure suit, Rin Foster was a small, taut woman with a close-cropped cap of unruly hair and tight muscles that she kept honed on the exercise machines back at the Shack.

Now it was a six-klick sprint across a long flat plain. She toggled a switch on her wrist panel to measure the radioactivity level – this section of the Rock was a lump of nearly pure thorium. Legs pistoning, arms back for balance, faceplate only forty centimeters from the surface. Fast. Dig in those cleats. Make time here.

She knew what she was doing was wrong, reckless. She knew that she was in charge of the Rock, that she was the commanding officer of what was, in essence, a spacecraft. That her convict crew needed much more supervision than most, that her responsibilities were greater, not less, than on a normal craft. But she simply couldn't sit in that pre-fab pressurized warehouse for a six-month trip and feel her muscles atrophy and listen to her brain rot.

Sergeant Santos was at the Shack; the Rock was in fine shape and on course. Supplies were in order. Earth was growing large in their little piece of sky and the end of the mission was in sight. As long as she delivered her cargo into lunar orbit with no major glitches (and didn't shatter her faceplate on the tricky move coming up over the Broken Glass Hill ahead) then she would have pulled off a tough mission and perhaps cleaned some of the smudges from her record. She could start over. It was possible. It had to be.

She grabbed the crown of the crystalline hill, felt a razor-sharp outcropping rip through the wrapping on her right glove and cleared her mind of everything but the task at hand. Focus! Her iron grip flipped her over onto her back, the stars careening wildly overhead as she levered

briefly into the blinding sunlight and then back into the shadow of the asteroid and slid feet first down into the black depths of the obsidian gully. The walls of the nearly perfect tube enclosed her, leaving only a meter-wide gap through which she could see the sky. She crossed her arms over her chest, a human torpedo sliding through flawless glass. Knowing the tube to be free of projections, she took a moment to examine her right gauntlet. The wrapping was torn, but her glove was fine. No leak. No damage. No lost time. Sweet.

She glanced up at the stars, hard and cold all around her. A bit of their ice pierced her spine. Stars all around her! She twisted and turned. By now she should have hit the bottom of the tube, dug her carefully honed cleats into the nearly pure iron ore of the next section of the patchwork asteroid and used her momentum to regain her footing. But she was no longer in the tube! She was afloat in space and already a hundred meters from the surface.

With an expert kick at nothing she spun on her axis until she was facing the asteroid. Even as she pulled the thruster from her pouch, she had to swallow a hot bubble of fear. She had achieved record speed, all right. She must have shot out of the tube like a bullet. Right out into space. Her planetoid was dropping away from her with alarming quickness.

She spun twice more before she had the thruster properly attached to her belly pack and her breathing calm enough to press the fire button.

Timing was everything. She watched the Rock float by her faceplate, estimated the speed of her spin and then pressed the short burst button.

The gentle flame nearly stopped her own polar rotation and, she assumed, at least slowed her progress away from the asteroid. She waited two excruciatingly long minutes, facing away from the Rock and into deep space. She could tell by the apparent stability of the stars that she had gauged the burn properly and was no longer spinning, but she could not tell if she was moving at all in relation to the asteroid. She pressed the short burst button again.

This time she was calm enough to feel the acceleration during the burn. She knew she had to be approaching the asteroid, that even if she missed it completely, she would be closer than she had been before. She tried to gauge her progress by the stars, but they remained motionless and unsympathetic.

Minutes crawled by. Her helmet cut off her peripheral vision. She resisted the temptation to initiate another spin to see where she was.

Groundfall was undramatic. She simply felt a thump on her tank and when she looked

around, she was surrounded by rocks. She took a moment to stow her thruster and let her breathing return to normal. All thruster use and “off-planet” activity had to be reported – forms in triplicate to be filed in the mission database – but that was the least of her worries now.

Several months of roaming restlessly over every inch of her little world had left Rin Foster with an intimate knowledge of its every lump and wrinkle and she knew with a quick glance exactly where she was. Within five minutes, she had glided back to the spot where she had rocketed out of the obsidian tube, expecting a mountain of iron and finding nothing but empty vacuum.

She stood on the edge of eternity, looking into a slowly expanding canyon filled with stars.

With a tip of her chin, she flipped on her radio.

“Santos. Suit ‘em up. We’ve got a Code Red.”

Chapter 2

L5

Station Commander Linda Boyd leaned against the cold bulkhead framing the large viewport and surveyed the space around LaGrange Station Five. At the left border of the viewport, the Earth glowed in full daylight, ocean and clouds challenging the polarizing elements of the thick plexiglass. On her right, the Moon, in half-phase, shone more softly, but with harsher outlines.

