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**JAMES S.A.  
COREY**

**PERSEPOLIS  
RISING**

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it ought to be written.”**

**—George R. R. Martin**



# **PERSEPOLIS RISING**

**BOOK SEVEN OF THE EXPANSE**



**JAMES S. A. COREY**

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Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

[orbitbooks.net](http://orbitbooks.net)

First Edition: December 2017

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Corey, James S. A., author.

Title: Persepolis rising / James S. A. Corey.

Description: New York : Orbit, 2017. | Series: The expanse ; 7

Identifiers: LCCN 2017042094| ISBN 9780316332835 (hardcover) | ISBN

9780316332859 (softcover) | ISBN 9780316478298 (special edition)

Subjects: LCSH: Life on other planets—Fiction. | Space colonies—Fiction.

| BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure. | FICTION / Science

Fiction / Space Opera. | GSAFD: Science fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3601.B677 P47 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017042094>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-33283-5 (hardcover), 978-0-316-33282-8 (ebook), 978-

0-316-47829-8 (Barnes & Noble signed edition), 978-0-316-52152-9

(Barnes & Noble special edition), 978-0-316-52377-6 (Indigo special

edition)

E3-20171103-JV-PC

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*To Dr. Shank*

*We never make it easy*

**[Prologue: Cortazár](#)**

Almost three decades had passed since Paolo Cortazár and the breakaway fleet had passed through Laconia gate. Time enough to build a little civilization, a city, a culture. Time enough for him to confirm that alien engineers had designed the protomolecule as a bridge builder. They had



thrown it into the stars like seeds to hijack whatever organic life it encountered and create ring gates into a pocket universe, a nexus between worlds. Until they died out, the slow zone and its rings had been the hub of an empire that defied human comprehension. And now, it would be again. A little bridge-building mechanism that overcame locality changed everything for all humanity.

Not that Paolo cared about all humanity. For him, the fact of the protomolecule and the technologies it opened was all-encompassing. It not only changed the shape of the universe around him but also altered his personal and professional life. For decades, it had been his only obsession. In the fight that ended their relationship, his most recent boyfriend had accused him of actually *loving* the protomolecule.

Paolo hadn't been able to deny it. It had been so long since Paolo felt anything approaching love for another human that he'd lost the context for what did and didn't qualify. Certainly, studying the protomolecule and all the myriad branches of scientific insight that came from it took most of his time and attention. Understanding the ways in which it interacted with the other alien artifacts and technologies would be the work of lifetimes. He made no apology for his devotion. The tiny, beautiful speck so rich with implicit information was like a rosebud that never stopped blooming. It was

beautiful in a way that nothing else could ever be. His lover had been unable to accept this, and the end of their relationship felt inevitable in retrospect. Paolo did miss him, in an abstract sort of way. Like he might miss a lost pair of comfortable shoes.

There were so many other wonderful things to occupy his time.

On the viewscreen in front of him, a latticework of carbon grew and unfolded in intricate, interwoven patterns. Given the correct environmental conditions and the right growth medium, the protomolecule defaulted to building these lattices. The material created was lighter than an equal volume of carbon fiber and had greater tensile strength than graphene. The Technology Directorate of the Laconian Military Council had asked him to explore its possible use in armor for infantry units. The lattice's tendency to permanently bond to human skin made that problematic from an engineering standpoint, but it was still beautiful.

Paolo adjusted the sensitivity of the electron stream and leaned in toward the monitor, watching as the protomolecule picked up the free-floating carbon atoms and neatly wove them into the grid like it was a child focused on its play.

"Doctor Cortazár," a voice said.

Paolo answered with a grunt and a wave of his hand that meant *Go*

*away, I'm busy* in any language.

“Doctor Cortazár,” the voice repeated, insistent.

Paolo pulled his gaze away from the screen and turned around. A pale-skinned person of indefinite gender stood in a lab coat, holding a large hand terminal. Paolo thought their name was Caton? Canton? Cantor? Something like that. One of the lab’s army of technicians. Competent, as far as Paolo could recall. But now interrupting him, so there would have to be consequences. The nervous look on Caton/Cantor/Canton’s face told him they were very aware of this fact.

Before Paolo could speak, the tech said, “The director asked me to remind you that you have an appointment. With”—the tech’s voice went low, almost to a whisper—“him. With Him.”

The tech did not mean the director. There was only one Him.

Paolo turned off the video display and checked to make sure the monitoring systems were recording everything before he stood up.

“Yes, of course,” he said. And then, because he was making an effort these days, “Thank you. Cantor?”

“Caton,” the tech replied with visible relief.

“Of course. Please let the director know I’m on my way.”

“I’m supposed to accompany you, Doctor,” Caton said, tapping on the

hand terminal as though this fact was on a list somewhere.

“Of course.” Paolo pulled his coat off a rack by the door and headed out.

The bioengineering and nanoinformatics lab of the University of Laconia was the largest research lab on the planet. Possibly in the entirety of human space. The university campus spread across nearly forty hectares of land on the outskirts of the Laconian capital city. His labs accounted for almost a quarter of that space. Like everything on Laconia, it was orders of magnitude larger than it needed to be for the people who inhabited it now. It had been built for the future. For all those who would come after.

Paolo walked briskly along a gravel path, checking the monitor on his forearm as he went. Caton jogged along behind.

“Doctor,” the lab tech said, pointing in the opposite direction, “I brought a cart for you. It’s in Parking C.”

“Bring it around to the Pen. I have something to do there first.”

Caton hesitated for a moment, caught between a direct order from him and the responsibility of being his chaperone.

“Yes, Doctor,” Caton said, then ran off in the other direction.

