



KV 66

ZOLANDA'S DESTINY

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by

K. G. MAW

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“The true delight is in the
finding out rather than in the
knowing.”

Isaac Asimov

Located deep inside the constellation of Orion's Belt, well within its habitable zone and orbiting a star numbered Kepler 62, is a planet not too dissimilar from Earth, which is home to a race of people almost ten thousand years more advanced than humans.

When astronomers first identified this worldly *mass*, they gave it an abbreviated name—Kepler 62f. But, unbeknownst to them, the people living there had long since provided their homely terra firma with a more dignified name—Pharaon.

The people of Pharaon had been roaming the stars in search of other Earth-like planets for thousands of years. To achieve this cosmic superiority, they had managed to overcome the two main hurdles blocking such outlandish expeditions, developing advanced technology that would enable them to travel millions of light-years between these targeted planets. Over time they discovered and mapped a series of wormholes, which led them to shortcut voyages and removed what had previously been inconceivable distance barriers.

Using a combination of suspended animation through frozen stasis and a power system that could provide an almost infinite supply of energy, they conquered the invisible boundaries that still prevent man from even dreaming of leaving the confines of our tiny solar system.

To propel their interstellar spacecraft and keep the life-support systems powered up for the duration of these exhaustive expeditions, their scientists had managed to develop and build mini fusion reactors. These sophisticated generators could provide limitless energy fueled by two critical elements, more commonly known as deuterium and tritium. While extremely rare on the planet's surface, the Pharaonians were able to harvest an

abundant supply of both components from outside of their atmosphere using an array of sophisticated robotic satellites, filtering off particles that encircled their planet in a series of rings similar to those of Saturn.

Pharaon orbits at a distance of sixty-five million miles from its host star with an orbital period of two hundred and sixty-seven days. Having a radius about one and half times the size of Earth, it likewise has both terrestrial and ocean topography supporting an even wider variety of species of animals, aquatic life, and fauna. Its atmosphere is almost identical to Earth's, and due to its advanced energy-production capabilities, it no longer suffers the ill effects of carbon emissions. The people of Pharaon are now completely unified, with lives dedicated to the planet's well-being and keeping it free from conflict, although that had not always been the case.

Darwin's doctrine of evolution was no different on Pharaon. Throughout many thousands of millennia, the peoples of Pharaon had evolved from ancient ape-like creatures into advanced humanoid beings spread across the planet with numerous races that adopted different cultures and beliefs that often led to unnecessary, bloody conflict.

Earlier lusts for power and greed by leaders of each nation led to their people's same anguish and misery. Following over a hundred years of destruction and continuous confrontation, sense finally prevailed. All the respected nations eventually rallied together under a single flag, shedding what was, in essence, invisible ideological propaganda and lifting all the cultural barriers that had previously been tools used by their despot chiefs and religious leaders to incite hostility.

Intermarriage and coupling between nations became commonplace as more people traversed the planet now that the borders had dissipated and there was freedom of movement. The central city of Penpharaon, named after its first unified leader, became the focal point of government and the planet's hub for knowledge and scientific research. With all the resources at its

disposal, Penpharaon was the chosen site for a new spaceport and future foundation for their people to reach out beyond their existing star system. Its purpose would be to seek other life forms, which they knew to be their destiny. Gaining mastery of the stars would be there to protect the future of their planet, knowing that their natural resources might not last forever.

The need for wealth had long since dissipated over the eons. All new generations of children had their futures carefully mapped out, not just to protect their rich past but also to help develop new ideas and technology to secure a bright future.

Zolanda was still a young teenager when she enrolled in the interstellar collegiate system. Her parents, ranking officers within the space program, wanted her to follow their lead and experience the excitement of reaching out into the unknown. Those lucky enough to embark on such incredulous missions would be in a position to practically freeze time and witness spectacular sights few could fathom.

Zolanda initially trained as a medical research assistant before embarking on the more rigorous preparation for interstellar flight.

Her striking looks were evident the moment she entered the academy. As she matured into a young woman, she had plenty of male admirers, all anxious to be partnered with her when the time came to be enlisted to one of their starships. These couplings were defacto, almost arranged marriages, as their elders and mentors deemed it essential for life on long-term voyages to be as close as possible to their existence back on Pharaon.

Zolanda had a sculpted, athletic figure molded through years of intensive training. Sporting a midriff contoured by a lean six-pack, her waist tapered upward. In her partially zipped up jumpsuit, she exposed just enough cleavage to gather the attention of her many admirers. Zolanda had a golden-brown, unblemished complexion, always preferring outdoor activities.

As with all Pharaonians, Zolanda had a slightly larger head that

exemplified her perfect beauty. Her soft, flowing, moon-shadow hair was cut to shoulder length and layered just enough to expose her delicate ears. With high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and sweeping eyelashes, her jade-green eyes were enough to captivate any audience. Keen and up for any task, she always sported a beaming smile with a set of flawless, angel-white teeth.

Now, age twenty and having completed four years of intensive preparation, was the day that the young cadets were to get a glimpse of what the future held. Her batch of twenty men and women gathered in the Great Hall at the center of the spaceport's academy to receive their well-earned graduation award. Other equally divided squads filled the cathedral-like structure and, for ease of identification, were each allocated different color-coded seating arrangements to match their armbands.

