

RAMA REVEALED



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Rama Revealed

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PROLOGUE

In one of the outlying spiral arms of the Milky Way Galaxy, an inconspicuous, solitary yellow star slowly orbits the galactic center thirty thousand light-years away. This stable star, the Sun, takes two hundred and twenty-five million years to complete one revolution in its galactic orbit. The last time the Sun was in its present position, giant reptiles of fearsome power had just begun to establish their dominion on the Earth, a small blue planet that is one of the satellites of the Sun.

Among the planets and other bodies in the family of the Sun, it is only on this Earth that any complex, enduring life has ever developed. Only on this special world did chemicals evolve into consciousness and then ask, as they began to understand the wonders and dimensions of the universe, if miracles similar to the ones that had produced them had indeed occurred elsewhere.

After all, these sentient Earthlings argued, there are a hundred billion stars in our galaxy alone. We are fairly certain that at least twenty percent of these stars have orbiting planets and that a small but significant number of these planets have had, at some time in their history, atmospheric and thermal conditions conducive to the formation of amino acids and other organic chemicals that are the sine qua non for any biology we can reasonably hypothesize. At least once in history, here on Earth, these amino acids discovered self-replication, and the evolutionary miracle that eventually produced human beings was set in motion. How can we presume that this sequence occurred only that single time in all history? The heavier atoms necessary to create us have been forged in the stellar cataclysms exploding across this universe for billions of years. Is it likely that only here, in this one place, these atoms have concatenated into special molecules and evolved into an intelligent being capable of asking the question, "Are we alone?"

The humans on Earth began their search for cosmic companions first by building telescopes with which they could see their immediate planetary neighbors. Later, when their technology had developed to a higher level, sophisticated robotic spacecraft were sent to examine the other planets and to ascertain whether or not there were any signs of biology. These explorations proved that no intelligent life has ever existed on any other body in our solar system. If there is anyone out there, the human scientists concluded, any peer species with whom we might eventually communicate, they must be found beyond the void that separates our solar system from all the other stars.

At the end of the twentieth century in the human time system, the great antennae of the Earth began to search the sky for coherent signals, to determine if perhaps some other intelligence might be sending us a radio message. For over a hundred years the search continued, intensifying during the halcyon days of international science in the early twentieth century, and then diminishing later, in the final decades of the century, after the four separate sets of systematic listening techniques still failed to locate any alien signals.

In 2130, an unusual cylindrical object was observed approaching our solar system from the reaches of interstellar space. By that time, most thoughtful humans had concluded that li-

was scarce in the universe and that intelligence, if it existed anywhere except on Earth, was exceedingly rare. How else, the scientists contended, can we possibly explain the lack of positive results from all our careful extraterrestrial search efforts of the last century?

The Earth was therefore stunned when, upon closer inspection, the object entering our solar system in 2130 was identified unambiguously as an artifact of alien origin. Here was undeniable proof that advanced intelligence existed, or at least *had* existed at some prior epoch, in another part of the universe. When an ongoing space mission was diverted to rendezvous with the drab cylindrical behemoth, which turned out to have dimensions greater than the largest cities on Earth, the investigating cosmonauts found mystery after mystery. But they were unable to answer the most fundamental questions about the enigmatic alien spacecraft. The intruder from the stars provided no definitive clues about its origin or purpose.

That first group of human explorers not only cataloged the wonders of Rama (the name chosen for the gigantic cylindrical object before it was known to be an extraterrestrial artifact), but also explored and mapped its interior. After the exploration team left Rama and the alien spaceship dove around the Sun, departing from the solar system at hyperbolic velocity, scientists thoroughly analyzed all the data that had been gathered during the mission. Everyone acknowledged that the human visitors to Rama had never encountered the actual creators of the mysterious spacecraft. However, the careful postflight analysis did reveal one inescapable principle of Raman redundancy engineering. Every critical system and subsystem in the vehicle had two backups. The Ramans designed everything in threes. The scientists considered it very likely that two more similar spacecraft would soon follow.

The years immediately after the visit from Rama I in 2130 were full of expectation on the Earth. Scholars and politicians alike proclaimed that a new era in human history had begun. The International Space Agency (ISA), working with the Council of Governments (COG), developed careful procedures for handling the next visit from the Ramans. All telescopes were trained on the heavens, competing with each other for the acclaim that would come to the individual or observatory who first located the next Rama spacecraft. But there were no additional sightings.

