

Cherished Convictions

An Intrepid Indigo Anthology

By Derek Ian Cantwell

Online Edition

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Cherished Convictions (An Intrepid Indigo Anthology)

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Never Go Back

The ship was a huddled mass of warm bodies in cold space. Cramped and thoroughly ill-scented, the cabin was less glorious than the one Vladlena had dreamed of as a young girl. Bulkheads were rusted and dirty. The air was stale. No luxury cabins as advertised. No sleeping quarters promised in holobrochures. Not even the in-transit meals were consistently provided. Vladlena laid quietly in her hammock.

In the walkway two muscular men fought over food rations.

They continued throwing punches. Lena tried to shut her eyes and forget where she was. It was the first time she had missed home. The first time she had ever wished to be in the North Woods in that leaky wooden shack. She wondered if it was normal for people leaving Earth for the first time.

“We’ll leave and have no reason to return.” Svetlana, her twin sister, had said one night while they lay in the snow, eyes fixed on the star in the sky called Pollux.

Svetlana had always been the leader. Vladlena always proved herself equal by standing beside her sister, but aboard the colony ship, guilt made Lena wonder if she wasn’t as strong as her twin. *I’m failing you, ‘Lana. What do I know about the colonies?* Lena cursed herself.

The North Woods was contested territories between Eurafica to the west and Southeastasia to the south. By the time they were in their early teens they had already seen five wars. They had even watched their valley and family’s house burned three times in two wars.

Svetlana had always tried to make light of everything.

“At least every few years we get to have a family bonfire,” she had said, the third time the bombs had fallen on their house. That was when she hatched the idea that they should go live in the colonies.

“There is no war in the colonies. No contested territories in the stars.”

The hopeful words still rang in Vladlena’s ears like an air raid siren over the trees. But the words had begun to lose their meaning. Dried blood stained the cabin floor. Most had been shed fighting over food. There were dozens of stains from other petty contests.

Vladlena remembered the disgusting look in the eyes of the colonist recruiter worldside as she had signed her name to the ship’s manifest. He looked like a starving man who had found a hot meal in a dark alley. She had taken note of his face and had taken steps to avoid him.

She was to be no one’s prize or meal. Not on Earth, and not in the colonies. In the weeks since being aboard the ship, she had made enemies and forged alliances with other passengers. But she made herself easily unnoticed. She stayed as silent and unmoving in her hammock.

“Best not to attract attention,” Svetlana had said often. She said it while climbing over the dirt wall into their neighbor’s garden. And without fail she would repeat it when they visited town. “Best to give no reason to be noticed, envied or targeted for inquiry,” she said while eyeing the Eurafrian guards who stood near the bank and embassy.

Svetlana had always been the reader, whereas Vladlena had always preferred to play in the woodlands. Now light years away from home, Vladlena wished she had some of her sister’s books. “Reading,” she had told Svetlana, “is just a clever way of taking a nap while looking busy.”

Vladlena lay in her hammock terrified because she had no plan. The woodlands had taught her nothing about the colonies. The only thing Vladlena knew about the Pollux Sector was the bits of trivia her sister had told her while they stayed up stargazing. *If Lana were here, Vladlena thought, she would have a plan. She always had a plan.*

“Escape the war in the colonies,” The handsome man in one holoprojection had said. “Where jobs are plentiful and housing is cheap.”

Not all of us get the opportunity to escape. All the fighting, all the killing, over what? Some pissing contest amongst men whom had ever stepped foot in our valley?! Vladlena felt her body tense up. She gritted her teeth together. War had taken Svetlana a year ago, bombed while at the library. What does it matter who did it? What does it matter why they did it? They killed my sister, over something she had nothing to do with. Why take Lana for their stupid war!?

The fighting in the cabin stopped abruptly. One man was panting heavily. The rest of the room fell silent. Vladlena held her breath. She could feel the rage coiled up inside her stomach like a snake with fangs at the ready.

On Earth it was a lousy woodland valley with nothing but a poor family’s house? People like Svetlana are put into the ground senselessly everyday on Earth. War was everywhere. Out here it’s a lousy piece of bread!

She had the chance that her sister didn’t. *Guilt is the quiet observer who descends when we are most vulnerable,* she thought. *Why her and not me?* She tried not to think. Lana would have very much to say about it. Lana would be preaching inside the colony ship already.

The cabin brawl winner could be heard gathering up his spoils. Vladlena tried to shut out the resumed conversations, ruminations and loud arguments. She tried to tell her nose to smell past the scent of unwashed feet. She stared up at the ragged hammock above. It was mounted by a much larger woman who was loudly snoring, Vladlena tried to think of someplace better.

Vladlena wondered with a chuckle if she should submit a formal complaint against the Starliner for the condition of the passenger cabin. After all, the commercials had touted “comfortable, spacious trans-stellar accommodations.” It was a lot like submitting a complaint to the mill for safety standards. It wasn’t something people did, because they knew nothing would come of it.

Looking around and seeing the bodies pressed together like timber logs piled onto a skyhauler, Vladlena remembered the one rule in timber transport: cram in as many as physically possible, regardless of safety or other standard. It was a waste of good credits to do anything less.

Svetlana had said the war was over credits. Vladlena only fun of the politics.

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“Free heads roll in every country on Earth, sis!” Vladlena remembered yelling at her sister in jest. “Stop with all the credits this, wars that, and power talk! Put down your book. Come outside.”

Her hammock swung as someone made their way past. Vladlena suppressed the tear welling in her left eye. All she had ever wanted was to spend time with her sister. But now the person who she had loved the most was gone forever.

Killed like so many others, over a line drawn on a map thousands of miles away.
Over their damn credits. Over some stupid number in a computer.

Almost on cue, the wallscreens that lined the passenger cabin lit up. Alterday was at an end, and Mainday had begun. The cabin was to wake, and perhaps be fed. The welcome and good morning visuals gave way to a cacophony of commercials. Vladlena eyed the screen which depicted a mountain climber. The screen grew larger and the audio began to deliver the monologue over the picture.

“Visit Chi Yu Saahas in the Pollux Sector for the adventure of your life!”

The mountain climber was a beautiful young woman standing victorious over the top peak of a mountain twice the size of any on Earth. The commercial gave way to others depicting hiking gear and nature tours. Then resort infomercials and Lunar skydiving videos. The commercials continued without end. There was no other programming. Soon Vladlena felt she was being crushed beneath an avalanche of advertisements. She was permitted no thought of her own.

“Stupid commercials,” she said, closing her eyes and turning away into her hammock. The audio continued for another thirty painful seconds, but when it cut finally Vladlena could breathe again. “I already miss the trees.”

“No more peace here than there was on earth,” she grumbled to herself.

And so she thought of Nikolai again. Abruptly, she felt her heart melt in sorrow. Her eyes became heavy and she swallowed hard again. *Not here*, she told herself. He should be here. The thought threatened to break her composure, but she forced a controlled breath. *No. He chose not to come.*

He had chosen to mock her and treat her like a child.

“You can’t just decide to run off to the colonies like in some fairy tale!” He said between his laughs, “This is real life, Lena! You need to grow up and stop living in the stars so much!”

Then to hells with him! Vladlena was resolute. She would assure herself as often as she questioned it. She wasn’t a child. This was an act of freedom. He was just a stupid tree cutter after all. *To hells with their damn timber mill! To hell with the whole damned valley! And to hells with any man like Nikolai!*

Her bitterness gave way to a sinking sadness. As the memories continued to play in her head, she sighed in frustration. Still, she realized, she loved him. She even missed the smell of his nasty work shirt. Sawdust, sweat and mud, and he never went home to shower first. He would come straight to her house after work.

“Why bother showering?” he laughed when asked, “I want to see you more than I want to be clean. I want to spend as much time with you as I can. In a way a shower is a massive waste of time. Besides, you should love me for my imperfections first!”

Each day after returning from the government prison-school she would wait by the window to see him walking down the road. Of course, she never let him know that.

He couldn't know that, it would only inflate his bombastic ego. Vladlena found herself smiling into her hands, the hammock feeling warm again.

That was his charm, that Nikolai smile that said he knew more than he was letting on, but really just meant he had no idea what the conversation was about. She would try not care either way. She tried to pretend he wasn't important. And she made sure he knew that she didn't care for his company one bit.

"Hiking is actually more fun alone, timberbrain," she told him while standing on a moss covered stump. "I let you come with me because I know you won't go near a tree peacefully otherwise."

Vladlena turned to him and smiled. She hadn't meant to.

"Trust me," he said with a grin, catching her, "Everyday I'm here imagining cutting 'em all down!"

It had been the first time she had laughed since watching her sister lowered into the ground. Guilt had snaked into her mind. How could she laugh or smile when her sister lay cold in the earth? Love seemed a cruel thing.

She tried to still push Nikolai away, but no matter the verbal abuse, he showed up the next day ready to take their daily hike. He didn't even get angry. He would just smile and keep walking through the trees. She hated that. He was kind yet strong, hard nosed and passionate but gentle.

But the truth was he soothed her soul. Everyday it was his company which filled her with life and vigor. The prison-school was more interested in her silence than her thoughts, but Nikolai wanted to hear everything she had to say. He would often have strong things to say, but he never told her he was right, he would say "just seems to me."

In the end, all he had done was spit on everything that she had ever known and loved. He had unlocked the door, only set fire to the house. *He'll never be anything but a wood cutter for as long as he lives!* He had finally pushed her away for good. She was better without him. It had been his choice. She had tried.

"Excuse me, miss, sorry, I did not mean to startle you." Torn suddenly from her thoughts, Vladlena almost jumped out of her hammock. She saw a worn wrinkled face of a brown-eyed man. His eyes were sunken and sad. His lips were cracked and dry. He lowered his chin and averted his eyes. "I only wished to ask if you had but a bit of bread or drop of water. My rations were stolen from me..."

Vladlena gave him the little crust she had been saving. His eyes lit up like torches in the night. He treasured the crust in his palm and quickly ate it, mumbling thanks. He pressed his palms together and bowed to her.

"Once we reach the colonies, everything will be better!" the old man said before he shuffled away. Vladlena recognized the phrase as a slogan from one of the colony commercials. *How easily we are programmed*, she mused.

Looking around the cabin, Vladlena was not so sure she believed that slogan. But one thing was sure: Nothing remained on Earth except heartache and sorrow. She was bound for Pollux Max. *Where I can finally be free*, she thought warmly. She shook her head and cursed the commercials, remembering that was a slogan, too. Vladlena decided she would use the words of her sister: No reason to return.

She thought back to all those nights in the snow where two little girls stargazed and daydreamed. *Why doesn't life work the way it was dreamed in the stars? And if the stars mirror the sins below... then what is holy?*

Breath From Death

When a ship begins to Phase, time stands still. The air crackles and tingles with charged particles. The walls of the bridge seemed to flex and stretch. Phasing was no simple matter, but Starliners seemed to be the toughest for Shiro. The chaotic minds in the passenger cabin tended to create a bucking tide that a navigator had to stay aware of during Transition. And on this particular Transition, Shiro wanted as little distractions as possible.

A little fear was a good thing for a navigator. It was healthy. Phasing was the first step. Transitioning a ship from star to star was risky business. Shiro had learned the venomous nature of stars when his mother, and all hands aboard her ship, was taken by one such wild star in his youth. She had been a renowned navigator, but the void should never be underestimated.

Shiro was not ready to join his mother in the belly of a star. He was determined to quiet the frequencies bouncing in the passenger cabin. He adjusted the Mandelbrot Drive and applied power to the Phase Coils. Shiro comfortably settled into his navigator's chair. He closed his eyes and took a long deep breath. He exhaled and increased power to the Coils until the ship was fully in Phase.

Shiro took three slow breaths and made certain that he had achieved full Resonance. Reaching out with his vibratory sense, he felt the direction of Pollux. Seeing the path to his target clear, he began to move the ship toward the star.

"Phase Complete, Captain." Shiro stated without opening his eyes or taking his hands off the console. "Vibrocilic motion engaged, I am now engaging in Transition."

"You mean Tunneling, right? You navigators are always so proper and over-educated!" Toshiyuki laughed from the Pilot's seat. "Talk to me like a man not a science experiment!"

"Yes, we're Tunneling." Shiro nodded without opening his eyes.

During Stellar Transition a starship loses communications and sensors equipment. The navigator had to account for every vibrating object in their path. Everyone knew someone who had been lost to rogue planets or brown dwarf stars. Optimistic navigators called such disasters "Avoidable Vibrating Objects" or AVOs. It was imperative to avoid not only the mass itself, but it's entire field of vibratory influence.

Shiro continued to take normal breaths, but kept his mind searching. Shiro used his timed breathing to keep the ship's Harmony. If the passenger cabin bucked up he would lower his breath deep into his chest. When a pipe burst in engineering, Shiro took it in stride, lifting his breath higher into his shoulders and head. The engineers repaired the issue and sent a full report to his console, but Shiro didn't even need it. His mind was focused outward.

Phase Frequency is always a delicate thing, and any competing vibration has the potential to disrupt and damage the ship. Every navigator knew stories of small objects

passing through ships without anyone knowing until they returned from Phase. Many were taught to frighten students into keeping their minds open to every vibration.

“Everything the ship needs, the universe will tell you. Everything the universe needs, the ship will tell you.” Shiro’s mother had recited that daily. After eight years of navigating, he had to agree.

“See what I mean though? He breathes funny,” Toshiyuki – with clearly nothing else to do - was talking behind the navigators chair. “I always think he is gonna start to have a panic attack or something!”

Shiro had been long accustomed to the teasing of station jockeys like Toshiyuki. They flew the ship from deep space into traffic controlled Starliners and docked with the station. Most pilots barely put down their coffee cups to hold the controls. Toshiyuki was different and it made Shiro respect him despite the lack of personal charm.

Toshiyuki was hands-on during every flight. “If we’re gonna die out here,” he would say with a laugh. “I want to be the one doing it. Automated Pilot is for cadets, movie stars and admirals, not for men!”

But the object of Toshiyuki’s jesting was nothing new either. Every navigator has a procedure that works for them. The purpose of any procedure is simple: to keep one’s balance and orientation. When you harmonize a billion different frequencies to Phase, your head can feel like it was launched down a torpedo tube. Shiro’s Procedure kept his mind grounded. It helped him keep focus and calculate.

The first time Shiro had been given the chance to Phase, in the GemTau Academy’s famous 8-Loop Accelerator, he had learned how quickly one could lose balance. His head felt like it was spinning for hours, and Phasing had felt like his brain had been set aflame. Then he learned to overcome it by regulating his breath, stabilizing his mind so that he could stabilize the ship’s frequency.

Each navigator finds their own way keep balance. The Academy had three pillars of curriculum: Mathematics, Vibration and Mediation. Navigators had to look inward in order to travel outward.

Shiro remembered the Academy fondly, studies came as second nature. He smiled remembering the name his mother had for it: the most reliable babysitter.

“Look, sometimes mommy has to be gone on long legs,” she said when he contested going back, “and a dirty exploration ship is no place for an intelligent young man like you. You should get to know the other kids, one day you’ll be competing over the stars!

“One day you’re day dreaming and WHAM!” Mother smacked his forehead with her palm. “The present hits you in the face. And in that moment, your future hangs in the balance. Sometimes the balance favors you, sometimes it does not. But you are capable of having remarkable command over balance.”

Her command had not been enough. She Phased too close to a nebula. A vibratory blast - of what kind could never be known for sure - damaged her ship. The chassis buckled and killed all hands. The remnants of her ship fell into a new star.

Shiro had been sad, then angry, but sitting in the navigator’s chair, he was calm. He knew what it was like to navigate past stars, how to feel a large body in the distance without sensors. But space was vast, and so much of it still as wild as ever.

So much of space was still uncharted, many AVOs still left unmarked. Almost every navigator worthy of the title had a suite built around her chair with every map,

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compass and sensor known to man. Better to have too much data than not enough. Navigation was still firmly a science, and every year it had to be fed more data.