Zolanda's father, Garrus, stood at the raised podium in full dress uniform proudly looking down on his cadets. As the most senior-ranked officer present, it would be his privilege to hand each graduate their well-deserved certificate. But, more importantly, he would also announce the partner's name that each recipient would be "coupled" with for future crew assignments.

Garrus had been an earlier pioneer in the Pharaon space program and had made many long-distance voyages with his wife, Xantara, who he had coupled with more than thirty years previously at an almost identical ceremony under the same roof. After captaining his own starship for several tours, the planetary leadership finally allowed Garrus to return to share his wealth of experience and head up the space academy. He was also promoted to admiral.

Xantara, who had been beside Garrus throughout his tours searching for other life, was an accomplished scientist. Over the past three decades, and spending as much time as possible in her onboard laboratory, she perfected the biological compound needed to preserve cellular life while in a state of frozen stasis. As with Garrus, she brought these skills to the academy and was appointed chief scientific officer with an honorary rank of

commander.

Immediately behind Garrus, and seated on either side of him, sat all the academy's scientific officers and trainers who had tutored this batch of recruits, likewise looking resplendent in their official dress attire. Xantara, as the academy's CSO, would later join her husband by the podium and assist in handing out the awards.

Tapping the mic and bringing the entire hall to silence, Garrus commenced his eloquent speech, congratulating the graduates on their extraordinary achievements over the past four years. He then articulated how they had evolved into astute adult Pharaonians that all would be proud of, including himself, explicitly referring to his daughter, also seated among the multitude of excited cadets.

Zolanda beamed at the mention of her name. Anxious to relieve the tension that had been building over the days leading to this auspicious moment, she couldn't wait to learn who the academy had selected as her partner.

After Garrus had finished his opening address, a chorus of trumpets sounded to signify the start of the main event.

Two stewards dressed in black jumpsuits moved toward the podium, carrying a table with scrolls in metal cylinders. Each cylinder, gold for women and silver for men, was elaborately engraved with the graduate's name and paired up to correspond with the preallocated coupling. After first presenting the female graduate with her golden capsule, Garrus would then summon her partner to collect his gilded citation and join their hands together, officially "tying the knot."

The atmosphere within the great hall was electric. After giving a rousing applause to Garrus, one could almost hear a pin drop as silence filled the room in anticipation of the next phase of the ceremony with its life-changing announcements.

Xantara stood looking beautiful and radiant in her white zipped-up uniform adorned with the academy's emblem and three stars on

either shoulder to signify her rank as commander. As Xantara walked toward Garrus, Zolanda looked at her parents with a sense of pride. Tears welled up, making her eyes even more captivating, and with the tension increasing, she wiped her nervous palms on her thighs.

The hundred cadets were seated in five color-coded, sectioned-off rows. Ten girls sat in front of ten boys for each color but in no particular order as the pairing would remain secret until the official announcement. Parents and family members were seated further back and invited to attend a glamorous “passing-out” gala event afterward.

Zolanda sported a blue armband and would have to be patient and wait until the third batch of students was processed, as Garrus had advised earlier that the ceremony order would be red first, followed by green, blue, yellow, and black.

Both Garrus and Xantara had a real advantage as parents. They had been actively involved in Zolanda’s progression through the academy and knew her closest friends. They also happened to be in charge of the selection process and would hopefully make an accurate judgment on the right choice of coupling partner for their daughter.

As soon as the green team had completed its formalities, Zolanda finally heard her name called by her father. She stood, slightly nervous, and with her legs now feeling a little jellified, she maneuvered in front of her colleagues, made her way to the carpeted aisle, and marched toward the stage. Climbing up the five wooden steps to the left of the lectern, Zolanda stood in front of her father and shook his hand while taking hold of the golden cylinder Xantara had just taken off the table and handed to him.

Picking up the silver receptacle, Xantara winked at Zolanda, believing that she would be happy with their choice of partner. Garrus took hold of the cylinder, looked at the inscribed name before him, and announced the cadet’s identity: “Draxos! Please

step forward and accept your award! And also the hand of our beloved daughter!”

Draxos hailed from a remote mountainous region and was orphaned at a young age. His parents died during a volcanic eruption close to their modest village. A charitable foundation set up by the people of Penpharaon to search for survivors found Draxos, only four years old and the sole survivor. He was a true warrior, like his people, raised by loving guardians who were also teachers at the academy and who had been unable to conceive.

Standing six feet tall, with unblemished, dark-brown skin and chiseled muscles, Draxos was the cream of the crop. Much admired by his peers, he excelled at practically everything he did and was a born leader.

His delicate but exotic nose was slightly curved, broken during a fight when he was ten, and poorly reset, giving him a more rustic appearance. His nose complemented his now-prominent cheekbones. Handsome was an understatement. His basalt jaw and Spartan shoulders radiated strength, intimating to all that this was not a man to underestimate.

His string of admirers had often remarked that his best feature was his charming and rare amber eyes. Slightly slanted, they could shine as bright as the evening stars alight with joy and happiness. Although this could be deceiving, as at other times they could also resemble cauldrons of flashing fire and a warning to stay away.

Dazzling and colorful, any room would fill with his resonant, husky voice. He would be the first to crack a joke or fire off a humorous retort and was the center of attention throughout his four years of training. His stylish clothes were a source of amusement to some, not least because they emanated musk luring in girls as if soaked in pheromones.