In the second half of the 2130s an economic boom, fueled partially during its last stages by worldwide reactions to Rama, came to an abrupt halt. The world was plunged into the deepest depression in its history, known as the Great Chaos, which was accompanied by widespread anarchy and destitution. Virtually all scientific research activity was abandoned during this sorrowful era, and after several decades in which they were forced to address more mundane problems, people on the Earth had nearly forgotten the unexplained visit from the stars.

In 2200 a second cylindrical intruder arrived in the solar system. The citizens of Earth dusted off the old procedures that had been developed after the first Rama had departed, and prepared to rendezvous with Rama II. A crew of twelve was chosen for the mission. Soon after the rendezvous, the dozen reported that the second Rama spacecraft was nearly identical to its predecessor. The humans encountered new mysteries and wonders, including some alien beings, but were still unable to answer questions about the origin and purpose of Rama.

Three strange deaths among the crew created great concern back on the Earth, where aspects of the historic mission were followed on television. When the giant cylinder underwent a midcourse maneuver that placed it on a trajectory that would impact the Earth, this concern changed to alarm and fear. The leaders of the world reluctantly concluded that in the absence of any other information, they had no choice except to assume that Rama was hostile. They could not allow the alien spacecraft to impact the Earth, or to come close enough that it might deploy any advanced weapons it might possess. A decision was made to destroy Rama II while it was still a safe distance away.

The exploration crew was ordered home, but three of its members, two men and a woman, were still on board Rama II when the alien spaceship avoided a nuclear phalanx launched from the Earth. Rama maneuvered away from the hostile Earth and departed at high speed from the solar system, carrying both its intact secrets and the three human passengers.

It took thirteen years at relativistic velocities for Rama II to travel from the neighborhood of Earth to its destination, a huge engineering complex called the Node that was located in a distant orbit around the star Sirius. The three humans on board the giant cylinder added five children and grew into a family. As they investigated the marvels of their home in space, the family again encountered the extraterrestrial species they had met earlier. However, by the time they reached the Node, the humans had already convinced themselves that these other aliens were, like them, only passengers in Rama.

The human family remained at the Node for slightly more than a year. During this time the Rama spacecraft was refurbished and outfitted for its third and final journey to the solar system. The family learned from the Eagle, a nonbiological creation of the Nodal Intelligence, that the purpose of the Rama series of spacecraft was to acquire and catalog as much information as possible about spacefarers in the galaxy. The Eagle, who had the head, beak, and eyes of an eagle plus the body of a human, also informed them that the final Rama spacecraft, Rama III, would contain a carefully designed Earth habitat that could accommodate two thousand people.

A video was transmitted from the Node to the Earth announcing the imminent return of the third Rama spaceship. This video explained that an advanced extraterrestrial species wished to observe and study human activity over an extended period of time and requested that two thousand representative humans be sent to rendezvous with Rama III in orbit around Mars.

Rama III made the voyage from Sirius back to the solar system at a velocity more than half the speed of light. Inside the spacecraft, sleeping in special berths, were most of the human family who had been at the Node. In Mars orbit this family greeted the other humans from Earth and the pristine habitat inside Rama was quickly settled. The resultant colony, which was called New Eden, was completely enclosed and separated from the rest of the alien spacecraft by thick walls.

Almost immediately Rama III accelerated again to relativistic velocities, blasting out of the solar system in the direction of the yellow star Tau Ceti. Three years passed without any outside interference in human affairs. The citizens of New Eden became so involved with their everyday lives that they paid scant attention to the universe outside their settlement.

When a set of crises stressed the fledgling democracy in the paradise that had been created for the humans by the Ramans, an opportunistic tycoon seized power in the colony and began

to ruthlessly suppress all opposition. One of the original Rama II explorers fled from New Eden at this time, eventually making contact with a symbiotic pair of alien species living in the adjacent enclosed habitat. His wife remained in the human colony and tried unsuccessfully to be a conscience for the community. She was imprisoned after a few months, convicted of treason, and eventually scheduled for execution.

As the environmental and living conditions inside New Eden continued to deteriorate, human troops invaded the adjacent living area in the Northern Hemicylinder of Rama and engaged in a war of annihilation against the symbiotic pair of alien species. Meanwhile, the mysterious Ramans, known only through the genius of their engineering creations, continued their detailed observation from afar, aware that it was only a matter of time until the humans came into contact with the advanced species inhabiting the region to the south of the Cylindrical Sea....

ESCAPE

“Nicole.”

At first the soft, mechanical voice seemed to be part of her dream. But when she heard her name repeated, slightly louder, Nicole awakened with a start.