As he walked, Paolo scanned through his task list for the day to be sure he wasn’t forgetting anything else, then plucked his sleeve down over the monitor and looked up at the sky. It was a lovely day. Laconia had a bright

cerulean-blue sky, with a few cottony white clouds scattered about. The massive rigging of the planet's orbital construction platform was very faintly visible, all long arms and empty spaces between, like a massive oligonucleotide floating in space.

The gentle wind carried the faint burned plastic scent of a local fungus analog releasing what passed for spores. The breeze pushed the long fronds of dogwhistles across his path. The grunchers—approximately the same ecological niche as crickets with even a few morphological similarities—that clung to the plants hissed at him when he got too close. He had no idea why the weeds had been named dogwhistles. They looked more like pussy willows to him. And naming an insect analog that looked like a cricket with four limbs a gruncher made even less sense. There didn't seem to be any scientific process to the naming of the local flora and fauna. People just threw names at things until a consensus arose. It annoyed him.

The Pen was different from the other lab buildings. He'd had its walls built from single sheets of high-impact armor plating welded airtight into ninety-degree angles to make a dark metallic cube twenty-five meters on a side. At the building's only entrance, four soldiers wearing light armor and carrying assault rifles stood at alert.

“Doctor Cortazár,” one of the four said, holding out a hand in the

universal gesture for *Stop walking*.

Paolo pulled his ID badge on its lanyard out from under his shirt and presented it to the guard, who plugged it into a reader. He then touched the reader to the skin on Paolo's wrist.

"Nice day," the guard said pleasantly, smiling as the machine did its work of comparing Paolo's ID to his physical measurements and his identifying proteins.

"Lovely," Paolo agreed.

The machine pinged its acceptance that he was actually Paolo Cortazár, the president of Laconia University and head of its exobiological studies lab. The guards had all known that by sight, but the ritual was important for more reasons than one. The door slid open, and the four guards stepped aside.

"Have a nice day, Doctor."

"You as well," Paolo said as he stepped into the security airlock. One wall hissed as hidden nozzles blasted him with air. Sensors on the opposite wall tested for explosives and infectious materials. And possibly even bad intentions.

After a moment, the hissing stopped, and the inner airlock door slid open. Only then did Paolo hear the moaning.

The Pen, as it was called by everyone in spite of not having an official name in any documentation, was the second highest security building on Laconia for a reason. It was where Paolo kept his milking herd.

That name had come from an early fight with his ex-lover. He'd meant it as an insult, but it was an apt analogy. Inside the Pen, people and animals that had been deliberately infected with the protomolecule lived out the remainder of their lives. Once the alien nanotech had appropriated their cells and begun reproducing, Paolo's staff could drain the bodies of their fluids and filter out the critical particles from the matrix tissue. When the bodies were exhausted, any remaining fluids could be incinerated without losing anything of value. There were bays for twenty-four, but only seventeen were occupied at the moment. Someday, with a wider population base, subjects would be more abundant.

The great works of Laconia depended on communicating with the underlying technology the long-dead alien civilization had left behind. The protomolecule hadn't been designed as a universal control interface, but there was a modularity to the alien technology that let it function that way often enough for the work to proceed. It was Paolo's job to supply the active samples needed. One of his jobs.

As he walked toward his office in the rear of the building, he paused on



a catwalk over one of the holding pens. Half a dozen people in early stages of infection wandered around the cramped, metal-walled space. They were still in the pseudo-hemorrhagic fever phase the techs called Pukers. They could manage no more than a shambling walk and occasional violent bouts of vomiting. It was the protomolecule's means of ensuring the infection would spread quickly. Once the bodies had been removed from the space, every centimeter of its metal walls and floor would be torched to destroy any biological debris.

They'd only had one accidental infection in the history of the lab, and Paolo intended to keep it that way.

Dr. Ochida, head of the Pen and Paolo's second in command, spotted him from across the holding area and rushed over.

"Paolo," Ochida said, clapping him on one shoulder in a friendly greeting. "Just in time. We finished pulling the stem cultures an hour ago, and the injections are prepped."

"I recognize that one," Paolo said, pointing at a hairy, muscular man in the Pen.

"Hm? Oh. Yes, he was one of our guards, I think. His intake paperwork said 'dereliction of duty.' Caught sleeping on watch, maybe?"

"You tested them?" Paolo asked. He didn't actually care about the hairy

man in the pen, and Ochida's answer had satisfied his curiosity.

It took Ochida a moment to realize they'd changed back to the original subject. "Oh, yes. I tested the samples for purity three times. Personally."

"I'm going directly from here to the State Building," Paolo said, turning to look Ochida in the eye.

His assistant knew what he was asking and replied, "I understand. These injections exactly meet your specifications."

If anything went wrong, they both knew they'd be the next two placed in



the Pen. They were valuable, but they weren't beyond consequences. No one was. That was what Laconia meant.

"Excellent," Paolo said, giving Ochida a friendly smile he didn't actually feel. "I'll take them now."

Ochida waved at someone in a corner of the room, and a tech trotted over carrying a silvery metal briefcase. She handed the case to Paolo, then left.

"Is there anything else?" Ochida asked.

"I'm starting to see some growth," Paolo said, pointing at a bone spur protruding from the hairy man's spine.

“Yes,” Ochida agreed. “They’re nearly ready.”

In the time he’d worked with Winston Duarte, Paolo had found much to admire in the man. The high consul was intelligent, given to astounding leaps of comprehension on complex topics but still measured and thoughtful in his decision making. Duarte valued the counsel of others but was decisive and firm once the information was gathered. He could be charismatic and warm without ever seeming false or insincere.