Draxos stood and stared back at Garrus with a lucid smile. He had only ever had eyes for Zolanda since he first caught sight of her and couldn't believe what he had always longed for was now

becoming a reality. As he made his way toward the podium, he thought of how much he wanted to share the rest of his life with her, experience endless adventures together, and desperately looked forward to their next assignment.

As Garrus placed the ornate silver tube into Draxos's left hand, he took hold of his opposite palm and joined it to Zolanda's already open hand with added support from Xantara. They then lifted their interlocked arms to the rapturous applause of everyone in the chamber.

Now officially a couple, Draxos and Zolanda walked happily back to their seats, hand in hand, ecstatic. Immediately after the announcement, their friends sitting in blue group had reshuffled their seating arrangement to allow the doting pair to sit next to each other for the remainder of the ceremony.

After the final graduating cadets had received their honors and had their hands joined in the act of coupling, Xantara returned to her seat behind Garrus, and he concluded the remaining formalities with a short summation.

"I congratulate all of you here for completing a grueling four years of essential preparation for what will be an exhilarating future, not just as astronauts but also as couples. When you exit this chamber, you will each receive a single star to affix to your uniform to reflect your official graduation and becoming members of our space program as acting lieutenants. In the next few days you will also be assigned to your starships and given further orders. Thank you again for your dedication and service. We wish you every success, and my team and I look forward to meeting you all outside afterward, where you can join us in the officers' mess for a more traditional celebration."

2

The party atmosphere that followed the graduation ceremony continued for days. The state-controlled planetary space force had provided each couple with separate living quarters within the confines of the spaceport close to where they had lived previously in single-sex dormitories while training at the academy.

The plush accommodation consisted of single-bedroom apartments in an ultramodern, low-rise, metal-and-glass structure. The “cosmic” building had five levels with ten flats per floor so that the whole property could accommodate the entire group until they were given their orders and transferred to onboard living within their assigned spaceship.

They had their own fully catered officers’ mess facilities that served meals three times daily on the ground floor. Dinners were compulsory for all to attend and always in full dress uniform. These meals were sacrosanct and hosted by senior officers from elsewhere within the corps who would entertain and brief the young officers with anecdotes of the many missions they commanded during their service period as ranking officers.

At the close of dinner, and while the entire year group was still seated, the attending officer would also communicate any official announcements or orders. It was during these briefings that each couple would receive their ongoing transfer orders. Consequently, one could feel the electricity in the room as heaps of adrenalin coursed through the veins of all present, in the expectation of hearing their destiny.

A week had passed since graduation, and as Zolanda and Draxos made their way into the dining hall, they were surprised to see Garrus was the guest of honor and wondered what he might have in store for them. They sat on either side of him at the high table

and made small talk throughout the dinner expecting that he had volunteered to take the chair, knowing full well that he had their orders.

They didn't have to wait long as after the last course had been removed from the tables by the catering staff, Garrus stood, clinked his glass to bring everyone to silence, and spoke.

"I suspect many of you have a sneaking suspicion at what I'm about to say, and I aim not to disappoint. Five couples sitting here tonight will be joining the next Pharaon intergalactic mission, scheduled to leave ten days from now onboard our brand-new starship PSS *Crassus*. This vessel is named after my first commanding officer from when I joined the force almost thirty years ago and will be piloted by our most experienced captain. Because much of your time in space will be in frozen stasis, there is a possibility we may not get to meet again should you venture too far beyond our galaxy and not return. For this reason, I would urge those selected for this expedition to spend the remaining week with their families before reporting to Captain Cheela and preparing for launch."

Garrus lifted a small sheet of paper with the list of names and revealed the chosen few, one by one.

Zolanda was beginning to wonder whether they were included in the crew list for this mission as her father announced the fourth couple; however, Garrus, now staring down at her bright-green eyes, shed a tear in anticipation of losing his only pride and joy and declared the final couple Zolanda and Draxos.

After receiving a cheer, Garrus sat down and turned to face his daughter and whispered an additional curious and somewhat cautionary note for her ears only: "Zolanda, my dear, your mother and I will miss you when you leave. When you come over to the house tomorrow, you must sit with Xantara and listen very carefully to what she has to say about our stasis pods. This being her area of expertise, she has a theory on how to improve the current system's

effectiveness, which the corps has still not taken note of, probably to the detriment of the whole crew, if anything should happen to excessively extend the duration of any voyage.”

“Of course, Father, I understand and am intrigued to hear her point of view,” Zolanda said while wrapping her arms around Garrus’s neck and planting a loving kiss on his cheek. Holding him down for a few more seconds, not wanting to let go, she pondered what he had just said, enjoying the rare moment she could savor his love before finally releasing her grip.

As Garrus walked away, Zolanda turned to Draxos.

“My father just said the oddest thing and gave a bit of warning concerning the new stasis systems fitted into the *Crassus*. Not sure how to read into this, as I don’t think he would let us go if something wasn’t right. Still, he wants me to chat about it with my mother tomorrow.”

“Keep me posted, as I’m sure they will only be thinking of your best interest and am glad we have them to fall back on.”

Zolanda hardly slept that night, excited about their forthcoming voyage but also a little apprehensive following Garrus’s closing remarks.

The following day, Zolanda was up early and had packed a small bag with a few clothing items to see her through while visiting her parents for what could be the last time.

She had felt both sad and a little guilty at having taken her mood swing out on Draxos during their early morning ritual of passionate lovemaking, almost hitting him as he reached the moment of climax.