A wave of intense fear swept through her. *They have come for me*, Nicole thought immediately. *It is morning. I am going to die in a few hours.*

She took a slow, deep breath and tried to quell her mounting panic. A few seconds later Nicole opened her eyes. It was completely dark in her cell. Puzzled, Nicole looked around for the person who had called her.

“We are here, on your cot, beside your right ear,” the voice said very softly. “Richard sent us to help you escape... but we must move quickly.”

For an instant Nicole thought that perhaps she was still dreaming. Then she heard a second voice, very similar to the first but nevertheless distinct. “Roll over on your right side and we will illuminate ourselves.”

Nicole rolled over. Standing on the cot next to her head she saw two tiny figures, no more than eight or ten centimeters high, each in the shape of a woman. They were glowing momentarily from some internal light source. One had short hair and was dressed in the armor of a fifteenth century European knight. The second figure was wearing both a crown upon her head and the full, pleated dress of a medieval queen.

“I am Joan of Arc,” the first figure said.

“And I am Eleanor of Aquitaine.”

Nicole laughed nervously and stared in astonishment at the two figures. Several seconds later, when the robots’ internal lights were extinguished, Nicole had finally composed herself enough to speak. “So Richard sent you to help me escape?” she said in a whisper. “Just how do you propose to do that?”

“We’ve already sabotaged the monitoring system,” tiny Joan said proudly. “And I’ve reprogrammed a Garcia biot.... It should be here in a few minutes to let you out.”

“We have a nominal escape plan, along with several contingencies,” Eleanor added. “Richard has been working on it for months—ever since he finished making us.”

Nicole laughed again. She was still absolutely stunned. “Really?” she said. “And may I ask just where my genius of a husband is at this moment?”

“Richard is in your old lair underneath New York,” Joan replied. “He said to tell you that nothing has changed there. He is following our progress with a navigation beacon. Incidentally, Richard sends his love. He hasn’t forgotten—”

“Be still for a moment, please,” Eleanor interrupted as Nicole automatically scratched the tickling sensation behind her right ear. “I’m deploying your personal beacon right now and it’s very heavy for me.”

Moments later Nicole touched the tiny instrument package next to her ear and shook her head. “And can he *hear* us also?” she asked.

“Richard decided we couldn’t risk voice transmissions,” Eleanor answered. “They could be too easily intercepted by Nakamura.... However, he will be monitoring our physical location.”

“You may get up now,” Joan said, “and put on your clothes. We want to be ready when the Garcia arrives.”

Will wonders never cease? Nicole thought while she was washing her face in the dark in the primitive basin. For a few brief seconds Nicole imagined that the two robots might be part of a clever New Eden government plot and that she was going to be killed trying to escape. *Impossible*, she told herself a few moments later. *Even if one of Nakamura’s minions could create robots like these, only Richard would know enough about me to make a Joan of Arc and an Eleanor of Aquitaine.... Anyway, what difference does it make if I’m killed while trying to escape? My electrocution is scheduled for eight o’clock this morning.*

There was the sound of a biot approaching outside her cell. Nicole tensed, still not completely convinced that her two tiny friends were indeed telling her the truth. “Sit back down on the cot,” she heard Joan say behind her, “so Eleanor and I can climb into your pockets.” Nicole felt the two robots scrambling up the front of her shirt. She smiled. *You are amazing, Richard*, she thought.

The Garcia biot was carrying a flashlight. It strode into Nicole’s cell with an air of authority. “Come with me, Mrs. Wakefield,” it said in a loud voice. “I have orders to move you to the preparations room.”

Again Nicole was frightened. The biot certainly wasn’t acting friendly. *What if...* But she had very little time to think. The Garcia led Nicole through the corridor outside her cell at a rapid pace. Twenty meters later, they passed both the regular set of biot guards and a human commanding officer, a young man Nicole had never seen before. “Wait,” the man yelled from behind them just as Nicole and the Garcia were about to climb the stairs. Nicole froze.

“You forgot to sign the transfer papers,” the man said, holding out a document to the Garcia.

“Certainly,” the biot replied, entering its identification number on the papers with a flourish.

After less than a minute Nicole was outside the large house where she had been imprisoned for months. She took a deep breath of the fresh air and started to follow the Garcia down the path toward Central City.

“No,” Nicole heard Eleanor call from her pocket. “We’re not going with the biot. Go west. Toward that windmill with the light on top. And you must run. We must arrive at Max Puckett’s before dawn.”

Her prison was almost five kilometers from Max’s farm. Nicole jogged down the small road at a steady pace, urged on periodically by one of the two robots, who were keeping careful track of the time. It was not long until dawn. Unlike on the Earth, where the transition from night to day was gradual, in New Eden dawn was a sudden, discontinuous event. On

moment it would be dark and then, in the next instant, the artificial sun would ignite and begin its mini-arc across the ceiling of the colony habitat.