But more than anything else, Paolo respected his total lack of pretension. Many lesser people, holding a position like absolute military dictator of an entire planet, would wrap themselves in pomp and glittering palaces. Duarte had instead built the State Building of Laconia. A massive construction of stone that towered over the rest of the capital city, it still somehow managed to feel comforting rather than intimidating. As though all its solidity and size was merely to house important works and solve serious problems. Not aggrandize those inside it.

Caton drove Paolo’s little cart up the wide street that led to the building’s front entrance. They were the only traffic. The street ended at a high stone wall, a narrow gate, and a guard post. Paolo climbed out of the cart, taking the metal briefcase with him.

“No need to wait for me,” Paolo said to Caton.

The tech hadn't spoken since picking him up outside the Pen, and



seemed relieved to be dismissed. “Yes, Doctor. Call if you—” But Paolo was already walking away. He heard the car’s electric whine as it left.

The narrow gate opened as he approached, and two soldiers left the guard post and fell in alongside him without a word. These were not like the lightly armored guards that stood watch at the university. These wore strength-augmenting suits of articulated composite plates, with a variety of weapons mounted on them. The suits were the same dark blue as the Laconian flag and had the same pair of stylized wings. A phoenix, he thought, but it might have been some sort of raptor. The pleasant color made the lethal war machines under it seem out of place. Their footsteps on the stone courtyard and the faint thrum of the power suits were the only noises that followed them to the State Building’s entrance.

At the door, his two guards stopped him, then spread out, one on each side. Paolo fancied he could feel the tickle of X-rays and millimeter waves bouncing off his body as they scanned him head to toe. After a long moment one of them said, “The high consul is waiting for you in the medical wing,” and then they turned and walked away.

“Technically, yes. The dreams have stopped,” Duarte said as Paolo slid a hypodermic port line into a forearm vein and taped it down. He knew from experience that Duarte was distracting himself to keep from looking down and seeing the needles go in. It was endearing that the most powerful human in the universe was still a bit squeamish about needles.

“Have they?” Paolo asked. It wasn’t a casual question. The side effects of the incredibly experimental treatment Duarte was receiving were something to be kept close track of. “How long ago?”

Duarte sighed, and closed his eyes. Either relaxing as the first of the sedative mixture hit his veins, or trying to remember the exact date, or both.

“The last one was eleven days ago.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” Duarte said with a smile and without opening his eyes, “I’m sure. Eleven days ago was the last time I slept.”

Paolo nearly dropped the IV line he was connecting to the port. “You haven’t slept in *eleven days*?”

Duarte’s eyes finally opened. “I don’t feel tired at all. Quite the opposite. Every day I feel more energetic and healthy than the last. A side effect of the treatment, I’m sure.”

Paolo nodded at this, though it wasn’t anything he’d anticipated. His

stomach gave a tiny spasm of worry. If there was an unexpected side effect this extreme, then what else was waiting for them? He'd asked Duarte to wait until they had more data, but the man had demanded they move forward, and how could he argue?

"I see that look, old friend," Duarte said, his smile even wider. "You don't need to worry. I've been monitoring it myself. If anything were out of balance, I'd have called you a week ago. But I feel fantastic, I'm not building up fatigue poisons, and the blood work promised I'm not psychotic. And now I get an extra eight hours every day to work. I couldn't be happier."

"Of course," Paolo replied. He finished hooking the IV bag filled with its payload of protomolecule-modified human stem cells into the port. Duarte gave a tiny gasp when the cool fluid started to enter his vein. "But please, do remember to send along these sorts of details, even if they don't seem to be a problem. Animal models are never perfect, and you're the first person to receive this treatment. Tracking the effects is incredibly important to—"

"I will," Duarte replied. "I have full confidence that your lab has everything working exactly as it's supposed to. But I'll make sure my personal doctor sends you all his daily notes."

“Thank you, High Consul,” Paolo said. “I’m going to draw some blood as well and have my people do a workup. Just to make sure.”

“Whatever you need,” Duarte said. “But as long as we’re alone, please don’t call me ‘High Consul.’ Winston’s fine.” Duarte’s voice had grown mushy, and Paolo could tell the sedatives were taking effect. “I want us all working together.”

“We are working together. But a body needs a brain. Leadership, yes?”

Paolo replied. He let the IV bag empty, used the line to draw a small sample of Duarte’s blood and put it in the metal briefcase, and quietly went about the process of doing a full body scan. The treatment had begun growing a small number of new organs in Duarte’s body that had been designed by the best experimental physiologists on the planet and implemented using lessons taught by the eternal protomolecule bloom. But there were still so many things that might go wrong, and tracking the development of the changes in Duarte was the most important aspect of Paolo’s job. Despite Duarte’s warmth and the genuine friendship he showed, if anything happened to the Laconian ruler, he would be executed shortly thereafter. Tying Paolo’s safety to his own was how Duarte could guarantee the scientist’s best efforts on his behalf. They both understood this, and there was no ill will attached. Paolo’s death wouldn’t be punishment, exactly. Just



a clear disincentive to letting his patient die.

As relationships went, it was probably the most honest one Paolo had ever had.

“You know, Winston, that this is going to be a very long process. There may be imbalances small enough that they don’t appear for years. Decades.”

“Centuries,” he said, nodding. “It’s imperfect, I know. But we do what we have to do. And, no, old friend. I’m sorry, but I haven’t reconsidered.”

Paolo wondered if the ability to read minds was yet another unexpected side effect of the treatment. If so ... well, that would be interesting. “I wasn’t suggesting that—”

“That you should undergo the treatment too?” Duarte said. “Of course you were. And you *should* suggest it. Make the best argument you can. I don’t believe you’ll change my mind, but I’d like it very much if you did.”

Paolo looked at his hands, avoiding Duarte’s eyes. Defiance would have been easier for him. The melancholy in the man’s voice was disturbing in a way he found hard to understand.