“What was that!” Draxos almost screamed, sweat dripping off his unshaven chin.

“Oh, Draxos, I couldn’t help it; please, forgive me. My mind is on another planet, and I’m sure I’ll settle down and be back to normal

once we take off. At least I hope so!”

“Look, go and enjoy your time with your parents. It’s going to be hard enough for me to be separated from you for the next week. Once we leave Pharaon, we will have all the time in the world for each other.”

3

It had been a long time since Zolanda had gotten quality time with her parents, and she enjoyed relaxing out of uniform and exploring other parts of the city and surrounding countryside, something she had rarely done before. These intimate moments with her family built up more emotion and fear of losing them, but at the same time, they provided her with warm memories that she would never forget. She also knew that even while traveling such distances, she would be able to communicate with them for a few minutes every month through an advanced video link.

One day, while her father was busy with academy affairs, she wandered over to her mother's small laboratory deep in the basement of their extensive home. Xantara still worked tirelessly from this "inner sanctum," carrying on with research topics she had first started looking into while reaching beyond their star system as a young astronaut.

As Zolanda strolled in, Xantara looked up and said, "Come on in, my love! I know why you're here."

"Yes, and this has got me wondering all sorts of things, not to mention leaving me a little concerned!"

"Look, it's not quite as sinister as all that. I've been working on the stasis project for over ten years, and I think I may have stumbled onto something that could improve the system."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look at this glass vial. See the purple liquid inside? This small amount has taken me nearly a year to extract from the petals of a rare flower found only in our equatorial region in the tropical rain forest. I named this flower Garrustasis, after your father."

“Wow! But what’s so special about this flower?”

“We already inject extracts from it into the bloodstream of astronauts before cryogenically freezing their bodies in life-support pods for deep-space voyages. Protein enzymes contained in the cells of this extract give it that purple hue. Once injected, they replicate and then act as a protective shield while the bodies are frozen. Even more important, they provide a degree of cellular regeneration for the rest of your life!”

“That’s fantastic! So why was Dad so concerned the other night?”

“Look, while I know the space force has nothing but safety in mind for all their crews, the new generation of craft they’re now using can reach beyond the boundaries that we could have ever previously dreamed. What they’re not yet fully acquainted with is how long our bodies can remain in stasis. With the Garrustasis plant being so rare, we don’t have that much spare extract, and as such, the dosages injected inside the pods may not be enough for ultralong-term stasis if something goes wrong.”

“Are you saying we could all die out there if we stay in stasis for too long?”

“I’m only theorizing, and my papers seem to have found deaf ears in both the academy and the space corps, even with your father lobbying for more research on the topic and keeping voyage distances to a minimum. Unfortunately, they’re not slowing down, and your scheduled voyage on the *Crassus* will be the first to plunge into the unknown.” Xantara sighed.

“So what are you suggesting? Do you want me to pull out and look like a coward in front of Draxos and all my friends!?”

“No, you’ve read me all wrong! I want you to trust me in what I’m about to do. This vial is all that remains of my limited supply of Garrustasis extract. I’m going to inject the entire quantity into your bloodstream, and hopefully, if I’m right, it will afford you extra protection. I’m sure everyone will be safe, and maybe it’s just us

being overcautious. Anyhow, to allay any such fears, I've instructed the space corps to make sure they include additional plants and seedlings onboard your ship and also given instructions to the science officer to produce additional extract as a precaution. Just forget the whole subject for now and enjoy the ride, as it will be like nothing you've ever experienced."

Xantara took a small, air-powered, hypodermic syringe gun, screwed the small vial to the top, placed the head on Zolanda's left bicep, and pulled the trigger. Like a lightning bolt, and driven by a jet of compressed air, the needle powered into Zolanda's arm. Within a matter of seconds, the purple liquid pumped into one of her veins, binding with her plasma and affording unseen protection as it coursed through her circulatory system.

"That wasn't so bad, was it? Just remember, you'll get a further dosage each time you use the onboard stasis pods, and as with any type of vaccine, your body will slowly build up more and more resistance to the extreme effects of the cryogenic process."

"Okay, I get it! And thanks for this. Now, let's get out of here and enjoy the rest of our time together!"

The week passed uneventfully. As the time came for Zolanda to pack and return to the barracks, Garrus and Xantara invited Draxos and his foster parents for one final dinner together. It was an opportunity for both families to give their children a few other useful snippets of advice before escorting them back to their apartment.

Xantara couldn't bear to say goodbye and looked lovingly at Zolanda with tears streaming down her face, knowing that this could be the last physical contact she would have with her daughter, having been through the same ritual with her parents. Garrus, too, felt the emotion; however, as commander of the academy, he always knew this day would come and instead saluted the couple before making an about-face and heading back home.

Once the door was closed, the pair made for their living room and decided to have a quick nightcap and mull over the week's events.

The distillation of Pharaonian liquor was an art that had been perfected over thousands of years. It was available in many different flavors, fermented, then distilled from all manner of fruits found in abundance across the regions of the planet. Draxos was particularly partial to a grape-like plant called Sumonoa, which had a blue-green hue and packed a sweet, fiery kick.

"Well, Zolanda, tell me what your mother had to say as I've been dying to know why your father was so secretive."

"It turned out to be nothing more than a lecture about the new stasis pods. She's a little worried that they haven't tested them adequately for ultralong voyages, which shouldn't be a concern to us, at least for now."