“Twelve more minutes until light,” Joan said, as Nicole reached the bicycle path that led the final two hundred meters to the Puckett farmhouse. Nicole was nearly exhausted, but she kept running. Two separate times during her run across the farmland she had felt a dull ache in her chest. *I am definitely out of shape*, she thought, chastising herself for not having exercised regularly in her prison cell. *As well as sixty years old, more or less.*

The farmhouse was dark. Nicole stopped on the porch, catching her breath, and the door opened a few seconds later. “I have been waiting for you,” Max said, his earnest expression underscoring the seriousness of the situation. He gave Nicole a quick hug. “Follow me,” he said, moving quickly off toward the barn.

“There have been no police cars yet on the road,” Max said when they were inside the barn. “They probably have not yet discovered that you’re gone. But it’s only a matter of minutes now.”

The chickens were all kept on the far side of the barn. The hens had a separate enclosure sealed off from the roosters and the rest of the building. When Max and Nicole entered the henhouse, there was a huge commotion. Animals scurried in all directions, clucking and squawking and beating their wings. The stench in the henhouse nearly overpowered Nicole.

Max smiled. “I guess I forget how bad chicken shit smells to everyone else,” he said. “I’ve grown so used to it myself.” He slapped Nicole lightly on the back. “Anyway, it’s another level of protection for you, and I don’t think you’ll be able to smell the shit from your hideout.”

Max walked over to a corner of the henhouse, chased several hens out of the way, and bent down on his knees. “When those weird little robots of Richard’s first appeared,” he said, pushing aside hay and chicken feed, “I couldn’t decide where I should build your hideout. Then I thought about this place.” Max pulled up a couple of boards to expose a rectangular hole in the floor of the barn. “I sure as hell hope I was right.”

He motioned for Nicole to follow him and then crawled into the hole. They were both on their hands and knees in the dirt. The passageway, which ran parallel to the floor for a few meters and then turned downward at a steep angle, was extremely cramped. Nicole kept bumping up against Max in front of her and the dirt walls and ceiling all around her. The only light was the small flashlight that Max was carrying in his right hand. After fifteen meters the small tunnel opened into a dark room. Max stepped carefully down a rope ladder and then turned to help Nicole descend. A few seconds later they both walked into the center of the room, where Max reached up and switched on a solitary electric light.

“It’s not a palace,” he said as Nicole glanced around, “but I suspect it’s a damn sight better than that prison of yours.”

The room contained a bed, a chair, two shelves full of food, another shelf with electronic bookdiscs, a few clothes hanging in an open closet, basic toiletries, a large drum of water that must have barely fit through the passageway, and a deep, square latrine in the far corner.

“Did you do all this yourself?” Nicole asked.

“Yep,” Max replied. “At night... during the last several weeks. I didn’t dare ask anybody

help.”

Nicole was touched. “How can I ever thank you?” she said.

“Don’t get caught.” Max grinned. “I don’t want to die any more than you do.... Oh, by the way,” he added, handing Nicole an electronic reader into which she could place the bookdiscs, “I hope the reading material is all right. Manuals on raising pigs and chickens are not the same as your father’s novels, but I didn’t want to attract too much attention by going to the bookstore.”

Nicole crossed the room and kissed him on the cheek. “Max,” she said lightly, “you are such a dear friend. I can’t imagine how you—”

“It’s dawn outside now,” Joan of Arc interrupted from Nicole’s pocket. “According to our timeline, we are behind schedule. Mr. Puckett, we must inspect our egress route before you leave us.”

“Shit,” said Max. “Here I go again, taking orders from a robot no longer than a cigarette. He lifted Joan and Eleanor out of Nicole’s pockets and placed them on the top shelf behind the can of peas. “Do you see that little door?” he said. “There’s a pipe on the other side. It comes out just beyond the pig trough.... Why don’t you check it out?”

During the minute or two that the robots were gone, Max explained the situation to Nicole. “The police will be searching everywhere for you,” he said. “Particularly here, since they know that I am a friend of the family. So I’m going to seal the entrance to your hideout. You should have everything you need to last for at least several weeks.

“The robots can come and go freely, unless they are eaten by the pigs,” Max continued with a laugh. “They will be your only contact with the outside world. They’ll let you know when it’s time to move to the second phase of our escape plan.”

“So I won’t see you again?” Nicole asked.

“Not for at least a few weeks,” Max answered. “It’s too dangerous.... One more thing: since there are police on the premises, I will cut off your power. That will be your signal to stay especially quiet.”