“The ironic thing?” Duarte said. “I’ve always rejected the great-man idea. The belief that human history was formed by singular individuals instead of broad social forces? Romantic, but ...” He waved a hand vaguely,

like he was stirring fog. “Demographic trends. Economic cycles.

Technological progress. All much more powerful predictors than any one person. And yet here I am. I would take you with me if I could, you know.

It’s not my choice. It’s history’s.”

“History should reconsider,” Paolo said.

Duarte chuckled. “The difference between zero and one is miraculous.

But it’s as miraculous as it ever will be. Make it two. Three. A hundred. It becomes just another oligarchy. A permanent engine of inequality that will breed the wars we’re trying to end.”

Paolo made a small sound that could have been mistaken for agreement.

“The best governments in history have been kings and emperors,”

Duarte said. “The worst ones too. A philosopher-king can manage great things in his lifetime. And his grandchildren can squander it.”

Duarte grunted as Paolo pulled the hypodermic port out of his arm. He didn’t need to place a bandage over the wound. The hole closed up before a drop of blood could escape. It didn’t even scab.

“If you want to create a lasting, stable social order,” Duarte said, “only one person can ever be immortal.”

## **Chapter One: Drummer**

The habitation ring of the transfer station at Lagrange-5 was three times

the diameter of the one Drummer had lived in on Tycho, half a lifetime ago. TSL-5 had a small city's worth of offices with the same fake-marble walls and soft, full-spectrum lighting as the one they'd given her, the same crash-couch beds and water showers as her quarters there. The air had a constant smell of terpene compounds, as if the station were the largest chrysanthemum in the universe. The dome in the center of the station had berths for hundreds of ships and warehouses that seemed so numerous and deep that filling them would leave Earth as empty as a squeezed-out bulb. All those berths and warehouses were at rest now, but starting tomorrow, that would change. TSL-5 was about to be open for business, and even as tired as she was, as annoyed as she felt at having to haul herself halfway across the system for what was ultimately a ribbon-cutting ceremony, there was also an excitement to it. After three decades of struggle, Mother Earth was open for business.

The planet glowed on her wall screen, whorls of high white clouds and glimpses of the still-greenish sea beneath it. The terminator crept across, pulling a blanket of darkness and city lights behind it. The ships of the Earth-Mars Coalition Navy floated around it, dots of darkness swimming on the high sea of air. Drummer had never gone down that well, and now by the terms of the treaty she'd signed on the union's behalf, she never would.

Fine with her. Her knees bothered her sometimes as it was. But as an objet d'art, Terra was hard to beat. Humanity had done its level best to kick the shit out of the slowly spinning egg. Overpopulation, exploitation, atmospheric and oceanic imbalance, and then three military-level meteor strikes, any one of which would have fucked up the dinosaurs. And here it still was, like a soldier. Scarred, broken, reimagined, rebuilt, and remade. Time was supposed to heal all wounds. To Drummer, that was just a nice way of saying that if she waited long enough, none of the things that seemed important to her would turn out to matter. Or at least not the way she'd thought they did.

Time, plus the combined expertise of a Martian terraforming project staggering under the loss of its mandate, the ruthless administration of Earth's political sector, and the huge market of thirteen-hundred-odd worlds all in need of biological substrates to grow food that people could actually eat had hauled Earth, slow and staggering, up to functional again.

Her system chirped, a polite little pop like someone snapping bamboo.

Her private secretary's voice followed like a drink of whiskey.

"Madam President?"

"Give me a minute, Vaughn," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. But Secretary-General Li would like to speak with you

before the ceremony.”

“The Earth-Mars Coalition can wait until after cocktails. I’m not opening this station by jumping every time the EMC clears their throat. Bad precedent.”

“Copy that. I’ll handle it.”

The system made the little woody tock that meant she had her privacy again. She leaned back in her chair, looked over at the images set into the wall behind her desk. All the previous Transport Union presidents before her: Michio Pa, then Tjon, Walker, Sanjrani, and her own thin, stern face looking back at her from the end. She hated that picture. It made her look like she’d just eaten something sour. The first version of it looked like something off a singles forum. At least this one was dignified.

For most of the Transport Union’s members, this image was all they’d ever see of her. Thirteen hundred worlds, and within a decade most if not all of them would have their own versions of the TSL-5. Hand-off stations that marked the bubble of void where the planet’s sphere of control ended and the union’s began. Anything that the colonies needed from humanity’s first home or from each other went up the gravity wells. That was the inner’s problem. Moving it from one system to another belonged to the Belt. Old terms. Inners. Belters. They stuck because language held on to things that

way, even when the reality around them had shifted.

The Earth-Mars Coalition had been the center of humanity once—the innermost of the inners. Now it was an important spoke on the wheel whose hub was Medina Station. Where the weird alien sphere sat in the middle of the not-space that linked all the ring gates. Where her civilian quarters were when she wasn't on the void cities. Where Saba was, when he wasn't on his ship or with her. Medina Station was home.

Except that even for her, the blue-black disk of Earth on her screen was home too. Maybe that wouldn't always be true. There were kids old enough to vote now who'd never known what it meant to have only one sun. She didn't know what Earth or Mars or Sol would be to them. Maybe this atavistic melancholy just behind her breastbone would die with her generation.

Or maybe she was tired and cranky and needed a nap.

The bamboo broke again. "Ma'am?"

"I'm on my way."

"Yes, ma'am. But we have a priority message from traffic control on Medina."

Drummer leaned forward, her hands flat against the cool of the desk.

Shit. Shit shit shit. "Did we lose another one?"

“No, ma’am. No lost ships.”

She felt the dread loosen its grip a little. Not all the way. “What, then?”

