

STEALING ALABAMA

by Allen Steele

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Philadelphia 7.4.70 / T-28.25.03

The Liberty Bell is much larger than he expected. Nearly fifteen feet tall, weighing over two thousand pounds, it's suspended by its oak arm between two cement supports, the ceiling lights casting a dull sheen from its bronze surface. Captain Lee stands in front of the bell, meditating upon the long crack that runs down its side, the Biblical inscription carved around its top: Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land unto All the Inhabitants Thereof. Lev. XXV:X_.

Reflected in the window behind the bell he can see the URS lieutenant who escorted him to the pavilion. The park ranger who met them there is young and nervous; his hand was sweaty when Lee clasped it, and he stuttered as he commenced a long-winded recital of the bell's history until Lee politely asked to be left alone. Now they wait patiently behind him, respectfully giving him a few moments alone.

Through the pavilion window, on the opposite side of the grassy mall, lies Independence Hall. The reception was already underway, yet Lee's in no hurry to join it, even though the party is being held in honor of him and his crew. It's a distinct privilege to be allowed to view the Liberty Bell; one of the first acts the government took after the Revolution was to close this site to the public. Citing the risk of a terrorist attack, the Internal Security Agency claimed that the bell was too valuable to be left unguarded during a national emergency, yet it's been nearly twelve years since the Revolution and still the Liberty Bell is off-limits to everyone save the party elite. Lee can't help but to wonder if the government fears what the average citizen might think if he saw for himself the artifact from which the Liberty Party took its name, and read the words inscribed upon it.

There's still time to call it off. A few words whispered to the right people, a couple of discrete phone calls using innocuous code phrases, and the conspiracy would not so much unravel as it would simply cease to exist. Everyone involved would stop what they're doing and assume fall-back positions, and with any luck the Prefects would never know that a plot had transpired.

Tonight's his last chance to back out. After this, there's no turning back, no acceptable alternative except success; failure means treason and treason means death. Which was why he's come here, to this particular place; not as a symbolic display of patriotism, as everyone assumes, but simply to give himself a few minutes to think.

So is he going through with this or not?

Lee still hasn't answered his own question as he turns away from the bell. The lieutenant snaps to attention; the ranger self-consciously does the same even though it isn't necessary.

"All right, Lieutenant," he says quietly, "I'm done here. Let's go to the party."

As appropriate for the Fourth of July, the President's Reception is being held in the cobblestone square behind Independence Hall. Once the guests make their way through the security checkpoints, they find that an enormous screen has been unfurled across the rear of the red-brick colonial courthouse, upon which real-time images of the Alabama are being projected. Lee ignores the screen as he saunters through the crowd, untasted glass of champagne in his gloved left hand, his right hand held formally behind his back. In the humid warmth of the July evening, his white dress uniform clings to his skin. He deliberately arrived after his senior officers; attending this fete was the thing he was most reluctant to do, yet his appearance is mandatory. Besides, there's one last bit of important business that needs to be settled.

So Captain Lee mingles with the gentlemen in their batswing ties and frock coats and the ladies in their bodices and gowns, smiling and bowing, pausing now and then to shake some stranger's hand or be photographed with another, yet taking care to remain in motion so as not to be cornered for very long. Along the edge of the crowd, he can see the uniforms of URS soldiers: black berets, jodhpurs ducked into leather knee boots, polished rifles held at parade rest. The red softball-size spheres of surveillance floaters hover above the partygoers, watching, listening, scanning. Security is tight; the president is supposed to be flying up from Atlanta for the occasion, although Lee has little doubt that he will be unavoidably detained. Philadelphia is a little too close to the New England border for the President of the United Republic of America to consider himself entirely safe. Indeed, very few people ever see him outside the capitol, although the news media regularly show footage of him attending events in places as far distant as Southern California.

Spotting another pair of white service uniforms beneath the boughs of a walnut tree, Lee makes his way through the crowd, and finds Tom Shapiro, the Alabama's First Officer, huddled with his Executive Officer, Jud Tinsley. He can't make out what they're saying until he's nearly

beside them. Tinsley sees him coming, and briefly touches Shapiro's elbow as he straightens his shoulders.

"Evening, Captain," Shapiro says.

"Gentlemen..."

"Enjoying the party, sir?" Tinsley raises his bare hand to stifle a burp. "Pretty nice send-off they're giving us."

"It'll do." Lee knows the XO is drunk even before he notices the empty champagne glass on the low wall below the tree. "Just make sure you don't enjoy yourselves too much. Jud, button your tunic and put on your gloves. We're in public."

"Sorry, sir." Tinsley's face reddens; he digs into his trouser pockets for his gloves. "It's kinda warm tonight."

"Enjoy it. You'll be cold soon enough." Lee steps forward to fasten the top brass button of the younger man's uniform. Shapiro, at least, is properly dressed and reasonably sober. "You're not talking about anything you shouldn't, are you?" he murmurs when he's close enough that only the two of them can hear him.

Tinsley starts to mutter a half-hearted denial. "Just a couple of details," Shapiro says quietly. He glances up at the low tree limbs above them. "We figured the floaters couldn't sneak up on us over here."

Good thinking, but not good enough. "Not the time nor place," Lee says. "Save it for..."

He catches himself. The next meeting, he was about to say, yet there aren't going to be any more meetings, are there? After the reception they'll be driven straight to the airport, where they're scheduled to board a jet to Gingrich Space Center. By 0600 tomorrow morning they'll be in quarantine along with the rest of the crew, and there will be no opportunity for any of them to have a conversation without risk of being monitored. If they wait until they reach the Alabama, it may be too late to make any changes. Perhaps Tom has the right idea after all.

"Has something come up?" Lee casually gazes up at the oak tree, just to make certain a floater isn't hiding among the leaves. "Anything I should know about?"

Neither of his senior officers say anything, although they give each other a reticent look. "Nothing we haven't already gone over, sir," Shapiro says at last. "It's just ... I mean, the ignition lock-out..."

"Don't worry," Lee says. "We're taking care of..." Tinsley coughs into his fist, his right foot innocuously prodding Lee's shoe. The captain glances his way, sees the XO gazing past his shoulder. A swish of a crinoline skirt from close behind, then a soft hand touches his arm.

"If I didn't know better, Robert," Elise says, "I'd swear you were avoiding me."

She's half-right; if Lee had known she would be here, he would have avoided her. Yet as soon as he hears her voice, he realizes this particular encounter is inevitable: it's only natural that she would attend this reception, and not only because they were once married.

Yet, as the captain turns toward Elise Rochelle Lee, he feels no regret over having left her. Their marriage lasted for more than seventeen years, and yet she remains as icily beautiful as when they first met at an Academy mixer; it's only in the last eighteen months that he's come to realize that he barely knows her. The fact that she's kept his name long after their legal separation is yet another indication that she married him for reasons that had more to do with social stature than love; for all intents and purposes, she's still the wife of Captain R.E. Lee, commanding officer of the URSS Alabama.

"I wasn't. I simply didn't see you among all these people." Lee takes her silk-gloved hand, gives her a quick buss on the cheek. "You look splendid ... is that a new dress?"

"Flatterer." Elise folds her hand around his elbow as her gaze shifts to Shapiro and Tinsley. "Pardon me, gentlemen, but may I borrow your captain? There's someone who wants to meet him."

"By all means." Shapiro assays a formal bow as he steps back. Tinsley does the same, and Lee can't help but notice that his eyes never leave Elise's cleavage. Those breasts once attracted him, too; it took him a long time to discover that the heart beneath them was cold. "Captain, madame..."

"Your father?" Lee murmurs as Elise escorts him away. "I figured he would send you to find me."

"Perhaps." Her smile becomes enigmatic as they stroll through the crowd. "Why, is it such a burden for you to see him one last time? After all, he had quite a bit to do with your selection."

A soft purr from somewhere just above his head. A floater has picked them up; now it's following them as they move through the reception. Even if he was inclined to give a candid answer -- thank you, but I've accomplished this on my own -- now isn't the time. "For which I'm grateful," Lee says. "And no, it isn't a burden."

"Good. I rather hoped not." Her hand slides down to take his own. "Besides, he has a treat

for you."

They find Joseph R. Rochelle, the senator from Virginia, standing in front of the screen, surrounded as always by aides, Liberty Party apparatchik, local political cronies, and sycophants of one sort or another. A short, avuncular man for whom somatotropin therapy has erased nearly twenty years from his real age, he now looks only slightly older than his former son-in-law. His back is turned as they approach; he must have just finished another one of his anecdotes, for everyone laughs out loud. Senator Rochelle rarely lacks for an audience, in or out of Atlanta.

"Oh, very good! You've found him!" Senator Rochelle beams as his daughter leads Captain Lee into the midst of the circle, then he half-turns to make an expansive gesture at the screen looming above them. "I was just saying that someone ... I won't say whom, of course ... in Atlanta had insisted upon christening your ship the Virginia." A broad wink that everyone understands. "But of course, that particular someone didn't have quite as much clout as the gentleman from another state."

More laughter from the senator's entourage, and Lee forces himself to smile appreciatively. While the Alabama was still under construction, there had been considerable in-fighting within Congress over which state the vessel would be named after. In the end, the President settled the dispute by christening it in honor of the state whose NASA center had been most responsible for its research and development. An ironic choice since NASA itself no longer exists; it's now yet another civilian agency dismantled under the National Reform Program, its primary functions folded into the Federal Space Agency, an arm of the United Republic Service.

But Lee doesn't say anything, nor does he need to; it's only necessary for him to smile and bow as the Senator introduces him to a dozen or so men and women whose names he forgets as soon as he shakes their hands, while Elise stands between them, playing the role of the loyal daughter and loving wife. When all was said and done, this was about appearances; once again, Lee realizes that he hadn't chosen his wife so much as she had chosen him, and then only with her father's pragmatic approval. The Senator needed a son-in-law from the Academy of the Republic, an up-and-coming URS officer whose career he could advance from a discrete distance in order to further his own political ambitions. Tonight's the big payoff for everyone.

As the Senator begins telling another one of his stories, Lee's attention drifts to the screen towering above them. The Alabama hangs suspended in low orbit above Earth, the spotlights of its skeletal drydock reflecting dully off the ship's light-grey fuselage. A tug gently maneuvers a cylindrical barge into position below the ship's spherical main fuel tank, in preparation for unloading another ten thousand tons of deuterium and helium-3 strip-mined from the mountains of the Moon. Fueling operations will continue non-stop right up until ten hours before the beginning of Alabama's scheduled launch at 2400 tomorrow night.

Once again, Lee finds himself wondering if he should call it off. Everything depends upon the timetable being kept. Nothing can be allowed to go wrong between now and then ... and yet there are a hundred different ways it could all fall apart.

"Why the long face, Captain?" One of the nameless men to whom he had just been introduced nudges his left shoulder. "Concerned about the mission?"

"No, not at all." Out of the corner of his eye, Lee catches Elise studying him. "Just observing the fuel-up, that's all."

"Robert doesn't worry. He's the coolest officer the Academy has ever produced." Senator Rochelle favors his son-in-law with a look which might resemble fondness unless one happened to look closely at his eyes. "He just wants to get out of here and see to his ship. Isn't that right, Bob?"

"Anything you say, Duke." Lee addresses the Senator by his nickname, and this elicits more laughter from the cronies. No one ever says no to the Senator from Virginia; by much the same token, Duke knows that Lee doesn't like to be called Bob. Tit for tat.

Rochelle chuckles as he pats Lee on the shoulder, then he takes him by the arm. "If you'll excuse us," he says to the others, "I'd like to have a few words with the captain." They nod and murmur as Rochelle leads Lee away, Elise falling in behind them. "This will take just a moment," Rochelle says softly once they're out of earshot. "There's someone here who wants to meet you."

Believing the Senator wants to introduce him to yet another politician, Lee suppresses a sigh as he lets Rochelle walk him past the edge of the crowd. Yet Duke surprises him; instead, he takes him behind the screen, toward the back entrance of Independence Hall. A pair of soldiers stand guard near the door, their rifles at ready; behind them is a prefect, wearing the calf-length dark grey overcoat and braided cap that is the uniform of ISA officers. The soldiers step aside when they see the Senator, but the prefect doesn't budge. He silently waits as Rochelle produces his I.D. folder; Elise reluctantly does the same, giving the intelligence officer a haughty glare as she holds up her card out him to inspect. Only Lee is spared; apparently the prefect recognizes

him, for he shakes his head as Lee reaches into his pocket. Satisfied, the officer turns and opens the narrow wooden door leading into the building.

The hallway is silent, vacant save for another soldier inside the entrance. Their footsteps echo faintly off the old plaster walls as Rochelle beckons Lee and his daughter toward a double-door to the right; he gives them a quick look-over as if to check their appearance, then he quietly taps on the door. A moment passes; the door clicks as it's unlocked from within, then it's opened by yet another soldier standing just inside.

Lee immediately recognizes this place from history texts he's studied since childhood: the Assembly Room, where the Declaration of Independence was signed and the First Constitution debated and framed. Small wooden desks, each with its inkpot and quill pen, arranged in semi-circular rows around a low platform on which a long table had been placed in front of three high-backed chairs. And here, in the middle of the oak-paneled room with his back turned toward them, stands Hamilton Conroy, the President of the United Republic of America.

Senator Rochelle stops at the wooden railing at the back of the room. "Mr. President," he says formally, "may I present to you Captain Robert E. Lee, commander of the United Republic Service Spaceship Alabama."

Hearing the senator, President Conroy turns away from the gaunt middle-aged man with whom he had been conversing. Rotund and short of stature, with narrow brown eyes set in a broad face, the president is smaller than he seems on government netv; now he seems diminished by the room itself. A pretender to history, Lee reflects. A charlatan aspiring to greatness.

"Indeed." The president smiles briefly as he walks toward the railing, his hands clasped together behind his frock coat. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, Captain. Your father-in-law has told me great things about you."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Lee doesn't relax from the rigid stance he automatically assumed the moment he saw the Commander-In-Chief. "I hope I live up to your expectations."

The president laughs drily, without much humor. "At ease, Captain. You're among friends here." He glances at Senator Rochelle. "Duke, you should have let him know I would be here. This reception is in his honor, after all. No need for surprises."

"The ISA requested I keep your presence secret," Rochelle says. "Security considerations."

"Yes, of course." The president dismisses the senator with scarcely a nod, his attention solely focused upon Lee. "Sorry to take you away from the party, Captain. I only wished to meet you in person. I haven't had a chance to do so before, and after tonight I'll never have an opportunity to do so again."

"Yes sir, Mr. President." Lee clasps his hands behind him. From the corner of his eye he sees Elise doing a slow burn. She's probably been awaiting this moment for several weeks; now she's being ignored, with no one bothering to introduce her to the president. "I apologize if I've taken you away from urgent business."

The smile fades from the president's face. "Only matters of state." He turns toward the man with whom he had been speaking. "I'm don't know if you've ever met our Director of Internal Security before ... Mr. Shaw, Captain Lee."