If a navigator felt something abnormal or off the charts, they were expected to Phase back into normal space and investigate the matter. The investigation would be uploaded to the Navigator's Network for public benefit. Most companies complained a great deal and captains were prone to urging a rapid data gathering process. The bottom line was at stake, and science was often pushed into the margin.

Shiro loved finding new AVOs. It was a childlike excitement of opening a present on All Gods Day. The opportunity to study something no one else had seen, to discover something new and have it added to a starmap. It was Explorer's Addiction, the irresistible urge to push the envelope, to bring oneself to the edge of everything.

The problem with exploration, of course, is its immense price tag. Companies didn't like to spend credits on new stars. There were easier ways to make credits immediately. The glory days of Shiro's mother, the charting of the GemTau systems and the taming of the Pollux Sector were in the past. By the time Shiro graduated, companies had very little interest in exploration and a great deal of interest in the next quarterly report.

On this Transition, though, Shiro was worried about a phantom star that had been recently reported but not verified. The Navigator's Lounge had been buzzing about it. There were many conversations around the main map speculating and hypothesizing. The arguments had steadily devolved into other disputes.

In Pollux Max's Navigators Lounge, Bao Yu had overheard one conversation.

"It's probably nothing more than a starghost." Bao Yu shook her head. She was a legend rivaling Shiro's mother. Bao Yu looked around the room and saw frightened faces. She stiffened up and raised her voice so that all could hear. "Listen to me! You are no collection of worthless jolly rogers! You are Star Navigators from the greatest Academy in known space! No ambitious rock or star can interfere with the Practice of Mind. If you find it, learn more about it. If you don't, stop worrying. You all have what you need: Practice of Mind, the Logic of Mathematics and the Procedure of Meditation."

Bao Yu straightened the front of her jacket tightly, then roared:

"No more sod talk! Space is beneath your boots!"

At that, she had left. The room dissipated back into the competing conversations. Now Bao Yu was being used as a pawn in the debates, arguing both for and against. Shiro had decided to leave the debate and find a private map room. That night Shiro had felt nervous and anxious studying the charts. He found no discrepancies, but he didn't sleep easy.

Moving the ship into Transition, Shiro pulled his breath in deeply. He slowly let his breath out, feeling the universe bend and widen. His next breath pressed forward, vibrocilia flaring around the ship. The ship was accelerating past the markers in his mind, he could feel the universe rolling around the ship.

Still no sign of this phantom, Shiro thought. Smooth sailing after all...

He kept alert. He kept his breath controlled. A star cluster off to one side gathered his attention. Perhaps this phantom star was in deep orbit with a star in that cluster. He remembered the numbers adding up to the negative, but he still hoped that it was at least something of a clue.

Then it was upon the ship. Shiro saw a flash expanding out in front of the ship. He dodged the light out of pure instinct, but he couldn't avoid the sphere of influence. It was already so close and so blueshifted that the ship's frequency was being bombarded by vibrations.

Shiro breathed into his chest slowly. His breath absorbed the brunt of the shockwave. His mind began to flake away. Looking down at the highest concentration of mass Shiro had ever felt in Transition, he breathed outward slowly. The ship began to glide out toward the nearest edge of the vibratory sphere.

Shiro felt a few blood vessels pop inside his head. Once the vibrations passed Shiro started to lower power to the Coils. He breathed quickly and steadily for a few moments. He let the Coils grow cold, snapping the ship back into real space.

Sirens and klaxons erupted on the bridge. Shiro fell back into his chair, gasping for air. Toshiyuki was the only one not swearing or yelling. Shiro looked over at him, his hands firmly in control of the ship. The ship had come back into realspace within an enormous gravity envelope, and Toshiyuki was finding the seams.

"Helm, report!" The Captain yelled from behind them.

"We appear to have found what all the fuss has been over!" Toshiyuki gritted his teeth together. "I am preparing the ship for a slingshot out system."

"Navigator! How in the hells did we Tunnel that close!?"

"We maintained our balance, sir." Shiro let out a sigh.

Shiro watched his holodisplay of the ship's trajectory. The maneuver would have been virtually impossible for an automated computer to adjust to on the fly. It would have killed everyone onboard while it sought a solution. He looked up at the bright star, it seemed warmer in real space, less threatening.

Hello mother, Shiro told the star, I remember what you taught me.

"I mean how aren't we all dead right now?" The Captain was losing his mind. Everything on his heads up display said he had witnessed something extraordinary. "That was way inside the red line!"

"Sometimes the balance favors you." Shiro smiled.

Pawn of Oceania

Aloisio was strapped to a missile of his own making, hurling toward the space station called Pollux Max. Checkmate. Aloisio had positioned all the pieces. Aloisio thought the spacers were idiots. *Every one of them was cocky on Earth*, he scoffed in his breathing mask, *but in space they are as absent-minded as children!* They were about to die because of their lack of discipline.

He waited in the furthest aft cargo bay, chosen because it might survive the collision. The cargo bay was small, rusted and musky. He was glad he couldn't smell it anymore. He was wearing an environmental suit with a deep space survival pack. Aloisio was suspended from all sides by crash webbing.

Feels as though I'm a spider, he thought, *waiting for the unwise or unobservant.*

Aloisio doubted that any other person on board was as ready for what was about to occur. The crew were about as flat footed as deck boys, and the passengers would not have access to EN-suits. Aloisio smiled. Even with the so-called inspections and regulations of the Three Kings Transit Authority, the crew was inept.

Aloisio had served in the Oceania Navy, where a sailor's life hung in the balance daily. The wars with Eurafica and Southeastasia had strained the Navy to the point of exhaustion. The shipyards couldn't launch ships fast enough. Oceania had to protect every ship in the water.

Protection requires Discipline, he thought.

These pretentious spacers think themselves in a league of their own. *Now under the microscopic eyes of this Sailor, they look like a group of recycled maggots on a rented yacht.* Preparing for his first time in space had kept Aloisio up almost every night since he was given the orders.

You can't swim to safety, Aloisio carried nightmares with him.

No Navy ship would be taken down so easily. Aloisio tugged at his crash webbing. He felt weightless, and it made him nervous. Better to have your boots on the deck, and your deck above water. The space ship had felt like a trapped submarine.

"Ladies and gentlemen in the cabin, this is your Captain speaking."

Soon, Aloisio thought, *Pollux Max would burn for betraying Oceania!*

"I just wanted to let you know that we have begun our approach into the Three Rivers Station and we will be arriving shortly. Please be ready to finish your games, shows and simulations and depart."

Looking down at the view screen on his forearm, the live feed from the forward cameras showed Pollux Max growing larger. The rear thrusters engaged and increased the approach speed to just under the legal limit. The bridge wasn't even be aware of it.

Aloisio had hacked the central engineering computer and disabled the Schematic Diagnostic Sweep (SDS) Meta-Program. Each Alterday, the program was instructed to check and recheck both hard wires and digital logic circuits and report any and all

breakages and disruptions. Most reports are ignored until functions break. Some reports are critical.

It was easily the most important software-hardware connection on a modern ship of any kind. And the Southeastasian crew was guilty of one of the cardinal crimes: Sleeping. They hadn't checked the SDS reports in weeks. Once disabled, Aloisio was certain it would be re-enabled, putting his hacked code to the test. As it stood, the ship was doomed without the code even being a factor.

Never allow an enemy an edge, or it will be your throat.

With the SDS disabled, Aloisio had set to work on the engines. First, he got on the bridge and hacked the helm console. He pulled the backside out with the Mainday's helmsmen standing beside him.

"Dust and debris gets kicked up inside the console." Aloisio had said to helmsmen. He had sandy hair and brown eyes. Aloisio shot a laser hit the motherboard's inferred port. "Like everything, computers are subject to entropy."

The virus carried by the beam infected the entire computer mainframe. It stole passwords, identities and appropriated every system and function aboard. It took eighty-seven seconds for the virus to complete its job.

"Code eventually fragments," Aloisio put the cover back over the helm controls. "Things fall to bits. It's the order of the universe."

"So what did you do about it?" Helm was just glad to have his seat back.

"All I did was check connections," Aloisio smiled. All warning and danger signals would be redirected to present All Green. The thrusters could literally be torn from the side of the ship and the bridge wouldn't know.

Teams were supposed to work together to accomplish their purpose. A Sailor would care for his ship better. A Sailor would know that the SDS was offline, and would certainly know of any updates to the helm console.

Another mechanic had found Aloisio disassembling the forward thruster mounts. On a Navy ship that would have landed any man in the brig. Aloisio had been surrounded by parts and tools. He brushed his hands off and smiled at a fellow crew member.

"What's wrong with the forward thruster?" the mechanic whined.

The whole crew whined.

"Chief wants me to inspect all the connections." Aloisio pointed at the toolbox. "No red lights from any yet."

"That guy is a fool! He just finds things to get upset about!" the mechanic whined again. He pointed to the deck. "What you should be doing is repairing the portside arrestor cables. They get me more nervous every time we use them."

"I'll ask him," Aloisio nodded thoughtfully.

"No, he doesn't fix things, he just buys crap no one needs!" The mechanic laughed and leaned forward. Something caught his eye over Aloisio's shoulder. He squinted. "Wait. Why is the SDS light off?"

"I turned it off so bridge wouldn't freak out, yeah know?" Aloisio found a smile.

"No, I know what you mean! Those guys are a pain!" The mechanic laughed again. "Just make sure you turn it back on! Old Benzhuo forgot once. Almost had a fire!"

"I won't forget." Aloisio could still hear himself saying the words.

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“You are smart.” Commander Aritza had said at their first meeting. “You could wear the stars of an Admiral. But you have to earn it. Those stars don’t come easy. You have to show that you are willing to put your life on the line for your country.”

“It would be an honor to die protecting my country,” Aloisio had said with pride.

“Let’s take the fight to the Colonies.” Aritza’s eyes twinkled like the flames of a lighthouse. “Let’s be the first to spill enemy blood in space.”

“But... how? Oceania has no Star Navy.”

“Sailors like you. That’s how we re-conquer the Colonies. Sailors who are the Admirals of tomorrow. Specialists, like you, able to bring the war to them.” Aritza held his hands up to the ceiling. “We will take back what is ours. I have been given command of a new program for the Ministry of Peace itself. You are going to be part of the greatest victory Oceania has ever known.”

The words of the Commander made Aloisio feel better. *A ship in space has no rhythm*, he decided. No waves. It was still, like crossing oblivion. It was like the soul of the ship was empty. Aloisio might die in such a place. There was no guarantee that he had chosen a place that would safe. And space walking to safety was an enormous risk.

Aloisio had been behind enemy lines aboard enemy ships, but never to the degree in which he was at Pollux Max. No Oceania vessel or satellite was permitted above Low Earth Orbit, much less within communications range. Should he be discovered a spy, he would have decades of torture to look forward to.

His doctored ID card was a forged copy of a real Oceania ex-patriot.

“It’s the perfect cover,” the Commander had grinned and stood as heroes stand. “Eduardo Alvarez has been living on several different stations in the last year so it’s likely that people don’t know his face on Pollux Max. He’s a tech mechanic so he has access to restricted software, which you need, and he even has your hair color!”

“He is Oceanian?” Aloisio started to memorize the name.

“Was. He betrayed his country. Scum. Worse than scum. He has joined the enemy.” Aritza was deathly serious. “The Oceanians on Pollux Max and the Colonies had their chance to prove their loyalty. They are traitors.”

The punishment for traitors has always been the same. Aloisio had killed the traitor in high orbit around Earth aboard the Three Kings Orbital City. Using a portable scanner, Aloisio took a copy of the traitor’s hands. Once he downloaded the fingerprints into his electrofiber gloves he could fool any security door.

The gloves were uncomfortably tight. It only took about fifteen minutes for them to start cutting off the circulation to his fingers. He had stored them inside his suit for use once aboard Pollux Max, if he should survive the impact.

“You are Oceania.” The words of the Commander rang in Aloisio’s head, giving him strength. “You and me, stars on our shoulders, will sit on a aircar and fly down Victory Avenue together.”

“Attention ladies and gentlemen, I do apologize but we are experiencing some difficulties with our approach,” the Captain’s was worried, “Station has ordered us to do one more orbit before attempting a dock again.”

The Vector Control Station (VCS) must have noticed their now illegal rate of approach and ordered the ship off. Too bad helm no longer controlled the ship. Aloisio’s virus had cut the helmsmen right out of the loop. The ship had become a missile.

“I apologize,” the Captain continued, “especially to those of you that have business affairs on Three Rivers, but I am afraid the order came from Vector Control so we will need to make another orbit, I am sorry for any inconvenience.”

Not long now, a chill ran down Aloisio’s spine. He held his breath a moment.

Finally, the betrayers would pay for their crimes in blood. All will know that Oceania will not go quietly into the dark! Oceania had a right to the stars, and soon they would reclaim their colonies.

“Attention Ship! All hands!” the Captain sounded far more frantic, “Brace for impact! This is not a drill! I say again, this is not a drill! All hands brace for impact!”

They would try, of course, but it was already too late. Aloisio watched as the view screen on his forearm showed docking bays, warehouses and starships. He grabbed the webbing tightly, waiting for the unsuspecting insect to hit Pollux Max.

He thought about home. He could almost taste the cold mountain air. Closing his eyes, he wished only for the chance to see the Andes roll toward both horizons once again. It was the backbone of Oceania, the heartland and his home.

All that he could hope was that his family would hear of his mission. He hoped that he could one day tell them that the stars he earned on his shoulder came by bringing the stars back to his Country. The last move had been made. Checkmate was called. The King was being tipped over.

Pollux Max would burn. That made Aloisio smile.

Life Is Precious

It was the biggest fire the station had ever seen. Two pylon airlocks were venting station atmosphere into space. The docks were almost out of contact. No one could estimate the casualties and damage found where the rogue ship had slammed into the Station at full speed. Multiple warehouses in the sector had been damaged and were on fire. The blaze was burning up oxygen and causing massive infrastructure damage.

Oksana, sitting in the back of the Fire Skiff and fully suited up for fire fighting operations, could only think about the people trapped in the docks. It had been an otherwise normal day on Pollux Max. Hundreds of dock workers and thousands of Earth immigrants had been down there. The death toll was already so high, Oksana only hoped they could prevent further casualties.

Fire and Emergency Skiff 44 raced down the highway at top speed. Ivan poured on the throttle. The streets started to blur. The Skiff was huge and other aircars not as perceptive as they should be. Ivan swerved through air traffic at an alarming pace.

Oksana sat across from the greenhorn, Romanov. His nerves were showing through the visor on his helmet. His eyes were darting around, he was clearly hyperventilating. Some guys come in pretending to be that macho mentality and get burned by the fires. Other guys come in wanting to be heroes of the neighborhood, and get burned by the people.

But when a starship collides with the side of the station, that's a day no one gets to be green. You get moving. You get helping. Romanov was clearly going to either flush out or get assigned a desk. He didn't have the chops to stand defiant and live.

"What do we do?" Romanov yelled into his mic, hurting everyone's ears.

"We do our job. Put the fires out. Tend to the wounded." The Captain said from the front. "Stay with the Team."

"But, yeah, but," Romanov shook his head, "I mean, we've never had a fire this big. No one has."

"Other skiffs are coming from sections Two and Seven," the Captain said confidently, "we aren't alone. The station will send more help! Until then, we focus on shutting those bleeding airlocks."

"Save lives." Oksana said looking directly into Romanov's eyes. A moment passed. Romanov's eyes were scared and weak. "Let the whole station burn and we can rebuild it. A life is precious. Saving a life happens in one second. You either save that life or it's gone forever. You never have time to decide. When you know, you go."

"Only if the team goes! Always stay with the team!" the Captain turned around to point at Romanov. "Firefighters that leave the team die. Don't be foolish! We have to think big picture. Saving lives is our job. But we cannot afford to send firefighters into places where they're going to die!"

“A life is worth it.” The life Oksana thought of was Tetra, daughter, four years old. Tetra was the most radiant star in Oksana’s universe. If ever there was a moment when someone would make the decision to try and save her life, Oksana hoped it wasn’t a matter of protocol. She spoke in a tone of neutrality but in the spirit of disagreement. “Romanov, you will regret ever losing a life.”