"Are you sure that's all she said? It seems a little odd."

"Well, she did also elude to the fact that I'll most likely have to continue her research work on the stasis process while I'm up there. Let's not worry about it for now and focus instead on getting ourselves prepared for departure. We need to report to Captain Cheela tomorrow and see our new mobile home!"

4

The following day, an electric buggy pulled up alongside their barracks and waited for the five couples to muster outside with their knapsacks, ready to take them to the launchpad where the PSS *Crassus* was docked and awaiting departure.

The giant spacecraft was perfectly circular, having a radius of over two hundred meters at the center point, tapering up over fifty meters. Underneath the glistening metallic hull's central portion was a further cylindrical compartment housing their latest generation of fusion reactors and hyperdrive engine.

The hyperdrive, mounted on a sophisticated gyroscopic device, could swivel a full 360 degrees allowing the craft to maneuver on a knife edge and make sharp turns in any direction. In addition, the powerful engine allowed the ship to hover above the ground, enabling it to land smoothly on any planetary surface should the crew encounter any exoplanets within the habitable zones of any new star systems. Four giant legs adjacent to the protruding engine bay extended from deep inside the hull, located at ninety-degree positions, keeping the craft stable and off the ground. It also provided an easy entry point via an elaborate series of airlocks for added safety, accessed by a retractable gangway.

Once through the airlocks, the lower level of the craft was principally an open flight deck and warehouse area for several smaller space tenders. These could be used either for escape purposes or for sending out smaller search parties to conduct initial ground reconnaissance before landing the mother ship. A separate concealed hatchway located on the side of the hull, and accessed through another mammoth airlock system, could be operated within minutes to launch any such missions.

Donning a gray, standard-issue jumpsuit, a junior

noncommissioned officer named Milos greeted the young officers as they passed through the inner hatch and entered the flight-deck area.

“Please, follow me, and I’ll take you to the briefing room where Captain Cheela will meet you and assign your initial orders. You’ll also find a list on the notice board allocating your private cabins, one per couple.”

A single elevator in the center of the flight deck was large enough to accommodate more than twenty crew or move heavy equipment between levels. As the door closed behind them, Milos gave a quick rundown of each deck.

“PSS *Crassus* is the latest and most extensive of all the Pharaonian spacecraft. There are five stories. Deck one is where we just entered, housing the flight deck. If you need to access the engine room below, a separate elevator on the other side of this one will take you down; however, it requires a secure access key. Deck two provides general crew accommodation, dining, entertainment, and other recreational facilities. It also houses the central bank of stasis pods where all crew will have to mobilize when the captain elects a deep-space jump. Deck three houses the junior officers’ cabins and the onboard hospital and research laboratories. Several escape pods can be accessed via this floor, strategically located around the hull’s superstructure and with separate release hatches. Deck four is restricted and contains the captain’s cabin and accommodation for other senior officers and briefing rooms. Finally, in deck five, the top floor, is our bridge and control room, the vessel’s beating heart. From here, we can see everything out there with a 360-degree viewing point.” Milos concluded as they exited on the fourth floor, strode past the captain’s cabin, and were ushered into the main briefing room.

“This is where I leave you. If you need any other advice or assistance, ask for me or make your way to the dining/recreation area as I’m stationed on deck two.”

As the ten young officers sat down, placing their haversacks between their legs, Captain Cheela marched into the room and stood behind the lone table in front of several rows of chairs where the recruits were now perched anxiously awaiting their orders.

Cheela was an impressive woman easily identifiable by her characteristic long silver mane of hair. She had been with the service for over thirty years, never once wanting to return home. Her husband was killed shortly after her initial coupling ceremony during her first voyage. The hull of their spacecraft, significantly damaged following a collision with external flying debris, caused a rupture leaving several crew members asphyxiated before internal airlocks could be sealed. The craft barely made it back to Pharaon, and Cheela, while grieving the loss of her husband, received her first commendation for bravery, followed by a swift promotion to captain.

Cheela's missions, on average, lasted as long as five years, excluding stasis time, and this was going to be her sixth and final exploration of deep space.

"Good morning, all. As you know, I'm Captain Cheela, and I'm delighted to welcome you aboard the *Crassus* in what will be a life-changing experience. Safety remains our priority, and if I feel anything will jeopardize the welfare of either my ship or crew, we'll head back here. On the notice board behind me, you'll find details of your cabin allocations and a reminder of your individual assignments. I wish you all the best! Should anyone have any doubts or second thoughts of what you're about to embark on, now is the time to raise your hands and exit the craft. There is no need to be ashamed if you have such feelings, as we're only looking for those who are fully committed to venturing into the unknown and prepared to leave loved ones behind in the knowledge that you may never see them again."

The room remained silent as Cheela waited in case there were any resignations.

“Thank you again for your dedication to the service. You’re all invited for prelaunch drinks in my cabin before going down to dinner in the main dining hall. Now, get yourselves bunked in and go and familiarize yourselves with the rest of the vessel.”

As Cheela got up and left the room, the young officers all stood to attention, saluted her, and shouted, “Thank you, Captain!”

Zolanda waited for the melee to dissipate before checking their room allocation on the notice board.

