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REVELATION

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PROLOGUE

“Approaching Arcturus. Disengaging FTL drive core.”

Rear Admiral Jon Grissom of the Alliance, the most famous man on Earth and its three fledgling interstellar colonies, glanced up briefly as the voice of the SSV *New Delhi*'s helmsman came over the shipboard intercom. A second later he felt the unmistakable deceleration surge as the vessel's mass effect field generators wound down and the *New Delhi* dropped from faster-than-light travel into speeds more acceptable to an Einsteinian universe.

The ghostly illumination of the familiar red-shifted universe spilled in through the cabin's tiny viewport, gradually cooling to more normal hues as they decelerated. Grissom hated the viewports; Alliance ships were purely instrument driven—they required no visual references of any kind. But all vessels were designed with several tiny ports and at least one main viewing window, typically on the bridge, as a concession to antiquated romantic ideals of space travel.

The Alliance worked hard to maintain these romantic ideals—they were good for recruitment. To people back on Earth, the unexplored vastness of space was still a wonder. Humanity's expansion across the stars was a glorious adventure of discovery, and the mysteries of the

galaxy were just waiting to be revealed.

Grissom knew the truth was much more complex. He had seen firsthand just how beautifully cold the galaxy could be. It was both magnificent and terrifying, and he knew there were some things humanity was not yet ready to face. The classified transmission he had received that morning from the base at Shanxi was proof of that.

In many ways humanity was like a child: naïve and sheltered. Not that this was surprising. In the whole of humanity's long history it was only in the last two centuries that they had broken the bonds of Earth and ventured into the cold vacuum of space beyond. And true interstellar travel—the ability to journey to destinations beyond their own solar system—had only been made possible in the last decade. Less than a decade, in fact.

It was in 2148, a mere nine years ago, that the mining team on Mars had unearthed the remains of a long-abandoned alien research station deep beneath the planet's surface. It was heralded as the most significant discovery in human history, a singular event that changed everything forever.

For the first time, humanity was faced with indisputable, incontrovertible proof that they were not alone in the universe. Every media outlet across the world had jumped on the story. Who were these mysterious aliens? Where were they now? Were they extinct? Would they return? What impact did they have on humanity's past evolution? What impact would they have on humanity's future? In those first few months, philosophers, scientists, and self-appointed experts endlessly debated the

significance of the discovery on the news vids and across the info nets, vehemently and sometimes even violently.

Every major religion on Earth was rocked to its core. Dozens of new belief systems sprang up overnight, most of them based on the tenets of the Interventionary Evolutionists, who zealously proclaimed the discovery as proof that all human history had been directed and controlled by alien forces. Many existing faiths tried to incorporate the reality of alien species into their existing mythologies, others scrambled to rewrite their history, creeds, and beliefs in light of the new discovery. A stubborn few refused to acknowledge the truth, proclaiming the Mars bunker a secular hoax intended to deceive and mislead believers from the true path. Even now, nearly a decade later, most religions were still trying to reassemble the pieces.

The intercom crackled again, interrupting Grissom's thoughts and drawing his focus away from the offending viewport and back to the shipboard speaker in the ceiling. "We are cleared for docking at Arcturus. ETA approximately twelve minutes."

It had taken them nearly six hours to travel from Earth to Arcturus, the largest Alliance base outside humanity's own solar system. Grissom had spent most of that time hunched over a data screen, looking through status reports and reviewing personnel files.

The journey had been planned months ago as a public relations event. The Alliance wanted Grissom to address the first class of recruits to graduate from the Academy at Arcturus, a symbolic passing of the torch from a legend of the past to the leaders of the future. But a few hours

before they were about to depart, the message from Shanxi had radically altered the primary purpose of his trip.

The last decade had been a golden age for humanity, like some glorious dream. Now he was about to bring a grim reality crashing down on them.

The New Delhi was almost at its destination; it was time for him to leave the peace and solitude of the private cabin. He transferred the personnel files from the data terminal to a tiny optical storage disk, which he slipped into the breast pocket of his Alliance uniform. Then he logged off, pushing himself away from his chair and stiffly standing up.

His quarters were small and cramped, and the data station he'd been working at was far from comfortable. Space on Alliance vessels was limited, private cabins were typically reserved exclusively for the commanding officer of the ship. On most missions even VIPs were expected to use the common mess or the communal sleeping pods. But Grissom was a living legend, and for him exceptions could be made. In this case the captain had generously offered his own quarters for the relatively short trip to Arcturus.