The windows of the skiff suddenly grew darker. The warehouses above and below the highway were billowing smoke into the entire sector. People were on the platform streets and running for their lives. After a few more blocks the flames could be seen rolling by the skiff.

Through the window entire warehouses were in flames.

“Dear Heaven,” Ivan said in disbelief.

Burnt bodies lay on the walkways where they had been dragged by survivors. The closer they got the worse the conditions. Soon they couldn’t see out through the smoke. The warehouses being consumed were ten stories high in some places. Fire suppression systems had failed. The station had to quarantine the entire section.

“Section Four is now on full lock down.” The emergency broadcast played in everyone’s earpiece as well as on all of the speakers on the streets. “Section Four is now under emergency status. Please stay in your homes. Do not travel. Please secure all airlocks. Compartmentalize rooms if possible. Pylon airlocks will be closed and will remain closed until further notice.”

The message began to repeat itself. Oksana didn’t even hear it. Her eyes were focused on the images in her head of the bodies they were driving by. The burns and injuries looked critical. They needed immediate attention if they were going to survive.

“Sir. We should drop a triage pod for these people.” Oksana said curtly.

“We can’t afford to stop, you know that.” The Captain snapped back. “Those airlocks have to be sealed first and foremost. We’ll be back for them.”

“And what if they’re all dead?” Oksana snorted.

“Doctors from all over the station are en route.” Captain softened his voice. “Triage pods are probably already being deployed. We will be back.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Oksana sat back, closed her eyes and tried not to see the bodies. She tried to breath slowly. She heard the radio chatter as Skiff 46 parted ways in order to mend the second bleeding airlock. They would rejoin once their respective airlocks had been sealed.

The airlocks were so critical because they were pylon airlocks. The pylon served to transport atmospheric necessities. If a pylon airlock was open the whole station was losing valuable environmental necessities. *Funny how necessities are always commodities rather than people*, Oksana thought bitterly.

The skiff finally arrived. Landing gear touched the ground and the side doors slide open instantly. The team was boots to deck and spreading out around the broken airlock. They found two gaping holes. One was in the wall three steps in front of the airlock. The second had gouged past the airlock itself into the pylon.

“What caused this?!” Nicolas murmured.

“That doesn’t matter yet! Seal it!” the Captain yelled from the skiff.

Mikhail stepped up to the vortex of atmosphere being pulled out into space. For a moment it looked like he was going to be drawn out into the void. From his belt, he lifted

up a Hermetic-Seal-Tech Foam Wall Ball. He programmed it quickly, pressing the big red button last and holding it for four seconds.

He let go of the Ball and it sat in mid air suspended. Lasers were gauging the distances to the walls. Then the ball exploded into a wall of foam that encased the hull breach. The foam expanded and hardened in seconds. Mikhail slammed his fist against the wall a few times and nodded in satisfaction.

“Breach sealed.” He trumpeted.

“Great work! Now seal the pylon breach and let’s get out of here!” The Captain barked. The skiff’s engine started to roar.

“Hey, look!” Romanov was standing right next to the pylon breach. He was peering into the pylon with his flashlight. “I think I found it.”

“Let me take a look,” Mikhail said, pushing Romanov aside. “Looks like the kinds of alloys they use in starship construction. Let’s scan it, record it and report it’s location to the Vector Control Center so they can get started on an investigation.”

“Make it fast!” the Captain yelled, and for once, Oksana agreed with the old skiffer. Then, she heard the radio from their sister skiff break into the chatter.

“Skiff 44, Skiff 46.”

“Skiff 46, go ahead.” Ivan said dryly.

“We have sealed the breached airlock. We are en route to red zone.”

Oksana hoped that the red zone was already cleared and that the fires themselves would be the only worry for the team. She knew better, of course, most of the people living in this sector were very poor. Many of them were the newest generations of immigrants to Three Rivers Station. Sector Four was known not-so-fondly as the Russian Quarter. Other stationers said the word as though it was a slur. As though being Russian was something to be disgusted by.

It seemed especially wrong that this tragedy should befall this particular part of the station. The most disenfranchised people had flames pouring over their homes and businesses. Fate seemed cruel.

The skiff came to a stop. The landing gear hit the ground and the skiff began to deploy the triage and information centers. The doors slide open and the team was out beginning a line around the nearest burning building. The skiff guns started to pour flame retardant over the building. Oksana and her team mates used their sonic extinguishers and foam grenades to attack large pockets of spreading flames.

“Uh... guys...” Liam spoke worriedly. He sat in the information center, surrounded by sensors and scanners. “We’ve got three people stuck in the warehouse one block upspin of us. Vitals are good for now, but it looks like at least two of them are children.”

Oksana started down the block. She ran with everything that she had.

The others were screaming, but she only heard the captain: “Stay with the team!”

No time for argument.

“Oksana, are you insane!? Think about your daughter!” Captain screamed in her ear. “Who will take care of Tetra after you get killed? Come back!”

Looking at the building ahead, engulfed in flames and structurally compromised, Oksana spoke calmly and clearly into the microphone. “Tell Tetra that I love her. Tell her that all life is precious.”

Oksana sprinted toward the inferno. Her helmet's heads up display was alive with alerts and warnings. She disabled the audio alarms and kept moving. She searched for the best access. The tier Oksana stood on and the one above were engulfed in flames.

She downloaded the information center's sensor data and noted where the vitals were coming from. It was an old building, she could tell instantly. The first buildings in Sector Four were thrown up without refined 3D printers. The blaze was weakening the support structures near the warehouse, but the office was still intact.

The office's hallway led to the receiving dock. Oksana decided that was her access. She fired two foam grenades up onto the dock. They exploded and covered the dock with a layer of foam. The door was already locked with flames within. She lifted her power axe high and tight and stepped up to the door. She pulled the trigger on the axe and heaved a blade of white plasma.

Immediately, smoke began to pour out. She threw two more foam grenades into the corridor and waited for them to explode. Once inside, she used her sonic extinguisher to get anything that hadn't been caught by the foam. She walked over to the door of the office and opened it slowly. When she peaked around the door she found an old woman and two young children huddled in the corner.

"Come with me! I will take you to safety! Keep your heads down!"

The old woman pushed the children into Oksana's arms almost immediately. The smoke in the office was substantial, and the old woman did not seem to be breathing well at all. Oksana pushed the children toward the door and went to help the old woman get up off the ground. Her body was frail, her breathing was heavy and painful. Oksana gave each a breather for the smoke.

"Oksana!" Liam yelled over the comm. "The fire has spread to the chemical warehouse next door! Get out of there before the whole tier comes down!"

"This is why you do not leave the team!" the Captain yelled over comm, "Oksana get out of there!"

This is why speed and support is so necessary, she thought to herself bitterly.

But to the young children and the old woman she said, "We need to move quickly. Don't be afraid. Let's just get out through the dock!"

A gut wrenchingly apparent sound accompanied her words. It was the building falling in on itself. Oksana's thoughts turned to Tetra. When she was old enough to appreciate life, Tetra would understand why her mother had fought to protect it so much. She hoped that Tetra would remember her as a hero, not as a fool.

A moment passed and they were still alive. Oksana looked at her schematic map once more, now uploaded with data from the Skiff's sensors. The dock had collapsed and revealed the debris littered tier below. Oksana searched for another exit, but there was nothing that was not in rapid deterioration. She wouldn't make it alone, much less with the old woman or children.

Go to the dock anyway, she thought. She lifted the old woman into her arms and started down the corridor with the children. She was almost angry at herself, knowing that she was leading them all to their deaths no matter where they went. But she couldn't tell them there was no way out. She wouldn't look at them and tell them their lives were about to end. Ever.

The floor had dropped out and what was once a processing factory was a pile of rubble. The dock's roof had fallen in too. Smoke from the whole building poured out as it

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sought station atmosphere. Beyond the chasm was the street, but Oksana could see no way beyond. They were sitting on a time bomb.

“Oksana, this is Romanov, please be prepared for evac.”

For a moment, she thought maybe she had imagined the words. But she raised her head up and saw a small civilian aircar descending toward her. Inside sat Romanov in his suit and a civilian woman piloting. Romanov helped the children board first. He took the old woman from Oksana’s arms and sat her down while Oksana climbed in. The blond-haired woman in the driver’s seat hit the accelerator.

The chemical warehouse erupted into the alley and engulfed the block in a chemical fire. Oksana barely saw it, her eyes were on Romanov. He sat back, taking off his helmet. He was sweaty and still nervous. He breathed heavily.

“Welcome aboard! I’m Yolanda!” The aircar’s driver called out. The old woman wept joyfully. The children shook in their seats. Yolanda piloted calmly toward the Pylon. “Don’t be afraid! We’re headed to the skydecks! We’ll be far from the fire soon!”

“How?” Oksana asked Romanov, still in disbelief.

“I had Liam guide me to where you were.” Romanov still breathed heavily.

Romanov nodded to himself. “As soon as I heard that building collapse, I knew, so I ran.”

“I’ve got nieces and nephews.” Yolanda added with a serious tone.

“I want you both to meet my daughter, Tetra. She should meet the people who saved her mother’s life.” Oksana said, pulling off her helmet. “I never thought you had it in you, Romanov. But I’m very glad I was wrong.”

Leander

The man stood in the doorway with an air of defiance. With the dim lighting, Tekla couldn't see his face, but she knew he was surveying the bar. Dimetri shifted uncomfortably in his seat across from her, the conversation now forgotten. The man walked up to the bar and leaned onto the rail like a familiar patron.

Chiron, Tekla's bartender, locked eyes with the man.

"Where can I find Tekla?" The man yelled for the whole room.

The entire bar fell silent.

Tekla saw her disguised guards grow still with attention. No one in the room had ever seen anything like it. Dimetri began breathing heavily. He leaned over the table. He whispered as a man does when terrified of the answer.

"Who is that?" Dimetri whispered.

"Shut up." Tekla snapped, quiet and firm.

Dimetri swallowed and sunk into his seat. The bartender leaned forward, putting his big hairy face within an inch of the stranger's face. Tekla had seen that pose before; it was the body language that told Chiron's wiser victims that they had better find another cup to drink from. Chiron whispered something to the man, what collection of swears it contained, Tekla could not know.

For a moment, the entire room was as silent as deep space. No one moved.

The man leaned back and roared with laughter.

Who is this man, who walks into my house, uses my name, and laughs at my rules? Tekla could feel the fury building up between her temples.

"Tekla," the man said accusingly, looking directly at her. "I would think you would welcome an old friend rather than send him back into the cold Beyond."

It was then that she saw him: *Leander*.

He took a step toward her table. Her guards began to move threateningly, but she waved them off with a signal. She called back to him with a chuckle.

"Still looking for new ways to get yourself killed, is that it?"

"Old habits die with the body, I'm afraid." Leander grumbled.

It was not the Leander of her memories. His hair had become silver and he sported new frown marks. He was worn, rustic and tired. But he still had that smug smile of a man who let the universe be his pawn. It occurred to Tekla that he had played his hand for her in particular. His eyes, now that he was closer, told the story of the fleeting mischief of an aging man. *God in Heaven*, she thought, *how time alters us*.

Seeing Leander caused her to think about how she had changed. Tekla was no longer the spunky girl from the docks. She thought of bigger things than how to outbarter her rivals. Her hair had begun to lose its reddish color in favor of a silver hue. She remembered why she had cut so much of it off in the first place. She probably looked just

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as weathered to Leander. In her memories, Tekla and Leander were two souls rocketing away from their youth.

“Sit, please. There is so much to catch up on.” Tekla motioned to the seat next to Dimetri. “I don’t think we have enough liquor to stem the tide of time.”

“Time can never be held back,” Leander sat down after a careful but instantaneous inspection of Dimetri. “I hope I didn’t interrupt a meeting of any great importance.”

Tekla laughed, the pseudo concern was wrapped in a tone of ill-impress.

“No, Dimetri and I were merely discussing a business arrangement.” Tekla looked at Dimetri, who swallowed nervously. “Let me introduce you to my good friend, Leander. We go back further than I like to admit.”

“What she means is that I remember when she wasn’t where she is now.”

“Were you business partners as well?” Dimetri asked with a meek voice.

“Of sorts.” Leander kept his eyes on Tekla, allowing her to make the first move.

“You see, Dimetri, Leander was GemTau’s the most feared bounty hunter.”

“B-bounty hunter?” Dimetri couldn’t help but shift in his seat.

“The most feared.” Tekla leaned in, grasping her cup. “Even station police used him when they couldn’t corner someone, or when they were concerned that a criminal was already off station. Leander earned his credits in spilling blood on decks all over. I earned mine in defining whose blood it was.”

Dimetri tried to pretend not to be scared, but his voice betrayed him. “Defining?”

“Of course, Leander needed someone to handle contracts and fees.” Tekla barely took her eyes off Leander. “We both benefited until his early retirement.”

“Speaking of retirement,” Leander leaned over and looked down at Dimetri.

“Why don’t you run back to the hovel you crawled out of? Think about all the words Ms. Tekla was trying to help you understand before I interrupted. She and I have some catching up to do and I wouldn’t want you to wet your pants.”

“Y-yes, yes absolutely, of course.” Dimetri nodded his head frantically. “T-thank you Ms. Tekla, have a pleasant Alterday.” With that, he found a swift exit from the bar.

Tekla took a sip from her cup as a server walked up to the table.

“Orion Whiskey and a mug of ale, please.” Leander smiled at the server.

The server was gone in a flash. Tekla and Leander sat in silence.

“It’s been too long...” Tekla shook her head. “What brings you back?”

“A reunion with the only person that I could have such a thing with.”

“I don’t even know where to begin...” Tekla didn’t often have a loss for words.

The server brought Leander’s drinks and a fresh glass for Tekla.

“How are operations?” Leander took a long sip from the mug of ale. He smiled from the rim of the mug. “How is Pollux Max these days?”

“The new Station Council wants to talk tough, nonsense about cracking down on criminal enterprises in the docks. Especially after that ship made a mess crashing and burning like it did. It’s pretty humorous, they’ve gained quite a bit of voter support.”

Tekla shrugged. “They don’t have plans to lift a finger. They’re just trying to find a scapegoat. Someone to pin stuff to and lock up. For the cameras.”

“So you’ve been lying low, I presume?” Leander raised an eyebrow.

“Of course, no need to be the one strung up on a harbor column. That said, it has detracted from some ambitious plans that I had been working on for a long time.” Tekla let out a sigh and scoffed. “It’s frustrating to wait this out. My work grinds to dust.”

“From stardust to stardust, right?” Leander saluted and threw back the whiskey.

Tekla laughed again. She had missed the release of laughter. She couldn’t name anyone else who had made her laugh in years. Men lined the walls to court her for the power she wielded in the Russian Quarter. Leander’s humor was never made for a goal; it was for his own amusement. He wasn’t trying to win a smile, underwear or bank account. He was merely trying to enjoy what life gave him. Leander had always been like that.

“What about you? Where’d you go?” Tekla remembered hardened killers spooked by the name Leander. “Your shadow loomed for a decade after you left.”

“Well, that’s part of the reason I left, I guess. Escape what I had made of myself.” he looked around the room slowly. “I found a nice quiet mining platform on the fringe.”

Leander stopped, his eyes floated away, lost in memory. Then he continued.

“I used to think that the people out there were simple, stupid or insane. Why else would they scatter from the trade routes?” Leander took a gulp of ale. “I found out that they are a lot like us. They have the same groups as we do. You’ve got the people who were born there, and who will definitely die there, because they don’t know anything else and don’t want to know anything else. Then you’ve got the people who were born there, but can’t wait to get somewhere else. Last, you’ve got the people who went there to escape something. I definitely belonged to that group.”

“They still sound simple, stupid and insane to me.” Tekla raised her mug.

It was Leander’s turn to laugh, nodding his head with a grin.

“They got the same problems out there that we got here. We’re pretty simple, stupid and insane, too. It was good to see that...” He trailed off to a point where Tekla wasn’t sure if he was faking a moment of deep thought or if he had truly discovered something profound on the fringes of civilized space.