Eleanor of Aquitaine had returned and was standing on the shelf next to the can of peas. “Our egress route is excellent,” she announced. “Joan has departed for a few days. She intends to leave the habitat and communicate with Richard.”

“Now I must leave also,” Max said to Nicole. He was silent for a few seconds. “But not before I tell you one thing, my lady friend.... As you probably know, I have been a fucking cynic all my life. There are not very many people who impress me. But *you* have convinced me that maybe some of us are superior to chickens and pigs.” Max smiled. “Not many of us,” he added quickly, “but at least some.”

“Thank you, Max,” Nicole said.

Max walked over to the ladder. He turned around and waved before he began his climb.

Nicole sat down in the chair and took a deep breath. From the sounds in the direction of the tunnel, she surmised correctly that Max was sealing the entrance to her hideout by placing the big bags of chicken feed directly over the hole.

So what happens now? Nicole asked herself. She realized that she had thought about very little except her approaching death during the five days since the conclusion of her trial. Without the fear of her imminent execution to structure her thought patterns, Nicole was able to let her mind drift freely.

She thought first of Richard, her husband and partner, from whom she had been separated now for almost two years. Nicole recalled vividly their last evening together, a horrible Walpurgisnacht of murder and destruction that had begun on a hopeful note with her daughter Ellie's marriage to Dr. Robert Turner. *Richard was certain that we, like Kenji and Pyotr, were also marked for death, she remembered. And he was probably right. Because I escaped, they made him the enemy and left me alone for a while.*

I thought you were dead, Richard, Nicole thought. *I should have had more faith... But how the world did you end up in New York again?*

As she sat in the only chair in the underground room, her heart ached for the company of her husband. A montage of memories paraded through her mind. She first saw herself again in the avian lair in Rama II, years and years earlier, temporarily a captive of the strange birdlike creatures whose language was jabbings and shrieks. It had been Richard who had found her there. He had risked his own life to return to New York to determine if Nicole was still alive. If Richard had not come, Nicole would have been marooned on the island of New York forever.

Richard and Nicole had become lovers during the time that they were struggling to figure out how to cross the Cylindrical Sea and return to their cosmonaut colleagues from the Newton spacecraft. Nicole was both surprised and amused by the strong stirrings inside her caused by her recollection of their early days of love. *We survived the nuclear missile attack together. We even survived my wrongheaded attempt to produce genetic variation in our offspring by sleeping with another man.*

Nicole winced at the memory of her own naïveté so many years before. *You forgave me, Richard, which could not have been easy for you. And then we grew even closer at the Node during our design sessions with the Eagle.*

What was the Eagle really? Nicole mused, shifting her train of thought. *And who or what created him?* In her mind was a vivid picture of the bizarre creature who had been their only contact while they had stayed at the Node during the refurbishing of the Rama spaceship. The alien being, who had had the face of an eagle and a body similar to a man's, had informed them that he was an advancement in artificial intelligence designed especially as a companion for humans. *His eyes were incredible, almost mystical,* Nicole remembered. *And they were as intense as Omeh's.*

Her great-grandfather Omeh had worn the green robe of the tribal shaman of the Senoufo when he had come to see Nicole in Rome two weeks before the launch of the Newton spacecraft. Nicole had met Omeh twice before, both times in her mother's native village in the Ivory Coast: once during the Poro ceremony when Nicole was seven, and then again three years later at her mother's funeral. During those brief encounters Omeh had started preparing Nicole for what the old shaman had assured her would be an extraordinary life. It had been Omeh who had insisted that Nicole was indeed the woman who the Senoufo chronicles had predicted would scatter their tribal seed "even to the stars."

Omeh, the Eagle, even Richard, Nicole thought. Quite a group, to say the least. The face of Henry, Prince of Wales, joined the other three men and Nicole remembered for a moment the powerful passion of their brief love affair in the days immediately after she had won her Olympic gold medal. She recalled sharply the pain of rejection. *But without Henry, she reminded herself, there would not have been a Genevieve.*

While Nicole was remembering the love she had shared with her daughter on Earth, she glanced across the room at the shelf containing the electronic bookdiscs. Suddenly distracted, she crossed to the shelf and started reading titles. Sure enough, Max had left her some manuals on raising pigs and chickens. But that was not all. It looked as if he had given Nicole his entire private library.

Nicole smiled as she pulled out a book of fairy tales and inserted it into her reader. She flipped through the pages and stopped at the story of Sleeping Beauty. The phrase “and they lived happily ever after” summoned another vivid memory, this one of herself as a small child, maybe six or seven, sitting on her father’s lap in their house in the Parisian suburb of Chilly-Mazarin.