Grissom stretched, trying to work the knots out of his neck and shoulders. The admiral rolled his head from side to side until he was rewarded with a satisfying crack of the vertebrae. He made a quick check of his uniform in the mirror—keeping up appearances was one of the burdens of fame—before stepping out the door to make his way to the bridge in the bow of the starship.

Various members of the crew paused in their duties to stand at attention and salute as he marched past their stations. He responded in kind, barely aware that he was doing so. In the eight years since he had become a hero of the human race, he'd developed an instinctive ability to acknowledge the gestures of respect and admiration without any conscious awareness.

Grissom's mind was still distracted with thoughts of how much everything had changed with the discovery of the alien bunker on Mars . . . a line of thinking that was not surprising given the unsettling reports from Shanxi.

The revelation that humanity was not alone in the universe hadn't just impacted Earth's religions, it had far-reaching effects across the political spectrum as well. But where religion had descended into the chaos of schisms and extremist splinter groups, politically the discovery had actually drawn humanity closer together. It had fundamentally united the inhabitants of Earth, the swift and sudden culmination of the pan-global cultural identity that had been slowly but steadily developing over the last century.

Within a year the charter for the human Systems Alliance—the first all-encompassing global coalition—had been written and ratified by Earth's eighteen largest nation-states. For the first time in recorded history the inhabitants of Earth began to see themselves as a single, collective group: human as opposed to alien.

The Systems Alliance Military—a force dedicated to the protection and defense of Earth and its citizens against non-Terran threats—was formed soon after,

drawing resources, soldiers, and officers from nearly every military organization on the planet.

There were some who insisted the sudden unification of Earth's various governments into a single political entity had happened a little too quickly and conveniently. The info nets were swarming with theories claiming the Mars bunker had actually been discovered long before it was publicly announced; the report of the mining team unearthing it was just a well-timed cover story. The formation of the Alliance, they asserted, was in fact the final stage of a long and complicated series of secret international treaties and clandestine backroom deals that had taken years or even decades to negotiate.

Public opinion generally dismissed such talk as conspiracy theory paranoia. Most people preferred the idealistic notion that the revelation was a catalyst that energized the governments and citizens of the world, driving them boldly forward into a brave new age of cooperation and mutual respect.

Grissom was too jaded to fully buy into that fantasy. Privately, he couldn't help but wonder if the politicians had known more than they publicly admitted. Even now he wondered if the communications drone carrying the distress call from Shanxi had caught them by surprise. Or had they been expecting something like this even before the Alliance was formed?

As he neared the bridge, he pushed all thoughts of alien research stations and shady conspiracies from his head. He was a practical man. The details behind the discovery of the bunker and the formation of the Alliance

didn't really matter to him. The Alliance was sworn to protect and defend humanity throughout the stars, and everyone, including Grissom, had to play their part.

Captain Eisenhorn, commanding officer of the New Delhi, gazed out through the large viewport built into the foredeck of the ship. What he saw there sent a shiver of wonder down his spine.

Outside the window, the massive Arcturus space station grew steadily larger as the New Delhi approached. The Alliance fleet—nearly two hundred vessels ranging from twenty-man destroyers to dreadnoughts with crews of several hundred—stretched out from it in all directions, surrounding the station like an ocean of steel. The entire scene was illuminated by the orange glow emanating from the type-K red giant far in the distance: Arcturus, the system's sun for which the base had been named. The ships reflected the star's fiery glow, gleaming as if they burned with the flames of truth and triumph.

Though Eisenhorn had been witness to this grand spectacle dozens of times, it never ceased to amaze him—a dazzling reminder of how far they had come in such a short time. The discovery on Mars had elevated humanity, binding them together with a new sense of singular purpose as top experts from every field had united their resources in one glorious project—an attempt to unravel the technological mysteries stored inside the alien bunker.

Almost immediately it had become apparent that the Protheans—the name given to the unknown alien species—had been far more technologically advanced than

humanity . . . and that they had vanished long, long ago. Most estimates placed the find at nearly fifty thousand years old, predating the evolution of modern man. However, the Protheans had built the station from materials unlike anything found naturally on Earth, and even the passing of fifty millennia had done little to damage the valuable treasures inside.

Most remarkable were the data files the Protheans had left behind: millions of tetrabytes worth of knowledge—still viable, though compiled in a strange and unfamiliar language. Deciphering the contents of those data files became the holy grail of virtually every scientist on Earth. It took months of round-the-clock study, but eventually the code of the Prothean language was broken and the pieces began to fall into place.

For conspiracy theorists this was seen as fuel for their fire. It should have taken years, they argued, for anything useful to come out of the bunker. But their negativity went unheard or unheeded by most, left behind in the wake of spectacular scientific advances.