"Never before now, Mr. President." Roland Shaw glides down the aisle to extend his hand. "However, I believe we have a meeting at the Cape tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir, we do." Lee clasps Shaw's hand. "A last-minute detail before the shuttle launch. Security procedures..."

"Of course." The left corner of Shaw's mouth tics upward. "We were just discussing a similar sort of thing."

"Really?" Senator Rochelle tries to reinsert himself in the conversation. "Anything you care to share with us?"

Shaw frowns. "Not much to talk about," he says, and for a moment his eyes meet Lee's. "A round-up of dissidents who may be opposed to this mission. Simply a precaution."

"A wise idea." Rochelle quickly voices his approval. "I'm glad we were able to renew the Alien and Sedition Act in the last session. It only seemed prudent, given our current situation."

The current situation. As always, the Republic is under constant siege by its enemies, both abroad and within. The Commonwealth of New England, which still maintains armed troops at the borders of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Pacifica, whose guerilla army wages daily skirmishes with URS forces over disputed territory in the northern Sierra Nevada range. The European Commonwealth, which continues to enforce trade embargoes until the Republic agrees to remove its orbital nukes from geostationary orbit. Meanwhile, alleged spies were being arrested every day, in cities and towns all over the country. Last night a high-school teacher was publicly hanged in Houston. One of her former students claimed that she was using a satphone to transmit information to France; although the accused repeatedly claimed innocence during her trial and the

satphone was never found, the student was the son of a prominent Liberty Party official, and therefore his word was beyond question. The teacher's execution was carried out a few hours after the trial's completion and shown live on Govnet.

The president acknowledges the senator with only a vague nod; for the moment, he's disinterested in politics. He steps a little closer to the railing, his solemn eyes casually examining the gold braid on Lee's epaulets. "We have something in common, Captain," he quietly observes. "We're both named after famous ancestors."

"Yes sir, Mr. President." Lee continues to stare straight ahead. "Robert E. Lee was my great-grandfather." Or at least, so he's been told; in Virginia, nearly everyone who's last name is Lee presumes to be descended from the general who led the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Lee's claims to family ancestry is no more or less valid than anyone else's.

"Just as I'm descended from Alexander Hamilton, yes." The president reaches up to smooth a minute wrinkle on the left shoulder of Lee's uniform. "I'm curious ... is there anything that General Lee ever said that strikes a chord with you? Something that has carried you to this place?"

Warmth curls around Lee's neck. Although the president doesn't look directly at him, he feels the eyes of everyone else in the room. Behind the president, Shaw watches him silently, his gaze never leaving his face.

"Yes, sir, he did." Lee's mouth is dry. "'Duty is the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should never wish to do less.'"

President Conroy raises his eyes to meet Lee's. For a few seconds that seem much longer he regards him with cool appraisal. A small vein pulses in his neck below his right ear; Lee finds himself watching it with an abstract sort of fascination.

Does he suspect? Has he learned of the conspiracy? Two days ago, Lee wrote a letter, addressed to both Elise and her father, which he stored in his desk's memory. The desk was instructed not to release its contents until after 2400 hours tomorrow night, but someone -- Elise, the senator, the ISA -- might have decrypted it. If they did...

"'Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness,'" the president says at last. "'Let the thirteen States, bound together in a dissoluble Union, concur in erecting one great American system, superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence, and able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world.'" He pauses. "Do you understand, Captain?"

"Yes sir, Mr. President."

"My great-grandfather wrote those words almost three hundred years ago, not long after this great country was founded in this very same room." The president speaks as if Lee hasn't said anything. "The conflicts were different then, but yet they remain much the same today. America is destined for greatness, and it's our responsibility to achieve its destiny in the stars themselves. Out there, the Republic shall become ageless. Immortal."

"Yes sir, Mr. President."

The president slowly nods. "You're doing a great service to this country, Captain. For this, the Republic owes its gratitude." His left hand moves from behind his back, extends across the railing. "God bless you, son. Good luck."

Lee has a sudden impulse to spit in his face. No one could have stopped him, not even the soldier standing behind him. Instead, he clasps the president's hand. His palm feels small and limp within his linen glove; Lee can't resist the impulse to give his exert a little more pressure than usual.

"Thank you, sir," he says. "I'll do my best."

The president winces, but smiles back at him, and it's in that instant Lee's last remaining doubts vanish. No more hesitation, no more second thoughts...

Tomorrow, he's going to steal the Alabama.

Huntsville 7.4.70 / T-26.30.38

The first fiery red chrysanthemum has just exploded above the Tennessee River when Jorge Montero's desk buzzes. Jorge doesn't hear it at first; he's out on the balcony with his family, enjoying the cool breeze that has come with the passing of the day, watching the skyrockets as they soar upward from the river side several miles away. The delayed boom of the fireworks almost drowns out the phone from inside the house; it's his son who notices it first.

"Call, Papa." Carlos barely looks away as an orange blossom opens in the sky, its iridescent petals coruscating down around the holo of the single-star Republic flag looming above the modest Huntsville skyline.

Jorge grunts, pushes himself out of his chair. Rita gives him a little smile as he tromps

past her to the glass-paneled door leading into the spare bedroom he's converted into an office; Marie is curled up her lap, her head nestled against her mother's shoulder. "Hurry back," Rita murmurs. "You're going to miss it."

"It'll take just a second." Jorge had switched off the inside lights so that their eyes would become night-adapted; he almost tells the room to turn them back on again, but thinks better of it as he gropes his way through the dark office. A blue flash through the window illuminates his desk, making it a little easier to find, and he picks up the phone just as it buzzes a fourth time. "Hello?"

An anonymous voice. "Excuse me, is this the Jackson residence?"

Ice tickles the nape of his neck. "I'm sorry, no. You've got the wrong number."

"My mistake. Sorry." There's a click, then the dial tone.

Jorge's hand trembles as he puts down the phone. He stands alone in the office for a few moments, staring at nothing in particular, feeling his heart beat against his chest. Then he turns away from the desk, walks to the office door and opens it. Light from the upstairs hallway causes him to squint; he deliberately shuts his eyes as he quickly moves across the hall to Carlos's room. Fortunately, the kid has switched off the lights; Jorge goes to the window next to the bed and touches the stud that deopagues the glass.

Several coupes are parked on the street in front of their apartment house, yet none look unfamiliar or out of place. As he watches, though, a dark blue midi cruises down St. Clair. It slows to a crawl as it comes within sight of his building; as it passes beneath a street lamp he catches a brief glimpse through the windshield of two men. They're peering up at his apartment.

The midi pulls over to the curb. Its rear lights flash and its fan skirts billow as it settles to the ground, but the doors don't open. The car remains still, as if its driver is waiting for something.

Jorge opagues the window, takes a deep breath. Then he hurries back across the hall to his office. Another pyrotechnic flash from across the city, followed several seconds later by distant thunder. "Hello, desk," he says, careful to keep the office lights off. "I.D. Jorge, password totem pole."

"Good evening, Jorge." The wall behind the desk briefly displays the start-up screen before replacing it with a picture he had taken of Marie and Carlos in Big Spring Park one autumn afternoon several years ago. "Would you like to read your mail?"

"No." Jorge opens the closet, pulls out the canvas duffel bag he packed nearly a month ago. "Locate all files prefixed zero-two and erase. Password one-nine-gamma."

"Files located and erased." A pause. "You have a phone subroutine attached to this command. Do you wish for me to activate it now?"

"Yes, please. Password two-nine-epsilon." The desk would now place a call to the next person in the chain and repeat the same sequence of code-words he had heard only a couple of minutes ago, alerting that individual in the same way he had been warned. Jorge hopes that the person who called him had been able to make a clean getaway, and that the next guy in line will receive the signal in time.

No time to worry about that now. "Make another call. Phonebook number twelve, password six-zero-six. Send voxcard in memory, attach encrypted file prefixed zero-three-zero. Then erase all data from memory. That's all, desk." Without waiting for an acknowledgement, Jorge drops the bag on top of the books and disks stacked on his desk and crosses the room to the balcony. His wife and children are still watching the fireworks. Rita looks around as he opens the door.

"It's time," he says quietly.

Her mouth falls open and fear briefly crosses her face, then she quickly puts on clamp on her emotions before Marie notices. "All right, kids," she says, swinging their daughter off her lap as she stands up, "that's enough fireworks. Papa's got a big surprise for you."

"But I want to watch!" Marie wails. In the far distance, skyrockets sail upward two and three at a time, their crackling detonations overlapping one another: poom! poppa-poppa-poom! poom! "I don't wanna go!"

"It's almost over. Now we're going out for ice cream." Rita picks Marie up again, turns to Carlos. "C'mon, you too. We're all going."

Carlos looks away from the city, stares across the balcony at his father. Their eyes meet, and in that instant Jorge knows that the boy has guessed the truth. His son may only be thirteen, but he's far more mature than his years; a few weeks ago, Jorge had told him everything -- at least, everything that he needed to know -- and warned him that this moment might come. Now Carlos simply nods. "Sure," he says softly. "Sounds like fun."

Jorge gives him a reassuring nod as he steps aside to let Rita carry Marie through the door. The little girl's still fussing over missing the rest of the fireworks, but there's no time to

comfort her now. He walks to the edge of the balcony, glances over the side. No one in the courtyard behind the apartment house, and his coupe is still parked in front of its recharger. "Seen anyone down there?" he murmurs as Carlos joins him at the railing.

"I haven't really been looking. No, I don't think so." The teenager is shaking. "Papa, that call..."

"It's begun." It figures the ISA would pick this day for their next crackdown; the mass-arrest of D.I.'s -- "dissident intellectuals," to use a favorite Party expression -- on the Fourth of July is sure to make every patriotic heart swell with pride. "We've got to hurry. Help Mama with Marie, will you?"

"Okay." Carlos hesitates. "Can we take anything?"

"Only the clothes on your back. Sorry." Carlos nods gravely, then heads for the balcony door. Jorge is about to follow him when an oval shadow passes across the balcony.

He looks up just in time to spot a floater moving past a floodlight on the cornice of the apartment house next door.

They're already too late. The prefects are closing in.

Rita has taken a moment to open the hall closet and wrap a light nylon jacket around Marie's shoulders. His daughter is on her own two feet now, but as petulant as only a five-year-old can be, stamping angrily and insisting that she doesn't want ice cream. His wife stares at Jorge as he comes out of the office, the canvas bag dangling from his left shoulder. Carlos emerges from his bedroom; he's grabbed a vest from his room, and Jorge catches a glimpse of something as he hides it in his pocket. Probably his pad; Carlos never goes anywhere without it. Jorge hopes it doesn't contain any incriminating information. Not that it matters; the court tends to reach a verdict first, then examine the evidence later, and then only if it cares to obey the letter of the Revised Constitution.

"All right." Jorge tries hard to sound carefree, if only for Marie's sake. "Let's go get some ice cream." Then he leads the way down the stairs to the entrance foyer.

The midi is still parked in front of the building, but now two men stand on the sidewalk in front of the vehicle. Neither wear the long grey coats of prefects, yet they silently observe the Montero family as they walk down the front steps and turn toward the alley leading to the rear courtyard. Just as they're about to walk around the side of the building, a police HV glides down the street.

"C'mon now. We don't want to be late." Jorge sweeps Marie off her feet, and the child giggles with delight as her daddy places her on his shoulders. "Ice cream ... we're gonna have ice cream..."

It's at that moment when the floodlights hit them, both in front and from behind.

"Stop!" The loudspeaker voice seems to come from all directions at once. "Don't move!"

Jorge raises a hand against the white-hot glare. From her perch, Marie screams: "Papa...!"

"Raise your hands! Don't try to run!"

Rita huddles against his side. "Jorge ...!"

Beyond the harsh light, the silhouettes of men running toward them, their footsteps loud against the pavement. From behind, a siren whoops as the HV rushes into the alley.

"Papa! What are they doing...?"

Above him, the windows of the apartment house deopaque. Figures appear at the windows: their neighbors, whom Jorge knows by face but not by name, staring down at them. Then the windows went dark once more.

"Let me have her!" Rita claws at Marie's jacket. "Let me have her!"

Marie howls in terror as Jorge lifts her off his shoulders. Her left foot lightly kicks him in the face, and he barely has time to deposit his daughter in his wife's arms before someone grabs his wrist and twists it behind him.

"Wait a minute!" He instinctively yanks his arm free. "Hold on! My kids...!"

A baton slaps his stomach just above his kidney. A moment of exquisite pain as an electrical current passes through him, then all his muscles relax and he collapses. The back of his head strikes the cracked asphalt and now he lies in the driveway, paralyzed and dazed, watching with a distant sort of fascination as one of the men from the midi move in upon Carlos. The kid tries to punch him, but he misses; the scuffle moves beyond his range of vision and all he sees are dark forms looming above him.

"Jorge...!"

One of the figures crouches closer, and the baton moves toward him again, the red light on its handle strobing against the night. Rita's screaming, Marie's screaming, and he can't see or hear Carlos any more.

The baton touches the side of his neck, and he plummets into black silence.

URSS _Alabama_ 7.4.70 / T-24.01.00

She can't see the stars. The spotlights arrayed along the open trusswork of the drydock are too bright, and the only thing beyond them is the matte-black expanse of space. Even Earth itself is invisible; it's somewhere below the long cylindrical boom of the ship's primary structure, which stretches away until it meets the enormous drum of the main engine. A shame; there won't be many more opportunities for her to be alone before launch, and she would like to see Earth one last time.

Dana Monroe hovers in front of the broad window of Deck H5, watching service pods and dock workers in hardsuits as they move along the _Alabama_, making their inspections of the starship's four-hundred-foot hull. The window is situated on lowest deck of the hub module, just below the primary airlocks and docking ports, and it's the only porthole that faces backward. All the other windows in the payload section, including those in the eight ring modules that encircle the hub, offer only side views, and none look forward: the view would have been blocked by the main fuel tank and the vast cone of the Bussard ramscoop.

Yet even as she surveys the prelaunch operations, Dana knows she's only killing time. As Chief Engineer, her list has a couple of hundred different duties -- two hundred thirty-nine, to be exact -- that she needs to perform over the next twenty-four hours, half of which have to be completed within the next twelve. Through her headset, she hears the mingled voices of her team murmuring to one another over the primary com channel. For the time being, though, she holds in place, awaiting one single message that will lead her to one all-important job ...

Dana switches her grip on the window rung from her left hand to her right. No sun-shadows on the drydock scaffolds; that means Highgate's equatorial orbit has taken it within Earth's night once more. If she was doing EVA right now and on tether outside the dock, she might be able to make out the Ursa Major constellation. If she couldn't see the place she was about to leave, then at least she could see where she was going...

"Charlie Eagle, Charlie Eagle, this is Lima Oklahoma Ten. Do you copy?"