“So did you find a consistent bedmate then?” Tekla snapped her finger.

Leander’s eyes seemed to snap back into focus, “Yeah, a few.”

“Any of those worth mentioning?” Tekla smiled and took another sip.

Leander’s eyes were locked onto the table, his mouth half open. Tekla was uniquely surprised to see the spectacle. Finally he took a long breath and said, “I got married about two years ago.”

“Really!?” Tekla laughed too hard.

“Yeah.” His tone was defeat.

“So... what is she like?” Tekla leaned in.

“She left me. Found someone new. About four weeks ago.” Leander took another long drag of ale, as if adding: *many drunken nights ago*. Leander seemed to have lost touch with the pain, but it remained.

Leander had always been strong. Probably the strongest person Tekla had ever met. Nothing had ever fazed him. Nothing had ever brought him to his knees. But here, Tekla saw the brilliant statue of a hero, like those of the Earth Gods, cracking from the inside. It was somehow strange to think of him as a normal man. Knowing that he was not only human, but human like her. Subject to the same agonies. The same poisons.

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“Damnit, Leander...” Tekla tried to show some compassion for him, leaning in closer. It felt robotic, unnatural to her. How long had it been since she had been compassionate? “I’m.... sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Leander put his empty mug onto the table and pushed it away from him feigning satisfaction. “In any account, that’s why I came back here, looking for you.”

“Me?” Tekla couldn’t think of any reason why Leander would want to fly half-way across the known universe to see an old business partner. Unless, there was something he thought he could get out of her...

“Yeah, well, the business I was in...” Leander shrugged and let a more-than-crazy smirk rise to his lips, “I didn’t get a lot of chances to make many friends. It was a lot of negativity, mostly. Everyone had someone they wanted hurt or spaced. In fact, I facilitated the ending of more than my share of the relationships I encountered. My business was most often the early retirement of one friend by another. So, you’re pretty much the only friend I’ve got.”

It occurred to Tekla that he could still be quite useful. Although beyond his prime, a man like Leander was of particular value.

This is Leander, you bitch, she thought. It was the first time she had ever cursed herself for thinking of a person as a product. She felt wicked for having thought that about him. On the docks, all those years ago, they had been equals.

“Leander... I don’t know what to say.” Tekla stopped and took a quick breath. “But I am glad your’re back. It feels good to have someone who isn’t a tool.”

The door of the bar slide open and two men entered. Leander and Tekla both snapped their eyes to see the men, but neither moved or turned to look. Chiron put on his annoyed face and gave the two men the most sincere greeting he could fathom.

“Gah. There goes my high score!” Chiron sounded truly indignant. He slipped his phone into his pocket. “But so long as this station still spins I got to work for my credits, so what can I fix you two lads with?”

“Just hoping to pull a fossil out from the dumpster. I hear that a name may have walked in here that the Council would like to speak to personally.” The voice didn’t seem familiar to Tekla, but the tone and attitude told her without doubt that it was a station enforcer. He couldn’t get more pompous over his little badge of fake power.

Dimetri opened his mouth. So I’ll have him spaced after all.

Tekla’s guards straightened up again. She signaled for them to be patient.

“So it’s true, then.” The station enforcer walked over to the table with his nervous partner. “Leander has returned.”

“Oh, damnit all.” Leander shook his head disapprovingly. “These days you spend more time doing customs checks than doing any traveling.”

Leander took his passport out and shoved it in the enforcer’s face.

“And it’s pleasure, not business, this time. Please make sure to e-stamp it the first time so that I don’t have to come back this way.” Leander took a look at his chrono, then looked up into the eyes of the furious badge standing above him. “Although the conversation has been stunning so far, I have better things to be doing than having my papers verified. Thank you.”

“I’ve heard quite a few stories about how much of a bum you can be, Leander.” The enforcer had balls, Tekla had to give him that. Either that or the young ones just didn’t recognize danger when it was in front of them. “You don’t impress me.”

Tekla guessed it was youth.

“Well, come on Leander,” the smug enforcer said, grinning at Tekla, “you’ve had your last drink with the Russian crime lord, it’s time you get to come with us.”

“You two are in *my* bar. You’ll be on your way out,” Tekla motioned to the door with her chin, “in the manner of your choice: alive or dead.”

The enforcer smiled from ear to ear. “Oh, I think not. I know that your muscle boys over there are trained to move of their own volition *only* when you are in danger. But I’m not here for *you*. I will be of no threat to you at all.” He put his hands in the air in surrender. “In fact, I don’t have a gun on me, which is one of the only reasons I got this close to you.”

Tekla simply glared at his smug face. He was right.

His grin seemed to grow larger, and more annoying, with each passing moment.

“You see, here is the deal. Leander and I walk out of here right now, and he takes a long walk down a very short corridor. We punish criminals on civilized stations like ours. Or: You all will be implicated in harboring a mass murderer and terrorist. And no one wants that. You don’t want to spend any more time in station lock up, do you? And your boys don’t want to attack me right now, because they’re pea-sized brains are only strong enough to know that would get you into trouble. Which they don’t want. I want Leander, and you want me satisfied.”

Tekla computed it in her head. She saw several marquee headlines: *Two unarmed enforcers killed in Russian Quarter. Infamous Assassin Brought to Justice following bar fight with enforcers. The War on Crime has a new victory: Leander.*

“You rat.” She growled at him. He was right.

“Well, look at that! I haven’t been on-station for three hours and I’ve got a welcoming committee *and* free room and board!” Leander laughed, his eyes full of bright fire. “Seriously, I have no idea why I ever left this holy station.”

“Leander...” Tekla’s emotions had never really been mixed in such a way before.

“Tekla.” He interrupted her thoughts. “It’s alright.”

“No it isn’t. They just want to hang you up to win some PR!” Tekla sighed and crossed her arms. She looked off toward the bar for a moment, then forced herself to look her old partner in the eye. “I’m sorry. I can’t protect you, either.”

“See? That’s what I have always loved about you, Tekla. You save no truth. I know what’s at stake for you. And you look me in the eye and you can tell me that I’m spaced and you won’t – because you can’t – help me. It’s an honesty that isn’t out there often. And that’s why I had to see you.”

He stood up out of the booth and the two enforcers began to place restrainers on him. He smiled at her when they jerked his arm back roughly. It was a cocky smile, but it was a sincere smile too.

“I’m sorry, Leander.” Tekla shook her head.

Once the restrainers were on, Leander shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m not. It was exactly what I needed to see once more. It was worth everything in the whole universe.” Leander smiled at her. She felt her heart flutter unexpectedly. “You’re the only honest person I’ve ever met.”

At that, they grabbed him and pushed him out the door. She signaled to her lieutenant to have both men marked for early retirement. As he was pushed out into the cameras and news crews in waiting, Tekla knew that the stories would brand him a

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murderer and a killer. But many of Leander's marks had been criminals and maniacs that the Station Council had given him credits to remove.

The Council had used him for all they could, and they would use him one last time. He had dealt death for them so their hands could remain clean, and then they cleanse their hands by dealing death upon him. *What a difference*, Tekla thought, *time can make*.

Oversight

“We have a serial killer on Pollux Max. Four similar murders in as many days.” Detective Valorie Geber locked eyes with Detective Ken Temu. Her brown eyes were stoic. Her voice decisive. Honking horns echoed from traffic above. “Anyone in Section Six is a suspect. Council oversight protocols are in effect.”

“I barely know what that means. I don’t want to mess up.” Ken kicked the wheel of his aircar. “I’ve never been assigned outside of Section Three.”

“Stay calm. Focus on the facts.” Valorie nodded toward the crime scene behind him. “Nobody likes oversight, so don’t expect a warm welcome. But stay firm. Let the truth present itself.”

Ken looked up at the Section Six Pylon. Strange symbols and graffiti covered every inch. A knot formed in his stomach. Pylons connected everyone to the Powerdecks above. Three Rivers Station had eight Sections. Ken was on the far side of the wheel, a world away from home.

“Have you done oversight before?” Ken asked.

“Once or twice. You’re thinking about your family, right?” Valorie’s words were soft, but her eyes darted around the street. Ken saw a line of Section Six squad aircars and a yellow crime scene holo-ribbon. She talked as she scanned. “I was born in Three. My grandparents still live there. But we can’t think about that, we have to do our job.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ken took a deep breath. Civilians gathered at the street corner.

“None of that ma’am, crap, either. Call me Val.” She took a step toward the crime scene. Ken followed timidly. Valorie motioned to walk beside her. “Oversight is all about diplomacy. You and I are agents of the Station Council here. Don’t forget that.”

Ken and Val stepped in unison. They followed the sidewalk circling the Pylon. Around the bend they saw a body above. A woman hung from the Pylon. A dozen Section Six enforcers stood in the intersection. Several riot lines stood between Ken and the crowded corner. Armored transports purred on the sidewalks.

Val and Ken strode up to the Lieutenant.

“I’m Detective Geber, this is Detective Temu. We’re agents of the Station Council.” Val displayed her badge and pointed up at the victim. “Why is that woman still hanging from your Pylon?”

“Lieutenant Novak, I’m just doing this by the book!” he threw his hands up defensively. Novak’s rosy cheeks were dotted with freckles. Ken saw him suppress a smile. “We didn’t want to touch anything until our babysitters arrived.”

“Take her down now.” Valorie tucked her badge back in her coat.

Val and Novak stared at one another. Ken counted nine heartbeats.

“Alright, let’s get this over with!” Novak signaled a waiting ambulance. It hovered off the street slowly. Novak turned back to Valorie. “We’re all just relieved it wasn’t that damned plague... you’re not carriers, right?”

“We were scanned before leaving our Sections. Three is under quarantine. Tell me about these murders, Lieutenant.” Valorie lifted her wrist computer to read the names of the victims. “In order of death we have Sati Kohli, nine years old, Tom Qin, twenty

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one years old, Vivaan Kade, twelve years old, and the woman you left up there was Charlotte Johnson, thirty two years old.”

The ambulance medics cut the rope and lowered the body onto a stretcher.

“We found her streetcar abandoned a few blocks away.” Novak pointed down Richmond Ave. The view was blocked by the growing crowd. “Evidence of a struggle suggests she was dragged from there to a vehicle.”

“Did she have any known enemies?” Ken saw the riot enforcers form up and lock shields. The crowd started cursing. Ken had seen rioting earlier in the morning from the highway. People in Three were protesting outside the hospital. The entire station seemed to be succumbing to fear. “Any outstanding debts?”

“She got her contract revoked several months ago for possession.” Novak shrugged. He pointed at the landing ambulance. “My guess is she couldn’t pay for her addiction. Looks like another gang hit.”

“Why would they hang her?” Ken couldn’t recall the last hanging in Three.

“Send a message.” Novak shrugged. “These gangsters are violent and petty.”

Novak, Valorie and Ken walked over to Charlotte. Charlotte’s skin was darker than Val’s. Her neck was raw and bloody. Her left eye was purple, arms covered in cuts and bruises. She had been stabbed in the thigh.

It dawned on Ken that he was tasked with finding her killer. He had worked on corporate espionage cases for eight months. He wasn’t sure he was capable of a gruesome murder case. Ken had no business working a case this big. But senior detectives in Three were focused on the virus.

“Cameras caught glimpses of an unmarked airvan. It entered the intersection about forty minutes before the morning rush. None of them got a clean look.” Novak pointed up at the Pylon’s air traffic tunnel. Aircars used the tunnel to reach the lower decks. “Someone saw her hanging while driving to work and called it in.”

Charlotte’s pockets were emptied to reveal a bag of white powder and her identification card. Ken knew a schoolmate who lost his contract, a boy named Norman. A twelve year old sentenced to sleep in alleys. Norman worked the most dangerous jobs on the docks. Over thirteen long years he saved up enough credits to buy a ticket back to Earth. Most non-contracts weren’t so lucky.

“Do we have any record of Charlotte after her contract was revoked?” Ken pulled out a handheld computer. “Any of your contacts in the black market know her?”

“No. But I’m sure she got herself involved with some unsavory people. Otherwise she wouldn’t have ended up where she did.” Novak gave Val a look from head to toe. Val was reading a report on her wrist. Ken saw Novak’s jaw clench. “Detective Geber, may I ask what Section you’re from?”

“Four.” Val answered without looking up.

“Oh? You don’t look Russian!” Novak laughed. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at the others. “Does that mean you’re a Bishops fan?”

“My mother’s family was from Eurafica. My father was from Southeastasia.” Valorie stopped reading and looked Novak in the eye. “I’m a Rooks fan, all my life.”

“How they doing this year?” Novak put his hands on his hips and cocked his head. “I don’t even remember the last time I saw the Rooks play...”

“We have a great defense.” Val smiled. “The two rookie crushers impress me.”

“My Lions could beat them any day.” Novak waved his arms dismissively. “Their offense has been unstoppable.”

“We’ll see when it comes to the tournament. I prefer a strong defense to any fancy offense.” Val turned back to her screen. She shrugged and chuckled, “You can’t score when you can’t get past midfield!”

“My father would disagree. You have to score to win. No other things matter unless points are on the board. You could say he was old-fashioned.” Novak laughed. He turned to the other enforcers. “My family settled here when Section Six first opened. We’ve never left. It used to be peaceful. But that plague brought us anarchy.”

“Why do people turn to violence out of fear?” Ken sighed.

“People come in packs. Some are hunters, some are prey. The packs we have around here aren’t the prey.” Novak pointed a finger at Charlotte’s bag of drugs. “Those have overrun our streets. The traffickers rule these decks.”

“Who are the major players?” Valorie switched a record button on her wrist.

“The Vohrah gang is by far the largest. Vohrah is responsible for most of the drug trade and a large part of the violence.” Novak bobbed his head from side to side. He made a slight shrug and threw his hands up. “There are about fifteen smaller gangs who run various decks and streets. Many have complicated alliances with one another.”

“Who leads Vohrah?” Ken had not heard of that criminal enterprise before.

“A worm named Maran. He lives the high life in Section One. We’ve never been able to extradite him. He runs a club that certain politicians tend to frequent.” Novak snorted and shook his head. “He has two lieutenants that run the ground game, Boris and Revi. They have proven themselves difficult to track. This is their work.”

“You think Vohrah is behind all four killings?” Val looked up at Novak.

“I know they are. We got confessions. One was ordered to kill his ex. They had a bad breakup, but ultimately he was ordered to kill him over some insult.” Novak bounced. Val circled the ambulance, her eyes on where Johnson had hung. “Not only that, but another Vohrah member confessed to killing that little girl as retribution against the family.”

“Sati?” Ken looked down at the big round brown eyes of an innocent child.

“That’s the one; her father didn’t pay protection for his store.” Novak shook his head in pity. “Then you had that Vivaan boy, spending time with the wrong pack. His mother said he was out at all hours. Reverend Onassis found him strung up.”

“How do you know who Vivaan was spending time with?” Val made a note.

“He was picked up a few times for breaking curfew.” Novak shrugged. “And tried to court the daughter of a friend. He said Vivaan’s friends were unsavory characters.”

“What was the girl’s name?” Ken opened a record search and waited.

“Elizabeth Cambridge.” Novak was annoyed by the line of inquiry.

“Any gang connections there?” Ken saw nothing unusual on her social media.

“Absolutely not! Lizzy comes from good stock.” Novak shook his head. He pointed to a running enforcer aircar. “Hop in and I’ll take you to Johnson’s streetcar.”

Valorie sat in the front and Ken took the seat behind her. Flying over the crowd, Ken saw signs he couldn’t read and an advancing line of riot shields. Beyond the signs was a dilapidated neighborhood lined with abandoned vehicles. Novak turned up the cabin’s radio and the news chimed in.

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“There are now over 3,000 confirmed cases of the virus in Section Three. Some people are already comparing this outbreak to the virus of Essex.” The voice of the local news anchor was filled with anxiety. “Let’s all hope it’s not that bad! Stay tuned because we have the Essex Virus experts on a panel after the break.”

Novak landed the aircar next to another holo-ribbon. The crime scene encompassed a car and two meters of sidewalk. Holographic pointers illuminated logged evidence. Most were blood splatter markers. Stepping onto the sidewalk Ken saw the blood labeled as belonging to Charlotte Johnson. Some of her hair was recovered further down the sidewalk.