It was as if a dam had ruptured and a cascade of knowledge and discovery had been unleashed to flood the human psyche. Research that previously took decades to achieve results now seemed to require mere months. Through the adaptation of Prothean technology humanity was able to develop mass effect fields, enabling faster-than-light travel; no longer were vessels bound by the harsh and unforgiving limits of the space-time continuum. Similar leaps followed in other areas: clean and efficient new energy sources; ecological and environmental advances; terraforming.

Within a year the inhabitants of Earth began a rapid spread throughout the solar system. Ready access to resources from the other planets, moons, and asteroids allowed colonies to be established on orbiting space stations. Massive terraforming projects began to transform the lifeless surface of Earth's own moon into a habitable environment. And Eisennhorn, like most people, didn't care to listen to those who stubbornly claimed humanity's new Golden Age was a carefully orchestrated sham that had actually begun decades earlier.

"Officer on deck!" one of the crewmen barked out.

The sound of the entire bridge staff standing to salute the new arrival told Captain Eisennhorn who it was even before he turned around. Admiral Jon Grissom was a man who commanded respect. Serious and stern, there was a gravity about him, an undeniable significance in his mere presence.

"I'm surprised you're here," Eisennhorn said under his breath, turning back to gaze once more at the scene outside the window as Grissom crossed the bridge and took up position beside him. They'd known each other for nearly twenty years, having met as raw recruits during basic training with the U.S. Marine Corps before the Alliance even existed. "Aren't you the one who's always saying the view-ports are a tactical weakness on Alliance ships?" Eisennhorn added.

"Have to do my part for the morale of the crew," Grissom whispered back. "Figured I could help reinforce the glory of the Alliance if I came up here and stared out at the fleet all wistful and misty-eyed like you."

“Tact is the art of making a point without making an enemy,” Eisennhorn admonished him. “Sir Isaac Newton said that.”

“I don’t have any enemies,” Grissom muttered. “I’m a goddamned hero, remember?”

Eisennhorn considered Grissom a friend, but that didn’t change the fact that he was a difficult man to like. Professionally the admiral projected the perfect image for an Alliance officer: smart, tough, and demanding. On duty, he carried himself with an air of fierce purpose, unshakable confidence, and absolute authority that inspired loyalty and devotion in his troops. On a personal level, however, he could be moody and sullen. Things had only gotten worse once he’d been so visibly thrust into the public eye as an icon representing the entire Alliance. Years of being in the spotlight had seemingly transformed his harsh pragmatism into cynical pessimism.

Eisennhorn had expected him to be sour on this trip—the admiral was never a fan of these kinds of public performances. But Grissom’s mood had been particularly dark even for him, and the captain was beginning to wonder if there was something more going on.

“You’re not just here to speak to the graduating class, are you?” Eisennhorn asked, keeping his voice low.

“Need to know basis,” Grissom said curtly, just loud enough for the captain to hear. “You don’t need to know.” After a second he added, “You don’t want to know.”

The two officers shared a minute of silence, simply staring out the viewport at the approaching station.

“Admit it,” Eisenhorn said, hoping to dispel the other man’s bleak humor. “Seeing Arcturus surrounded by the entire Alliance fleet . . . it’s an impressive sight.”

“The fleet won’t look so impressive once it’s spread out across a few dozen star systems,” Grissom countered. “Our numbers are too small, and the galaxy’s too damn big.”

Eisenhorn had to admit that Grissom was probably more aware of that than anyone.

The technology of the Protheans had catapulted human society forward hundreds of years and allowed them to conquer the solar system. But it had required an even more amazing discovery to open up the vastness of space beyond their own sun.

In 2149 a research team exploring the farthest fringes of human expansion realized that Charon, a small satellite orbiting Pluto, wasn’t really a moon at all. It was actually an enormous piece of dormant Prothean technology. A mass relay. Floating for tens of thousands of years in the cold depths of space, it had become encased in a shell of ice and frozen debris several hundred kilometers thick.

The experts back on Earth weren’t completely unprepared for this particular revelation; the existence and purpose of mass relays had been mentioned in the data archives recovered from the Mars bunker. In simplest terms, the mass relays were a network of linked gates that could transport a ship from one relay to the next, instantaneously traversing thousands of light-years. The underlying scientific theory behind the creation of mass relays was still beyond the scope of humanity’s top

experts. But even though they couldn't construct one themselves, scientists were able to reactivate the dormant relay they had stumbled across.