Boyd pictured the equilateral triangle formed by the Earth, the Moon, and her Station. Her Station. She smiled, thinking of the long journey that had brought her to this, the best command in the System. And then her smile faded. A beam of sunlight reflected off a smooth surface on the approaching Lunar shuttle and brought her back to the present.

She had watched enough shuttle approaches that she could gauge its arrival time to within a minute.

Soon now, very soon, and the waiting, the anxiety, the uncertainty will be over.

She turned and looked at the dozen technicians at their consoles, each intently checking and re-checking that all functions were ready for the upcoming official ceremony and launch. The Control Complex was the top level of the Station structure and contained two concentric circles of monitors and screens surrounding a raised podium where officers, scientists and, today, other interested parties, could oversee the operations. Beyond the outer ring of terminals was the circular bulkhead with its eight wide ports opening to panoramic visuals.

L5 consisted of a stack of seven squat cylinders joined along their axes, only the very widest of them rotating to supply one level with gravity. Once construction was completed and the station fully staffed it would serve as a massive research facility in addition to its duties as an observation and weapons platform. But at this point the permanent crew was relatively small, the minimum required to keep the station functioning and to arm and fire its missiles. The barracks were pleasantly uncrowded; the tight corridors throughout the Station empty of traffic. Of course, in preparation for today's events, security forces had been beefed up dramatically.

With only a few compartments of interior space still under construction, the ambiance of the sparkling new station was changing drastically. Hard-working, raucous work crews were being replaced by dead-eyed, tight-lipped security types. The twice-daily barge arrivals from the Lunar mag-launch facility in the Mare Imbrium were no longer carrying beams, bolts and pre-formed bulkheads of plasteel. The last of the missile components had been assembled; recent shuttle cargoes had contained high-tech equipment and technicians.

Boyd had arrived on L5 when the first crew quarters were just newly pressurized, the naked beams still frigid from the vacuum of space, and had worked beside the rivet jockeys as the skeleton became a station. She knew the station, bulkheads and welds, wires and fiber-optics, as well as anyone.

Certainly much better than the Chief of the Diplomatic Mission from Earth, Admiral Henry, who stood near the center of the raised dais, feet anchored with no-float soles, hands folded at the base of his spine, watching the activity around him.

And probably not understanding much of it, Linda Boyd thought unkindly. His face was flushed to a richly revealing groundhog's pink as his circulatory system struggled to become accustomed to the zero-grav environment. Not his fault, she knew, but it was hard to get past a long-time spacer's impatience with...

She shook her head slightly. It was not the Admiral's fault that he was not at home in free-fall. If only he were not so resistant to that fact. A bit of humility would help the man greatly, she thought.

A small kick and she glided to her console where she called up the data streaming in from the security scanners. Security Control had already established full contact with the shuttle and all frequencies were wide open. No scrambling; no shielded circuits. No one was

going to take any chances with Minister Alexis and his team. The shuttle exterior showed completely clean, as she knew it would. All shuttle instrumentation read in normal ranges.

Momentarily reassured, she performed a daily ritual and checked the Ragnarok Cluster read-outs.

Yes, it's still there, Commander Linda Boyd thought. The end of the world.

Thundering into the Solar system, a cosmic stampede of stellar debris so perfectly aimed at Earth that half the planet's population had already given themselves over to God's wrath. If only they could agree amongst themselves which God it was...

Its headlong plummet as it fell from the frozen black beyond Neptune drew billions of dread-filled eyes every day. Monitors in public squares on Earth, in the cavern cities of the Moon, in the domed colonies on Mars, and in all the little glowing pinpoints of human habitation scattered throughout the Inner System, displayed pictures of the Cluster day and night, most with a count-down timer inexorably shedding seconds in one corner of the screen. Knowing the exact day and date the tumbling pica-tonnes of ancient rock and ice were going to obliterate humanity's warm blue original home had galvanized the construction of the two LaGrange Point stations. LaGrange Four was still just a naked framework of girders, in the early stages of construction. But the LaGrange Five Station, L5, was nearly complete and recently armed with its interceptor weaponry.

Boyd took a quick look at the ten missile pods floating above the North Pole of the Station. 100 missiles, most of them ready to be armed and launched, tethered in protective pods near the North Pole of the station. A battery of shaped thermo-nuclear plasma charges to not only shatter the planet-busting stampede of rocks but to use the expanding clouds of radiant energy to divert the glowing remnants' paths into harmless orbits. Warheads of sufficient mass to gradually divert remnants. Highly maneuverable missiles to plant thrusters or smaller, precision charges at strategic points in the cluster.

It's why we're all here, she thought. It's why the Admiral is here, why the Lunar Shuttle will be arriving in a few minutes. Whatever our differences, whatever the past contains, the future depends on those missiles, and our launching the first wave today.