“A smashed window with keys still in the ignition. Maybe the killer caught her as she was leaving?” Ken bent over the broken glass. He peered into the streetcar. Old, beat and filled with trash. Blood caked the window’s glass shards. “Dragged her out.”

“We recovered a loaded gun from the backseat.” Novak watched the upspin air traffic. “Obviously, without a valid contract it was useless to her.”

“What was she protesting?” Val pointed to the sign in the backseat.

Ken read the sign: *No Justice, No Peace!*

“Who can ever know? Most of them are unemployed freeloaders demanding handouts,” Novak scoffed. He let out a long sigh before continuing. “Thugs promoting anarchy. They’re using that plague as an excuse to make a mess of the whole Section!”

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Ken and Val stood beneath the streetlamp where Vivaan died. Val pulled up the holographic crime scene and projected the evidence markers. Blood and feces had accumulated beneath the lamp. A holographic rope showed where it was tied. There were many markers of blood splatter against the alley walls.

Val was suddenly drawn to one alley wall. She pointed at red letters:

तत्त्वमसि

“Do you know what that is?” She asked patiently.

“It’s marked as ‘gang graffiti,’ Southeastasian origin.” Ken read from his wrist.

“They obviously didn’t translate it.” Val exhaled slowly.

“What does it mean?” Ken looked over at Val. Her eyes were serene.

“Tat Tvam Asi. It means ‘that art thou’ or ‘thou art that.’ Definitely not a gang marking... It’s a beautiful spiritual reminder.” Val shook her head somberly. She turned to Ken and smiled. “My grandfather taught me Sanskrit.”

An old white bearded man stepped out of the Church. He wore a heavy black robe with a blue sash around his neck. The sign on the lawn read, *First Identified Church of Pollux*. The reverend George Onassis did not hide his annoyance.

“Forgive me if I am not elated by your presence. We are not fond of the Council here. Agents of the Council are always out to cheat us.” Onassis waved an arm toward the distant Pylon. He put his hands together and looked up. “Yahweh gave us a second chance. The Zionists in Section One have been trying to break our will ever since.”

“We’re just here to investigate Vivaan’s death.” Val’s eyes scanned the street. A few streetcars drove by slowly. “Just run through the day you found him.”

“After morning service I took Ms. Gretchen home in the church airvan. I went to the farmer’s market. I bought four boxes of vegetables and brought them back here.”

Onassis pointed at a window over his shoulder. “The kitchen window looks out onto this street. I saw him hanging and called the authorities.”

“Did you recognize him?” Ken saw a garden under the indicated window.

“No, he wasn’t from this neighborhood.” Onassis tilted his head. “I was told later that he was a member of some ruthless deck gang.”

“Which gang?” Val chuckled to herself. She shook her head. “What’s his role?”

“How should I know?” Onassis was clearly offended. “I don’t mix with them.”

“Was he alive when you found him?” Ken asked sheepishly.

“No... I am quite sure he was dead. He had lost a great deal of blood. I remember he had limbs missing.” Onassis crossed his arms. The reverend cringed at the memory. “He was missing his privates and a finger. The rope was caked in blood. I heard it’s how they punish those who don’t pass initiation.”

“Heard it said by whom?” Val squinted and looked up at the church’s spire.

“Gang violence is a fact of life in Six. Maybe in the other Sections they are tame, but here they are not. They deliver violence over the most trivial matters.” Onassis sounded increasingly bitter by the word. “We don’t understand the reasons but we see the effect. We understand only the horror.”

“Has anyone come along asking about Vivaan?” Val read her wrist.

“His parents arrived to pay respects to the intersection. I remember she wore a black dress and he was wearing a very nice suit. I believe it may have been after the funeral.” Onassis walked out onto the lawn. He kicked a bag of litter into the street. “I spoke to them and offered my prayers. I invited them inside but they were in no condition to socialize.”

“Did they have any insights into their son’s murder?” Val sounded irritated.

“They insisted that he had been a good boy, despite his activities. They said that he had anger issues. He had been in a few fights at school.” Onassis shrugged his shoulders. He pursed his lips. “They seemed certain that it was a rival gang, given his severe wounds. He must have caused some distress upon the perpetrators.”

“Do you know Elizabeth Cambridge?” Ken offered.

“That family attends another church.” Onassis said lifelessly.

“But you know Elizabeth?” Ken hoped it would lead to something.

“I only know of her from the neighborhood.” Onassis grew more bored every second. He sighed and checked his watch. “Her family lives not far from here.”

Val walked backwards into the street and stood underneath the streetlamp.

“Did they visit the site of Vivaan’s murder?” Val called out to the reverend.

“I suppose... I don’t recall seeing them.” Onassis spoke hurriedly. “I don’t think so. Are they suspects?”

“Everyone in Six are suspects, Reverend.” Val walked back to stand shoulder to shoulder with Ken. She looked the old man in the eyes. “Council rules.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of any more help, detectives.” Onassis turned to leave.

“We’re not leaving yet. Show us the church airvan.” Val pointed at the church’s garage door. Onassis spun on his heel to glare at Val. “Don’t make me call the Council. You prefer my search to theirs.”

“Now you show your true face.” Onassis spit at Val. He snorted and started toward the church. “I am constantly amazed by our vile government. Follow me.”

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Ken followed Val and Onassis through the heavy wooden doors. A hallway led to an auditorium. The hall was flanked by classrooms. Portraits lined the walls. One was a glowing white figure with flowing red hair. The plaque below read *Yahweh's Only Son, Yahshua*.

"I've never seen a white Jesus before." Ken was confused by it.

"You've been brainwashed by Zionists!" Onassis turned and put his finger in Ken's face. "He was white. He was always white. He should forever be depicted as white!"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that scientists—" Ken began to shrug.

"It is historical fact that Yahshua was white!" Onassis screamed. "This house still honors the heritage of the white race. We refuse to feel guilty!"

Ken was totally taken about by the outburst. He had heard similar rhetoric from Earth history. The reverend's words stung him in his chest. His tone filled Ken with dread and sadness. Val seemed fixated on Onassis' face. He continued to scream.

"You've been brainwashed by the Zionists who control the holo-industry! I've been to Section Eight! I've seen their vulgarities!" Onassis pounded on his chest. "Whites are endangered! We do not bow, sing or pledge to that heretical Council!"

Onassis continued to breathe heavily. Onassis slumped and fumed as he led them through the hallway. There were classes of children on the right. A large sign indicated a door on the left was a gun-safety class. Inside a tall man was cursing and stomping.

"I bet that plague came on the back of a dirty immigrant!" The man yelled.

Passing the door Ken saw nine men in desks. A message board beside the classroom was covered with posters. One read "the Council wants your guns!" Another showed a man with a shirt that read "I'm here for the cross burning."

Ken heard the man yelling to the end of the hall. Onassis opened the door to the garage and walked in without waiting for them. The lights flickered on. Ken saw a gray airvan surrounded by piles of boxes. Another portrait of white Jesus on the far wall.

"Are you convinced?" Onassis snapped, hands on his hips.

"What should I be convinced of?" Val opened the driver's side door.

"Whatever reason you decided to waste my time!" Onassis crossed his arms and nodded toward the door. "I have better things to be doing. There is a whole Station in need to salvation."

"I've developed an interest in airvans." Val shut the driver's door and walked the length of the vehicle. She looked under the bumper and in the wheel wells. "Very utilitarian. Super common in Six."

"We use it for Yahweh's work." Onassis spoke with derision.

"You certainly keep it clean." Val brushed her hands together.

"You must have this house confused with filthy stock!" Onassis was furious.

"Do I?" Val laughed. She looked in the stacked boxes.

"This is a holy house. My congregation has little enough as it is. What are you here stinking of Section One for?" Onassis threw his arms out and shook his head frantically. "Did you come to offend us? Perhaps you're here to steal what's ours!"

"We're here to do our job." Ken stepped between Onassis and Val, he put his hand over his heart. "We're here to find Vivaan's murderers."

"Then find a gang member to question." Onassis stepped over to the door.

"We sure will, Reverend." Val smiled at Onassis as she stepped through.

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Section Six's largest industry was the Pollux Rehabilitative Super-Max Prison. Val and Ken walked into the complex from the employee side. A concrete dome with towers at regular intervals, the prison didn't appear to be complex from the outside. The employee parking lot was flanked by a tall administrative building.

The detectives were ushered through the screening process.

Above the doors was a plaque. *"Noncompliance is disobedience."*

Beyond the metal detectors was a large commons area with adjacent locker rooms. They continued through a large set of doors into a long corridor. Transparent walls allowed Ken to see the well lit domed ceiling.

Under the dome was a complex array of smaller domes connected by a central hallway. Each dome was its own block with a security station and lockdown capabilities. Guards were stationed in the center and could see into each cell from their desks. There were a dozen subdecks of blocks below.

Ken and Val were brought into the main control room at the end of the corridor.

Dozens of computer stations and surveillance displays crowded the room. In the center of the room was the prison's warden, Earl Lytton. He wore a smart suit. The kind business men in the exchanges wore. *Part lawyer and part tycoon*, Ken thought. As warden Lytton was also the CEO of the prison's export corporation.

Ken looked up at one of the cell displays. An inmate was working on something at their bench. It slide past and another arrived for work. Other displays showed other inmates at work in their cells. Ken wondered at the profits.

"Warden Lytton, thank you for the warm welcome," Val stood across from the warden. "I'd like to see Yuen Kanda and Rawat Mehta. Now, please."

"Inmate 369 is in the security questioning office in his block." Lytton pointed out toward the access hallway to the main prison corridor. Ken checked the record and saw that #369 was Yuen Kanda. "I'll send two guards to escort you. Block 11A has 369."

Easier to dehumanize a number than a name, Ken thought.

The corridors were blank and bare. Cameras were positioned at every intersection to see in every direction. Each block had a security station with black one way windows. Some of blocks had inmates walking around, others were confined to their cells. Body odor filled the air.

They were led to a small interrogation room. Inside sat a young muscular young man. He had two full sleeves of tattoos. The room had one metal table bolted to the floor. Three chairs were arrayed around it, two opposite Yuen. He was chained both to his chair and the table.

Val and Ken sat down simultaneously.

"Where are you from?" Yuen's eyes darted between them.

"We're agents of Three Rivers Council." Val said curtly.

"Can you get me out of here?" Yuen looked cautiously hopeful.

"What can you tell us?" Val leaned back.

"I didn't kill Tom. They forced me to confess, but I didn't do it." Yuen's head swayed back and forth. He started to choke up. "I loved him... I loved him so damn much. I could never do that."

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“You signed your name.” Val sounded unimpressed.

“They made promises... They said if I blamed Maran they’d get my charges reduced.” Yuen slumped back and sighed. “Instead I got the maximum sentence.”

“Did you have a public defender?” Ken couldn’t understand what went wrong.

“I saw him for four minutes. He didn’t even have all of my paperwork.” Yuen chewed his lip nervously. “He said he had too many other cases. He didn’t even show up to my hearing.”

“How are you going to help find the real killer?” Val leaned forward.

“It wasn’t Asuri.” Yuen straightened up in his seat. He spoke slowly and clearly. “No Vohrah and definitely not Maran.”

“That’s not only repetitive it’s totally unhelpful.” Val leaned on the table and turned to Ken. “Are we wasting our time?”

“Look, listen, I know it’s not easy to trust someone in chains, but hear me out. Tom wasn’t with us, ok? He never was.” Yuen leaned back and swallowed. “He did theatre. He did interpretative dancing. No one in those streets wanted him dead.”

“Not even an ex?” Val squinted.

“He left me, ok? He was always finding a new man to drool over. But that doesn’t mean that I wanted him dead.” Yuen started clasping his hands together. Ken could see a tear forming in the corner of his left eye. “I wanted him back. Now he’s gone forever. I want his killer found.”

“So do we. I still don’t hear any new information.” Val crossed her arms.

“I didn’t join the gang, I was born Asuri. My father died Asuri. My older brothers ran corners. I ran sacks at seven years old. I’ve been at this my whole life. Tom never threw a sign.” Yuen pointed out toward the cells. “Not one of those people hanging was killed by any gang. We wouldn’t kill babies like that.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ken put both elbows on the table.

“I’m sure because Section Six gangs agreed to a truce.” Yuen shrugged and smiled. He shook his head with wonder. “It’s the first truce in my lifetime.”

“A truce between Vohrah and Asuri?” Val was skeptical.

“No. A truce between all the gangs of Six.” Yuen grinned wide.

“What would cause all those rivals to form a truce?” Ken asked.

“Enforcer brutality.” Yuen was finally calm.

“You want us to believe that?” Val winced.

“Go see the streets. We’ve locked arms to stop the violence. Everyone knows someone whose been killed. Even when the protests started, we told people to stay peaceful. When they shut it down we encouraged people to go home.” Yuen pointed at the wall then the floor. “Even in here people die on their watch! Even with all the cameras! They told me that I would be next unless I signed that confession!”

“I’m going to need to see proof.” Val shrugged.

“Sandra Crowford, Mike Ford, Akai Rice, Romain Reid, Tabitha Vang, Toney Phillips, Eric Scott, Fredrick Mahadevi... those are only a few of their names.” Ken saw a fire within Yuen’s dark pupils. He gritted his teeth as he spoke. “These were normal people. They didn’t throw colors. Unarmed!”

“Every badge wears a camera,” Val leaned over the table and looked Yuen in the eyes. “Does the footage agree?”

“You all lost it.” Yuen licked his lips.

“It doesn’t get lost.” Val sat up straight and frowned.

“Judge Wallace said it got deleted.” It was Yuen’s turn to cross his arms.

“Convenient. Can Rawat confirm any of this?” Val looked down at her computer.

“Yeah... he knew that Charlotte girl they found today. I never knew her, but I know she didn’t deserve that.” Yuen shook his head and let out a long breath. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “The truce continues despite all the lies on the holo-screens. We’re committed to this.”

“How can the truce survive in here?” Ken couldn’t help but shake his head.

“The same reason it works out there,” Yuen shrugged, “we’re brothers.”

Val and Ken thanked Yuen and were escorted back to the control room. The sound of their heels on the concrete echoed down the hall. Entering the control room Ken could tell the surveillance operators were trying not to pay attention to their arrival. The room grew unnaturally silent.

“I’d like to speak with Rawat Mehta now.” Val waved at the operators.

“That won’t be possible. Inmate 458 was found dead when we went to fetch him.” Warden Lytton shook his head. The operators averted their eyes. “It’s definitely a gang hit. Bloody one, too.”

“So much for the truce.” Ken sighed.

“I’d like to see where he was found.” Val crossed her arms.

“That entire Block is on lockdown, no one in or out.” Lytton shrugged. He shook his head with smug certainty. He pointed to a screen that showed riot guards being deployed. “The investigation into 458’s murder is already underway.”

“We’re agents of the Council.” Val took a step forward.

“Here we have our own rules,” Lytton met Val’s stare, then gave Ken a stoic glance. “Here you have no jurisdiction, understood?”

“Loud and clear.” Val turned her back on the warden and started toward the exit.

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Ken saw abandoned streets and overflowing litterbins. A streetcar raised on bricks, the wheels missing. Every other streetlamp was out. Ken and Val stood on subdeck 3, which should not look so impoverished. In Three Ken could guess the affluence of a subdeck by number alone.

“So close to the skydecks...” Ken whistled. “How does it look like this?”

“You’ll find there are always people to blame.” Val didn’t seem interested. She pointed absently at a graffiti-covered billboard. “Better to find the people involved.”

They walked up to the Delphi Delights corner store. Ken smelled curry and chicken. The front window had been smashed in. Tarp and tape had been applied but it wouldn’t last. Few of the lights in their marquee were lit. Many were smashed or shattered.

Inside a middle-aged woman sat behind a scratch-covered desk. Behind her were coolers and a small kitchen. She smiled weakly at the detectives as they entered. Her voice was raspy. “Welcome to two-dee, my name is Aditi, what can I get you?”