I longed as a little girl to be a princess and live happily ever after, she thought. There was no way I could have known then that my life would make even the fairy tales seem ordinary.

Nicole replaced the bookdisc on the shelf and returned to her chair. *And now, she thought, idly surveying the room, when I thought this incredible life was over, I seem to have been given at least a few more days.*

She thought again of Richard and her intense longing to see him returned. *We have shared much, my Richard. I hope I can again feel your touch, hear your laughter, and see your face. But if not, I will try not to complain. My life has already seen its share of miracles.*

Eleanor Wakefield Turner arrived at the large auditorium in Central City at seven-thirty the morning. Although the execution was not scheduled to take place until eight o'clock, there were already about thirty people in the front seats, some talking, most just sitting quietly. A television crew wandered around the electric chair on the stage. The execution was being broadcast live, but the policemen in the auditorium were nevertheless expecting a full house for the government had encouraged the citizens of New Eden to witness personally the death of their former governor.

Ellie had argued with her husband the night before. "Spare yourself this pain, Ellie," Robert had said, when she had told him that she intended to attend the execution. "Seeing your mother one last time cannot be worth the horror of watching her die."

But Ellie had known something that Robert did not know. As she took her seat in the auditorium, Ellie tried to control the powerful feelings inside her. *There can be nothing on my face, she told herself, and nothing in my body language. Not the slightest hint. Nobody must suspect that I know anything about the escape.* Several pairs of eyes suddenly turned around to look at her. Ellie felt her heart skip before she realized that someone had recognized her and that it was completely natural for the curious to stare at her.

Ellie had first encountered her father's little robots Joan of Arc and Eleanor of Aquitaine only six weeks before, when she was outside of the main habitat, over in the quarantined village of Avalon helping her physician husband Robert take care of the patients who were doomed by the RV-41 retrovirus inside their bodies. Ellie had just finished a pleasant and encouraging late evening visit with her friend and former teacher Eponine. She had left Eponine's room and was walking along a dirt lane, expecting to see Robert at any moment. All of a sudden she had heard two strange voices calling her name. Ellie had searched the area around her before finally locating the pair of tiny figures on the roof of a nearby building.

After crossing the lane so that she could see and hear the robots better, the stunned Ellie had been informed by Joan and Eleanor that her father Richard was still alive. It had taken her a few moments to recover from the shock. Then Ellie had begun to question the robots. She had become quickly convinced that Joan and Eleanor were telling the truth; however, before Ellie had ascertained why her father had sent the robots to her, she had seen her husband approaching in the distance. The figures on the rooftop had then told her hurriedly that they would return soon. They had also cautioned Ellie not to tell anyone of their existence, not even Robert, at least not yet.

Ellie had been overjoyed that her father was still alive. It had been almost impossible for her to keep the news a secret, even though she was well aware of the political significance of her information. When, almost two weeks later, Ellie had been again confronted in Avalon by the little robots, she had been ready with a torrent of questions. However, on that occasion Joan and Eleanor had been programmed to discuss another subject—a possible forthcoming

attempt to break Nicole out of prison. The robots told Ellie during this second meeting that Richard acknowledged such an escape would be a dangerous endeavor. "We would never attempt it," the robot Joan said, "unless your mother's execution were absolutely certain. But if we are not prepared ahead of time, there can be no possibility of a last-minute escape."

"What can I do to help?" Ellie had asked.

Joan and Eleanor had handed her a sheet of paper, on which there was a list of items including food, water, and clothing. Ellie had trembled when she recognized her father's handwriting.

"Cache these things at the following location," the robot Eleanor had said, handing Ellie a map. "No later than ten days from now." A moment later another colonist had come in sight and the two robots had vanished.

Enclosed inside the map had been a short note from her father. "Dearest Ellie," it had said. "I apologize for the brevity. I am safe and healthy, but deeply concerned about your mother. Please, please gather up these items and take them to the indicated spot in the Central Plain. If you cannot accomplish the task by yourself, please limit your support to a single person. And make certain that whoever you pick is as loyal and dedicated to Nicole as we are. I love you."

Ellie had quickly determined that she would need help. But whom should she select as an accomplice? Her husband Robert was a bad choice for two reasons. First, he had already shown that his dedication to his patients and the New Eden hospital was a higher priority in his mind than taking a political stand. Second, anyone caught helping Nicole escape would certainly be executed. If Ellie were to involve Robert in the escape plan, then their daughter Nicole might be left without both her parents.