The mass relay was a door that could open up the entire galaxy . . . or lead right into the heart of a burning star or black hole. Exploratory probes sent through immediately dropped out of contact—not unexpectedly, considering the notion that they were being instantly transported thousands of light-years away. In the end, the only way to truly know what was on the other side was to send somebody through; someone willing to brave the great unknown and face whatever dangers and challenges waited on the other side.

The Alliance handpicked a crew of brave men and women: soldiers willing to risk their own lives, individuals ready to make the ultimate sacrifice in the name of discovery and progress. And to lead this crew they chose a man of unique character and unquestioned strength, one they knew would not falter in the face of untold adversity. A man named Jon Grissom.

Upon their successful return through the mass relay, the entire crew had been hailed as heroes. But the media had chosen Grissom—the imposing, solemn commander of the mission—to become the flag-bearer of the Alliance as humanity forged ahead into a new age of unparalleled discovery and expansion.

“Whatever’s happened,” Eisenhorn said, still hoping he could pull Grissom from his dark state of mind, “you have to believe we can deal with it. You and I never could have imagined that we could accomplish all this in such a

short time!”

Grissom gave a snort of derision. “We couldn’t have done a damn thing if it wasn’t for the Protheans.”

Eisennhorn shook his head. While it had been the discovery and adaptation of Prothean technology that had opened up these great possibilities, it was the actions of people like Grissom that had transformed possibility into reality.

“If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,” Eisennhorn countered. “Sir Isaac Newton said that, too.”

“Why the obsession with Newton? He a relative or something?”

“Actually, my grandfather was tracing our family’s genealogy and he—”

“I didn’t really want to know,” Grissom growled, cutting him off.

They were almost at their destination. The Arcturus space station dominated the entire window now, blocking out everything else. The docking bay loomed before them, a gaping hole in the gleaming hull of the station’s exterior.

“I should go,” Grissom said with a weary sigh. “They’ll want to see me come marching down the gangway as soon as we touch down.”

“Take it easy on those recruits,” Eisennhorn suggested, only half joking. “Remember, they’re barely more than kids.”

“I didn’t come here to meet with a bunch of kids,” Grissom replied. “I came here looking for soldiers.”

The first thing Grissom did when he arrived was request a private room. He was scheduled to address the entire graduating class at 14:00. In the four hours between then and now he planned to conduct private interviews with a handful of the recruits.

The brass at Arcturus weren’t expecting his request, but they did their best to accommodate it. They set him up in a small room furnished with a desk, computer workstation, and a single chair. Grissom was sitting behind the desk reviewing the personnel files on the monitor one last time. Competition to be accepted into the N7 specialist training program at Arcturus was fierce. Every recruit on the station had been handpicked from the best young men and women the Alliance had to offer. Yet the handful of names on Grissom’s list had distinguished themselves from the rest of the elite; even here they stood out from the crowd.

There was a knock at the door—two quick, firm raps.

“Come in,” the admiral called out.

The door slid open and Second Lieutenant David Edward Anderson, the first name on Grissom’s list, walked in. Fresh out of training, he had already been marked for the ranks of junior officers, and looking at his file it was easy to see why. Grissom’s list was arranged alphabetically, but based on Anderson’s marks at the Academy and the evaluations of his training officers, his name would probably have been right at the top regardless.

The lieutenant was a tall man, six foot three according to his file. At twenty years old he was just starting to fill out his large frame, still growing into his broad chest and wide, square shoulders. His skin was dark brown, his black hair cut high and tight in accordance with Alliance regulations. His features, like most citizens in the multicultural society of the late twenty-second century, were a mix of several different racial characteristics. Predominantly African, but Grissom thought he could see lingering traces of Central European and Native American ancestry as well.

Anderson marched smartly across the floor and stopped directly in front of the desk, standing at attention as he snapped off a formal salute.

“At ease, Lieutenant,” Grissom ordered, instinctively returning the salute.

The young man did as he was told, relaxing his stance so that he stood with his arms clasped behind his back and his legs spread wide.

“Sir?” he asked. “If I may?” Even though he was a junior officer making a request of a rear admiral he spoke with confidence; there was no hesitation in his voice.

Grissom scowled before nodding at him to continue. The file showed Anderson had been born and raised in London, but he had almost no discernible regional accent. His generic dialect was likely the product of cross-cultural exposure through e-schooling and the info nets combined with a steady barrage of pan-global entertainment vids and music.

“I just want to tell you what an honor it is meeting you in person, Admiral,” the young man informed him. He wasn’t gushing or fawning, for which Grissom was grateful; he simply stated it as a matter of fact. “I remember seeing you on the news after the Charon expedition when I was only twelve. That’s when I decided I wanted to join the Alliance.”