“They’re reporting an unscheduled transit. A freighter, but it didn’t have a transponder.”

“Seriously?” she said. “Did they think we wouldn’t notice it?”

“Couldn’t speak to that,” Vaughn said.

She pulled up the administrative feed from Medina. She could get anything from her realm here—traffic control, environmental data, energy output, sensor arrays in any slice of the electromagnetic spectrum. But light delay made all of it a little more than four hours old. Any order she gave would come through eight, eight and a half hours after the request for it was made. The vast alien intelligence that had engineered the ring gates and the massive ruins in the systems beyond them had found ways to manipulate distance, but the speed of light was the speed of light, and seemed like it always would be.

She scrolled through the logs, found the relevant slot, played it.

*Medina here. Conferme.* Traffic Control’s usual calm.

The responding voice had a little interference. An artifact of the gates.

*This is the freighter Savage Landing out of Castila on approach, Medina.*

*Transferring our status now.*



A new window popped up. The ship status of a light freighter. Martian design. Old, but not antiquated. It took a few seconds for Traffic to come back.

*Visé bien, Savage Landing. You are clear to transit. Control code is—  
fuck! Abort, Savage Landing ! Do not transit!*

A sudden spike on the safety curve and the alarm status blinked to red. A new drive signature appeared on Medina's control board, the plume sweeping through the starless dark of the slow zone.

It was done. All of it over with hours ago, but Drummer still felt her heartbeat pick up. Traffic was shouting for the new ship to identify itself, the rail-gun emplacements clicked to active. If they'd fired, everyone on the unauthorized ship was dead already.

The safety curve decayed, the disruption created by mass and energy passing through the ring dropping until it passed the threshold. The intruding ship spun, burning hard, and zipped through a different gate, kicking the curve back up again as it escaped.

Traffic cursed in several languages, sending stand-by messages to three other inbound ships. The *Savage Landing* was quiet, but the feed from their system showed a bruisingly hard burn as they peeled away, breaking off the approach to the Castila gate.

She rolled back, the near calamity reversing itself. The reckless asshole had come in from Freehold and passed out into Auberon. Because of course it had. The leaking radiation from the Auberon gate showed that the ship had made it. As close as it had cut the safety curve, it hadn't gone dutchman. But if the *Savage Landing* had gone through as scheduled, one or both ships could have vanished into wherever ships went when their transits failed.

In the short term, it would mean slotting *Savage Landing* in later.

There'd be a bunch of pushbacks. Maybe dozens of ships that had to change their burns and coordinate new transits. Not a threat, but a pain in the ass.

And not a good precedent.

"Should I respond," Vaughn asked, "or would you rather deal with this personally, ma'am?"

It was an excellent question. Policy was a ratchet. If she pulled the trigger, gave the order that the next unauthorized ship through was going to



be turned into scrap metal and regrets, it wasn't something she could pull back from. Someone much better at this than she was had taught her to be very careful doing something if she wasn't ready to do it every time from

then on.

But, Christ, it was tempting.

“Have Medina log the transit, add the full cost to Freehold and Auberón’s tabs, and penalties for the delays they caused,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Vaughn said. “Anything else?”

*Yes, she thought, but I don’t know what yet.*

The conference room had been designed for this moment. The vaulted ceiling looked as grand as a cathedral. Secretary-General Li of Earth stood at his podium, shifting his grave but satisfied countenance out at the cameras of dozens of different, carefully selected newsfeeds. Drummer tried to do the same.

“President Drummer!” one of the reporters called, lifting a hand for attention the same way people probably had in the forums of Rome. Her podium told her the man’s name was Carlisle Hayyam with Munhwa Ilbo’s Ceres office. A dozen others had started clamoring for her attention too.

“Hayyam?” she said, smiling, and the others quieted down. The truth was, she sort of liked this part. It appealed to some long-forgotten ambition to perform on a stage, and it was one of the few places where she felt like she was actually in control. Most of her work felt like she was trying to stuff air back into a leaking balloon.

“How do you respond to Martin Karczek’s concerns about the transfer station?”

“I’d have to listen to them,” she said. “I’ve only got so many hours in my day.”

The reporters chuckled, and she heard the glee. Yes, they were opening the first hand-off station. Yes, Earth was about to stagger up out of years of environmental crisis to ramp up its active trade with the colonies. All anyone really wanted was a couple politicians being snippy at each other. And that was fine. As long as they kept looking at the little stuff, she could work on the big things.

Secretary-General Li, a broad-faced man with a lush mustache and a workman’s callused hands, cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind,” he said. “There are always people who are wary of change. And that’s a *good* thing. Change should be watched, moderated, and questioned. But that conservative view shouldn’t rein in progress or put a damper on hope. Earth is humanity’s first and truest home. The soil from which all of us, whatever system we now inhabit, first grew. Earth will always, *always*, be central to the greater project of humanity in the universe.”

Whistling past the graveyard. Earth was celebrating a huge milestone in its history, and that was maybe the third most important thing on her

agenda. But how do you tell a planet that history has passed it by? Better to nod and smile, enjoy the moment and the champagne. Once this was over, she'd have to get back to work.

They moved through the expected questions: would the renegotiation of the tariff agreements be overseen by Drummer or former president Sanjrani, would the Transport Union remain neutral in the contested elections on Nova Catalunya, would the Ganymede status talks be held on Luna or Medina. There was even one question about the dead systems—Charon, Adro, and Naraka—where ring gates led to things much stranger than goldilocks-zone planetary systems. Secretary-General Li fended that one off, which was just as well. Dead systems gave Drummer the creeps.

After the Q-and-A was done, Drummer did a dozen photo ops with the secretary-general, high-level administrators from the EMC, and celebrities from the planets—a dark-skinned woman in a bright-blue sari, a pale man in a formal suit, a pair of comically identical men in matching gold dinner jackets.