What about Nai Watanabe? There was no question about her loyalty, but Nai was a single parent with twin four-year-old sons. It was not fair to ask her to take the chance. That left Eponine as the only reasonable choice. Any worries that Ellie might have had about her afflicted friend had been quickly dispelled. "Of course I'll help you," Eponine had replied immediately. "I have nothing to lose. According to your husband, this RV-41 is going to kill me in another year or two anyway."

Eponine and Ellie had clandestinely gathered the required items, one at a time, over a period of a week. They had wrapped them securely in a small sheet that was hidden in the corner of Eponine's normally cluttered room in Avalon. On the appointed day, Ellie had signed out of New Eden and walked across to Avalon, ostensibly to "monitor carefully" a full twelve hours of Eponine's biometry data. Actually, explaining to Robert why she wanted to spend the night with Eponine had been much more difficult than convincing the single human guard and the Garcia biot at the habitat exit of the legitimacy of her need for an overnight pass.

Just after midnight Ellie and Eponine had picked up their sheet and crept cautiously into the streets of Avalon. Being very careful to avoid the roving biots that Nakamura's police used to patrol the small outside village at night, the two women had sneaked through the outskirts of the town and into the Central Plain. They had then hiked for several kilometers and deposited the cache in the designated location. A Tiasso biot had confronted them outside

Eponine's room upon their return and had asked what they were doing wandering around such an absurd hour.

"This woman has RV-41," Ellie had said quickly, sensing the panic in her friend. "She is one of my husband's patients. She was in extreme pain and could not sleep, so we thought that an early morning walk might help.... Now, if you'll excuse us..."

The Tiasso had let them pass. Ellie and Eponine had been so frightened that neither of them had spoken for ten minutes.

Ellie had not seen the robots again. She had no idea whether or not an actual escape had been attempted. As the time for her mother's execution now drew near and the auditorium seats around her began to fill, Ellie's heart was pounding furiously. *What if nothing happens? What if Mother is really going to die in twenty more minutes?*

Ellie glanced up at the stage. A two-meter stack of electronics, metallic gray, stood next to the large chair. The only other object on the stage was a digital clock that currently read 0742. Ellie stared at the chair. Hanging from the top was a hood that would fit over the victim's head. Ellie shuddered and fought against nausea. *How barbaric, she thought. How could any species that considers itself advanced tolerate this kind of gruesome spectacle?*

Her mind had just cleared away the execution images when there was a tap on her shoulder. Ellie turned around. A large, frowning policeman was leaning across the aisle in her direction. "Are you Eleanor Wakefield Turner?" he asked.

Ellie was so frightened she could barely respond. She nodded her head. "Will you come with me, please?" he said. "I need to ask you a couple of questions."

On shaky legs, Ellie edged past three people in her row and entered the aisle. *Something's gone wrong, she thought. The escape has been foiled. They've found the cache and somehow know that I'm involved.*

The policeman took her to a small conference room on the side of the auditorium. "I'm Captain Franz Bauer, Mrs. Turner," he said. "It is my job to dispose of your mother's body after she has been executed. We have, of course, arranged for the customary cremation with the undertaker. However..." At this point Captain Bauer paused, as if he were carefully selecting his words. "...in view of the past services that your mother has rendered for the colony, I thought perhaps that you, or some member of your family, might like to take care of the final procedures."

"Yes, of course, Captain Bauer," Ellie replied, weak with relief. "Certainly. Thank you very much," she added quickly.

"That will be all, Mrs. Turner," the policeman said. "You may now return to the auditorium."

Ellie stood up and discovered that she was still shaky. She put one hand on the table in the middle of the room. "Sir?" she said to Captain Bauer.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Would it be possible for me to see my mother alone, just for an instant, before...?"

The policeman studied Ellie at length. "I don't think so," he said, "but I will ask on your behalf."

“Thank you very—”

Ellie was interrupted by the ring of the telephone. She delayed her departure from the conference room long enough to see the shocked expression on Captain Bauer’s face. “Are you absolutely certain?” she heard him say as she left the room.

The big digital clock on the stage read 0836. “Come on, come on,” the man behind Ellie grumbled. “Let’s get on with it.”

Ellie forced herself to stay calm. She glanced around at the restive crowd. Captain Bauer had informed everyone at five past eight that the “activities” would be delayed “a few minutes,” but in the last half hour there had been no additional announcements. In the row in front of Ellie, a wild rumor was circulating that the extraterrestrials had rescued Nicole from her cell.