“Drax, we’re in room D5, and I’m to report to the laboratory after takeoff to start working there under a Lieutenant Dorian. On the other hand, you get to enjoy the spoils of the bridge and join the navigation team. I can’t wait to get started, and you’ll have to let me know everything you see out there since I’ll be immersed in the depths of the ship.” Zolanda exhaled with excitement, grabbing Draxos’s hand and pulling him toward the elevator, having already shouldered her haversack.

The third floor was easy to navigate. It consisted of a central circular corridor spanning an inner circumference with individual cabins evenly spaced along half of the outer passageway. When they reached D5, they saw their names affixed on a metallic nameplate by the access switch, already programmed to respond to their fingerprints or those of the captain who had access to every room.

As Zolanda put her index finger on the glass reader, the door slid open, revealing a spacious, comfortable double room complete with en-suite bathing facilities. Much to their surprise, there was also a porthole-like window giving them an external view, again accessible using a finger-controlled switch to slide open an outer metallic protective panel.

“Mmmm, this will work!” Zolanda exclaimed.

“Agreed. Let’s get unpacked and wander around before drinks with the captain. Or maybe we can take a short rest in our new digs,”

Draxos said, winking at Zolanda.

After leaving their room, they walked around to check the other side of the third floor where the laboratories were situated. One large room was an extensive hydroponic garden, full of plants that generated high amounts of oxygen. This essential glasshouse supplemented the vessel's own complex gas-scrubbing regeneration system and, together, would produce enough clean air for the crew to keep them alive indefinitely. Zolanda also spotted a bed of rare Garrustasis flowers and wondered whether these were for forthcoming research.

Adjacent to the hydroponic garden were two laboratories, one for botanic and zoological activities and the other for medicinal research and to support the onboard medical team.

Bent over one of the tables in the medicinal lab and wearing a white jumpsuit, Zolanda spotted who she assumed must be Lieutenant Dorian and rushed over to introduce herself.

"Excuse me, sir, I'm Zolanda, and I'm due to report down here tomorrow, but since I saw you, I thought I'd say hello."

Lieutenant Dorian knew everything about Zolanda, having already studied her profile and academic records, and greeted her with a smile.

"You must be Xantara's daughter! I know your mother and worked with her as a young lieutenant on one of my earlier voyages, which is why I selected you for this one. You were a star performer at the academy, and it will be interesting for you to follow in her footsteps. Welcome aboard, and I look forward to seeing you later this evening."

The reception that evening held in the captain's suite was an informal welcome event for the five new couples. It provided an opportunity for them to get to know the senior officers before beginning work the following day, with only forty-eight hours left until launch.

Captain Cheela made all the introductions and instructed the recruits to report to their line officers at 0800 in specially color-coded jumpsuits that would now be their compulsory work attire until completion of the mission. The ship's quartermaster had already included an appropriate quantity of these in each of their rooms. Red for engineering, white for science, green for flight deck and other deckhands, and blue for bridge/flight control.

The next day passed quickly, with all crew hands joining their posts on schedule, keen to get the wheels in motion in preparation for the big launch, only twenty-four hours away. Final supplies were loaded and stored. Engineering primed up the primary fusion reactor with enough fuel to enable the craft to exercise hyperdrive once it cleared planetary orbit. The deck crew secured any loose equipment to prevent injury or accidental damage during takeoff, as did Zolanda and her science team for the two laboratories.

Draxos, now serving on the bridge as a navigation officer, planned the vessel's course after discussions with the captain.

Setting the coordinates for the far end of their galaxy and the previously discovered Bhalumian wormhole, the craft would take almost a year to reach there, maintaining constant hyperdrive speed. During this period, other than a small rotating skeleton unit of five officers, the remaining crew would be tucked away in their stasis pods until reaching the outer fringe of the wormhole. At that point, the captain would require all hands on deck.

A few hours before takeoff, a delegation from the planetary leadership, accompanied by senior officers from the space force and academy, climbed aboard to meet the captain and her crew one last time. Garrus was among the party of VIPs and beamed when he saw Zolanda looking so beautiful in her crisp white jumpsuit, proud that she was now part of an elite team and following in his footsteps.

When the distinguished group reached the bridge, Captain Cheela briefed them about the voyage and their plan to discover what was

on the other side of the Bhalumian wormhole, at which time Garrus took Draxos aside and provided some firsthand advice about what to expect.

“When you reach that wormhole, you’ll be able to recognize the outer area as there is a perpetual debris field rotating around it as if guarding the entry point. Our last craft to reach there wasn’t built like this one and would not have been able to penetrate the meteor field to get beyond it. Captain Cheela will testify, too, that when she was aboard my ship, we first discovered the anomaly and suffered the consequences of debris penetrating our hull. Had it not been for Cheela’s bravery, we may not have made it back, so I’m glad she’ll be looking after you and Zolanda and the crew!”

Cheela walked over to the pair as they debated how best to tackle the debris field to gain access to what they expected to be a portal to another dimension.

“Admiral Garrus, it’s been far too long since we were on a bridge together. This will be a very fitting expedition, and I look forward to finally being able to unravel what’s on the other side. If all goes to plan, we could be back within five years, and while we remain on this side of it, we’ll at least be able to communicate with our Pharaon ground-control team.”

“I look forward to this and will keep in touch. And, of course, please take care of my daughter, whom I entrust in your hands.”