“We’re agents of the Council, investigating your daughter’s murder.” Val flashed her badge and pulled up a notepad on her wrist. “We were hoping you could help us find her killer.”

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“We found her hanging from the building. The enforcers convinced themselves it was gang-related.” Aditi fumbled through her pockets. “We knew better. It was that invisible nation. They’ve terrorized us ever since we moved here.”

“Nationalists don’t have a prayer on Pollux Max, who are they?” Val was awed.

“They hide in the shadows, but they make themselves known.” Aditi lit a cigarette and took a long drag. “Mostly through absurd literature, but they make sure to distribute it widely.”

“Is that what happened to the window?” Ken motioned with a thumb.

“Yes. A brick, covered in pig’s blood.” Aditi sounded as if she were telling someone else’s story. She pulled long on the cigarette. She continued in a calm tone. “A passing streetcar threw it in while screaming slurs. I can show you what their subscribers get subjected to.”

Aditi pulled a folder from a drawer. Inside were cards and pamphlets.

[A picturesque neighborhood]

“Better air, less crime and less trash requires fewer nonwhites.”

[Rainbow and Earthlike Hearts]

“Anti-racism is anti-white.”

[A torch carrying horsemen in front of a burning cross]

“Nothing can save our people except propaganda and physical terror.”

[An empty flagpole and a setting sun]

“Death to the traitors! Time for old-fashioned justice!”

“A couple down the street showed those to me. Whoever distributed them knew who lived where. We got the brick. The couple got those. I kept them and showed the authorities. They weren’t interested.” Aditi wiped away a tear. She brushed her black hair away from her face. “They were sure it was a gang... because they had a confessor.”

“Rawat Mehta...” Val watched Aditi very carefully. “He died in prison.”

“You have to find out who did this...” Tears streamed down Aditi’s cheeks.

The mother sobbed uncontrollably. Out of the kitchen stumbled a pale man.

“There’s nothing you can do! Nothing anyone can do! What’re you look’n to get killed? If they want something gone... it disappears!” Ken recognized the man as Sati’s father from the dossier. Jack held a cup and bashed his leg into the counter. Beer spilled onto the floor. He steadied himself. “They’re all untouchable! Ok? They don’t care about any of us! Just like the politicians they work for. Just like the corporations who own them. Give up already! You’re making fools of yourselves even talking to her!”

“At least they are trying to find out the truth!” Aditi threw a book at him.

“Truth!? What truth? Our daughter is dead!” Jack spilled more beer onto the counter. He angrily tossed a pile of bank notices and bankruptcy warnings onto the floor. Jack glared at his wife. “What other truth is there? How can anything else matter?”

“We want to bring the men responsible to justice.” Ken’s heart cracked seeing the family’s suffering. The muffled sounds of music and dancing came from an apartment above. “We want to stop them from killing anyone else.”

“If there was any real justice, my daughter would still be alive.” Jack left his beer and stumbled over to Ken. He spoke quietly. “I think they like it when children die.”

“I’m sorry that the system has failed your family, but where I’m from we catch killers.” Ken looked Jack in the eyes and pleaded. “We want to help. Where we can find the truth?”

“Go ask Judge Wallace.” Jack laughed. “He shut down the protest.”

“What were you demanding?” Val turned an ear toward Jack.

“Answers...” Jack shook his head dreamily. “Any answers at all.”

« ô »

Section Six’s courthouse was elaborately decorated and beautifully landscaped. The parking lot was flanked by rows of bright red and blue flowers. The courtyard had marble sidewalks and tall green hickory trees. The courthouse itself was a tall glass structure that dominated the area.

Val and Ken weaved through cubicles to the corner office of Judge Wallace. His office door was open. They entered the office without knocking. Judge Wallace was pale with thin gray hair. He was clean shaven and smiled when they entered.

“I heard we had some agents of oversight in Six. Please take a seat!” Wallace motioned to the two leather chairs before his desk. He leaned back in his plush chair and smiled. “I’m glad you found out about my open door policy. How can I help?”

“Yuen Kanda is to be transferred to Council lockup.” Val dropped a disk on Wallace’s desk. “His life is in danger inside the prison.”

“You want me to move a convicted killer?” Judge Wallace raised an eye brow.

“He was coerced into signing that confession.” Val sat on the edge of her seat.

“Coerced by whom, exactly?” Wallace winced as though he smelled sewage.

“White supremacists,” Val pointed at the disk, “they’ve infiltrated the prison.”

“Excuse me?” Wallace’s jaw dropped. He looked bewildered and offended.

“There is precedent, sir, a report by the Council Bureau of Investigation found that white supremacists are a significant threat to Pollux Max.” Ken sent the judge a link from his wrist. “There are over two dozen known racist operations selling illegal guns, manufacturing drugs and forging identities.”

“Sounds like typical gang activity.” Wallace shrugged.

“Street gangs have formed a truce.” Ken sat down in the elegant leather chair.

“Gangs don’t form truces! They spend all day killing each other! There’s been a lot of gang violence in Six.” Wallace spoke slowly. He motioned to a stack of disks. “I have reports that they’ve united to kill enforcers!”

“They’re demanding tapes.” Val leaned back and put her index and middle fingers on her chin. “Which reminds me: why aren’t those publicly available?”

“A clerical error. Stuff happens...” Wallace extended his arms out to his sides. He let out a sigh of desperation. “They were destroyed before their intended date.”

“Station law calls that a high crime.” Val’s voice sounded potent and ominous.

“It was an innocent misunderstanding.” Wallace smiled thinly.

“Certainly not infiltration within the department, though, right?” Ken quipped.

“Those enforcers risk their lives!” Wallace made fists on the desk.

“They’re also taking lives.” Ken felt his chest tense up.

Cherished Convictions

“It’s not their fault that some people have a death wish!” Wallace pointed out the window toward the courtrooms. Ken saw congested air traffic near the Pylon. “An investigation already concluded the enforcers acted in self defense!”

“It’s hard to have confidence without evidence.” Val clenched her jaw.

“Take a look out there! It’s total chaos! Your President has called for Station-wide martial law!” Wallace pounded his fist on the desk again. The disk bounced. “You won’t make trouble for us! I won’t allow further unrest!”

“Whose *us*, Judge?” Ken put his hands on the edge of the desk.

“Are you listening to yourselves right now? We have a major terrorist threat on Pollux Max. Martial law is in effect. I will not allow you to undermine those enforcers!” Wallace pointed his index finger at both of them. “I’m not going to be releasing criminals onto the streets. Especially not those connected to terrorists. We have new evidence connecting all of this to the plague in Three.”

“What new evidence?” Val was thoroughly skeptical.

“A confession from a terrorist.” Wallace leaned back in his chair.

“How can we be sure it’s legitimate?” Ken wanted more than hearsay.

“So why won’t you release Yuen?” Val was losing patience.

“Because I’m confident he still played his part.” Wallace scoffed. “He’s taking you two for a ride. You’re gullible enough to believe nonsense!”

“Records indicate that she lodged an appeal of her revoked contract.” Val locked eyes with the judge. “Her case states that the drugs were planted on her person by the arresting enforcers.”

“Her accusations are equal parts ridiculous and unfounded.” Wallace grunted.

“Don’t you find it curious she died so soon after lodging her appeal?” Ken asked.

“I find it curious that you ask.” Wallace’s voice was cold and threatening.

“I’m calling for a full investigation of George Onassis.” Val sounded unsatisfied. She dropped a second disk on the desk. “He’s got an airvan I want a closer look at.”

“Absolutely not! George would never be affiliated with terrorist trash. I won’t allow it!” Wallace shook his hands frantically. “We’ve gone to the same Identified Church for years. I knew him before he took his vows. Yahweh forgives, brothers don’t.”

« ô »

Judge Wallace owned a mansion on subdeck 1 and it extended into subdeck 2. Just below the mansion was an abandoned building on subdeck 3. It was listed as in violation of code: unfit for use. Val and Ken parked on the empty street. Ken was again amazed at the relative poverty so far from the docks.

Val showed Ken a list of messages. They were logged from Council Central Data.

Wallace to Onassis: [The Committee is in session.]

Onassis to Wallace: [Sinner sighted.]

Wallace to Onassis: [Prepare flight.]

“If you ever wonder if you should revoke a contract before entering a building, at least do yourself the favor of queuing it up.” Val showed Ken a hologram of two names: *Onassis and Wallace*. “If it doesn’t go your way, you won’t have time to search.”

Ken reached for his electrogun. Val waved his hand away from it.

“Save that for later. Remain calm. Never escalate.” Val smiled.

“Don’t we need a warrant?” Ken felt uncomfortable. His stomach twisted.

“We are the warrant, Detective Temu.” Val pressed a button on her wrist.

The rusted garage door opened quietly. The parking spaces were empty. Tape and rope hung on the wall. Ancient folk music played in the next room. Ken couldn’t make out any words. There was a gray door on the left. The walls were bare. Val and Ken took opposite sides of the door.

Val turned the handle and slowly pushed the door open. Ken saw a brightly lit living room. An ancient jukebox with an eagle crest blared from the opposite wall. Hanging in the back was a white-blue-red flag of Oceania. National symbols had been outlawed on Day One. History books carefully omitted them. In front of the flag was a podium with a book.

Val cut off the jukebox.

Ken walked over to the podium and saw a paper under the book. Paper was rarely used on Pollux Max. Generally used for ceremony or ornamental display, Ken wondered if it was a national anthem or some otherwise illegal artifact. Ken turned to Val and gestured to the paper. Val nodded and Ken pulled the paper from behind the book.

*We the undersigned do pledge to exact punishment
Upon those who are enemies of our race.
We solemnly swear to create a pious government.
This oath is made to the Identified Yahweh in Heaven,
This Committee rebels against tyranny.*

Onassis

Wallace

Novak

Ken looked up from the signatures. A gun barrel dominated Ken’s vision. Novak stood behind Val. He held two pistols. The other was against Val’s head. The door slammed shut with a thud. Wallace’s hand was on the door’s locking panel. Onassis stood beside the judge brandishing a silver knife.

Val was discreetly typing on her wrist computer. Ken stepped up to stand beside her. Ken looked over the barrel into Novak’s eyes. Novak and Ken stared at one another. Ken counted six breaths. Ken’s found it hard to breathe.

“You won’t frighten me. You give enforcers a bad name!” Ken looked over Novak’s shoulder and glared at Judge Wallace. “Resorting to terror only exposes the weakness of your position.”

“Shut up, mudblood!” Novak pressed the gun into Val’s neck. “Now put your hands up and turn around you Zionist lackey!”

“So this disgusting little “punishment committee” killed Sati because she was mixed. Killed Vivaan for dating your friend’s daughter. Then Tom because he was gay.” Val turned around slowly. She lifted her hands into the air and looked at Novak. “Then

you murdered Charlotte for Wallace. That's domestic terrorism. Why add the crime of threatening Council agents?"

"We're gonna hang you both from the government building." Novak wore a twisted smile. "Six is for Oceanians."

"Don't bother trying to call the Council. Signals don't get in or out of this room." Wallace stepped away from the door holding three masks. He gave a mask to both Onassis and Novak. "We're free to pull off our ghost faces. You're free to die quietly. Resistance will only prolong the pain."

Ghost faces... Ken recognized the term for undercover supremacists.

"You want an uprising." Val nodded toward the podium.

"We want to rule as Yahweh intended!" Onassis waved his knife.

"That plague is a signal of the end times. The chosen children must rise." Wallace beamed. He pulled a mask over his face. "Now you'll both learn your place."

"Revolts on Pollux Max are always crushed." Val chuckled to herself.

"This will bring more Council oversight." Ken shook his head.

"We'll see who rules Six when all is said and done." Wallace pulled out a rope.

"Vanquish them already!" Onassis pointed his knife's edge at Val.

Novak pulled both triggers. Ken closed his eyes. Both triggers chimed. Ken opened his eyes. The thumbprint readers had turned red. Novak gritted his teeth and snarled and lunged to pistol whip. Val drew her electrogun and fired in one fluid motion.

Novak slumped onto the deck. Nanite gel seeped into his bruised cheek. The nanites would keep him incapacitated. Wallace aimed his pistol at Val and pulled the trigger. Wallace's trigger chirped and turned red. Onassis taunted Val with a twinkle in his eye. Ken pulled his electrogun and aimed it at Onassis. Val kept hers centered on Wallace. Onassis lunged toward Val. Ken fired.

The nanite gel hit Onassis' chest. It dissolved his robe and soaked into his skin. The knife clanged to the floor. The old man crumbled into the fetal position. Wallace dropped his pistol and put both hands up. He backed away toward the door.

"A revolt is coming," Wallace grimaced. "You won't make it out of Six!"

"Ordinary people don't support your sick views. Good people in Six will not rise up for your racist regime," Val motioned toward the floor with her electrogun. "Get down so we can cuff you. Otherwise you get a wicked gel burn."

"How did you cancel our contracts without a signal?" Wallace lowered to his knees and placed his hands behind his back. "Without Council approval?"

"Ken, keep your gun on him while I help him into his new bracelets." Val holstered her weapon. She pulled back her sleeve to reveal a transmitter attached to her forearm. "You'll recognize it from under the hood of most squadcars. As an agent of the Council, I don't need their approval."

"Tyranny..." Wallace grumbled under his breath. "Even judges need approval."

Enforcers used transmitters to deactivate non-contracted weapons. Ken had never heard of an agent using one on their person. Mass shootings were resolved by revoking the shooter's contract. Some shootings lasted longer because the shooter's identity was not known. It depended on how fast enforcers could discover it. Only after a judge's petition was sent to the Council.

“She used the law against you; you used the law against innocent people. All you’ve done is promote violence and terror!” Ken looked Wallace in the eye and held his electrogun steady. “You abused your power. Now you won’t have any.”

Val tightened the cuffs three notches too tight and pulled off Wallace’s mask.

“I’ll be out of custody inside three hours.” Wallace smiled up at Ken.

“Not after the Council sees all this nationalist pomp and circumstance! They’ll want a catalogue before it all gets incinerated.” Val laughed from her belly. She slapped Wallace on the back and pointed to the walls. “Expensive stuff! I know the symbol on that one! And that flag! Wow! That helmet must be ancient! All headed to ashes.”

“This is our heritage!” Wallace’s face turned red.

“This was Earth’s sickness.” Val waved a hand toward the podium in the back. “I don’t always like our Council, but they don’t kill people over primitive nonsense.”

“You’re just a number,” Wallace smiled, “your death just profits lost.”

“The people on Pollux Max aren’t just a number. It’s our job to care.” Val pulled out her badge and gazed at it for a long moment. She smiled, put it back and raised Wallace by his cuffs. “Now for a thorough investigation of your Section government. I want to know who killed Rawat.”

Ken stepped over Onassis and Novak to unlock the door for Val.

“Unquestioned authority inevitably corrupts the possessor.” Val pushed Wallace through the door. The church airvan was running in the garage. “Today it’s Six, tomorrow another Section. You’re not the first and you won’t be the last.”