She ran her fingers through her short-cropped hair. Sleep had been difficult the past few nights. She had to focus better than ever in the coming hours.

She completed her usual status checks on her Station's components, taking a quick

look at the cluster of leftover junk metal that floated two kilometers from the South Pole of the station. When it was big enough, it would be netted like a giant sea urchin, hauled toward the moon and dropped into a crater, the materials finally re-absorbed into some colony's underground walls.

She logged the readings from the well-sealed and insulated fusion power source at L5's South Pole, and the technical control facility for the power center, one level up.

Admiral Henry's irritatingly gruff voice interrupted her run-through.

"Commander Boyd? Everything is in order?"

"Yes sir," she replied. "Running through final checks now."

"I'll want you up here at my side when Minister Alexis and his party arrive."

"Yes sir. I'll run a final communications and security check, and I will be right with you."

"That's fine, Commander. That's fine."

Even his approval gets on my nerves, she thought. Well, everything is nerves today.

She flicked her console over to the security systems.

Yes, it's still there, Ensign Dee Staley thought. The end of the world.

Staley always checked the progress of the Ragnarok Cluster when she first came on duty.

Twelve hours on, twelve hours off, every sixth day free, Staley was one of three Distance Detection Specialists in charge of the Communications Relay Coordination Center of L5.

Staley called up the Orbital Traffic Array. A long line of blips moved slowly toward L5 in a parabola from the lunar surface. Every 12 hours a barge arrived at the platform, was emptied and disassembled, its cargo and components becoming part of the station.

L5 had two docking bays in its third section, their busy crews alternating between arriving and departing shuttles. Mentally crossing her fingers for luck, Staley checked on the status of the shuttle that had arrived nearly twelve hours before. She breathed out a sigh of relief. It was still at the dock. Of course it was, she chided herself for her attack of nerves. The plan was on schedule and everything was proceeding exactly as it should.

The only out-going transport still within alert proximity was a slow-burner already two

hundred clicks away, its small jets pushing it up out of the LaGrange point's gravity well. Within a few days, the two dozen construction workers aboard would be back home in Clarke City on the far side. One of the laser-welders on the transport, a low-gravity giant with incredibly white teeth and callused yet gentle hands, had shared her bunk for most of the past three months. He had ice-smooth vacuum-freeze scars over half his chest and back that she had enjoyed caressing. She was glad, for his sake, that he was gone. For a brief moment, she wished she had left with him, but she swallowed hard, steeling herself for what was coming, for what she had to do.

Staley's screens also confirmed two incoming high-speed transports, one the diplomatic-priority rocket-assist mag-L from Luna and one hot-torching up from the Big Blue. For the moment, she ignored the lunar transport and keyed the icon of the craft approaching from Earth, reading the displayed manifest. Also listed as a diplomatic mission, it was not scheduled to dock for 18 hours. She smiled to herself despite a shiver of fear – “diplomatic mission” indeed – and turned to another monitor. Sunlight reflected white off the deceptively peaceful missile pods floating in their perfect little orbit near the North Pole of the station.

A redundancy factor of at least four times built into the missile capabilities of the LaGrange station for this emergency alone.

Staley repeated that fact to herself. A redundancy factor of at least four times built into the missile capabilities of the LaGrange station. She had been careful to confirm that from several independent sources. She had been told many things recently, but that was the one fact that simply had to be true.

She took a deep breath and turned to the other screens and checked the local traffic. One clunky construction vehicle tethered at the South Pole of L5; a two-person party performing minor repairs on an antenna array there. She couldn't tell which of the figures was which, but she turned her eyes away quickly. She did not like to think about that part of the plan...

Staley had only two unusual proximity alerts for her shift. One was the ongoing curiosity that her commanding officer referred to as the “Lump of Coal.” A small group of convict-labor miners out near the asteroid belt had smashed some chunks of low-grade heavy metals together and were riding their tiny gray planet back to Earth orbit. The ungainly clump of rock would be passing relatively close to L5 within a day or two on its way to a wide polar

braking orbit around Earth. When it reached the moon, it would be broken apart, dumped into convenient craters and used by the mineral-poor Lunar colonies.

She keyed in a view of the Lump of Coal and, despite its relative proximity, could barely make out any details. Its dusty, non-reflective surface defied visuals. Radar showed its basic shape – something like a long, lumpy potato jammed into a smooth flat rock. “A turd stuck in a biscuit,” someone in the barracks had jeered. Gamma readings gave it a slight ghostly glow. A quick trajectory analysis showed it on its projected course.