There was a part of her that enjoyed this too. She suspected that the pleasure she took in Earthers clamoring to get mementos of themselves with the head of the Belters spoke poorly of her in some vague spiritual way. She'd grown up in a universe where people like her were disposable, and

she'd lived long enough for fortune's wheel to lift her up higher than Earth's sky. Everyone wanted the Belt for a friend, now that the term meant more than a cloud of half-mined-out chunks of debris trapped between Mars and Jupiter. For children born today, the Belt was the thing that tied all humanity together. Semantic drift and political change. If the worst that came out of it was a little schadenfreude on her part, she could live with that.

Vaughn waited in a small antechamber. His face was a network of crags that would have done credit to a mountain range, but he managed to make it work for him. His formal jacket was cut to echo old-style vac suits. The marks of their oppression remade as high fashion. Time healed all wounds, but it didn't erase the scars so much as decorate them.

"You have an hour before the reception, ma'am," he said as Drummer sat on the couch and rubbed her feet.

"Understood."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Encrypted tightbeam and privacy."

"Yes, ma'am," he said without missing a beat.

When the door slid closed behind him, she turned on the system camera and composed herself. The plan that had been forming in the back of her

head all through the ceremonies was in place. All the bits and pieces she'd need to make it happen. And sooner was better than later. Punishment worked best when there wasn't a gap between misbehavior and consequences, or at least that was what they told her. But there was also a real advantage in giving the offender time to savor their regret. Best of all was when she could do both.

She hit Record.

"Captain Holden," she said. "I'm linking you through to the data on an unauthorized transit from Freehold to Auberon that occurred today. I'm also giving you access to the security review of the Freehold system. It's not much. One habitable planet a little smaller than Mars, another one that's exploitable as long as you don't mind too much nitrogen and cyanide in your air. The governor of Freehold is named ...."

She checked the records and coughed with contempt and laughter.

"Payne Houston. I'm assuming that's his own choice and not what his mommy called him. Either way, I'm sending you under an executive mandate so that you can get going right now. I'll get Emily Santos-Baca and the security committee to genuflect over this well before you get there, so we'll be fine with that.

"Your official mission is to carry the message that Freehold's repeated

violations of Transportation Union guidelines have triggered punitive action, and that I'm banning all traffic in and out of Freehold for three years. When he asks whether it's Earth years, the answer is yes. He's going to make a point of that, because that's the kind of idiot he is.

"Your unofficial mission is not to hurry. I want Freehold and all the systems like it to see a gunship moseying toward them for weeks without knowing what it's going to do when it gets there. I'll have my staff draw up the usual work agreement. If you can't take the job, let me know as soon as possible. Otherwise, I'll have you on the roster to fuel up and make transit in the next fifteen hours."

She reviewed the message, then sent it out with a copy to Ahmed McCahill, the chair of the security committee. Then it was an executive request to push the *Rocinante* to the head of the resupply and transit authorization queues. And then Vaughn was knocking discreetly at her door. He took her grunt as permission to come in, which it was.

"Secretary-General Li is asking whether you're indisposed, ma'am," he said. "He's getting concerned."

She checked the time. Her hour's respite had ended twenty minutes ago.

"Tell him I'm on my way," she said. "And do I have a change of clothes?"



“In the closet, ma’am,” Vaughn said as he slipped out the door again, quiet as a phantom. Drummer changed quickly, shedding the formal jacket and slacks for a bamboo-silk blouse and self-tailoring skirt with a neural net woven into it that was about as intelligent as an insect just to keep the drape right. She considered herself in the mirror with a certain satisfaction. She only wished Saba were here to accompany her. But he’d probably make too many consort-of-the-queen jokes. She shut down the mirror, its screen defaulting back to the image of Earth.

The planet was over half in darkness now, a crescent of white and blue. Belters had tried to kill the Earth, but here it was still spinning. They’d tried to burn the inner planets’ ships, and here was the EMC navy, scraped back together and flying.

And on the other hand, Earth had tried to choke the Belters under its boot for generations, and here was Drummer. Time had made them allies in the great expansion of civilization out to the stars.

At least until something *else* changed.

## **Chapter Two: Bobbie**

The transit from the slow zone was behind them and Freehold was still weeks away, but an atmospheric landing in a ship as old as the *Rocinante* wasn’t the trivial thing it had once been. Age showed up in unexpected

ways. Things that had always worked before failed. It was something you prepared for as much as you could.

Bobbie squinted at a wall panel on the engineering deck and watched as a long list of data scrolled by, ending with the ship's reassurance that it could handle at least one more descent without burning up.

"All greens on the atmospheric braking thrusters," Bobbie said.

"Hmmm?" Alex's sleepy drawl replied from the panel.

"You awake up there? This is your damn landing prep list. I'm down here doing the work. Could at least seem interested."

"Yeah, not sleepin'," the pilot replied, "just got my own list of shit to do." She could hear his smile.

Bobbie closed the diagnostic screen. Verifying the status on the thrusters was the last item on her work order. And short of putting on a suit and climbing outside to physically look into the nozzles, there wasn't much more she could do.

"I'm going to do some housekeeping, then head up," she said.

"Mmhm."

Bobbie put her tools away and used a mild solvent to wipe up some lubricant she'd spilled. It smelled sweet and pungent, like something she'd have cooked with back when she'd been living alone on Mars. Anxiety

pushed her toward preparing more for the mission even after she was prepared. In the old days, this was when she'd have cleaned and serviced her power armor again and again and again until it became a kind of meditation. Now, she went through the ship the same way.

She'd lived on the *Rocinante* for more years now than anyplace else.