Dana gives her headset a gentle tap. "Charlie Eagle here. What's up?"

Lima Oklahoma is Launch Operations, the pillbox-shaped superstructure outside the main bay; Lima Cherokee Ten is the call-sign for the duty officer for this shift. "Dana, we just received a squib from Houston. A voxcard forwarded to you from someone in Pensacola, name of Arthur Monroe."

Dana's left eyebrow involuntarily ticks. An old boyfriend once told her that it did that when she's nervous. "That's my uncle. Sure, put it through ... vox only, please."

A moment passes, then she hears a reedy old man's voice: "Dana, it's your Uncle Art. I know you haven't heard from me in a long while, but I just wanted to let you know how proud I am of you, and that your family is wishing you all the best of luck. You're probably very busy just now, so you don't need to call back if you don't have to, but just remember that we love you very much ... and that's all I wanted to say. Oh, and I'm sending you a picture to take with you. Goodbye, and may God be with you."

A brief pause, then the duty officer comes back online. "That's it. Do you want me to open the card?"

Dana's breath shudders as she let it out. "No thanks. Just download it to my pad. I'll look at it the next chance I get."

"Will do. Lima Cherokee Ten over."

"Thanks. Charlie Eagle out." She clicks off, borrows another moment to gaze through the window. Uncle Art's the family patriarch; her late mother's youngest brother, old enough to remember when black people in the South were sometimes called bad names. He's still alive, yet only a small handful of family members and close friends know that he now lives in a hospice in Pensacola. He's barely able to remember his own name, let alone send a lucid voxcard to his favorite niece.

Dana glances at a wall chronometer: 2400 EST, exactly as she anticipated. All the proper code phrases had been used. _Best of luck. Don't call back. File attached. Goodbye._

Goodbye, indeed. One way or another, she's committed now.

She pushes away from the window, glides across the compartment to a ceiling hatch. She enters the hub access shaft, barely touching the ladder rungs as she floats upward through the ship's core. She passes Deck H4, where the command deck is located, and H3, the life-support center, and H2, the engineering section where her own team would be going about their business, until she reaches the hatch leading to H1, at the top of the shaft.

The outer pressure door is already open; Dana presses a stud on the bulkhead and the inner hatch bisects in half, revealing a short corridor leading to another hatch. She pauses to touch her headset again. "I'm in the ring, going off-line for a few minutes," she announces on the

common frequency. "Be right back." She switches off the headset. No further explanation is necessary; everyone will assume that she's visiting the head.

The corridor takes her to a circular passageway that leads to the ring modules. Dana floats to a hatch marked C2. Opening it, she glides through a manhole in the module.

C2 is one of the Alabama's two hibernation modules: four decks stacked one atop the other, each deck containing fourteen biostasis cells. Folded down from their wall niches, their lids open, the fiberglass cells faintly resemble coffins, a similarity Dana finds unnerving. Through a window on the opposite side of the deck, Dana can see the drydock bay.

No time to waste; if she remains off-line for too long, someone in Launch Control might get suspicious. She moves to a console beneath the window, pulls out the recessed keypad, quickly taps instructions into the module's secondary computer system. A flatscreen lights, displaying the main menu; she touches the button marked Program Install and the screen shows a list of options beneath a password prompt. Dana enters her clearance number, then reaches into her pocket and pulls out her pad.

As she hoped, the duty officer has already downloaded the voxcard she received from "Uncle Art." She clips the pad against the console's serial port, then opens the photo that came attached to the voice-mail message. The picture that appears on the pad's screen is of Uncle Art's family, taken during a reunion picnic several years ago in Pensacola; what the casual viewer wouldn't know is that the digital image contains an encrypted file.

A few deft strokes and the information is fed into the computer's backup memory. Once it's in, Dana takes a few moments to decrypt the file and double-check its contents. Long, dense lines of information appear on the screen. Satisfied that the info is secure, she saves it in the system under a password, then unclips the pad from the console, stows away the keypad and shuts down the board. With luck, no one will ever know she's been here.

Dana climbs head-first down a ladder to the deck below, then enters a horizontal tunnel leading to the next module. C3 is one of the two modules devoted to crew quarters: racks of narrow bunks, tightly packed together between storage lockers. She's not looking forward to the sharing close confines with a hundred and three other crew members; with luck they won't remain aboard the Alabama for very long after they come out of biostasis. She locates the head, takes a moment to flush its zero-gee commode. The minute change in water pressure will indicate to the duty officer that someone has just used the toilet on Deck C3B; this will help substantiate her alibi.

She lets out her breath. One more task completed. There will be more over the course of the next twenty-four hours, some even more difficult than this, but for now...

A sharp double-beep in her headset; someone's trying to page her. She switches the comlink back on. "Charlie Eagle, we copy."

"Charlie Eagle, Lima Cherokee Ten. Where are you right now?"

"Charlie Three Baker. Is there a problem?"

An uncertain pause. "Ahh ... yeah, there is. We've detected a glitch in Charlie Two's backup computer. You know anything about this?"

Southern Georgia 7.5.70 / T-20.42.45

Gliding a couple of inches above its elevated track, the maglev passenger train races through the forested hill country south of Macon, its spotlight piercing the thin haze above the superconductive monorail. As it rushes past one of the innumerable shanty towns that fester the countryside, a squatter warming himself by a trash can fire notices that the train has only two cars, and that they have steel slats bolted against their windows. He stares at the train long after it has vanished, silently reflecting on the fact that, as hard as his life has become, it could be much worse.

A sudden vibration awakens Jorge from his restless slumber. Raising his head from where he had propped it between the edge of the seat and the window, he studies the compartment with weary eyes. Crammed together in every available seat are men, women, and children. Most are asleep -- wives huddled against husbands, kids dozing in their parents laps -- but some are awake. Staring through the window slats, they watch the occasional lights that swiftly pass by, their faces taut with anxiety, exhaustion, hopelessness. Precious little baggage in the overhead racks; only a handful managed to take anything with them when the prefects came for them. Judging from what precious little conversation Jorge has overheard, some of these people were taken off the street, arrested while leaving restaurants, shops, even their own homes.

D.I.'s, each and every one. Scientists, for the most part -- Jorge knows most of these people by face if not by reputation -- although scattered among them are also a few writers, artists, students, and various other individuals who present "a clear and present danger to national security," to use the ISA's favored term. There must be a couple of hundred people packed into

this train; the prefects were busy this Fourth of July.

Marie's head lies cradled in Jorge's lap, her jacket wadded around her shoulders as a makeshift blanket. He tries not to disturb her as he raises his arm to glance at his watch. Almost 3:45 a.m.; they've been on the train for nearly five hours now, ever since they left Huntsville along with a few dozen other D.I.'s and their kin. No trial, no hearing; only a ride in the back of a government midi to the maglev station, where they were ushered aboard by armed soldiers. The train wasn't crowded until it reached Atlanta, then it made a long stop while more than a hundred more detainees were herded aboard, the grey-coated prefects on the platform carefully checking off each name on their pads. Now a soldier stands guard at each end of the compartment, rifle in hand, forbidding anyone to speak aloud. Nothing to do except sleep, and be afraid.

Camp Buchanan is their destination. Just north of the Florida state line in Valdosta is the Patrick J. Buchanan Education Center. Jorge has seen the Govnet propoganda for Camp Buchanan: clean, well-lighted dormitories where D.I.'s are allowed to live while they take classes intended to broaden their political awareness. Happy, well-nourished children playing tag while their parents sit at benches, eagerly asking questions of patient teachers. People in blue paper pajamas standing in line in the mess hall, patiently waiting for healthy food served up by smiling cooks. Heartfelt testimonials by former D.I.'s proclaiming the worthiness of the re-education program, repeatedly stating they were well-treated during their stay. But Jorge knows three former colleagues who were sent to Camp Buchanan, and he hasn't seen any of them since.

Across the aisle, Rita stirs, opens her eyes. Carlos is curled up next to her, his head on her shoulder. His wife looks around, sees Jorge, gives him a wan smile that he knows she doesn't feel. He wants to whisper something to her -- an apology? a little late for that now! -- but the last thing they need is to have one of the soldiers shouting at him, so all he can do is give her what he hopes is a comforting nod. Everything will be all right, everything's going to work out just fine...

But it isn't. He knows that now. The ISA must have stumbled onto the conspiracy. Why else would they have been arrested?

The train lurches again, a little harder this time, and now there's a gradual sense of deceleration. Are they already coming into Valdosta? Jorge peers through the window slats. Nothing except darkness, yet Valdosta is a large enough city that he should be able to see its lights. Nonetheless, the train is slowing down....

Other passengers are waking up. Jorge catches the eye of an old friend seated two rows up: Henry Johnson, an astrophysicist who also used to work at Marshall Space Flight Center. He's known Henry since they were postgrad students at MIT, long before the Second Revolution; after that they worked together on the Starflight Project, or at least until they signed a petition protesting the National Reform Program. The new government let them keep their jobs until the Alabama was finished, then they were publicly denounced as D.I.'s and cast out of the Federal Space Agency. Shortly after that, their citizenship was suspended, their voting rights revoked. They became non-citizens, left to fend for themselves as best they could.

Now Henry's on the train to Camp Valdosta, along with everyone else from Marshall who stood up to the Liberty Party and its social agenda. Six rows back is Bernie Cayle and his wife Vonda, and Jorge spotted Jim Levin on the platform at Huntsville just before he and his family were marched into the next car down. Henry silently gazes back at him, and as the train makes another lurch he slowly nods his head. Henry is more closely involved in the conspiracy than Jorge; the whole thing has been kept compartmentalized, so that if one person was arrested and interrogated by the prefects, he wouldn't be able to reveal all the details. Jorge isn't sure, but he believes Henry may be the leader. If he is, then...

"Papa? Are we stopping?" Marie has woken up; she raises her head from his lap, knuckles her sleep-wizened eyes.

"Shh. It's all right, sweetie. Just be quiet." Jorge strokes her hair, glances over his shoulder to see if the guard has heard them. Not that it matters; although passengers softly murmur to one another as they stare through the windows, for the moment the soldiers aren't paying attention. The one in the back of the train, a kid not very much older than Carlos, grabs a seatback to steady himself as he bends over to the nearest window. The soldier up front spreads his feet a little further apart; he yells at everyone to shut up, but there's a baffled expression on his face.

The train slows to a crawl, coasts down an incline. A series of metronomic bumps against the undercarriage as its wheels engage the track; now Jorge can see a sparse handful of lights from directly ahead. Warehouses trundle past the windows; they're coming into an industrial park somewhere north of Valdosta, a rail yard meant for freight trains. Perhaps they're taking aboard more D.I.'s. Yet when he glances at Henry again, his friend's face is carefully neutral. Jorge has

seen that secretive look before. He knows something...

The train comes to a halt. "Shut up!" the soldier up front yells. "Stay where you are! Don't move!" He gestures for the other soldier to come forward; the kid walks the center of the compartment, his rifle at ready, as his sergeant retreats into the accessway. A faint thump, then a blast of cool air from outside. The passengers on the other side of the compartment watch through the windows as the sergeant steps off the train.

Marie looks at Jorge, her eyes wide with fear. _What's going on?_ she silently mouths. Carlos is awake now, his gaze flitting between the window and the soldier standing only a few feet away. The soldier turns his back to him, and, for an instant, Jorge sees a wild impulse dart through his son's eyes. He urgently shakes his head, and the boy reluctantly settles down.

A minute passes, then another. Three, four ... Footsteps on the stairs, and the sergeant steps back into the compartment, followed by a prefect. Young, tall, fit; callous eyes in a handsome face. The ISA officer studies the passengers with something much the same sort of loathing a chef would feel toward cockroaches he's found in his kitchen, then he pulls out a pad and flips it open.

"The following individuals and their families will accompany me," he says. "Exit from the rear, and no talking. Abbott, Francis K ... Arnold, Alice C ... Burstein, David C..."

One by one, people rise and stagger down the center aisle, their legs cramped and numb. Bernie and Vonda Cayle leave the train; a minute later, Henry Johnson follows them. Everyone on the list is a former Marshall scientist, so it's no surprise when, just a few seconds after the Levins have been called, Jorge hears his own name.

"Papa, where are we going?" Marie's hand is tiny within his own, terribly vulnerable.

"Shh. I'll tell you later." Jorge lets Marie and Carlos get in front of them, then he reaches up to pull his heavy bag down from the overhead rack. The young soldier sneers at him as he picks Marie up and carries her down the aisle.

The night is colder than he expected, dark save for the lights above the warehouses. An unmarked government maxvee is parked next to the train, a loading ramp lowered from its rear cargo door. Two soldiers stand near the vehicle, silently watching the D.I.'s as they line up to board the vehicle. Still holding Marie in his arms, Jorge nervously looks around, spots Jim and Sissy Levin standing a few yards behind them, their children between them.

The prefect who called their names steps down off the train. He walks over to the max, glances inside at the D.I.'s already inside, then does a quick head-count. Jorge estimates that about forty-five people have been taken off the maglev, including spouses and children. Just about everyone who had boarded in Huntsville, plus a few from Atlanta. The remaining hundred or so passengers stare at them through the windows. They're destined to continue south to Camp Buchanan; it's impossible to tell whether they envy the ones who've been pulled from the train or pity them.

Another prefect disembarks from the second car. He walks over to his companion; they compare their lists, murmuring quietly to one another. The line shuffles slowly forward, the people in front ducking their heads as they march up the ramp into the max.

The vehicle is even more cramped than the train; everyone squeezes together on its hard plastic benches. No windows. Through a grate-covered window in the front of the compartment they can see the back of the driver's head; he glances around once to watch the people coming aboard, then looks away again. Rita puts Marie in her lap to make a little more room.

When the last D.I. has finally come aboard, the prefect who called their names from the train marches into the vehicle. Pulling a stunner from within his coat, he regards everyone with cold scrutiny, as if challenging them to attack him. When no one says anything, he takes an empty seat at the rear, then motions for the soldiers to close the rear hatch. They hesitate, then pick up the ramp and shove it back into its slot. The hatch slams shut.

Long silence, then the maxvee whines to life. Everyone is jostled against one another as the vehicle picks itself off the ground. Jorge can't see the rail yard as the max coasts away.

"All right," the prefect says quietly. "I think we're safe."

Everyone stares at him. What did he just say? Then Henry Johnson clears his throat. "Did it work?" he asks quietly.

Jorge looks first at him, then at the prefect. Incredibly, he's putting away his gun. Rita's mouth is wide open; she doesn't know what to make of this any more than anyone else in the max ... all save Henry, who briefly favors Jorge with a broad grin.

"Well done, everyone," he says. "Especially you. Nice performance." The prefect nods, trying not to smile, then Henry sharply claps his hands to break through the cacophony of voices all around them. "Okay, everyone calm down, take it easy. Sorry we had to put you through this..."

"What the hell are you trying to do?" This from Bernie Cayle, sitting near the front of the vehicle. "Goddammit, Hank, you scared the shit out of...."

