

Prologue

A communications probe continued to accelerate at its maximum possible rate. Though it knew this in a factual sense, that it was the last functioning piece of human technology in the system was just another dataset to it. Similarly, the pursuing vessels were just additional variables in its operating logic. There was no sense of joy as it eluded its attackers, crossed the heliopause, and engaged its superluminal drive.

There would be no sense of joy when it delivered its message, either.

Chapter 1 – January 28, 2275, 0637 UTC

Liam Ward was awake. He didn't know where he was or why his head hurt, but at least the bed was comfortable. A bed meant that he was probably in a bedroom; but whose, he wasn't sure. As his eyes came into focus, the unmistakable, bland décor of a hotel room became obvious.

Ward groaned.

“Are you okay?” a soft, feminine voice asked him.

It took a lot of effort, but Ward rolled to his left to see who had spoken. He was pleasantly surprised to find an attractive woman. She was probably five or so years younger than him, with long black hair, striking green eyes, and a pleasant, honest smile.

It was a face that he recognized.

“Having trouble?” Michelle asked playfully. She had been the bartender at a local dive that he had been frequenting since he'd been back on Earth.

“I'll be alright,” Ward mumbled as he slowly got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. Though his mind was still foggy, his reflexes were sharp and he figured that the hangover would fade soon. They always had since the treatment.

“I'm glad you finally opened up to me last night,” Michelle said from the other room.

“What did I say?” Ward attempted to ask as he brushed his teeth, taking a moment to scrutinize himself in the mirror. Unsurprisingly, he looked horrible. His eyes were bloodshot, there were dark circles under them, and he hadn't shaved in a few days.

“What?” she asked.

“I said, ‘What did I say?’” Ward repeated more clearly as he continued to take stock of his physical state. He was in the best physical condition of his thirty-five-year-old life, but the scars, whether they were visible to the naked eye or not, were stark reminders of the cost.

“You told me about the girl.”

Ward did not want to talk, let alone think, about the girl. In fact, he couldn't believe that he'd brought it up. It wasn't exactly a state secret, but it was very private. “How much did I have to drink?”

“More than your usual; so, a lot,” she responded.

Ward sighed.

“You're just going to clam up on me again?” Michelle asked as she walked over to the bathroom's doorway in her bathrobe.

“I talk plenty, every night when I come in.”

“Sure, you talk a bit; but you don't *say* much.”

“What am I supposed to *say*?” Ward asked, mocking her tone.

“You know exactly what I mean,” she responded. “Most guys come in either to pick up women, be nostalgic, get into fights, or all of the above.”

“I do those things,” Ward insisted.

“Maybe you plan on it,” Michelle admitted. “But plenty of women have tried to pick *you* up, and you'll talk to them for a bit, but you always go home alone.”

“I could be finding them on my way back,” Ward said with a half-hearted attempt at a smile. His head still hurt, after all.

“Whatever,” she said as her eyes briefly flashed with anger. “And when people pick fights with you, you get all passive and buy them drinks instead. I know enough to know that you *are* a soldier.”

“I'm not a soldier,” Ward admitted truthfully.

“But you've been in combat,” she said, eyeing his scars.

Ward just nodded. He had his faults, but dishonesty was not one of them.

“So then what are you?” she pressed.

“Look, I don’t really know you...” He knew it was a stupid thing to say as soon as he said it, but she didn’t react as he had expected.

“We talk almost every night; you’ve been coming into my bar for the better part of a month,” she responded gently. “And you always seem to find your way to my section.”

Ward looked at her again and couldn’t help but be reminded of how beautiful she was. Why she was here with him, he truly didn’t understand. Eventually, he nodded as he picked his pants off the floor and pulled what looked like a wallet from his back pocket. He opened it to reveal a badge and said, “I’m a special agent with the INIA,” short for the Interstellar Navy Investigations Agency.

Michelle seemed surprised at first, but the reaction didn’t last long. “That ... makes sense,” she said. “So tell me about the girl.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Ward said as he squeezed past her to reenter the bedroom.

“I think you should,” she maintained.

“I leave today.”

“You told me that, too.”

“Then why ...?” Ward asked, gesturing at the unmade bed and undergarments on the floor.

“Because you should’ve made a move weeks ago.”

“I’ll never understand women,” he replied after a pause.

“I don’t doubt *that*,” she said with a smile.

“But I’m leaving.”

“So come back.”

Ward thought for a moment, because he really did pride himself on honesty. “That’s not entirely likely.”