5

After the guests had vacated the bridge, Cheela pushed an intercom switch on her captain's chair and made an announcement: "All ground crew are to exit the craft immediately as launch countdown will commence in ten minutes. All crew report to your quarters and secure yourselves in your seats in preparation for liftoff. Engine room, fire up the hyperdrive, and wait for my signal!"

Silence enveloped the spacecraft with all hatches now secured. Takeoff protocols were done from inside the ship's bridge and not ground control. As soon as Captain Cheela was satisfied that it was safe to implement the countdown, she again pressed the intercom switch to alert the crew of their impending status.

"Standby all crew, and brace yourselves for liftoff," she echoed, then followed with the customary countdown procedure.

Soon the ship's compliment could feel the vibrations as the hyperdrive began to forcefully push the enormous weight of the *Crassus* off the ground. As it inched upward, the four legs retracted inside the hull, and within less than a minute, their speed intensified, driving the ship through the planet's outer-atmospheric layers and into space. As the craft settled into an orbital position, Captain Cheela instructed the engine room to slow down so all could adjust before embarking on their primary objective.

During their preliminary adjustment period of almost seven days, Captain Cheela whittled down her crew, placing nonessential team members into stasis pods that would also help preserve air consumption during the expected year-long voyage.

Zolanda and Draxos elected for early stasis as both wanted to be up for the last watch and witness the arrival at their next

destination.

Climbing into pods adjacent to each other among a bank of one hundred cryogenic chambers that could accommodate the whole crew, Zolanda blew one last kiss to Draxos as she operated the switch inside to begin the process.

As soon as the lids closed, an inbuilt hypodermic needle injected a sufficient quantity of Garrustasis extract into their sternums, followed by a powerful sedative to put them into a deep sleep as their cells were preserved and essentially frozen in time. Each pod in the stasis chamber was connected to the ship's mainframe computer. It also included a timing device to automatically awaken occupants at preordained times to rejoin their posts when required.

Captain Cheela had decided she would remain at her post for the duration of the voyage. The other five crew hands needed to support the captain were to be substituted every four weeks with another five, recalled from their stasis pods. Having already input the coordinates in their autopilot system, she instructed the chief engineer to exercise maximum hyperdrive and head for the Bhalumian wormhole.

6

After almost eleven months in stasis, Zolanda and Draxos were part of the final contingent selected to support Captain Cheela for the last sector of their initial voyage, which so far had passed without incident.

At the prearranged moment, red heat lights flashed inside both their chambers as a further dose of Garrustasis extract was administered to their thawing bodies. Within minutes, the process was almost complete and, with a distinctive hissing sound caused by outside air being sucked into the chamber as the lid lifted to an upright position, their eyes opened as life returned to their still-chilled bodies.

It took them an hour to recover fully and to such an extent where they could walk unaided. However, the “magic” plant extract must have done the trick as Zolanda felt reinvigorated after warming herself up under a heater before exiting the chamber hall.

Draxos and Zolanda made their way to the bridge, where Captain Cheela welcomed them back.

“It seems you may have woken up just at just the right time as we’ve reached our destination well ahead of schedule. The ship’s hyperdrive is far more potent than our engineers expected and achieved speeds of more than six times the speed of light. Take a look out there; you can already see the revolving debris field guarding entry to what we believe to be a wormhole. Even now, I can feel the *Crassus* being pulled toward it like a magnet. As the rest of our crew aren’t due to awake for another four weeks, I’m almost tempted to activate an immediate cessation of stasis and get everyone back to their posts in advance of passing through the field. On the other hand, it may be better to maintain a status quo and cross through the outer barrier with just our skeleton crew, as

it could be a bumpy ride. What do you think, Draxos?”

“Well, this is your call, Captain, but assuming we can handle the ship as we are, then I’m inclined to agree and maintain that status quo,” Draxos said, not wanting to take responsibility for such an important decision.

“Agreed, then! Neutralize the hyperdrive, and make a heading for 030 degrees using impulse power only,” Cheela said.

Zolanda looked out in wonder standing behind Draxos as he adjusted the helm and steered the *Crassus* toward the meteor field while maintaining a slow speed ahead and having the hyperdrive on standby in the event they needed to take evasive action.

All appeared to be going smoothly; however, as they passed the first line of meteors, the pull suddenly became intensive and dragged the *Crassus* toward the center of the wormhole. As the drag intensified, *Crassus* hit a series of large meteors, causing alarms to sound off as their defensive outer shield became weakened from repetitive collisions.

Draxos hit the hyperdrive.

“We have no option but to give it everything we have and hope for the best,” Cheela said.

As Draxos pulled down on the throttle, nothing happened. *Crassus* was now at the mercy of the wormhole, which continued to suck the vessel into its gigantic maw hitting whatever debris got in its way.

“Draxos, what’s happened to the main engines?” Cheela asked, remembering her last encounter with this wormhole and knowing that the ship was doomed without them.

“I’m afraid they’re dead, as a meteor must have hit the external housing.”

“Draxos, Zolanda! Quick, head down to level three and seal yourselves in one of the emergency escape pods. If we need to

abandon the *Crassus*, you must be ready! I've already sounded out the general alert, activated our distress beacon, and am forcibly waking up all remaining crew to ready them for possible evacuation."

"Are you sure you don't need us up here for anything?" Zolanda inquired, looking worried.

"No, get down there right away and hold tight. We should be through the worst shortly and on the other side, wherever that may be!"