"Bernie, please," Henry says. "Watch your language. There's children present."

Laughter, relieved and out of place, ripples through the max. Oddly enough, only the handful of kids seem unruffled. Maybe they're still half-asleep, or perhaps they figured out this was a hoax long before the adults did.

"Like Dr. Johnson says, I'm sorry we .. I had to do this." Everyone quiets down as the prefect stands up in the back of the vehicle. "If more of you had known about this in advance, it wouldn't have worked. We had to find a way to collect everyone on short notice, and this was the best way we could manage. This way, we're perfectly legit."

"What do you mean, legit?" someone in the back demands. "What are you...?"

"Right now, y'all are being taken to Little Rock, where you're scheduled for ISA interrogation. That's our alibi for taking you off the train." The prefect raises a hand. "It's complicated, I know. Just bear with us."

Silence now, as everyone takes this in, yet Jorge is beginning to understand. There's aspects of the plot of which he hasn't been informed, but now it's all coming together...

"So where are we going?" Marie looks first at the prefect, then Henry, then finally Jorge. "If it's not Camp Buchanan or Little Rock..."

"A lot further than you think," Jorge says quietly.

Merritt Island 7.5.70 / T-17.10.39

The rising sun has painted the sky with shades of magenta and burnt-orange, lent a silver tint to the blue-grey surf rushing against the beaches of Merritt Island. Closer, the Alabama's shuttles await takeoff on their concrete lunch pads; fuel trucks are parked nearby, while ground crew makes final inspections on the twin delta-winged spaceplanes.

Captain Lee takes in the view from a wall screen in a briefing room within the Crew Training Facility, wishing he could be out there right now, if only for one last taste of salt air. But that's clearly out of the question; the sea breeze is filthy with microorganisms, and he's already undergone decontamination procedures. The world is now beyond his reach, behind the hermetically sealed doors of the quarantine area. In a few minutes he's to join the rest of his crew; right now, though, he has one last duty to perform on Earth.

A soft click from behind him, then the faint whoosh of pressurized air as the door glides open. Lee reluctantly turns from the wallscreen as two men enter: Ben Aldrich, closely followed by Roland Shaw. They're wearing white paper coveralls and caps, their hands covered with latex gloves; both men had to be decontaminated before they were allowed to pass through two sets of airlocks leading to this bare, unfurnished room. His last face-to-face contact with anyone from Earth who doesn't wear a helmet.

"Morning, Robert," Aldrich says. "Ready for the big day?"

Lee gives the Launch Supervisor a tight smile. "That's not for another 226 years. Ask me again when I get to 47 Uma B."

Aldrich grins back at him. "Maybe it'll be only 226 years for you, but it'll feel like 230 for me." He turns to the Republic's Director of Internal Security. "Not that it makes much difference, but if he'd made that sort of mistake during training, I would've found someone else for the job."

Shaw barely acknowledging the joke; indeed, Lee wonders if he fully appreciates the effects of time dilation. Once the Alabama achieves its maximum cruise velocity of .2c, time aboard the starship will slow relative to the rest of the universe. Add three months for acceleration to 20-percent light-speed after leaving Earth and another three months for magsail deceleration into the 47 Ursae Majoris system, and the ship's internal chronometers will record a passage of little more than 226 years, while back home the voyage will have lasted nearly four years longer. The Lorentz factor will matter very little to him or anyone else aboard the Alabama, since they'll be in biostasis during most of the journey, but it's highly doubtful that Shaw will still be alive by then, even with the benefit of life-extension treatments.

"I don't think you could have found anyone better." Once again, Shaw's manner is as stiff as it had been last night when Lee saw him with the president. "I'm sure the captain wants to be with his people right now. Perhaps we should get along with our business."

'Yes, of course." Aldrich is clearly nervous in the presence of the Director of Internal Security. He reaches into a pocket of his coveralls, pulls out his pad, flips open the cover. "Okay, then..."

The briefing is a routine run-down of the major events of the next seventeen hours. At 1000 EDT, the URSS Jesse Helms, piloted by First Officer Shapiro and carrying the forty-five members of the Alabama's flight team not already aboard the starship, is scheduled to lift off from Pad 10, with an ETA of 1230 with the Alabama. Pending successful rendezvous and docking of the

Helms, the _George Wallace_ will launch at 1300 from Pad 11, carrying the 51 members of the _Alabama's_ colonization team, with Captain Lee himself as pilot. Its anticipated rendezvous and docking is scheduled for 1430; by then fuel load-up will have been completed by 1400. At 1500 the main hatches will be sealed, and the crew will go through prelaunch procedures until 2345, when the president will publicly address the nation via netv from Atlanta. Following the President's speech, final countdown will commence at 2350; if all goes well, primary booster ignition will be at 2400.

"We had a small problem early this morning." Aldrich studies his pad. "Launch Control detected an error in the backup computer system in Module C2 shortly after 2400 last night..." Lee feels his heart skip a beat. "...but the Chief Engineer checked it out and found that it was just a faulty program alarm. It's been fixed and countdown was resumed at 0014."

"Good. Glad to hear it." Lee pretends a calmness he doesn't feel. Something must have gone wrong, but it sounds as if Dana managed to take care of it without tipping her hand. "Anything else?"

"Nothing. We're right on schedule." Aldrich closes his pad, looks at Shaw. "Your turn, Mr. Shaw."

"Thank you." The DIS has remained quiet through all this; now he unzips the black plastic pouch he carried into the room, pulls out a small object wrapped in clear cellophane. "Captain Lee, I don't think I have to tell you what this is."

"No, sir." Lee takes the packet, opens it, pulls out a large chrome-plated key on a neck chain: the launch key for the _Alabama's_ primary ignition system. Without it, the ship's main engines cannot be fired. A security precaution to prevent the _Alabama_ from being launched without direct authorization from the president..

"Thank you, sir." Lee clips the chain around his neck, lets the key slide down the front of his jumpsuit. It's only now that the ISA has seen fit to entrust it to the Mission Commander; during dress rehearsals in orbit, a prefect has always been in the _Alabama's_ command deck to insert the key and turn it, even though the main engines were never started. Yet this is supposed to be a symbolic moment, so Lee snaps to attention and salutes Shaw.

Shaw responds with a salute of his own, then offers his hand. "Good luck, Captain. All our prayers go with you."

Lee looks straight at Shaw as he clasps his hand, yet there's nothing in his expression that the captain can read. Shaw simply nods, ever so slightly, then he turns to Aldrich. "I believe you have something to add..."

"Yes, sir, there is." As Aldrich steps forward again, he pulls from beneath his arm a large parcel sealed in plastic. Through the transparent wrapping, Lee can see a single white star embroidered on a field of dark blue canvas, bordered by red and white horizontal stripes. The flag of the United Republic of America.

Aldrich handles it reverently, almost as if reluctant to give it up; when he looks up at Lee, his eyes are moist. "I know you've already got one of these aboard," the Launch Supervisor says quietly, his voice raw at the edges, "but this one comes from all of us here at the Cape. If you wouldn't mind, Captain, we'd like for you to raise it on the new world once you get there ... in our honor, please."

Lee feels a hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. Ben means well, and Lee has nothing against him, yet the last thing he ever wants to see again is this flag: a symbol of a totalitarian government that has taken everything America once stood for and twisted it beyond recognition. One star to signify one people, or so it has been stated; what it really stands for is one party, one political ideology. The purpose of this mission isn't exploration, as originally intended before the Second Revolution, but conquest. He's being sent to 47 Ursae Majoris not to expand the horizons of humankind, but to establish an interstellar colony that will insure the immortality of the Republic. Millions of people now live in shacks made of discarded junk and cook squirrel stew over manure fires because so much of his country's resources have been diverted to the construction of a starship. One of humankind's most noble dreams, now perverted ...

"Robert?" Aldrich stares at him. "Is there something wrong?"

"Sorry." Lee takes a deep breath. "Just thinking about this moment, that's all." He accepts the wrapped flag from Aldrich, bows slightly, gives him what he hopes the other man will interpret as a modest smile. "Thank you. I'll put this in a place of honor."

Aldrich bows formally. "Thank you, Captain. May God be with you."

Lee gives the Launch Supervisor a farewell handshake, lets him enjoy this last moment of pride. And all the while, he feels Roland Shaw's eyes upon him.

Three seconds before the countdown reaches zero, reddish-orange flames erupt from the shuttle's ascent engines, followed by billowing brown plumes that quickly envelope the spacecraft. For a second the spaceplane can barely be seen, then the Jesse Helms slowly rises from the thick haze. Microphones pick up the sound of people cheering, then the crackling thunder ripples across the VIP viewing area three miles from the launch pad, drowning out their voices as the camera pans upward, tracking the white-glare. A thousand feet above the ground, the shuttle's nose tilts upward, then its NIF main engines kick in and the spacecraft suddenly vaults into the blue heavens above the Atlantic.

"The g's will still be nominal at this point." Henry Johnson nods toward the dusty old flatscreen above the bar. "There'll be some discomfort once they reach seven g's, but that lasts for only about a minute or so."

"You don't think the kids will be hurt?" Jim Levin glances uncertainly across the closed-down restaurant. His two children, David and Chris, are sitting on the floor with Carlos and Marie Montero; they're playing scissors-rock-paper, from the looks of it. "My youngest gets motion-sickness when he's on the plane."

"I'm sure a lot of us are going to be throwing up." Jorge is still watching the screen. The Helms itself is now visible only as tiny white spot at the head of a long contrail. He's tempted to step outside to see if he can spot it with the naked eye, but the rules are firm; no one leaves the restaurant until they're ready to go. "Don't worry about it. I've been up before. It's an easy ride."

The screen switches to a young woman standing at the press site: a Govnet correspondent, delivering a recount of what they've just seen, the liftoff of the shuttle carrying the members of the Alabama's flight team. The volume is turned down low, so only a handful of the people gathered in the abandoned restaurant on the outskirts of Titusville can hear her. "Just as long as we've got a vomit bag for my boy," Jim murmurs. "Otherwise we're going to have a hell of a..."

"Hush," Henry says as the image changes once more. "Here it comes..."

A video replay from an hour ago: the walkout from the Crew Training Facility within the Gingrich Space Center. A door opens, then the flight team walks out. Striding single-file past the journalists and cameramen gathered behind a rope, they wear one-piece isolation suits, their features barely visible through the faceplates of their fabric helmets. Among the adults are several children of various ages, distinguishable as minors only because of their shorter stature. They wave to the bystanders as they stroll past the camera toward the white FSA maxvee parked less than thirty feet away.

"See?" Henry murmurs. "No questions, no interviews..."

"No I.D. checks." Jorge glances over his shoulder at him, sees Bernie Cayle gnawing at a fingernail. Of all the people gathered in what used to be called the Lamplighter Grill, he's the most nervous. As if any of them could be described as calm. "But what if someone recognizes ... I mean, if they don't recognize...?"

"Look how they're dressed." Jim gestures to the screen. "You can barely see their faces."

"Uh-huh. So long as everyone stays in motion, it'll be over and done in just a few seconds." And just as Henry says, the last crew member boards the maxvee less than a minute after the first one emerged from the building. A soldier shuts the door behind him, and a moment later the vehicle rises from the ground, turns away from the camera, and skims down the road leading to the launch pad. "See? Easy."

"So why can't we ..?" Bernie hesitates, trying to articulate his thoughts. "I mean, can't we just head straight for the pad? We've got our own suits, so why do we have to go through...?"

"Bernie..." Jim lets out an impatient breath. He's already explained everything to everyone, but for some reason Bernie still doesn't get it. "Look ... for one thing, if we don't do the walkout, everyone will wonder why the colonists haven't appeared. Second, we have to ride that particular max out to the pad. We can't take the one we have, because..."

Jorge has heard this before. He excuses himself to check on his family. The restaurant smells of mildew and rotting wood; the windows have been long-since boarded up, so the only light comes from the camp lanterns scattered around the dining room where locals used to enjoy Friday night all-you-can-eat buffet dinners. He wonders again how the underground managed to gain access to this condemned highway inn, but decides it's one more question better left unasked. Even now, no one wants to divulge secrets. Further evidence that more people are involved in this conspiracy than he realized.

He finds Rita seated at the folding table at the far end of the room, her face scrunched up as she receives one of the antibiotic injections everyone has to take. Jorge knows the doctor giving the shots: Kuniko Okada, formerly the senior space medicine researcher at Marshall before she, too, signed the petition which got her labeled as a D.I.. There's no way a clean-room

facility can be set up here, but at least they can make sure no one carries any viruses aboard the Alabama.

"Okay, you're done," Dr. Okada says, and Marie sighs as she pulls down the sleeve of her shirt. "Bring your children over, and I'll do them next." Then she looks up and sees Jorge. "Wait a minute ... I haven't taken care of you yet, have I?" When Jorge shakes his head, Kuniko turns back to Marie. "On second thought, let Jorge go first. If your kids see their dad doing this, maybe they'll take it a little easier."

"Good idea." Carlos won't mind a few shots, but Marie has always been a problem at the pediatrician's office. Jorge sits down in the chair Rita has just left and rolls up his right sleeve. "Of course, it might help if you've got a sucker. My daughter expects one when she goes to the doctor."

Kuniko shakes her head as she fits a clean needle and another cartridge into her syringe gun. "Sorry. No food for anyone from here on out. I don't like it either ... I could use a cup of coffee right now." She checks Jorge's name on her list. "After this, you can help your wife get the kids in their isolation suits."

Jorge nods. The crowd in the dining room has gradually thinned over the last hour; after they've received their shots, everyone has gone into the kitchen nearby. When he peered through the swinging doors a few minutes ago, he saw that shower curtains had been draped from the ceiling pipes, forming makeshift changing rooms. One by one, people took folded garments behind the partitions, and emerged a few minutes later wearing one-piece coveralls. Whoever made the isolation suits had done their job well; they're identical to ones he had just seen the flight crew wearing during walkout, right down to the Republic shoulder flag and the Alabama mission patch.

"You managed to send the medical data, didn't you?" Kuniko asks quietly as she dabs alcohol on his biceps.

"Just before we left." The voxcard sent to Houston from his desk contained encrypted medical records for everyone gathered in this room; Kuniko would need them to reprogram the Alabama's biostasis cells. "It should have been received and downloaded by now."

"Should be." Kuniko sighs, massages her eyelids. "Just one more thing that could go wrong between..."

"Look! Papa's getting his shots!" Jorge turns around, sees Rita shepherding their children to the end of the table. Carlos looks faintly bored, but Marie's eyes are wide with terror. "See how easy it is?"

"Sure, there's nothing to..." Jorge starts to say, then Kuniko takes that moment to jab the barrel of the syringe-gun against his arm and squeeze the trigger. Jorge tries not to wince as he feels the sting of the needle, and he forces a smile as he looks back at her. "Hey, did you just do something? I didn't feel anything?"