Appendix: Contemporary History

THREE KINGS PORT AUTHORITY
PRESENTS
THE HISTORY
OF
THREE RIVERS STATION
OR
“POLLUX MAX”

Historical Periods

Earth Era: Design and Initial Construction

Pylon Axis and Wheel

Principle Immigrants: Oceania
Southeastasia

First Era: Deployment and Initial Colonization

Section I and II

Principle Immigrants: Yuen-Yannan / Southeastasia (I)
Triton Engineering / Eurafrika (II)
Religious Influence: Zenbuddhist (I)
Zensunni (II)

Second Era: Expansion and Production

Section III and IV

Principle Immigrants: Southeastasia / India (III)
Eurafrika / Siberia (IV)
Religious Influence: Zenhindu (III)
Zenorthodox (IV)

Third Era: Autonomy and Social Upheaval

Section V and VI

Principle Immigrants: Southeastasia / Korea (V)
Oceania / North America (VI)
Religious Influence: Zencheondoism (V)
Zenchristian (VI)

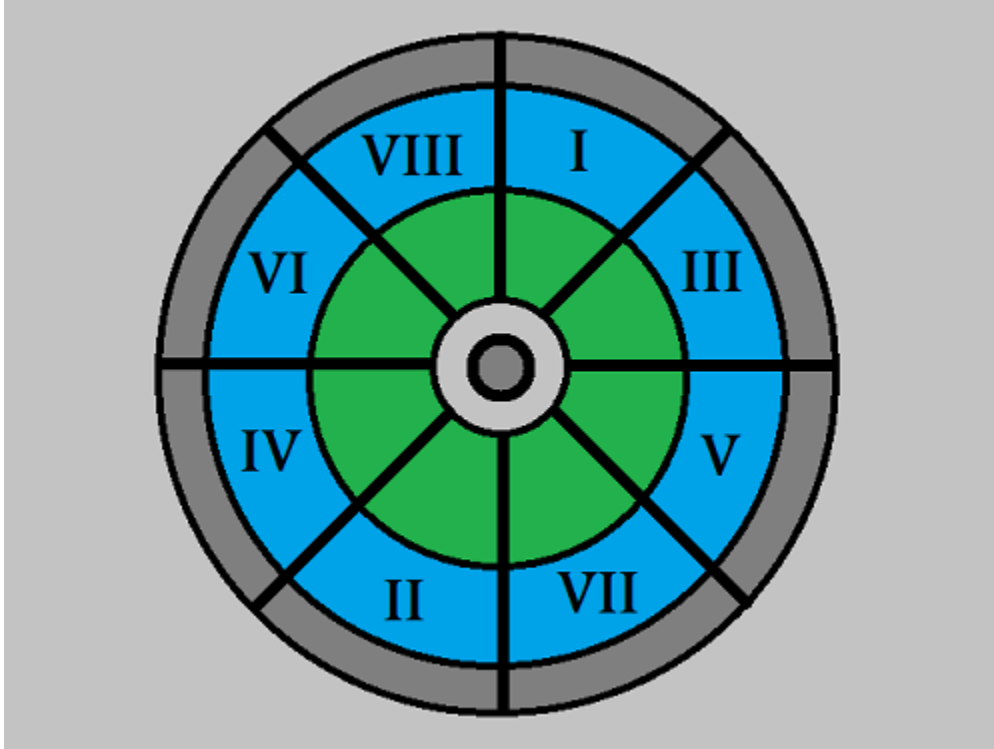
Fourth Era: Encapsulation and Cultural Exchange

Section VII and VIII

Principle Immigrants: Southeastasia / Tibet (VII)
Oceania / South America (VIII)
Religious Influence: Zenlami (VII)
Zenmaya (VIII)

Section Numbers

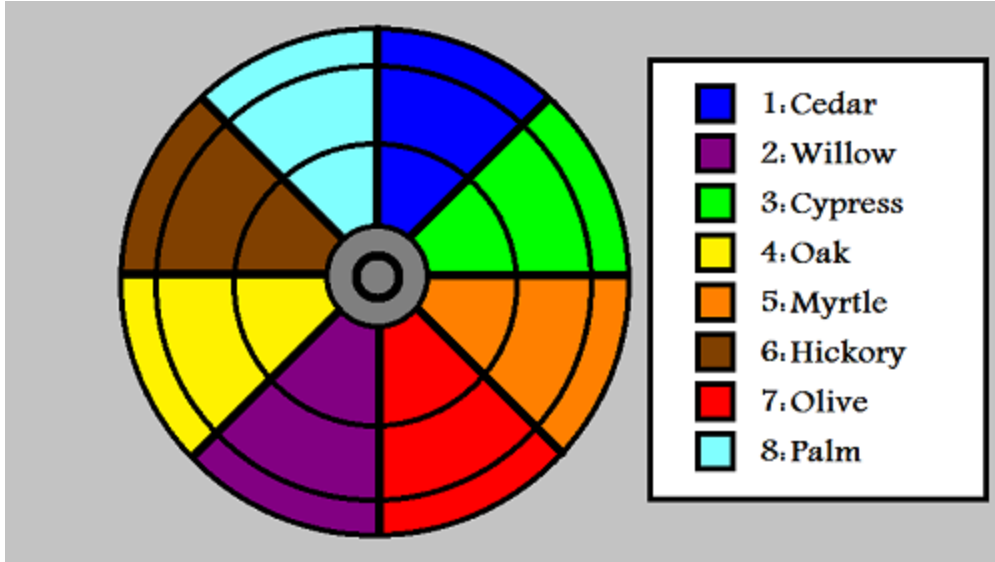
Section numbers were assigned based on the order of construction



<u>Number</u>	<u>Tree</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Industry</u>
Section One (I)	Cedar	Knights	Capitol
Section Two (II)	Willow	Pawns	Starport
Section Three (III)	Cypress	Rooks	Exchange
Section Four (IV)	Oak	Bishops	Factories
Section Five (V)	Myrtle	Kings	Stadium
Section Six (VI)	Hickory	Lions	Prison
Section Seven (VII)	Olive	Eagles	Gardens
Section Eight (VIII)	Palm	Snakes	Hololabs

Section Trees

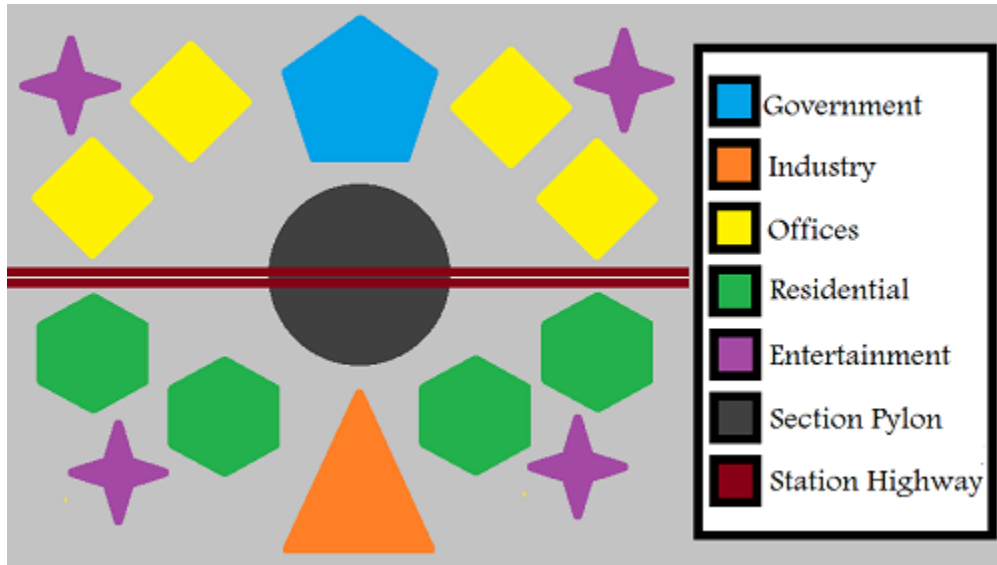
Between Section government buildings and the Section Pylon stands a natural tree replanted on the Station from Earth. Each Section has a unique tree.



Sections are colloquially referred to by their tree name or number.

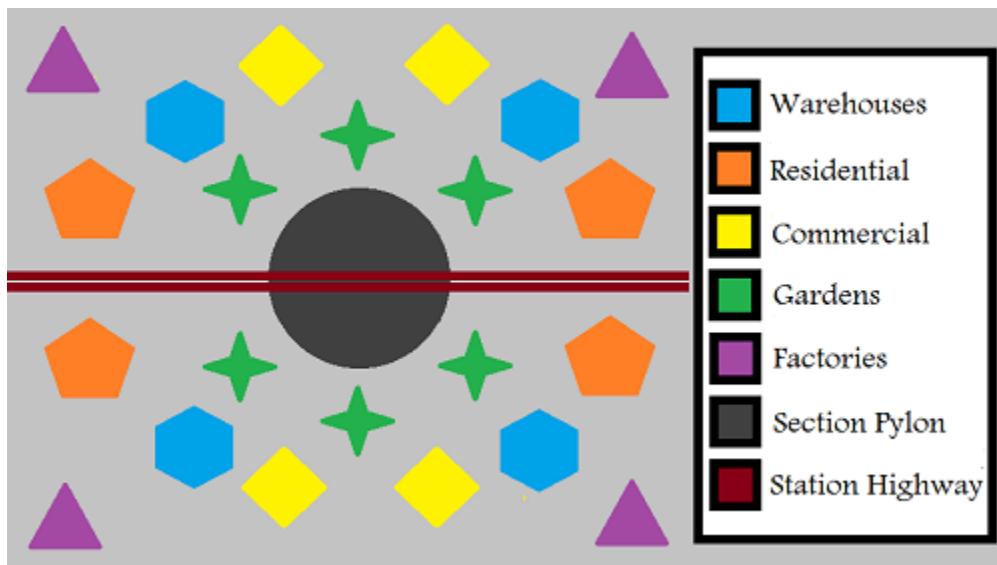
Skydeck Layout

This represents a typical zoning map, but Section governments rezone regularly.



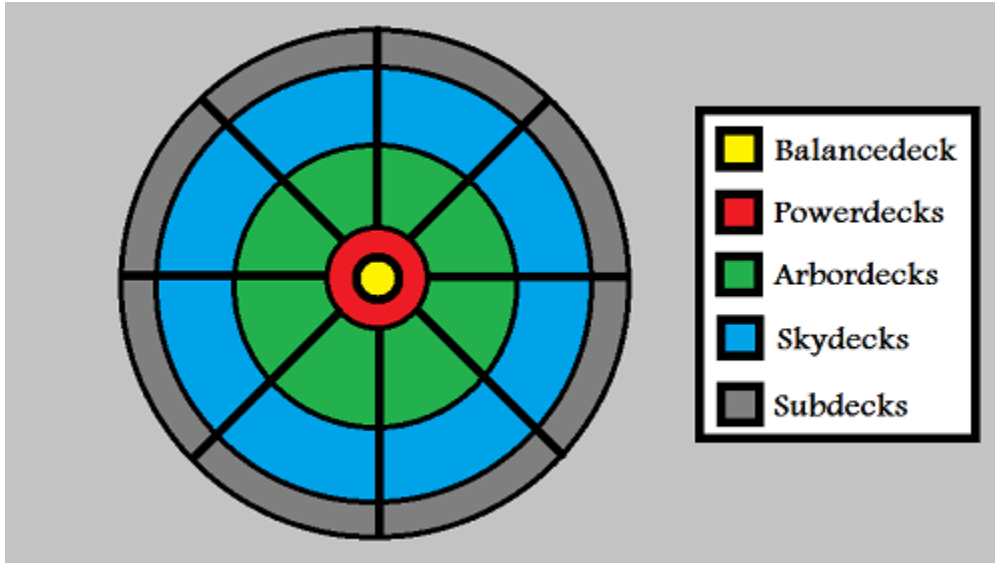
Subdeck Layout

This represents a typical zoning map, but Section governments rezone regularly.



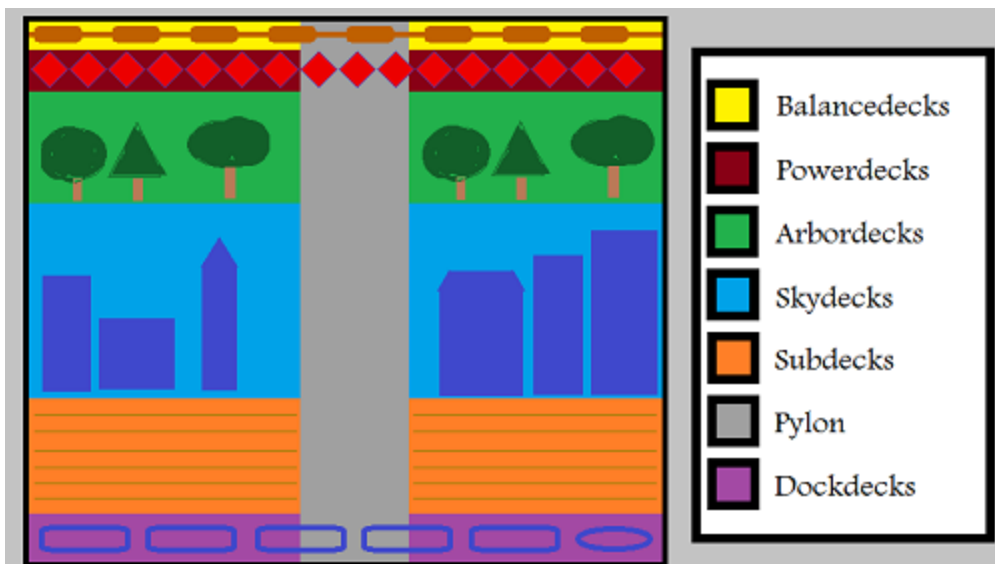
Deck Environments

The majority of the Station's population lives in the subdecks.



Cutaway Section

The majority of the Station's population lives and works on the subdecks.



Note: Not to scale.

Section Teams

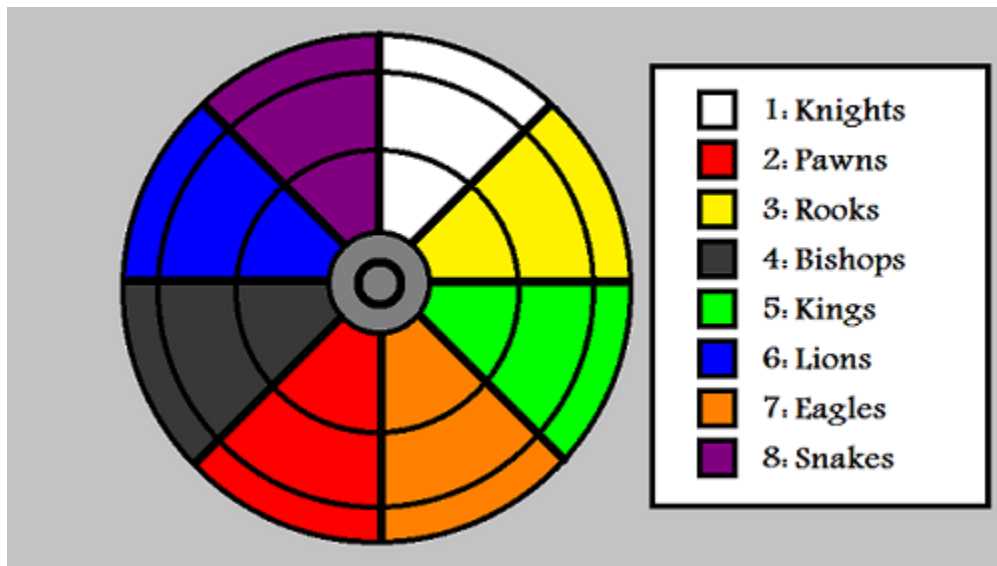
United Earth League (UEL)

Sol System Conference (SSC)
Sirius Max Conference (SMC)
Pollux Max Conference (PMC)
Colonial Worlds Conference (CWC)

Each Conference sends two teams to Earth for the League Championship.