Some of the people had already started to leave when Governor Macmillan walked onto the stage. He looked harried and upset, but he broke quickly into his official open smile when he began addressing the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “the execution of Nicole des Jardins Wakefield has been postponed. The government has discovered some small irregularities in the paperwork associated with her case—nothing really important, of course—but we felt these issues should be cleared up first, so that there can be no question of any impropriety. The execution will be rescheduled in the near future. All the citizens of New Eden will be informed of the details.”

Ellie sat in her seat until the auditorium was nearly empty. She half expected to be detained by the police when she tried to leave, but nobody stopped her. Once outside, it was difficult for her not to scream with joy.

She suddenly noticed that several people were looking at her. *Uh-oh*, Ellie thought. *Am I giving myself away?* She met the other eyes with a polite smile. *Now, Ellie, comes your greatest challenge. You cannot under any circumstances behave as if you expected this.*

As usual, Robert, Ellie, and little Nicole stopped in Avalon to visit with Nai Watanabe and the twins after completing their weekly calls on the seventy-seven remaining RV-41 sufferers. It was just before dinner. Both Galileo and Kepler were playing in the dirt street in front of the ramshackle house. When the Turners arrived, the two little boys were involved in an argument.

“She is too,” the four-year-old Galileo said heatedly.

“Is not,” Kepler replied with much less passion.

Ellie bent down beside the twins. “Boys, boys,” she said in a friendly voice. “What are you fighting about?”

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Turner,” Kepler answered with an embarrassed smile. “It’s really nothing. Galileo and I—”

“I say that Governor Wakefield is already dead,” Galileo interrupted forcefully. “One of the boys at the center told me, and he should know. His daddy is a policeman.”

For a moment Ellie was taken aback. Then she realized that the twins had not made the

connection between Nicole and her. “Do you remember that Governor Wakefield is my mother, and little Nicole’s grandmother?” Ellie said softly. “You and Kepler met her several times before she went to prison.”

Galileo wrinkled his brow and then shook his head.

“I remember her... I think,” Kepler said solemnly. “Is she dead, Mrs. Turner?” The ingenuous youngster then added after a brief pause.

“We don’t know for certain, but we hope not,” Ellie replied. She had almost slipped. It would have been so easy to tell these children. But it would only take one mistake. There was probably a biot within earshot.

As Ellie picked up Kepler and gave him a hug, she remembered her chance encounter with Max Puckett at the electronic supermarket three days earlier. In the middle of their ordinary conversation, Max had suddenly said, “Oh, by the way, Joan and Eleanor are fine and asked me to give you their regards.”

Without thinking, Ellie had asked Max a leading question about the two little robots. He had ignored it completely. A few seconds later, just as Ellie was about to repeat her question, she noticed that the Garcia biot who was in charge of the market had moved over closer to them and was probably listening to their conversation.

“Hello, Ellie. Hello, Robert,” Nai said now from the doorway of her house. She extended her arms and took Nicole from her father. “And how are you, my little beauty? I haven’t seen you since your birthday party last week.”

The adults went inside the house. After Nai checked to ensure that there were no spy biots in the area, she drew close to Robert and Ellie. “The police interrogated me again last night,” she whispered to her friends. “I’m starting to believe there may be some truth in the rumor.”

“Which rumor?” Ellie said. “There are so many.”

“One of the women who works at our factory,” Nai said, “has a brother in Nakamura special service. He told her, one night after he had been drinking, that when the police showed up at Nicole’s cell on the morning of the execution, the cell was empty. A Garcia biot had signed her out. They think it was the same Garcia that was reportedly destroyed in the explosion outside the munitions factory.”

Ellie smiled, but her eyes said nothing in response to the intense, inquiring gaze from her friend. “The police have also questioned me, Nai,” she said matter-of-factly. “Several different times. According to them, the questions are all designed to clear up what they call the ‘irregularities’ in Mother’s case. Even Katie has had a visit from the police. She dropped by unexpectedly last week and remarked that the postponement of Mother’s execution was certainly peculiar.”

“My friend’s brother,” Nai said after a short silence, “says that Nakamura suspects a conspiracy.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Robert scoffed. “There is no active opposition to the government anywhere in the colony.”

Nai drew even closer to Ellie. “So what do you think is really happening?” she whispered. “Do you think your mother has actually escaped? Or did Nakamura change his mind and

execute her in private to stop her from becoming a public martyr?"

Ellie looked first at her husband and then at her friend. "I have no idea," Ellie forced herself to answer. "I have, of course, considered all the possibilities you have mentioned. As well as a few others. But we have no way of knowing... Even though I am certainly not what you would call a religious person, I have been praying in my own way that Mother is a right."

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