Kuniko gives him a faint smile as she changes needles and cartridges again. "As painless as can be." Marie hides her face against her mother's side, and Jorge decides not to press the issue. Marie will just have to suffer through this, that's all...

The prefect who had taken them off the train outside Valdosta emerges from the kitchen. He's no longer wearing his grey overcoat, and his tie is askew around the collar of his shirt. He whistles sharply between his fingers, then claps his hands for attention. "Listen up!" he yells, and the room goes quiet as everyone looks toward him. "We've only got twenty minutes before we've got to be out of here, and we still haven't taken care of half of you. If you haven't had your shots, form a line behind the table, then proceed to the kitchen for suit-up. We're running out of time, so let's get going here, okay?"

Rita gives the prefect a cold glare. "He could be a little more..."

"Honey," Jorge murmurs, then clenches his teeth as Kuniko hits him with another shot. Marie seems a little less afraid; now she watches with morbid fascination as Kuniko exchanges needles and cartridges one more time. The prefect crosses the room to where Henry, Bernie, and Jim are gathered in front of the screen. He says something to them, and Jim and Bernie leave the bar to join the line forming behind Rita, yet Henry stays behind. As Jorge watches, his friend pulls out his pad and opens it. The prefect steps around behind him to peer over his shoulder. Something's going on...

Another swift jab, and he's done. "Boy, that was great!" he exclaims as he stands up from the chair. "Thanks, Doc! I feel better already!" He bends over to Marie, slaps his hands against his thighs. "C'mon, you gotta try this!"

The dubious expression on his daughter's face tells him that she isn't buying any of it, but she allows Rita to escort her to the chair. Jorge waits until Kuniko swabs her arm, then asks her if she can spell her mother's name backward. Marie is still working on the second letter when the

doctor gives her the first shot. She yelps, but more out of surprise than from actual pain; Jorge decides that Rita can handle things from here, then he quietly slides away and heads over to the bar.

"If they're coming, they'd be here by now," Henry says to the prefect as Jorge draws closer. "But we've still got twenty minutes..."

"We've got twenty minutes, but you know as well as I do that..." The prefect looks up, sees Jorge approaching. "Can I help you?"

"Who's coming?" Jorge asks, keeping his voice low. "Is there someone else?"

Henry hesitates, then shows the pad to Jorge: a long list of names, nearly every one highlighted, yet a few remain unlit. "We've got forty-five," he says quietly. "There's supposed to be fifty. Five remain unaccounted for. They were supposed to be on the train, but it doesn't look like they were picked up."

"Or they were picked up, but weren't taken to the train. And that's what worries me." The Prefect absently rubs the beard stubble on his chin. "Not good. Not good at all..."

"They wouldn't break..."

"Anyone can be broken. Trust me on that one." The prefect glances at the line of people standing in front of the table. From behind him, Jorge hears Marie's high-pitched scream as she's given another injection. "Never mind. Let's just get these people out of here."

"You don't think ...?"

"Just hope no one does a head-count during the walkout." The prefect shakes his head, turns away. "C'mon. The clock's running out."

"He shouldn't mind," Jorge murmurs once he's out of earshot. "He's getting a seat, after all."

Henry doesn't look up from his pad. "He's not coming with us," he says very quietly. "We gave him a chance, but he opted to stay behind ... he has to, the way all this is planned." Then his eyes meet Jorge's. "When ... if his people find out what he's done, they'll put him on trial for treason."

Jorge stares at him. "But why would he..?"

"Asked him that once myself. He wouldn't tell me." Henry slaps the pad shut, turns to join the line at the table. "Don't say anything about it, though, to him or anyone else. It's something personal."

Rita has already escorted the kids into the kitchen; Jorge can hear her behind one of the curtains, coaxing Marie into one of the child-size isolation suits. Almost everyone has had their shots and donned their garments; now they're crowded together in the pantry, gazing through the restaurant's rear door. Just outside is the government maxvee that had picked them up in southern Georgia. The driver stands next to the vehicle, and Jorge notices that he's changed clothes; now he's wearing the uniform of a URS lieutenant. Another nameless man facing death for what he's doing today...

Sissy Levin hands Jorge a folded suit, motions him toward the nearest changing room. Just as he's about to enter, Carlos comes out from behind the curtain. He's put on his isolation suit, and carries his helmet under his arm. "How do I look?"

"Fine. Just great." Jorge gives his son a quick inspection. "How're you holding up there, _muchacho_?"

"Okay, I guess." Yet his face is pale, his shoulders visibly shaking beneath the coveralls. "I don't know about this..."

"I know. I'm not crazy about it either." Jorge bends down on one knee, looks Carlos straight in the eye. He's never lied to his boy before, and he isn't going to start now. "It sounded like a good idea when we were putting it together, but that was kind of in the abstract. Now we're here, and ... well, it's going to be tougher than I thought."

"Then..." Carlos glances at the people waiting by the delivery entrance. For a moment, they're alone; no one is paying attention to them. "We don't have to do this, do we? I mean, we don't have to get to go..."

"You know of another way out of this?" Carlos's mouth trembles, but he doesn't say anything. "Son, we're escaped criminals now. The government's undoubtedly frozen my credit account, so we've got no money, and we can't go home even if we could. If we turn ourselves in..."

"I know that!" Carlos's voice rises, and several people standing nearby turn to look their way. Jorge hastily shushes him. "Papa ... it's 46 light-years away..."

"I know, I know..." Jorge shakes his head, then grasps his son by the shoulders. "But it's either this, or we spend the rest of our lives in a D.I. camp. You, me, your mother, your little sister ... you want to see Marie in Camp Buchanan?" Carlos snuffles back tears, looks down at the floor. "Believe me, there's no other way. If there were, I'd..."

A sharp whistle from behind them. "Hey, someone leave something behind?"

Jorge glances over his shoulder, sees the prefect standing in the doorway of the dining room. He's holding aloft Jorge's duffel bag. "Someone dropped this," he calls out. "Who does it belong to?"

Damn. He had almost forgotten it. Jorge raises his hand. The prefect sees him, then marches across the kitchen to where he's crouched with Carlos. "If it's yours, you can't bring it with you," he says, still swinging the bag by its strap. "Sorry, no personal belongings."

"Those aren't personal belongings. It's something we need."

Surprised at having his authority challenged, the prefect stares back at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Rita and Marie coming out from behind the curtain. Marie's suit is a size too large for her; its leggings rumple down around the tops of her boots, and it seems as if she could crawl out from within the loose collar.

"Something you need. Man, everyone's has something they need." The prefect drops the bag on the floor. "Okay, open 'er up, let's see what you've got."

Jorge hesitates, then unzips the bag and pulls it open, revealing its contents.

The prefect bends down, studying what's inside. He frowns, looks up at Jorge. "You really thought about this, didn't you?" he asks, his voice now so low only Jorge and Carlos can hear him. Jorge doesn't say anything, and the prefect reluctantly nods. "Okay, you can take it," he says quietly. "When we do the walk-out, sling it over your right shoulder, so that it's away from the people standing behind the rope. If someone notices and asks you what you've got, pretend you didn't hear. Just keep walking. Got it?"

Jorge nods, and the prefect checks his watch. "Hurry up and get dressed. We leave in six minutes." Then he turns away, clapping his hands once more. "C'mon, people, hustle...!"

Carlos stares at his father as he zips the bag shut again. "Papa, what did you...?"

"Never mind. Just go help your mother and sister." Jorge hands the bag to his son. "Keep an eye on this, will you? It's important ... but don't show it to anyone."

Carlos takes the bag by its strap, pulls it over his shoulder. He slumps a little beneath its weight, and his expression changes from fear to puzzlement. For a moment Jorge wonders whether he's going to open it, but the boy obeys him. Jorge gives him a smile, then steps behind the curtain.

Alone for the moment, he sags against the cement wall. He shuts his eyes, takes a deep breath, tries to will his heart to stop pounding. This is the first time since he received the phone call at his apartment that he's been out of sight of his family; until now, he hasn't allowed himself to show fear, let alone feel it. Yet deep down inside, he's just as terrified as Carlos. How can Rita accept all this so calmly, when she didn't know what was happening until ...?

No. He doesn't have time for this now. Jorge opens his eyes, takes another deep breath, then sits down on the plastic chair and begins removing his shoes. Beyond the curtain, he hears Rita begging Marie to stay still and stop fidgeting so much.

No choice. They're committed now. All of them.

URSS Alabama 7.5.70 / T-11.41.12

"He wants to what?" Dana stares at the com officer in disbelief. "You mean now?"

"Nothing I can do about it, Chief." Les Gillis carefully keeps a hand cupped around his headset mike. "He's already on the way over."

"For the love of..." Dana turns to another officer seated a few feet away. "Can you confirm that?"

"See for yourself." Sharon Ullman has already punched up a real-time image on the nav table; holographic wire-model of the Alabama appears above the table, surrounded by Highgate's skeletal bay. Most of the service pods have already moved away from the ship, although a fuel barge still holds position beneath the main tank. As Dana watches, a small cylindrical craft moves through the bay, heading toward Alabama.

"OTV has requested clearance for docking at SC2," Gillis says. "I don't think the colonel's going to take no for an answer."

Not now, God. Please, for the love of all that's holy, don't do this to me now. Dana and Les share a wary look; Sharon's one of the handful of crew members who isn't in on this, so they can't talk freely. "What's the present ETA for the Helms?" she asks.

"ETA at 1230, on schedule." Sharon expands the holo to display the distant shuttle on final approach for low-orbit rendezvous with the Alabama. "They're docking at SC2 in ten minutes."

"Okay." Dana takes a deep breath, tries to calm herself down. "Les, inform the OTV driver I want him in and out by 1225 max, and if he hits my ship I'm going to ... never mind. Just remind him that the Helms needs to use SC2, and any delay is going to screw up the countdown." She

releases the ceiling rail, pushes herself toward the deck hatch. "If you need me, I'll be in H5."

The orbital transfer vehicle has arrived by the time she makes it to the EVA ready-room; through the window next to the egress hatch she watches as the craft gently moves into the shuttle cradle. A slight bump as its blunt forward end mates with the docking collar; a half-minute later the tiger-striped inner hatch irises open. The five men who emerge wear URS military fatigues, their flechette rifles strapped to their shoulders. One by one, they push themselves into the EVA compartment, clamping the toes of their boots within the foot restraints. Although Dana is herself an Academy graduate, she never saw combat duty before she transferred to the Federal Space Agency. These men, she knows just from looking at their faces, are seasoned pros, hardened by tours in Cuba and the Sierra Nevadas. Bad mofos and proud of it.

The last man through the hatch is Col. Gilbert "Gill" Reese, something of a legend within the Service and now leader of the URS security detachment aboard Highgate. Reese is built like a bull: thick arms, thick legs, thick neck. Thick head, too, or at least that's Dana's private opinion after having dealt with him several times already.

Seeing her, Reese gives Dana a smile that borders on being a smirk. Before she can say anything, he turns to the soldier nearest to the hatch and cocks his thumb at it. The soldier closes the outer hatch and dogs it tight, pounds his fist against it twice, then stabs the button that seals the inner hatch. A hollow thump, then the deck shudders slightly as the OTV disengages from the docking collar. Through the window, Dana catches a glimpse of the ferry moving away. Reese makes a show of checking his watch.

"It's 1225 on the nose," he says, not looking at her. "Satisfied, Chief Engineer?"

A snicker from one of the soldiers behind her. Dana pretends not to notice. "No, Colonel, I'm not. In fact, I want you to bring that OTV back here and put your men aboard."

Reese raises an eyebrow. "Wouldn't that throw you off schedule?"

"We'll make up for it." She stares straight back at him, refusing to give an inch.

Reese shrugs. "Then you won't mind if we stay awhile. Wouldn't want you to leave us without a proper farewell."

Again, the smirk. More muffled laughter from his troops. The colonel gives them a stern look, yet there's dark amusement in his eyes. Dana feels her face growing warm. "Why are you here, Colonel?"

"Glad you asked. Saves us a lot of time." The smile disappears. "We've received word that there may be a conspiracy against this mission."

Dana feels her left eyelid involuntarily twitch. "A conspiracy? Where have you heard...?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss the details, ma'am. All I can say is that my orders come from the top. My people are to remain aboard the Alabama until its entire complement has arrived and prevent any unauthorized personnel from entering the ship." Reese never looks away from her. "I hope you don't mind, considering the circumstances."

It takes all of her willpower to keep her voice even. "Yes, sir, I do mind. These people coming aboard have been under strict quarantine since 0600, with no outside contact permitted with anyone. Your men haven't been sterilized, have they?"

Reese's face stiffens. The soldiers aren't chuckling now. "Chief, my orders..."

"And my orders are to get the Alabama safely underway, on time, on schedule. This entire ship has just undergone a twenty-four-hour decontamination procedure. No one except the flight crew had been permitted through that hatch. The moment your men came aboard, they broke quarantine." Despite her fear, Dana is surprised to find a thin current of anger rising up from deep within her. "You want authorization? Let's get authorization. Put a call through to Houston and talk to the Flight Director. Or better yet, let's call Atlanta and get the president on the phone."

Dana can't believe she's doing this. For all she knows, Reese's orders could be coming straight from Peachtree House. Yet even as she throws the challenge at the colonel, she knows the bluff worked; Reese stares at her in mute surprise, and his squad has become dead silent. For a moment he doesn't say anything; when he does, his voice is low. "I don't think that'll be necessary. But my orders..."

"Fine. I understand." All at once, a new thought occurs to her. "I respect your concerns, Colonel," she says, softening her tone a little. "Really, I do ... just as I hope you respect mine."

As if on cue, there's another dull impact against the outer hull. She doesn't have to look around to know that the Helms has just hard-docked with the Alabama. Good. "Your guys can remain here until 1500," she continues. "That's when we close the hatches. But they can't leave this deck, and they can't make physical contact with anyone coming aboard. Agreed?"

Dana knows what Reese really wants to do: place his men throughout the Alabama, and not

remove them until a few minutes before the ship is ready to launch. Indeed, whatever information he's received may justify that course of action. Yet she has to gamble on his unwillingness to be officially reprimanded by someone farther up the chain of command.

"All right," Reese says, "we'll play it your way." He turns to his men. "Boone, Schmidt, remain here. Carruthers, Lucchesi, go over to the other hatch. Stay at arm's length from anyone coming aboard, and don't leave this deck unless I give a direct order." The soldiers salute him as they move into position, and Reese looks back at Dana. "Okay?"

"Yes, sir, it is. Thanks for your cooperation." Reese gives her a perfunctory nod and pushes himself over to join Boone and Schmidt by the airlock.

A minute passes, then the inner hatch cycles open again; a figure wearing an isolation suit pushes himself through. He's already removed his helmet: Tom Shapiro, the Alabama's First Officer. Tom grins when he sees Dana, but his expression changes when he sees the soldiers.