She got a flag from her density anomaly software and called it up. As the artificial asteroid spun slowly along its long axis the sun glinted off a polished metal structure on its surface. Surprised to see a man-made object so large and dense on the planetoid, Staley quickly took a shot of the device and had the computer analyze and enhance the image. A thruster; a big solid-fuel rocket by the look of it. She knew that moving rocks like this was done with thrusters, but too big a push could break a jigsaw asteroid apart in the cold of space. A small steady push took longer, but worked much better. Who would put a hot rocket like that on a bag of gravel glued together with spit?

But Ensign Staley had other concerns.

Her mouth dry, she called up her other proximity alert.

Today was the day that Minister Sergei Alexis and his delegation arrived from Cité Bergerac for their inspection tour. The Lunar Federation’s capital had been aflame with debate since the governments of Earth had overridden (or more accurately, she thought acidly, *ignored*) their objections and decided to put 100 thermo-nuclear warheads in the sky over their heads.

Staley keyed in the view of the Minister’s approaching high-speed shuttle. On time and on course, it was less than twenty minutes out. As she watched, several scans commenced, searching the shuttle for large obvious weapons, such as missiles or explosives. The scans would continue until the craft docked.

“Staley? Boyd here.”

She flicked a toggle to two-way communication. Commander Boyd’s concerned face appeared on the screen.

“Yes ma’am. Ensign Staley here.”

“I know you’ve got Minister Alexis’ shuttle craft on the pipe. How’s everything

looking on your end?”

“All systems nominal, Commander. All back-ups in order. The scans are all reading negative so far. In a couple of minutes I’ll be running one last check on the RS-6 security circuits.”

“Any concerns there?”

“No ma’am. Just keeping them tight.”

“Good. We want everything at one hundred percent. I’d like nothing better than to frisk him and his diplomatic team personally, but we can’t lay a finger on him. The treaties say it’s passive systems only. I want to know if he’s got a nail clippers in his pocket. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am. We’ll have him and his whole crew on the grill as soon as we hook up to the shuttle. We tested the scanning systems earlier today, ma’am. They are working perfectly. We’ll be able to scope the whole inside of the craft before they crack the hatch.”

“Don’t blink. Don’t miss a thing, Ensign. Blue Ball or Lunar – we’re all together on this one, right?”

Staley forced a smile.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good work, Ensign.”

Boyd switched off without further ceremony.

Staley gave herself a second to feel a bit guilty about what kind of day Commander Boyd was going to have. Boyd was hard, but fair. She, unlike so many others, didn’t deserve what was coming.

Staley glanced at the chronometer. It was time. She let out deep breath and floated across the room, opened the electronics locker, and removed a circuit board from a storage slot behind the other circuit boards. The electronic element was small, easily concealed in her cupped hand. She hoped the sweat on her palms wouldn’t short out the contacts.

Back at her console, she flicked on the comm.

“Corporal Brown?”

Brown’s young face appeared on her screen.

“Yes ma’am?”

“I’m still getting a bit of static off that RS-6.”

“The one we had trouble with yesterday?”

“Right. I’m going to divert the stream and replace the board. Take about a minute.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She flicked off the comm screen and shut down the RS-6 module. Three of her displays went blank. She swallowed hard and swapped out the electronics.

“Brown? I’m back up. Signal optimal?”

“Looks perfect.”

She switched off.

By the time she finished running the required diagnostics, the Lunar shuttle was docking, the seals closing around the hatches.

As per Earth-Lunar Treaty provisions, the cameras on the shuttle provided Staley, and her superiors at other scan stations throughout L5, with several views throughout Minister Alexis’ shuttle.

Minister Sergei Alexis, a trim man in his 50’s with short, black hair, smiled up at the camera over his main control panel. He and his eight delegates were all dressed in formal black colony jumpsuits with the silver dome and mountain insignia on their lapels. They stood calmly waiting for the scan to be completed. Each of them carried an attaché case.

A voice echoed through the shuttle:

“Welcome to L5, Minister Alexis. This is Admiral Robert Henry. Please wait one moment and then step through the air lock. I will greet you on the other side.”

Alexis glanced once more at the camera and Staley saw his shoulders tense a little. The inside of the shuttle was an open book for L5’s array of detection apparatus and he knew it. Alexis approached the lock.

Instantly, the alarm above Staley’s screen flashed red. She cancelled the light and glanced toward the other monitors. Fail-safe precautions made it impossible for her to cancel the alarm, but her specially wired circuit board kept it within her system. No one else had seen any problem at all.

She looked back at the shuttle monitor. Out of the range of the camera in the shuttle cockpit, the hatch opened. After a moment’s hesitation, Alexis was the first to exit. One by one, the delegates picked up their bags and followed him. The last of them looked up at the camera and winked as he glided into L5.