Teams in the Pollux Max Conference:

- I White Knights
- II Red Pawns
- III Yellow Rooks
- IV Black Bishops
- V Green Kings
- VI Blue Lions
- VII Orange Eagles
- VIII Purple Snakes

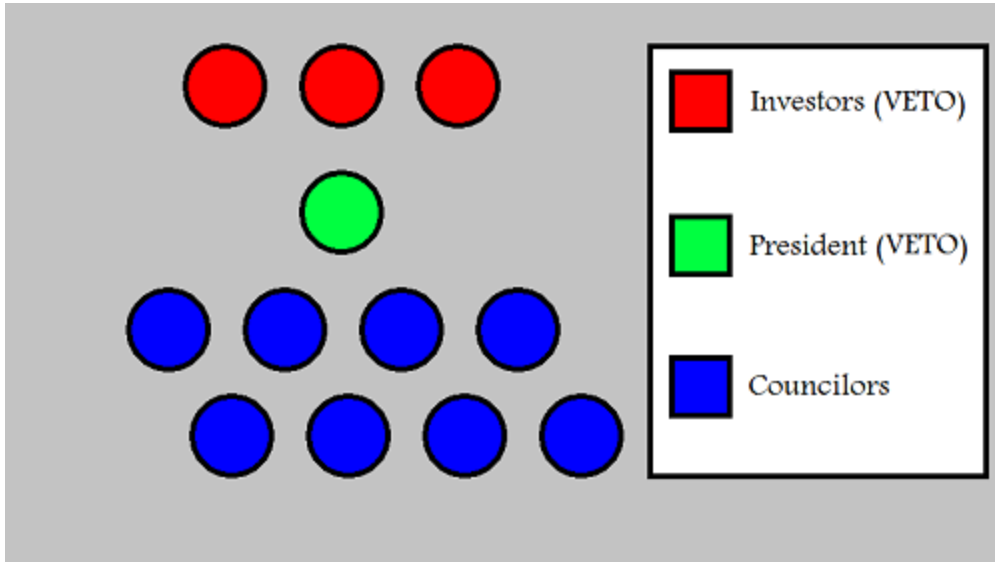


Station Government

Investors include Triton Engineering, Saturn Interstellar Systems and Yuen-Yunnan Inc.

President is elected in Station-wide popular vote.

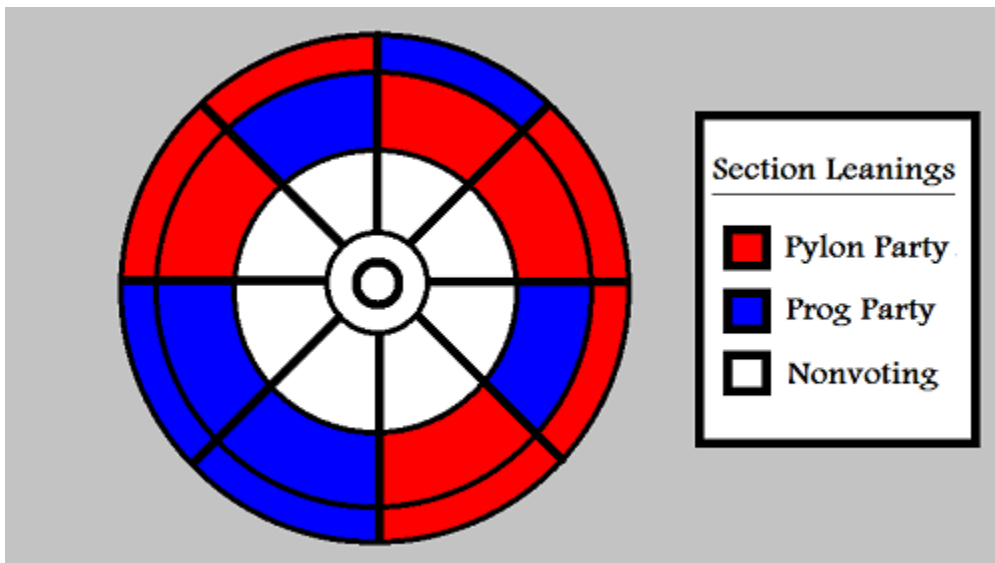
Councilors are elected from each Section by popular vote.



Political Representation

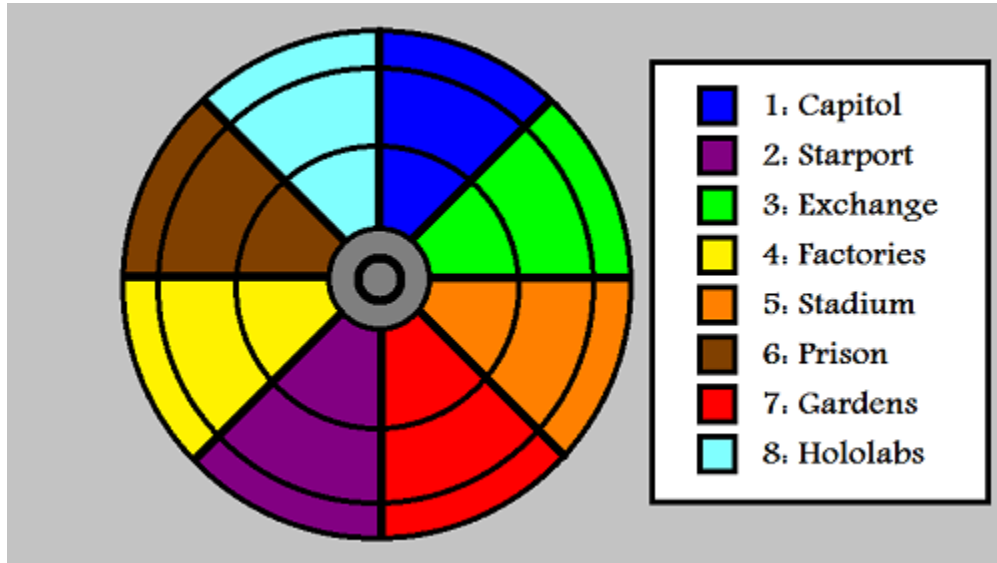
Grand Pylon Party represents corporate interests.

Pollux Progress Party represents working classes.



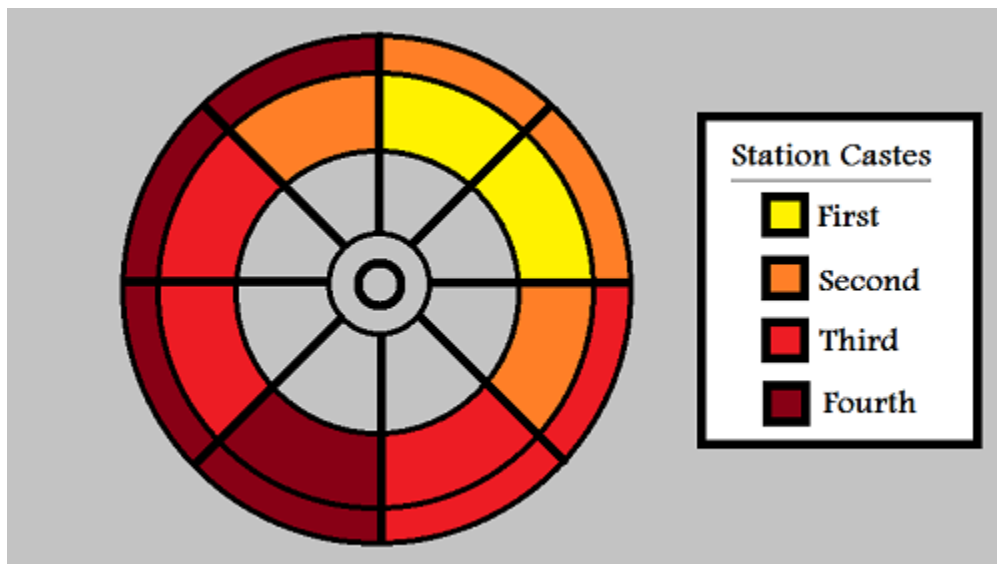
Industrial Infrastructure

Sections were brought online with specific commercial goals in mind.



Economic Mobility

The majority of the Station's population lives in the bottom tier.



First Era

Deployment and Colonization

Notable events

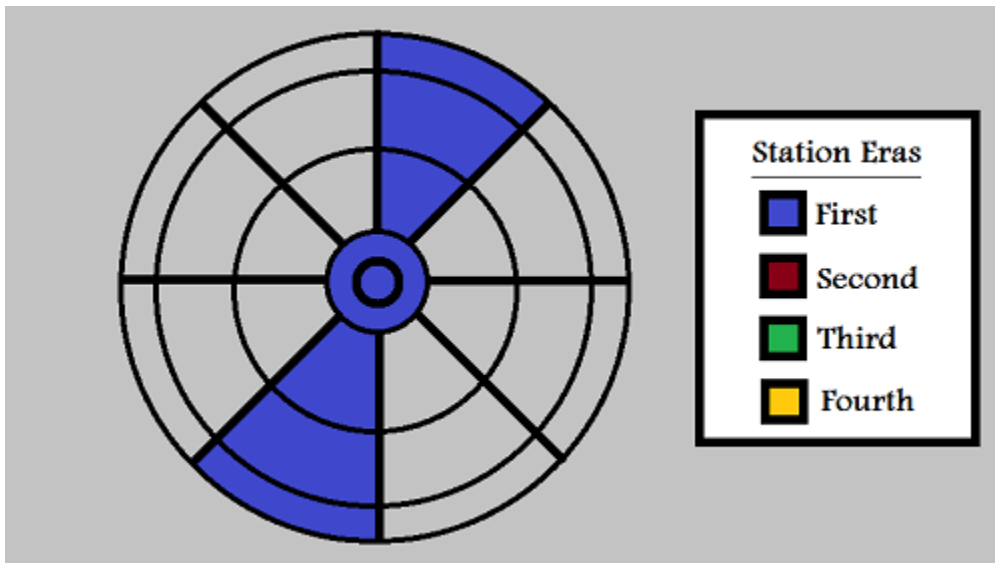
Red Revolt of Section II

Contract Revoking

First pirate wars

Pirax Tree Virus

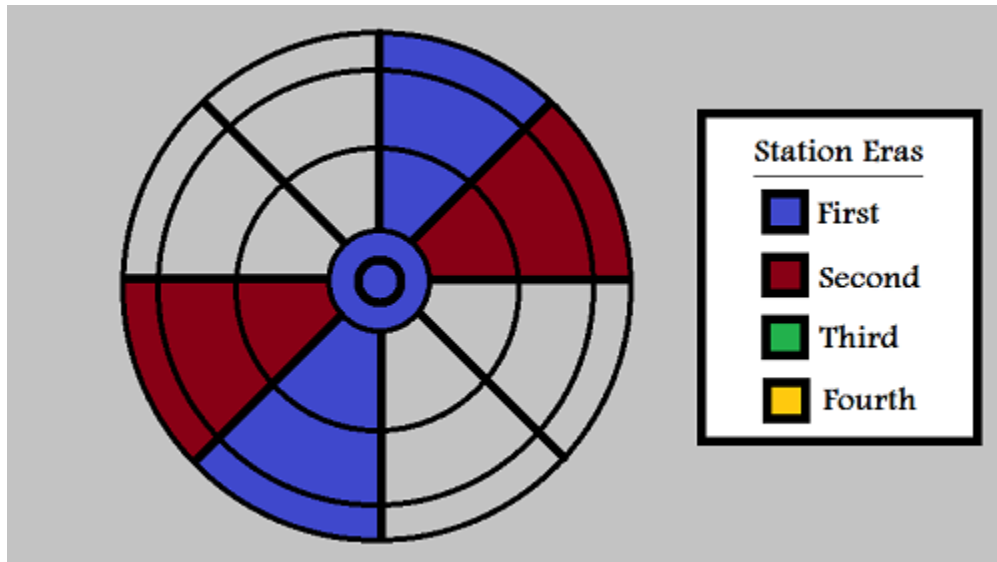
First Famine



The station frame and rail tubes were constructed by Investors first.
Once in orbit around Pollux, Cedar and Willow were installed.
Settlers arrived from Southeastasia (I) and Eurafica (II).

Second Era Expansion and Production

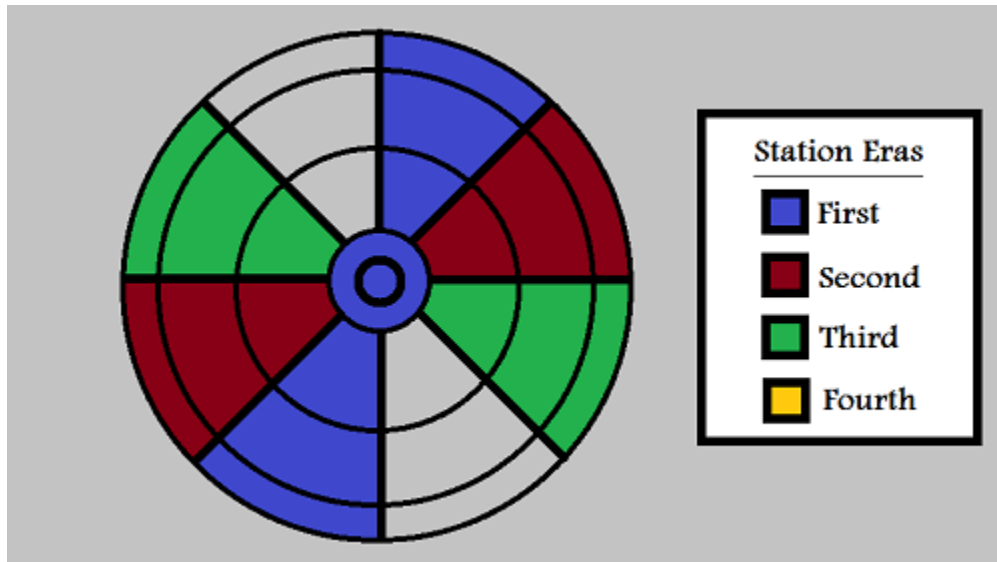
Notable events
Imminent Domains
Earth Pirate War
Manifest pioneers
Non-contract slavery
Great famine



Massive marketing campaigns yielded replacement citizens.
Cypress and Oak were installed under an anti-piracy coalition.
Settlers from Southeastasia / India (III) and Eurafrica / Siberia (IV).

Third Era Autonomy and Upheaval

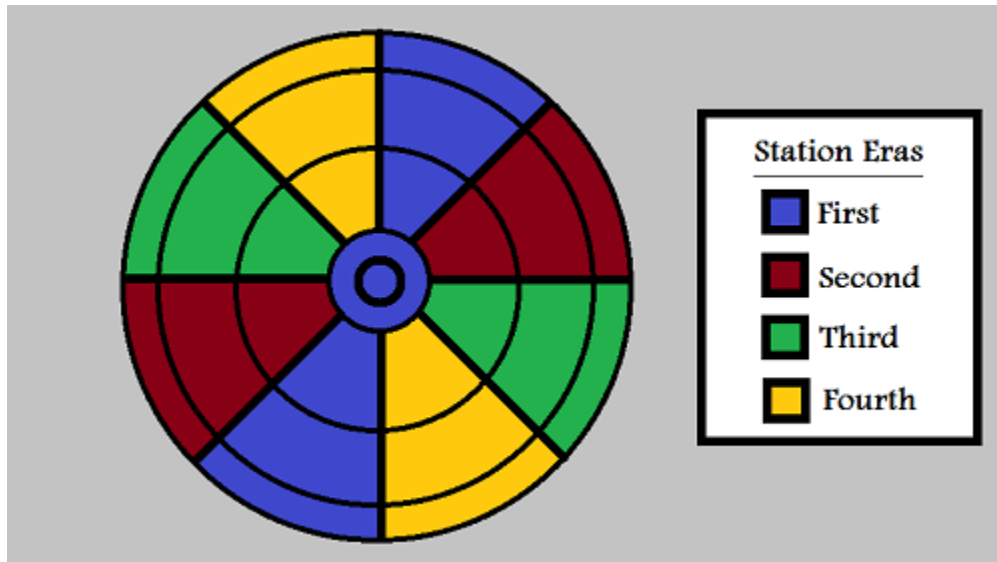
Notable events
Virus of Essex
Civil War
Recontraction
Great Depression
Colonies War



Massive unemployment and neo-nationalism cause widespread unrest.
Myrtle and Hickory were installed under anti-Earth coalition.
Settlers from Southeastasia / Korea (V) and Oceania / North America (VI).

Fourth Era Encapsulation and Exchange

Notable events
Export Explosion
Commercial Summits
Oligarchic League of Pollux
Great Recession
Artemis Revolution



Innovation and immigration contribute to a booming economy.
Olive and Palm installed by a pro-Investor coalition.
Settlers from Southeastasia / Tibet (VII) and Oceania / South America (VIII).

Derek Ian Cantwell

About the Author

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I found this **idea**

It belongs to us *all*

The idea is **to be**

The order is *love*

Every **science** and *spirituality*

Looks up into the **sky**

Sees the same *moon*

Mind measures the same *divine*

Perspectives vary in *human* fashion

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