"Welcome aboard, sir," Dana says. "Hope you had a good ride."

"We did, thanks." Tom's gaze moves across the troopers. Behind him, Jud Tinsley has already poked his head and shoulders through the hatch; his eyes widen as he catches sight of the soldiers. "What's this, an honor guard?"

"I think we should take it that way." Dana stares him square in the eye. "Apparently Colonel Reese here has just received word that there's someone wants to sabotage the launch."

"Really?" The First Officer turns to Reese. "Colonel, would you like to explain what you're doing aboard my ship?" Before he can answer, Shapiro raises his hand to Tinsley. "Hold the line, Jud. We've got a problem."

The executive officer nods and remains where he is, half-in and half-out of the hatch. Now it's Reese's turn to look uncomfortable: now that he's aboard the Alabama, Shapiro outranks him. "My apologies, sir," Reese says, giving Shapiro an untidy salute. "We've received word from the ground that the ISA have arrested some D.I.'s who they believe are linked to a plot to sabotage this mission."

"Really?" Shapiro frowns. "And how do they intend to do that?"

Reese hesitates. "We're ... I mean, they're not certain, sir. It seems that they may try to smuggle someone aboard this ship. Possibly more than one person."

"And you've been sent to make sure no one gets aboard." The colonel nods, and Tom slowly shakes his head. "I respect your concern, Colonel, but I find that highly unlikely. When I left GSC only ninety minutes ago, it was under strict lockdown just as this ship is supposed to be." He glares at Dana. "Why have you let these people aboard, Chief?"

"Sorry, sir. I was trying to accommodate the Colonel."

"Well, keep 'em here. I don't want to scrub the launch just because we have to sterilize the ship again." Then he looks back at Tinsley. "Jud, tell everyone behind you to put their helmets back on. They can take 'em off once they're through this compartment."

"Aye, sir." The XO disappears from the hatchway.

"Pain in the ass," Shapiro mutters angrily as pushes himself toward the access ladder. "Sorry if I don't shake your hand, Colonel, but I don't want to catch whatever it is you're carrying." He pauses by the access shaft. "I know you're just doing your job, and I appreciate it. But don't touch my people, okay?"

"Yes, sir." Again, Reese salutes him. "Sorry."

"Very good. Carry on." Shapiro returns the salute, then looks back at Dana. "Chief...?"

"Yes, sir." Dana lets Tom lead her through the manhole leading upward into the ship. Once they're out of earshot, she taps his ankle. "Nice catch," she whispers.

"We're not out of it yet." Shapiro glances up and down the shaft to make sure they're not being overheard. "Get in touch with the skipper, let him know what's going on."

Dana glances at her watch: 1229 EST. "Too late," she murmurs. "They're on their way."

Merritt Island 7.5.70 / T-11.31.43

The roadside along the causeway crossing the Banana River are jammed with coupes and midis of every make and color; tens of thousands of people have crowded themselves onto the narrow sandbars linking the bridges. Tents are scattered all across the narrow beaches, and the aroma of hamburgers and hot dogs rising from barbecue braziers mixes with the salt breeze.

Unimpeded by traffic, the government maxvee cruises straight down the causeway, the swirling red and blue lights on its roof rack clearing the way. The driver ignores the bystanders who stare curiously at the vehicle as it sweeps past them. In the back of the max, though, no one can see any of this. Crammed together on the hard plastic benches, they silently stare at one another, beads of sweat rolling down their faces. Most of their perspiration comes from the stifling heat within the vehicle, but Jorge can't help but wonder if much of its is due to fear.

Everyone's suddenly jostled as the maxvee begins to slow down. The nameless prefect at the back of the van cups his hand over his earpiece. "Okay, we're coming up on the checkpoint," he says loudly. "Everyone, helmets on. People with children, lean forward a little to hide them. No matter what happens, don't say anything. Just keep your mouths shut." He reaches beneath his seat, picks up his uniform cap. "Don't worry. It'll all be over and done with in a minute."

Jorge glances at Rita and the kids one last time, then pulls the loose hood over his head. Now he perceives the world only through a curved pane of transparent plastic; every time he exhales, the bottom of the faceplate fogs up. Next to Rita, Marie begins to protest -- "Mama, I can't breathe!" -- until her mother quickly shushes her. Beside him, Carlos sits up a little straighter, trying to make himself look more like an adult. With his hood on, he could almost pass for a grown-up, but Jorge isn't taking any chances; as the vehicle glides to a halt, he gently pushes his son back against the bench, then he moves forward on his hips to hide him as best as he can.

Time passes. How long, Jorge can't tell; perhaps it's only a minute, but it seems much longer. Muffled voices from the front, but he can't make out any words. The driver talking with the guards at the gatehouse, showing him his I.D. Something that sounds like laughter. Then, all of a sudden, the rear hatch opens, and he squints against the midday sun to see an armed soldier staring at them.

"What the hell are you doing?" The prefect stands up, blocks the hatch. "Shut the door, you idiot! These people are in quarantine!"

The soldier stares back at him, then he hastily reaches up to close the hatch. Jorge lets out his breath as it bangs shut, briefly closes his eyes in silent prayer of thanks. A few people around him start to murmur, but the prefect hastily gestures for everyone to remain quiet. A few seconds pass, then they're thrown against each other once more as the max surges forward again.

"Okay, they bought it." The prefect looks as relieved as anyone else. "We're in."

Cheers ring through the vehicle; all around him, people start to remove their helmets. "Keep 'em on!" Henry shouts. "We'll be there in just a couple of minutes."

Jorge reluctantly leaves his helmet in place. The cover story worked: the people in the maxvee are members of the back-up crew, being brought in at the last minute from a remote location just in case the Wallace suffers a catastrophic launch failure.

Minutes pass, then the maxvee downshifts again. It makes an abrupt turn to the right, slows to a crawl, then coasts to a stop. People shift nervously in their seats, but the Prefect holds up his hand, silently gesturing for everyone to remain where they are. One hand cupped over his earpiece, he keeps an eye on his watch, as if waiting for something. Another minute goes by, then he looks up at them.

"Okay, we're ready," he says. "Remember, do just as you were told. Don't stop for anything, don't talk to anyone. Just keep moving."

The rear hatch opens; just outside are two men in white FSA coveralls. They quickly lower the ramp, then urgently motion everyone to get out. The passengers rise, start shuffling down the ramp. Jorge picks up his bag, pulls it over his right shoulder, glances over his shoulder to make sure his family is with him. Carlos is directly behind him, leading Marie by the hand, with Rita bringing up the rear.

Their vehicle is stopped in a garage. Another max, this one painted white with FSA markings, is parked nearby, yet the area is vacant save for the two workmen helping them out of the max and a third standing at the top of a short flight of steps leading to a closed metal door. "Hurry up, hurry up," the prefect snaps. "C'mon, folks, we're running out of time! Go, go, go...!"

Now they're heading up the steps to the landing where the third workman is waiting for them. The prefect trots past them to the front of the line; a quick look back, then he nods to the workman. He swings open the door and steps aside to hold it open, and the prefect ushers them into a narrow corridor.

A lone figure wearing an isolation suit comes out of a doorway halfway down the hall. He and the prefect exchange a hand-signal, then the prefect steps away, holding open the door and motioning for everyone to follow the man he's just met. "Keep going, keep going," he says quietly as they file past him. "Don't stop, just keep going..."

Another short corridor, then a left turn through the double-doors of an airlock. Jorge passes through the door, finds himself in a long room lined with chairs and tables. A thin yellowish haze hangs in the air, floating a couple of feet above the tile floor, yet that isn't what he notices first.

Throughout the room, men, women, and children dressed in isolation suits are sprawled everywhere: lying across tables, collapsed in chairs, fallen face-down on the floor. None of them wear helmets.

They were gassed, Jorge realizes with horror. Whatever was introduced into the quarantine facility's air system knocked these people down so quickly, they didn't have a chance to reach their helmets lying nearby. The Alabama's colonization team: fifty URS officers and their families, bowled over within seconds. Jorge sincerely hopes they're not dead. They're so still, it's hard to tell ... but no, they're still breathing; he can see their chests moving, their eyelids twitching ever so slightly.

The figure at the head of the line turns, makes a hasty gesture: come on, come on, don't stop, keep moving! Jorge follows the procession down the center aisle. His faceplate fogs up and he feels light-headed; he has an impulse to drop the bag, turn around and run for the door. Too late. For the sake of his wife and children, he has to keep going...

At the far end of the room is a second airlock. The figure at the head of the line stops to twist open the lockwheel, then quickly gestures for someone behind him to grab a chair and prop it open. Caught by a draft of fresh air moving between the two open doors, the yellow haze drifts toward the second hatch. The line starts moving again, heading toward the exit.

Another short corridor, this one leading to a new pair of double-doors. A URS soldier lies face-down just inside the doors. Someone stunned him while he was standing guard. The leader gets someone else behind him to take care of the sentry; he grabs the soldier under his shoulders, drags him back into the quarantine room. Their leader waits until the soldier has been taken away and the volunteer has returned; another quick look to make sure that everyone is with him, then he turns and opens the door.

Raw sunlight, hot and blinding, floods the corridor, and now they're walking into it, a procession of anonymous figures in isolation suits. Beyond the door, upraised voices, the staccato clicking of camera shutters, loud applause...

And now they're striding single-file past a dense crowd of journalists and cameramen, all gathered behind a red velvet rope to bear witness as the Alabama's colonization team emerges from the Crew Training Facility.

Everything seems so surreal, as if he's walking through a weird dream, yet Jorge feels his fear suddenly leave him, replaced by a strange dissonance. Somehow, it seems to him that this is the way it should be, the way it was meant to be. On the other side of those lenses are hundreds of millions of eyes, watching as he begins his journey to the future. Still remaining in step with the man just in front of him, he can't help himself...

Jorge raises his hand to wave goodbye, and the mob straining against the rope roar its approval. Then microphones and cameras are shoved toward him, and he remembers who he really is, what he's doing. Jorge feels his knees become weak; he drops his arm and looks away, deliberately focusing on the white maxvee parked only a few yards away.

A soldier stands in front of the max, and standing next to him is the prefect who had helped them get this far. He glares at Jorge as he steps onto the ramp. Embarrassed, Jorge doesn't dare meet his angry gaze as he boards the vehicle.

He takes a seat on the bench, moves over a little to make room for Carlos. Through the faceplate, he catches a brief glimpse of his son's face -- Papa, you moron! -- then he takes the bag and shoves it beneath his legs as Marie and Rita sit down next to them.

The last person aboard is the man who met them outside the quarantine facility. He turns to wave to the press, then takes a seat at the back of the vehicle. The prefect turns his back to them as a soldier pushes the ramp back in place. The rear hatch slams shut; a few seconds later, the maxvee rises from its pads to glide away.

The man who led them through the CTF ducks his head, pulls off his helmet. When he looks up at them, his eyes are cold and hard.

"Gentlemen, ladies," he says quietly, "I'm Captain Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the Alabama. From this moment on, you'll do exactly what I tell you to do..."

Merritt Island 7.5.70 / T-11.10.52

Fifty years ago, Pad 11 was Shuttle Launch Complex 39-B, the point of departure for NASA's first-generation space shuttles. The enormous launch tower and service structure, however, have long since been dismantled to make room for single-stage orbital transports that require none of the old hardware. Virtually the only things that remain from the former site are the high security fences that encircle the base of the mound, and the broad concrete road leading across the surrounding marshlands to the pad.

The URSS George Wallace rests on its tricycle landing gear, tended to by a half-dozen pad technicians who now wait near the gangway lowered from beneath the spaceplane's fuselage. Wisps of supercooled hydrogen drift from the blowoff vents of the transport's nuclear indigenous fuel engines, curl upward around the raked edges of its twin vertical stabilizers. The pad crew watches

as the maxvee, escorted by a pair of security HVs, passes through the fence gate and glides to the top of the mound.

The max comes to a halt, and two workers open the rear hatch and pull down the ramp. Captain Lee is the first to emerge; peering through his helmet, he takes a moment to gaze at the Wallace, then he turns to salute the pad crew gathered nearby. They grin and break into applause, which he accepts with a gallant bow. Then he stands aside and watches as the colonization team disembarks from the maxvee and marches toward the shuttle.

Most of the passengers have already trooped up the gangway when Lee notices a couple of pad workers looking away from the spacecraft. He turns to see a black coupe gliding down the service road from the distant launch control center. The security officers walk over to meet the car as it moves through the gate and up the hill. It comes to a halt next to the maxvee, then its doors slide open.

Lee feels a twinge of unease when he sees the prefect who shepherded the D.I.'s from southern Georgia; there's no reason why he should be here now. When Roland Shaw climbs out of the car, something clutches at the back of his throat; despite the heat of the day, the DIS is wearing his uniform grey overcoat and cap. Yet Lee's unprepared for the woman in the hooded travel cape who gets out of the back of the coupe. For a few moments he doesn't recognize her, then she comes closer and lowers her hood, and he finds himself gazing upon the face of the last person he ever expected to see again: Elise Rochelle Lee.

Lee's still staring at Elise as Shaw and the prefect approach him. "Captain Lee," Shaw says quietly, "my apologies, but there's a matter of utmost importance we need to discuss with you."

"I ... I don't understand." Lee's mouth is dry. "Is there a problem?"

A grim smile appears on his former wife's face, yet Elise remains quiet, her hands clasped together within her cape. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid there is," the Prefect replies. "We have to speak with you immediately."

The security officers step closer, their hands never far from their holstered sidearms. Confused, the pad techs hover nearby, murmuring to one another. The last handful of men and women boarding the Wallace watch from the bottom of gangway; Lee can't see their faces, but he knows that they must be frightened. "Yes, of course. By all means. What is it that you want?"

Elise opens her mouth as if to say something, but she's cut off by Shaw. "Perhaps we should do this in private." He gestures to the max. "In there?"

Lee nods within his helmet, and the prefect turns to lead them up the ramp into the back of the vehicle, signaling for the two security officers to shut the hatch behind them. Once they're alone, Shaw looks at Lee. "Would you take off your helmet, sir? I think we've minimized the risk of contamination, and it would make this conversation easier."

Lee reluctantly removes his helmet. His hair is soaked with sweat; he pushes it with his gloved hand as he steps back, trying to keep the others at arm's distance. "If this is supposed to be a last-minute send-off, you're timing is..."

"Sorry, Captain, but it's a little more serious than that." Shaw glances at Elise. "Your wife..."

"Former wife," Elise interrupts. "For the record, we're married in name only."

"We're not on the record, but I'll try to remember that." Shaw's eyes never leave Lee's. "Ms. Lee has alerted the ISA to a ... well, certain improper actions on your part. She claims she's found a letter..."

"You know the one I'm talking about, don't you?" Elise indicts him with her gaze. "The letter you left in your desk, the one which I wasn't supposed to find until after the Alabama launched..."