Longer than her childhood home. Longer than her tour in the Marines.

The engineering deck was Amos country, and the mechanic kept a tidy shop. Every tool was in its place, every surface spotless. Other than the oil and solvent, the only other smell in the compartment was the ozone scent that hinted at powerful electricity coursing nearby. The floor vibrated in time with the fusion reactor on the deck below, the ship's beating heart.

On one bulkhead, Amos painted a sign that read:

SHE TAKES CARE OF YOU

YOU TAKE CARE OF HER

Bobbie patted the words as she walked by and climbed onto the ladder lift that ran up the center of the ship. The *Roci* was at a very gentle 0.2 g braking burn, and there had been a time when riding the lift instead of climbing the ladder would have felt like admitting defeat, even if the ship was burning ten times that hard. But for the last couple years Bobbie's joints had been giving her trouble, and proving to herself that she could

make the climb had stopped mattering as much.

It seemed to her that the real sign you were getting old was when you stopped needing to prove you weren't getting old.

The hatches separating each deck slid open at the lift's approach, and then quietly closed after she'd passed. The *Roci* might be a decade or two past her sell-by date, but Clarissa tolerated no sticking or squeaking on her ship. At least once a week, Claire made a complete pass through every environmental system and pressure hatch. When Bobbie had mentioned it to Holden, he'd said, *Because she broke the ship once, and she's still trying to fix it.*

The lift hummed to a stop on the ops deck, and Bobbie stepped off. The hatch up to the cockpit was open. Alex's brown and almost entirely bald head poked up over the back of the pilot's crash couch. The crew spent most of their working time in Operations, and the air felt subtly different. Long hours spent in the crash couches meant the smell of sweat never entirely went away, no matter how hard the air recyclers worked. And, like any room James Holden spent a lot of time in, the comfortable scent of old coffee lingered.

Bobbie ran a finger along the bulkhead, feeling the anti-spalling fabric crackle under the pressure. The dark-gray color had faded, and it was

getting harder to tell where the fabric didn't match because it had been damaged and patched and where it was just aging unevenly. It would need to be replaced soon. She could live with the color, but the crunching meant that it was losing its elasticity. Getting too brittle to do its job.

Both of Bobbie's shoulders ached, and it was getting trickier to tell the difference between the one that had been explosively dislocated during hand-to-hand training years before and the one that just hurt from decades of not being gentle with her body. She'd picked up a lot of battle scars during her life, and they were getting harder and harder to differentiate from the normal damage of wearing out. Like the discolored patches on the *Roci's* bulkheads, everything was just fading to match.

She climbed the short ladder up through the hatch into the cockpit, trying to enjoy the ache in her shoulders the way she'd once enjoyed the burn after an intense workout. As an old drill sergeant had told her, pain is the warrior's friend. Pain reminds you that you aren't dead yet.

"Yo," Alex said as she dropped into the gunner's chair behind him.

"How's our girl look?"

"Old, but she can still get around."

"I meant the ship."

Bobbie laughed and called up the tactical display. Off in the distance, the

planet Freehold. The mission. “My brother always complained I spent too much time looking for metaphors.”

“An aging Martian warrior living inside an aging Martian warrior,” Alex said, the smile audible in his voice. “Don’t have to look too hard there.”

“Not too aged to kick your ass.” Bobbie zoomed in on Freehold on their tactical screen. A mottled marble of brown continents and green oceans, with the occasional white swirl of cloud. “How long?”

“We’ll be there in a week.”

“Talk to Jizz lately? How’s my future baby daddy doing?”

“*Giselle* is fine, and she says Kit is doing great. Picked planetary engineering as his major at Mariner Tech.”

“It is the hot job market right now,” Bobbie agreed.

She’d been Alex’s best man when he’d married Giselle, and she’d waited at the hospital on Ceres when Kit had been born thirteen months later. And now Kit was going into upper university, and Alex had been divorced for over a decade. He was her best friend, but he was terrible husband material. After his second failure at it Bobbie pointed out that if he just wanted something to hurt, she could break his arm for him and save everyone time.

But for all the unnecessary drama, Alex and Giselle’s short-lived

trainwreck of a marriage had produced Kit, and that made the universe a better place. The boy had all of Alex's laconic charm and all of his mother's regal good looks. Every time he called her Aunt Bobbie, she wanted to hug him until his ribs cracked.

"When you reply, make sure to tell Jizz I said 'fuck off,'" Bobbie said.

The failure of the marriage wasn't entirely Giselle's fault, but Bobbie had picked Alex in the divorce, so acting like she blamed his ex for everything was part of the best-friend pact. Alex pushed against it, but she knew he also appreciated her saying all the things that he couldn't.

"I'll send *Giselle* your love," Alex said.

"And tell Kit that Aunt Bobbie says hi, and I want new pictures.

Everything I have of him is a year old. I wanna see how my little man is filling out."

"You know it's creepy to flirt with a kid you've known his entire life, right?"

"My love is a pure love," Bobbie replied, then switched tactical to the mission parameters. Freehold had a population of just under three hundred, all Earth-born. They called themselves an Assembly of Sovereign Citizens, whatever that meant. But the colony-ship manifest had included a lot of firearms and ammunition. And with the weeks the *Roci* had spent dropping

down toward Freehold's sun, the locals had had plenty of time to work themselves up.

Reading along with her, Alex said, "Captain'll need some backup down there."

"Yeah. Talking to Amos about that is the next thing on my list."

"Taking Betsy?"

"This is probably not a Betsy-level situation, sailor," Bobbie said. Betsy was Alex's nickname for the suit of Martian Marine Recon armor she kept in the ship's cargo bay. She hadn't put the thing on in years, but she kept it operational and charged anyway. It made her feel warm and comfortable knowing it was there. Just in case.