"Okay, Draxos, let's go. Good luck, Captain, and we'll be standing by!" Zolanda exclaimed, pulling Draxos from his seat at the helm and dragging him toward the elevator.

Once they reached the third floor, Zolanda led Draxos to one of the three emergency escape pods adjacent to the hydroponic garden, which glowed a blueish hue from all the UV lights that kept the plants actively photosynthesizing.

The escape pod was spherical, and only the apex of the miniature craft was visible, sealed into the floor and extending into the crescent hull of its mother vessel.

Zolanda had practiced using such craft many times before in the academy and knew where to place her hand to gain access. Once inside, the pod was like a small spacecraft, complete with a control room up top, two stasis pods located in the middle floor, and right below that, storage for food, weapons, and a tiny cubbyhole for ablutions.

"Quick, get in, Draxos! Let's seal the apex and make contact with the bridge to see what's happening out there."

Draxos climbed in and pulled the pointed apex closed, leaving them in semidarkness with only the control panel's lights making it possible to see each other.

Switching on an internal lamp, Zolanda then reached for the

intercom to connect with Cheela, who was still commanding from the bridge, ready to go down with her ship.

“Captain Cheela! Are you there? Zolanda here. We’re in Escape Pod 2, Standing by and awaiting your further instructions as ordered.”

“Zolanda, Draxos, the situation is dire. *Crassus* is breaking up. The crew are making their way to the flight deck, but I’m not sure if we have time to evacuate everyone. I’m going to jettison your pod right away and hope we’ll meet again!”

Within seconds, a concealed hatch on the side of the enormous hull flipped open. The escape pod ejected into deep space, leaving Zolanda and Draxos at the mercy of time and the pod’s tracking beacon, which was probably defunct now that they were on the other side of the wormhole in an unfamiliar galaxy.

Draxos flipped on one of the screens to get a view of the external position and saw the *Crassus* beginning to break apart, followed by a series of explosions as the reactor core melted down, making an exit from the flight deck impossible.

7

All hands, other than Zolanda and Draxos, were lost that day. As Cheela sent her last transmission, which would take more than a year to reach Pharaon, she knew her time was up and accepted her fate. Sitting down in her captain's chair, she waited for her impending death, which was now inevitable and only seconds away. Staring at the screen, she observed Zolanda's escape pod sail past their dying hull and wished the young pair a safe return to Pharaon. It was to be her last vision. At that point, the hull cracked above her head, sucking her and anything that wasn't fixed down, out into the inert, frozen blackness.

While relieved to still be alive, Zolanda and Draxos grieved the loss of Captain Cheela and all their friends and other crew members who had perished that day.

Not knowing how long it might be until they would be found, the pair decided that it would be in their best interest to go into stasis to conserve their limited air supply and provisions.

Climbing back down to the compact storage area, they made love for the last time on the warm metal floor, just above the pod's concealed fusion reactor. Zolanda stared at Draxos, wondering whether she would ever wake up and see his face again. Both remained silent as they zipped up their jumpsuits and prepared to enter the inert stasis pods.

Once inside the coffin-like compartments, Zolanda asked Draxos if he could count down so they could activate the pods in unison. As they lay down and depressed the switches, the pods initialized, with both lids closing in tandem. The then all-too-familiar injection of Garrustasis plant extract coursed through their veins. As the machine administered the second sedative shot, their eyes closed. The pod's temperature then dropped dramatically, preserving both

souls indefinitely or for however long it might take to be found in a cryogenic state.

As the years swept by, the couple's escape pod continued moving at sub-light speed toward a new galaxy. Xantara had been right to be concerned about the longevity of the stasis extract, as Draxos's cellular preservation within his pod was no longer evident. The onboard computer monitoring the life-support systems detected these irregularities and initiated the thawing process; however, it was too late, as the deterioration of his vital organs and tissue had been far too extensive, and Draxos would never wake up and see his beloved Zolanda again.

Zolanda, having had the booster shot of extract before leaving Pharaon, had built up a capability within her body to produce excess protein enzymes necessary for the preservation process and would survive in stasis for an indefinite period or until the onboard reactor gave in.

As the disk-like object sped past several unusual planets within the solar system of a large and unknown star, sensors suddenly detected a largely blueish exoplanet with life-supporting capabilities. Adjusting the trajectory to make a collision course with this celestial ecosphere, Zolanda's escape pod hurtled toward it. Sailing through the Earth's outer thermosphere, the craft's exterior metal glowed red hot. With only fifty kilometers to final impact, it had now veered beyond the point of no return and signaled Zolanda's destiny.

Still trailing a glowing tail of flames as gases within the atmospheric layers ignited behind it, the disk whizzed through the planet's mesosphere, at which point, objects usually burnt out. As it broke through the inner stratosphere and illuminated the night's sky, the craft compensated by rotating 180 degrees, in effect reversing thrust to make allowance for a smoother collision with the surface. Not in a position to select a soft landing site, the object continued its path slowing down just enough to mitigate any serious damage.

Careening into a desolate limestone valley, guarded by a peak resembling that of a pyramid, the disk hit one of the scree-filled slopes, plunging it deep into a subterranean cavern within the depths of the mountainside and through thousands of years of natural erosion from rivers long since evaporated.

The collision failed to trigger an autorelease of the stasis pod's sophisticated ejection system; however, unbeknownst to Zolanda, who remained in a stable cryogenic state, the disk's arrival did not go altogether unnoticed...