"The one I addressed to you and your father, yes." Lee slowly lets out his breath. "My mistake. I thought you'd wait until I was gone before you decrypted the password to see what I might have left behind." He can't help but to smile. "No bank codes, sorry. I left everything to charity."

Her face darkens. "After all my father's done for you..."

"The senator did nothing for me. It was all for himself. Maybe for the Republic, too, but that's almost as low." Despite his fear, Lee gives her a defiant smile. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't give a damn about the Republic or your father."

Elise's eyes widen. A confession is the last thing she expected. Indeed, Lee is shocked himself at the words which spill from his tongue. Yet if they've read the letter, they already know everything; denying it now would be pointless. Shaw steps a little closer, his right hand moving to the front of his coat. "Then you admit you're involved in a plot to hijack the Alabama, that you're planning to smuggle D.I.s aboard...?"

"Absolutely. Everything in my letter, it's all true." Lee barely glances at Shaw. "In fact,

they're already aboard the shuttle." Although he speaks to the DIS, he continues to stare straight at Elise. "And so you'll know, I'm not just involved in this ... it's my plan, has been from the very beginning."

Elise's mouth falls open; she recoils as if he's slapped her. "How ...? When did...?"

"From the moment I was selected as mission commander." Lee savors her horror, even as from the corner of his eye he sees Roland Shaw slowly draw a stunner from within his coat. "Perhaps even before then. Maybe I got the idea even while I was in the Academy and saw what was being done to Project Starflight. Or maybe it was while we were married, and I got to watch from close range while your father and his cronies ruined the country. In any case, I've had a long time to learn to hate the Republic ... and you too, for that matter."

Elise can't speak. Lee isn't surprised; for the first time, at least in his memory, someone close to her has uttered seditious thoughts about the government. Now he knows for certain that she never suspected what he was planning, even during the years that they shared the same bed. More evidence to the fact that their marriage was a sham. "But I have to thank you for one thing," he continues. "Your father's connections enabled me to establish a few of my own. Through him, I met some people without whom none of this would have been possible."

Then he looks at Shaw. "Are we all set?"

"Yes, captain, we are." The Director of Internal Security nods his head. "Just one last detail...."

Elise turns to stare at Shaw. "What...?"

Shaw squeezes the trigger. There's a soft *_thufft_* of compressed air, then Elise collapses as the charged dart strikes her. She almost falls against the side of the van, but the prefect grabs her by the shoulders, gently lowers the unconscious woman onto a bench.

Lee lets out his breath. "Bad luck," he says quietly. On one hand, he's glad Shaw used a nonlethal weapon; as much as he despises this woman, he has no desire to see her dead. On the other hand, she knows too much. "What are you going to do with her?"

"We can keep her down for a couple of hours, at least." Shaw tucks the stunner back in his shoulder holster. "By the time she wakes up, she'll be in Valdosta, awaiting trial on sedition charges. Don't worry, we'll find a way to make 'em stick, father or no father. But we've still got a problem...."

"Let me guess. She told someone else at ISA."

"Uh-uh ... fortunately she called me first. I heard from her just after our briefing, and by then she was already flying down here. She wanted to confront you personally, and I told her to keep it to herself." Shaw glances warily at the closed hatch of the van. "But some of your people were arrested earlier this morning, apparently while trying to make it to the rendezvous point. One of them cracked under interrogation and my people tipped off Highgate, and now there's a service squad on your ship, checking everyone who comes aboard. Sorry, Robert, but I didn't learn about it until right after I got the call from your wife..."

"Please don't call her my wife." Lee picks up his helmet, juggles it in his hands. "And you can't order the squad to leave without raising suspicions, right?" Shaw shakes his head. "Okay. I'll deal with it somehow. At least cover for us until we lift off."

"That, I can do." Shaw looks at the prefect. "Ms. Lee is under arrest. Keep her sedated, and don't let anyone see her when she wakes up. I'll deal with this later." Then he takes Lee by the arm, leads him toward the hatch. "You've just had a long, tearful farewell visit with your loving wife, and now you and I are going to walk out there..."

Security officers and pad workers silently watch as the commanding officer of the *_Alabama_* and the Director of Internal Security emerge from the back of the max and quickly walk across the launch pad to the *_Wallace_*. The colonists have already boarded the shuttle; now only the captain needs to walk up the gangway.

One of the pad workers has a camera. He uses it to catch a final snapshot of the two men as they formally salute each other at the bottom of the shuttle gangway. Many years later, historians will study this picture, and wonder what final words might have been exchanged between the two greatest traitors to the United Republic of America.

"Good luck, Captain," Shaw says quietly. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thank you, sir." Lee holds the salute. "And good luck to you, too."

Shaw nods ever so slightly. "We'll both need it."

URSS *_Wallace_* 7.5.70 / T-11.00.00

Jorge winces as an awesome roar rips through the passenger compartment, accompanied by a prolonged shudder that seems to go straight to the roots of his teeth. Scowling against the overpowering sound and vibration, he can barely hear Marie's frightened scream above the engines,

but he clamps his hand over his daughter's.

"It's okay," he murmurs even though he knows she can't hear him. "It's all right ... It's okay ... everything's going to be all right..."

No windows back here in the passenger compartment, only two long rows of narrow acceleration couches; his only view is past the shoulders of the passengers seated in front of him, through the latticed bubble window of the forward cockpit. Jorge catches a final glimpse of flat Floridian landscape falling away, then cloudless sky fills the window, more blue and clear than any sky he's ever seen before.

The deck tilts backward, pushing him further into the foam padding of his couch. Jorge turns his head, gazes at his family strapped into the seats next to him. Rita's eyes are closed tight and Marie's face is screwed up in mortal terror, but Carlos wears a huge grin; all his fears have vanished, and now he relishes every moment of this. Jorge feels a surge of paternal pride. His son...

Then the main engines howl into life, and Jorge has only a moment to turn his head forward again before his body is slammed back. Weight descends upon his body; his lungs fight for every breath he takes. Marie isn't screaming anymore, but the nails of her small hand dig into his palm. He wants to say something to her, but he can't. The g-force is incredible. Henry, you bastard, you lied...

The sky turns dark purple, starts fading to black.

URSS _Alabama_ 7.5.70 / T-10.47.12

"Incoming OCN from the _Wallace_, sir. Captain Lee."

"Thank you, Mr. Gillis, I'll take it from here." Shapiro rotates the command chair seat away from the status board, taps his headset. "_Wallace_, this is _Alabama_, do you copy?"

"We copy, _Alabama_." Lee's voice comes clearly over the orbital communications network, the satellite system that permits spacecraft to radio one another without having to use ground-based systems. "Sorry for the delay, Tom. The ride up was a little bumpy, but we cleared the pad without any difficulties. LEO achieved and we're headed for Highgate rendezvous, ETA 1430."

Shapiro closes his eyes in relief. Good. Lee spoke of himself in the plural, which means he's managed to get everyone aboard the _Wallace_. The line about having a bumpy ride up, though, is a signal that not everything went well. "Sorry to hear that you picked up some chop, sir. Maybe I can narrow your ETA if you'll feed me your numbers on the GI."

"We copy, _Alabama_. Thanks, I'd appreciate it."

"Stand by, _Wallace_." Shapiro unbuckles the seat harness, pushes himself across the deck to the com station. Several other members of the bridge crew are gathered in the semi-circular compartment, but not all of them are involved; he has to be careful what he says and does. Les Gillis punches up the OCN graphic interface; glancing over his shoulder at Shapiro, the com officer briefly holds up three fingers, then lowers one. Shapiro nods, then taps his headset again. "Captain, we're patching the GI into OCN-3. I hope this isn't too much trouble."

A brief pause. "Roger that, _Alabama_," Lee says. "No, it's not too much trouble."

Shapiro and Gillis trade a knowing look: Lee understands the double-talk. Although they're using OCN-3 to exchange data regarding orbital coordinates, at the same time they'd be patched into OCN-2, a seldom-used extra-low frequency band they've established for covert print-only communications. Although flight controllers in Houston may be monitoring OCN-3, they won't be looking for ELF transmissions carried over OCN-2. Or at least so they hope.

Leslie taps at his keyboard, and the small flatscreen in front of him bisects in half. The top half depicts a global map of Earth's surface, with the curved ground-tracks of Highgate and the _Wallace_ projected above it. The shuttle is halfway through its first orbit, now passing through the night terminator somewhere above the Indian Ocean; meanwhile Highgate, in a higher orbit, is coming up on the northern California coast. Numbers to the right of the map display the exact coordinates of both spacecraft. All very routine. The bottom half of the screen, though, displays a decrypted ELF message from the _Wallace_:

ISA CAUGHT 5 HERE -- 1 TALKED -- GSC SECURITY ALERT

Shapiro swears beneath his breath. If there was a security alert at the Cape, then Lee was lucky to get the _Wallace_ off the ground. Feet dangling in midair, he leans across Gillis to type a response:

5 URS ABOARD WAITING FOR YOU -- WEAR SUITS W/ HOODS

A long pause. Shapiro glances over his shoulder, spots Dana Monroe watching him from the engineering station. He cocks his head toward the screen; she nods, then pushes off to glide toward them. When he looks back, Lee's response has already appeared:

WILL DO -- 1ST OPTION OUT -- GO TO OPT. 2

Gillis hisses between his teeth. "He can't be serious," he whispers, so low Shapiro can barely hear him.

Tom feels a soft hand grip his shoulder. Looking around, he finds Dana behind him. Her eyes widen as she reads the screen. "Oh, God..."

Shapiro twists around to examine the status board. All systems are in the green, and the final stages of the fuel load-up are almost complete. Through the windows on the other side of the deck, he can see the aft end of the fuel barge parked beneath the main tank. At 1400, forty-four minutes from now, the last few tons of the helium-3 and deuterium necessary for the primary boost phase will have been pumped aboard. Thirty minutes later, at 1430, the Wallace is scheduled to dock with the Alabama. After that...

"Can we do this?" Tom whispers. Dana hesitates, gives a reluctant nod. "Okay," he murmurs, then he taps his headset again. "We've got your numbers, Wallace, and they look good to us. Concur with your projected ETA."

"We copy, Alabama," Lee replies. "Wallace out."

Shapiro sighs, then he looks at Gillis. "Tell the others to get ready ... and for God's sake, do it quietly." The com officer is ashen, but he nods his head. Shapiro gives him a gentle pat on the back, then he turns again to Monroe. "Can you get us ready for a quick-start?"

"I ... sure, no problem. We'll be there." Shapiro starts to push away, but she stops him. "One thing ... what about the lock-out?"

"I don't know," he mutters. "Better just hope the right man made it aboard."

URSS Wallace 7.5.70 / T-9:32:14

Gazing up through the cockpit, Lee watches as the Alabama fills the canopy window. The shuttle cradle is only a few yards away; with deft movements of the hand controller, occasionally glancing down at the instrument panel to make sure the upper fuselage hatch is properly aligned with the docking collar, he gently coaxes the Wallace closer toward the enormous ship as the spaceplane's blunt shadow falls across its hull. The shrill beep of contact probe, and he relaxes his grip on the stick. Another moment passes, then the hard thump of the hatch mating with the collar.

"Alabama, we're in," he says. "Secure shuttle, please."

"Roger that, Wallace." Tom Shapiro's voice. "The XO's waiting for you. He'll help you bring your party aboard."

"Very good, Alabama, thank you." As he switches off the main systems he feels a soft jar pass through the shuttle as the cradle closes around the Wallace and locks it in place. Another quick look across the board to make sure the engines are safe and the wings have been properly folded, then Lee shrugs out of his harness, picks up his helmet, and pushes himself out of his seat and moves from the narrow cockpit into the aft passenger compartment.

A few of the hardier ones are already unbuckling their straps, but many remain in their seats, their faces queasy and pale. The air is rank with the odor of vomit; quite a few of these people got sick as soon as the Wallace entered orbit, and some didn't find the puke bags in time. Globular flecks of bile float through the compartment, but there's nothing that can be done about that now. Lee whistles sharply between his fingers, and everyone looks up at him.

"Okay, listen up," he says loudly once he has their attention. "You know what the situation is, so make sure your hoods are on when you leave the shuttle. Don't stop for anyone, just head straight for the hatch ... we've got someone there to show you the way. Go straight up the ladder until you reach Deck H1, and follow First Officer Shapiro to your bunks. Is that clear?"

Murmurs of assent, a few wary nods. Lee scans the compartment, sees dozens of nervous faces. "Everyone just relax," he adds, doing his best to calm them. "You did fine on the ground. Play it the same way here, and we're home free. Now ... is there a Jorge Montero aboard?"

A pause, then a hand rises from three rows back on the right: a middle-aged man, seated with a woman, a young girl, and a teenage boy. Lee tries not to show his relief; he wasn't one of those who was apprehended by the prefects. "Jorge, please follow me. We need you right away."

Jorge nods his head, then hastens to unbuckle his daughter's harness. Judging from her pale expression, she was one of those who got spacesick. His son stares back at Lee with incredulity, wide-eyed with the notion that they've been singled out. "Just you, sir," Lee quickly adds. "I'm sorry, but your family has to leave with everyone else."

Jorge hesitates. "Yes, sir. Of course." He looks at his wife and kids, murmurs something to them, then struggles with a canvas duffel bag he has stuffed beneath his seat. Lee moves forward to catch it before it hits another passenger in the back of the head.

"You brought it?" he quietly asks. Jorge nods again, and Lee looks past him toward his children. "I'm going to need your father for awhile, so I want you to follow your mother. She'll

take you where you're supposed to go, okay?"

His wife gives her husband an uncertain glance, but his son has a broad grin. The little girl, though, has a frightened look on her face. "Is my papa in trouble" she asks uncertainly.

"Not at all, sweetie." Jorge gives her a smile. "Don't worry. I'll be back with you quick as a flash." He takes the bag from Lee, pulls its strap across his shoulders. "Ready. Let's go."

Behind them, the rest of the passengers are opening their harnesses, pulling on their helmets. These people have been through a lot in the last eighteen hours; he can only pray they can keep it up just a little while longer.

"Good luck, everyone," he says, then he pushes himself to the ceiling hatch.

URSS _Alabama_ 7.5.70 / T-9.28.04

The inner hatch hisses as it irises open, then Captain Lee pushes himself through it, the soles of his shoes nearly touching the faceplate of Jorge's helmet. Jorge tries to follow him through the manhole, but something pulls at him from behind. Looking back, he sees that his duffel bag has snagged on the edge of the hatch.

Cursing under his breath, Jorge yanks the bag free, hauls it over his shoulder as he scrambles the rest of the way through the hatch. A moment of disorientation -- everyone seems to be standing on the walls -- eclipsed by fear as he spots URS soldiers within the narrow compartment.

Say nothing, do nothing. Jorge pretends not to notice the troopers as Lee salutes a senior officer wearing a colonel's insignia. Past them, on the other side of the deck only a few yards away, a young man in a FSA jumpsuit floats near a ceiling hatch. He gives Jorge an impatient gesture, and he obediently moves toward him...