“Are you trying to make me feel old, son?”

Anderson started to smile, thinking it was a joke. But the smile withered under Grissom’s glare.

“No, sir,” he replied, his voice still sure and strong. “I only meant you’re an inspiration to us all.”

He’d expected the lieutenant to stutter and stammer out some kind of apology, but Anderson wasn’t so easily rattled. Grissom made a quick note in his file.

“I see it says here you’re married, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir. She’s a civilian. Lives back on Earth.”

“I was married to a civilian,” Grissom told him. “We had a daughter. I haven’t seen her in twelve years.”

Anderson was momentarily thrown off balance by the unexpected personal disclosure. “I . . . I’m sorry, sir.”

“It’s hell keeping a marriage together when you’re in the service,” Grissom warned him. “You don’t think worrying about a wife back on Earth is going to make it harder when you’re out on a six-month tour?”

“Might make it easier, sir,” Anderson countered. “It’s nice to know I’ve got someone back home waiting for

me.”

There was no hint of anger in the young man’s voice, but it was clear he wasn’t going to be intimidated, even when speaking to a rear admiral. Grissom nodded and made another note in the file.

“Do you know why I scheduled this meeting, Lieutenant?” he asked.

After a moment of serious consideration Anderson simply shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Twelve days ago an expedition fleet left our outpost at Shanxi. They were heading through the Shanxi-Theta mass relay into an uncharted region of space: two cargo vessels and three frigates.

“They made contact with an alien species out there. Some kind of patrol fleet, we think. Only one of our frigates made it back.”

Grissom had just dropped a bombshell in the young man’s lap, but Anderson’s expression barely changed. His only reaction was a momentary widening of his eyes.

“Protheans, sir?” he asked, driving right to the heart of the matter.

“We don’t think so,” Grissom told him. “Technologically, they seem to be on about the same level as us.”

“How do we know that, sir?”

“Because the ships Shanxi sent out to engage them the next day had enough firepower to wipe out their whole patrol.”

Anderson gasped, then took a deep breath to collect himself. Grissom didn't blame him; so far he'd been impressed with how well the lieutenant had handled the whole situation.

"Any further retaliation from the aliens, sir?"

The kid was smart. His mind worked quickly, analyzing the situation and moving forward to the relevant questions after only a few seconds.

"They sent reinforcements," Grissom informed him. "They captured Shanxi. We don't have any other details yet. Comm satellites are down; we only got word because someone got off a message drone just before Shanxi fell."

Anderson nodded to show he understood, but he didn't say anything right away. Grissom was glad to see the young man had the patience to give himself time to process the information. It was a lot to wrap one's head around.

"You're sending us into action, aren't you, sir?"

"Alliance Command makes that decision," Grissom said. "All I can do is advise them. That's why I'm here."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Admiral."

"Every military engagement has only three options, Lieutenant: engage, retreat, or surrender."

"We can't just turn our backs on Shanxi! We have to engage!" Anderson exclaimed. "With all due respect, sir," he added a second later, remembering who he was talking to.

“It’s not that simple,” Grissom explained. “This is completely unprecedented; we’ve never faced an enemy like this before. We know nothing about them.

“If we escalate this into a war against an alien species, we have no way to predict how it will end. They could have a fleet a thousand times the size of ours.

“We could be on the verge of starting a war that will culminate in the total annihilation of the human race.” Grissom paused for emphasis, letting his words sink in. “Do you honestly think we should take that risk, Lieutenant Anderson?”

“You’re asking me, sir?”

“Alliance Command wants my advice before they make their decision. But I’m not going to be on the front lines fighting the war, Lieutenant. You were a squad leader during your N7 training. I want to know what you think. Do you believe our troops are ready for this?”

Anderson frowned, thinking long and hard before he offered his answer.

“Sir, I don’t think we have any other choice,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “Retreat isn’t an option. Now that the aliens know about us they aren’t just going to sit at Shanxi and do nothing. Eventually we’ll have to either engage or surrender.”

“And you don’t think surrender is an option?”

“I don’t think humanity could survive being subjugated under alien rule,” Anderson replied. “Freedom is worth fighting for.”

“Even if we lose?” Grissom pressed. “This isn’t just about what you’re willing to sacrifice, soldier. We provoke them and this war could make its way to Earth. Think about your wife. Are you willing to risk her life for the sake of freedom?”

“I don’t know, sir” was Anderson’s solemn reply. “Are you willing to condemn your daughter to the life of a slave?”

“That’s the answer I was looking for,” Grissom said with a sharp nod. “With enough soldiers like you, Anderson, humanity just might be ready for this after all.”

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