"Copy that," Alex said.

"Where is Amos, anyway?"

It was subtle, the difference between Alex being at ease and Alex trying to sound like he was at ease. "Ship thinks he's in the sick bay," Alex said.

*Clarissa*, Bobbie thought. *Well, shit.*

The *Rocinante*'s medical bay smelled like antiseptic and vomit.

The antiseptic came from the little floor scrubber that was humming



around the room, leaving a trail of shiny decking in its wake. The acid-and-bile smell of vomit came from Clarissa Mao.

“Bobbie,” she with a smile. She was on one of the med bay’s couches, an autodoc cuff around her upper arm that buzzed and hummed and occasionally clicked. Claire’s face would tighten at each click. Injections, maybe, or something worse.

“Hey, Babs,” Amos said. The hulking mechanic sat at Claire’s bedside reading something on his hand terminal. He didn’t look up when Bobbie entered the room, but raised a hand in greeting.

“How’re you feeling today?” Bobbie asked, grimacing internally as she said it.

“I’ll be out of bed in a few minutes,” Claire said. “Did I miss something on the pre-landing check?”

“No, no,” Bobbie replied, shaking her head. She feared that Claire would tear the tubes out of her arm and leap out of bed if she said yes.

“Nothing like that. I just need to borrow the lunk for a minute.”

“Yeah?” Amos said, looking at her for the first time. “That okay with you, Peaches?”

“Whatever you need,” she said, gesturing at the med-bay in general.

“You will always find me at home.”

“All right,” Amos stood up, and Bobbie guided him out into the corridor. Surrounded by the fading gray walls, and with the sick-bay hatch closed behind him, Amos seemed to deflate a little. He leaned his back against the wall and sighed. “That’s tough to watch, you know?”

“How is she?”

“Good days and bad days, same as anyone,” Amos said. “Those aftermarket glands she had put in keep leaking their rat shit into her blood, and we keep filtering it back out. But taking ’em back out would fuck her up worse, so ...”

Amos shrugged again. He looked tired. Bobbie had never really been able to figure out what the relationship between the *Roci*’s mechanic and his tiny counterpart was. They weren’t sleeping together, and it didn’t seem like they ever had. Most of the time they didn’t even talk. But when Claire’s health had started its decline, Amos was usually there by her side in the sick bay. It made Bobbie wonder if he’d do that for her if she got sick. If anyone would.

The big mechanic was looking a little thinner himself these days. Where most big men tended toward pudgy in their later years, Amos had gone the other direction. What fat he’d had was gone, and now his arms and neck looked ropey with old muscle just under the skin. Tougher than shoe leather.

“So,” he said, “what’s up?”

“Did you read my briefing on Freehold?”

“Skimmed it.”

“Three hundred people who hate centralized authority and love guns.

Holden’s going to insist on meeting them on their turf, because that’s the kind of shit he does. He’ll need backup.”

“Yeah,” Amos agreed. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“I was thinking maybe I should take this one,” Bobbie said, nodding her head toward the sick-bay hatch. Not saying, *She doesn’t look good*. Amos pursed his lips, considering.

“Yeah, okay,” Amos said. “Atmospheric landing will probably shake the damn ship apart. I’ll have plenty to do here.”

Bobbie started to leave, then something made her stop. Before she knew she was going to say it, she asked, “How much longer?”

“Rest of her life,” Amos said, then went back into the sick bay and closed the hatch behind him.

She found Holden and Naomi eating breakfast in the galley. The smell of scrambled eggs with powdered onions and what passed for peppers competed with brewing coffee. Bobbie’s belly growled as soon as she walked into the room, and without a word Holden pushed a plate toward her

and began slopping eggs onto it.

“Enjoy, because this is the last of the real eggs until we get back to Medina,” Holden said as he dished her up.

Naomi finished chewing a mouthful and said, “What’s going on?”

“Did you guys read my threat assessment on Freehold?”

“Skimmed it,” Holden replied.

“First-generation colony,” Naomi said. “Eight years since founding, and it’s still only got one township on it in a semiarid temperate zone. Low-level agriculture, but most of the food supply is salvaged hydroponics.

Some goats and chickens, but the livestock is surviving on the hydroponics too, so not the most efficient model. Lithium in the planetary crust and a weirdly lot of uranium trapped in polar glaciers that hopefully means it’ll be easily harvested helium if they ever get the infrastructure to mine something. Charter that calls for radical personal autonomy enforced by a citizen militia made up of the whole colonial population.”

“Really?” Holden said. “The whole population?”

“So three hundred people who like guns,” Naomi said, then pointed at Holden. “This one will insist on getting off the ship and speaking to them in person.”

“Right?” Bobbie said, then quickly shoveled a heaping scoop of eggs

into her mouth. They were as good as her nose had promised they'd be.

"This *has* to be done face-to-face," Holden said. "If not, we could just have radioed the message to them from Medina and saved ourselves the trip."

"Diplomacy is your thing," Bobbie said. "I'm strictly concerned with tactical issues. And when we talk to the powers that be on Freehold, we'll be telling them there's no reason not to just start shooting and hope for the best."

Holden pushed his half-empty plate away and leaned back with a frown.

"Explain that."

"You really should read my assessments."

Naomi grabbed Holden's mug and moved over to the coffee machine. "I think I know where she's going with this. You want any coffee, Bobbie?"

"Yes, thank you," Bobbie said, then pulled up the tactical assessment on her hand terminal. "These are people who left Earth to form a colony based on personal sovereignty. They believe in the absolute right of each citizen to defend themselves and their property, with lethal force if necessary. And they are well armed for this purpose."

"I followed that part," Holden said.

"They are also years from self-sustaining at this point. The reason