"Hold it." Someone grabs at his bag, nearly pulling it off his shoulder. Jorge turns, sees one of the soldiers, his hand wrapped around its strap. His name strip reads Carruthers, and his eyes are suspicious. "What d'ya got in there?"

Jorge feels his heart pounding in his mouth. Past Carruthers, Captain Lee and the colonel -- Reese, from the name on his uniform -- turn to stare at him. "Nothing ... I mean, it's just..."

"Open it." Carruthers releases the bag, but his hands fall upon his rifle.

Lee turns toward Reese. "Gill, this is unnecessary. We're already behind..."

"Let my people do their job." Reese gives Carruthers a brief nod. "Open it for him."

One hand still on his weapon, Carruthers takes the bag from Jorge, lets it dangle in mid-air while he unzips its flap. He peers at its contents, then he looks up at Jorge. "Lemme guess ... scientist, right?"

Jorge nods, unable to speak. "Yeah, okay..." Carruthers zips the bag shut, looks back at his superior officer. "Safe."

Reese acknowledges his man with a small nod, and Carruthers returns the bag to Jorge. His pulse still hammering, Jorge pulls the bag back over his shoulder, moves toward the hatch. When he glances back, he sees that Captain Lee is behind him, and more passengers are emerging from the shuttle hatch. No one else is getting harassed.

Yet the third soldier ... his right hand is raised, his index finger wagging a little. Jorge realizes that he's counting everyone who leaves the _Wallace_. Four, five, six ...

What happens when he gets to forty-seven, and discovers that the crew roster is short by five?

The crewman near the access hatch silently urges him toward the ladder. Jorge grasps the bottom rung, pushes himself upward into the shaft. He looks back, sees Captain Lee coming up the ladder. "Get to the command deck," he whispers. "Next deck up. C'mon, _move!_"

Two crew members float unconscious on Deck H4, a man and a woman, their arms limp at their sides, their heads thrown back. A young woman hovering near the hatch aims a stunner straight at Jorge; he raises his hands, then Lee appears behind him. "Stand down, Dana," he says calmly. "He's with us." Dana lowers the weapon as the captain glances at the crewmen. "Is this everyone?"

"On this deck, yes sir. Our people are taking care of the rest now. Some resistance in H3. Someone tried to shut down the life-support system, but they've been taken down. No casualties reported."

"Well done, Chief." Lee turns to another officer, points to the unconscious crewmen. "Put them where they won't cause any trouble when they wake up. The nearest head should do." Then he looks back at Dana. "Here's our man. He knows what needs to be done."

"Aye, skipper." She tucks the stunner in her belt, gestures to Jorge. "This way ... what's your name?"

"Jorge. Jorge Montero." He grabs the ceiling rail, follows Dana across the deck of the main control console. "Electrical systems engineer ... I designed the wiring for this place, when I was

with..."

"Right. The service panel you want is down here." She lowers herself to the floor, thrusts her head and shoulders beneath the console. "You know where you're supposed to go?"

Jorge quickly scans the complex array of buttons, toggles switches and digital readouts until he finds a key slot covered with a transparent plastic cover. "Uh-huh. Main engine ignition system's here, which means the lock-out should just beneath..."

"Don't explain it to me. Just do it." Dana unlatches the service panel, impatiently shoves the cover aside. She pulls herself out from beneath the console, nods toward the open bay. "Whatever it is, make it quick."

"I know. Hold this." Jorge thrusts the duffel bag into Dana's arm. He pulls open the zipper, then begins pulling out its contents. Her eyes widen as books, many of them dating from the last century, spill forth from the bag: Skills For Taming The Wilderness, The Foxfire Book, Survival With Style, Bartlett's Famous Quotations ...

"What did you do, bring a library?" Dana snatches a frayed oversize paperback before it floats away, glances at the title: The Boy Scout Handbook.

Jorge grins despite himself. "Sort of. I picked some things I thought we'd need when we ... here we are!" The hardcover copy of J. Bronowski's The Ascent of Man is nearly a century old; it took years of searching before he discovered a copy in an antiquarian bookstore outside Atlanta. Jorge opens the book to the back cover. "Got a knife? Something sharp?"

Dana reaches into a thigh pocket, pulls out a small penknife. Jorge takes it from her, opens its small blade, carefully slices the endpaper straight down the center of the inside binding. She watches in fascination as Jorge carefully peels back the false endpaper glued over the back cover, revealing a hidden pocket. Concealed within the book is a paper-thin plastic sheet: a fiberoptic circuit board. Dana smiles at Jorge with newfound respect. "Sneaky. Very sneaky."

"Figured someone might search me. It never came to that, but..." Withdrawing the circuit board from the pocket, Jorge gingerly holds it by its edges as he bends down to the open service panel. "Okay, look in there and find the electronics bay marked 2-304."

Dana pulls out a penlight, squeezes in past Jorge. After a few moments, she slides out a slender metal case. "Remove the board that's in there," Jorge says, and she carefully removes the thin sheet contained within the drawer. As Jorge carefully places the substitute board within the drawer, he hears voices from across the compartment:

"Captain! Chief Tinsley reports Reese's men have discovered we're short!"

"Where's Tinsley now?"

"Access shaft just outside H5!" A pause. "He's shut the hatch, sir. The last of the passengers are aboard."

"Good. Tell the XO to stand by. Chief Monroe, where are we?"

Jorge slides the drawer shut, twists around within the cramped space to give the Dana a thumbs-up. She raises her head above the console. "We're clear, skipper!" Then she looks back down at Jorge. "I hope this works," she whispers.

"You and me both." Ten months of effort went into devising a bypass for the main engine ignition system that would not require code authorization from the ground, yet there was no certain way of testing it before now. Jorge barely has time to climb out from the console before Captain Lee pushes him out of the way. He's already removed his isolation suit, and now he yanks the chrome launch key from around his neck. Without any hesitation, Lee flips open the cover above the ignition system, shoves the key into the slot, gives it a one-quarter turn.

For a half-second, nothing happens; Jorge feels his heart skip a beat. Then diodes across the console flash from red to green, and a flatscreen in the center of the console lightens to display bars of alphanumeric code. Dana glances at the screen, then quickly types an instruction into a nearby keyboard. The screen changes, displaying a schematic of Alabama's fusion reactor.

"Lock-out is down!" she shouts. "We've got the ship!"

Everyone in the command center yells at once, and Jorge feels the strength leave his body; gasping for breath, he lets his head fall back. It worked ... oh, God, it worked ... then, through the laughter and applause, he hears a voice from the other side of the command deck:

"Skipper! Message from Launch Operations ...!"

7.5.70 / T-9.10.32

"They've ordered us to open the hatch!"

Holding onto a ceiling rail, Lee stares at the launch key half-turned in its slot. For a few seconds, everything seems frozen in time, Gillis's voice a distant echo from across a vast distance. At the edge of his vision he sees Dana just beginning to react; next to her, Jorge Montero turns toward them, fear beginning to register on his face...

It's got to be now, he realizes. Now, or never.

"Inform Ops we've got a ship emergency." Lee snaps back to full awareness. "Tell 'em ... whatever. An electrical fire somewhere in the hub. Buy us some time." He glances at the chronometer above the console, then turns to Dana. "Put everything on line, Chief. We launch in five."

Dana's expression changes to astonishment. For a moment it seems she's about to protest, then she quickly nods her head. "Right away, sir," she says, then she pitches herself across the deck to the engineering station. "Paine! Jessup! Pressurize liquid fuel tanks, initiate primary ignition sequence! We're restarting the clock at minus-oh-five!"

The bridge crew stares at them, frozen in place, not quite believing what they've just heard. "Let's go, people!" Lee yells. "You know what to do!" That's all it takes; suddenly, everyone is motion, nearly colliding with each other as they rush for their stations. The only person who seems confused is Jorge Montero; still holding onto the console, he stares about the compartment in confusion, not knowing what to do.

"Mr. Montero, get out of here." Lee points to the hatch as he pushes himself toward the command chair. "Find your family and tell them to get ready." Montero nods dumbly, then heads for the access shaft. Lee taps his headset. "Mr. Shapiro, where are you?"

"Deck C3B, skipper." Lee can hear voices in the background. "What's going on?"

"We're moving up the countdown. Zero-five and counting. Get those people strapped down, then get back here." Without waiting for a response, Lee turns toward Gillis. "Les! Put me through to Colonel Reese!"

The com officer slaps buttons on his board; a moment later, Reese's angry voice comes through Lee's headset. "Captain, what are you...?"

"Ship emergency, Colonel." Lee tries to keep an even tone. "A fire has broken loose in Deck H3, and we're working to contain it, but I have to ask that you and your men leave the Alabama at once. Use the EVA suits in the lockers..."

"Lee, there's no fire. The master alarm hasn't gone off." Reese isn't buying it; Lee can tell from the sound of his voice. "Your exec lit out of here when we informed him that the head-count was short by five persons, and now he's sealed the hatch. Either you let us in, or we're going to have to shoot our way through."

Reese is bluffing. The access shaft hatch on Deck H5 are built to withstand a full-scale decompression accident, and the rounds from a URS flechette rifle are specifically designed not to be able to penetrate bulkheads. There's no way the soldiers can enter the shaft. "Colonel Reese," Lee says calmly, "please take your men off the ship within four minutes. That's an order."

"I've already got my orders." A long pause. "Lee ... I know what you're planning to do. We can't allow this. Surrender yourselves now, and you might get out this without..."

"Sorry, Colonel, we're way beyond that." No sense in keeping up the pretense; Reese has figured out the truth. "Four minutes, then you're stowaways. Your choice."

Lee has just clicked off when he hears Gillis again. "Skipper, I've got Houston. They..."

"Mr. Gillis..." He takes a deep breath. "You have my permission to tell them to go straight to hell."

"Yes, sir!"

"Secondary engines pressurized, ignition systems armed." From her station, Dana keeps up a steady drone as she moves down the checklist. Lee absently gnaws at a knuckle as he watches her people flip switches, enter commands in their keyboards. "Main engine reactor on standby ... navigation interface, checked and ready..."

"You're sure you're ready to do this?" Tom Shapiro has returned to the command deck without Lee noticing; he rests his hand on the captain's shoulder. "Another ten minutes..."

"Another ten minutes, and they may find a way to stop us." Lee shakes his head. "We get out now, and they can't do anything. We'll complete flight procedures once we're underway." He looks up at Shapiro. "Agreed?"

The First Officer hesitates, slowly lets out his breath. "Yes, sir. Understood."

"Are the passengers strapped down?" Shapiro nods reluctantly, and Lee points to the vacant seat at the main console. "Okay, take the helm. You'll have to fly until we've had a talk with Mr. McDowell."

Shapiro doesn't immediately obey his order; instead he lingers by the command chair, gazing through the windows at the drydock surrounding them. Lee looks up at him; for a moment neither man says anything. Shapiro waits for an answer to his unspoken question, when he doesn't receive one, he lets out his breath, then he moves to the helm, straps himself in, punches commands into his keyboard. "Main nav systems online," he murmurs. "Primary AI interface, green for go..."

Now Lee's all alone. Voices in his headset ask questions; he answers yes or no, never once

removing his gaze from the status board above the console. The last few minutes drift by. He rests his right elbow on the armrest, feels Alabama tremble beneath him: eighty thousand tons of metal, plastic, ceramic alloy, and flesh, waiting to be fired into the cosmos.

"Captain?" Gillis's voice is hesitant. "President Conroy online. He wants to speak with you."

Lee feels eyes upon him. Everyone waits for him to say something. A final denouncement? A curse upon the Republic? Perhaps haughty laughter from a trusted senior officer who has stolen the crowning achievement of a corrupt government and transformed it into an expression of freedom?

"Switch off the comlink, Mr. Gillis." Lee unfastens his seat belt, pushes himself over to the main console. "We're ready for launch."

Then he grasps the silver key, twists it the rest of the way to the right. A green light flares above it. "Disengage mooring lines," he says. "Fire main thrusters."

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Pyros silently ignite along the Alabama's hull as the mooring cables are jettisoned, then the four maneuvering engines blaze to life and the starship slowly begins to move forward.

Ponderously, like a leviathan awakening within its grotto deep beneath the sea, the enormous vessel glides through the drydock, the red strobes of its running lights casting shadows along the trusswork of Highgate's central bay.

A service pod unlucky enough to be flying past Alabama at that moment turns on its axis, its RCRs flaring as it maneuvers wildly to avoid collision with the gaping maw of the ramscoop. Breath caught in his throat, the pilot watches through the cockpit as the four-hundred-foot length of the starship passes above him.

Within the EVA compartment, URS soldiers clutch the ceiling rails with both hands, their feet dangling in midair as they yell obscenities. A rifle skitters across a bulkhead, slams against the floor. Colonel Reese loses his grip, falls to the deck; there's a sharp pain in his left ankle as it twists; he ignores it as he tries to crawl toward the nearest suit locker. Yet he knows it's a futile effort; even if he were able to put on a suit and get to the airlock, Alabama is under thrust. Any attempt now to escape the ship would most certainly be fatal. Like it or not, he's going where it's going...

On Deck C4A, Jorge Montero lies prone on his bunk; weight descends upon him, pushing his body flat against the narrow mat. Within the cramped confines of the crew compartment, he can hear people cheering, laughing, sobbing with relief. Turning his head, he glances across the narrow aisle. Rita meets his gaze, then looks away. She's frightened: not of this, but of what lies before them.

"Goodbye, Earth!" From the bunk above him, Carlos yells against the dull creak of the bulkheads, the distant hollow thrum of the engines. "Goodbye, URS! We are history!"

Jorge grins. The kid's right. They've become history...

Eyes half-shut, arms and legs relaxed, Captain Lee lets his body collapse against the soft membranes of his chair. All around him, he hears the low voices of the command crew as they murmur to one another; the quiet tapping of fingers against keyboards, the subdued chitter and occasional electronic beep of instruments. Studying the status board, he sees that all is well: Alabama is behaving just as it should, its complex systems all working well within their parameters.

Everyone's going about their work with quiet stoicism, just as they were trained. Dana looks around at him, meets his eye; she gives him a smile, a silent thumbs-up. He returns the gesture, then shifts his gaze to the windows.

Highgate can no longer be seen. It's already many miles away, falling away behind him. In a couple of minutes he'll give the order for main engine ignition, the beginning of the four-month boost phase that will gradually accelerate the Alabama to cruise velocity. Long before then everyone aboard will be hibernation; virtually immortal, they'll sleep for the next two and a quarter centuries, and when they awaken...

No. Now's not the time for this. Ursae Majoris 47 can wait a little while longer.

Lee watches as the silver-blue curvature of the Earth gracefully drifts past the command deck windows. No one says anything; the bridge team falls silent as they look upon their home world for the last time. For a moment, there is only the silence of the stars.

Peace. Liberty. Freedom.

End