

Unearthly Things Above

CHAPTER ONE

Jacey

Arrival. At last. Jacey Rexen tried to look bored, following Captain Farr and First Lieutenant Kramer as they dawdled through the hatch into Space Station *Ilex*. No good acting the slack-mouthed firstie. The three uniforms lined up behind her were looking around with the jaundiced expressions of those who'd seen it all before. Whereas, not only was this unexpected posting her first assignment as Second Lieutenant, but the first time she'd ever stepped onto a space station.

As they clumped through the airlock onto the station, one of them muttered, "What did I tell you – labrats and boffheads. Place'll be in seven shades of chaos."

"For truth," another breathed back.

Jacey watched the milling group of overalled techs with their lading bots leisurely unloading supplies from their transport ship. No military snappiness in evidence, that was for cert.

And the civi's didn't seem over-razzed at their appearance, either. "Suffering Universe, didn't know they was sending us slotcrawling phaze-pointers!"

Having grown accustomed to this attitude during the Saraswati Rebellion, Jacey adopted a blank-faced parade ground look. No point in further stirring up the natives. Clearly not a view shared by the uniforms behind her, however. Sensing their tension she glanced round to see all three soldiers glaring at the flapper-tongued civi, who by rights should be a steaming puddle on the floor if eye power alone could do it.

"Ease it back. When we get the orders to line'em up against the wall and shoot the drossers, it's s'posed to come as a surprise." Jacey murmured.

Corporal Pickett grinned at her, "Yes'm."

Captain Kimber Farr and First Lieutenant Zerwal Krama led their small group across the loading bay. After the thick fugginess they'd been breathing on the transporter for the last three months, the air was thin and sharply cold. It prickled her nose and sliced through her thin uniform. She was grateful they were in quickmarch mode, else she'd be outright shivering. A couple of bods in station admin uniforms were waiting for them at the safety door, looking as happy as a 'naut space walking in the nude.

They stopped in front of the adminites. There was a sudden hush in the loading bay behind them, as Captain Farr's parade ground roar announcing their presence bounced off the damp, shiny walls. Jacey hadn't believed that the adminites could look less cheery. She'd been wrong.

The woman, whose name badge labelled her as Jarka Lendl, waved a limp hand in their direction. "Er, yeah... whatever. I'm Station Officer Lendl, responsible for accommodation and welfare. I'll take you to see Taylor Voicke. He's the chief round here." Lendl smiled tightly at the Cap. "Not that we have much time for status and that kinda thing. Too busy working."

Jacey wasn't sure exactly what kind of reception she'd expected, but it wasn't this. What was going down here? So far, they'd been made as welcome as a fart in a spacesuit.

Jacey's knees were trembling. She'd be cresting grateful for a workout and a hot shower after two days strapped into a crashcouch while decelerating from warp-speed.

Firstoff though, a visit to the Station Commander, trailing after Lendl and her oppo along the familiar colour-coded corridors, that at intersections always reminded Jacey of ancient abstract art. Dirty yellow for Command and Admin – well, they got that right. Someone once told her that it was supposed to be gold, but Jacey reckoned she was closer with muck-yellow. She was disappointed at how ordinary the space station interior seemed.

She'd peered out of the window during their approach to *S.S. Illex* and the slowly spinning, six-sided cylindrical shape with its bubbled ends had appeared cresting magical, brightly light-studded against the black vastness of space. She'd sneaked a download of the image on her dataslate and every time she peeked at it, she felt a dizzy disbelief that she was really here. So it was a letdown to find that Galaxytrust used the same colour coding in their space stations, as the Military. Probably would make acclimatisation easier, though. And Military was majorly hot on quick acclimatisation.

At the Commander's door, Lendl pressed the two-tone and walked straight in. Startled at the lack of formality, Jacey hoped the Big Man wasn't picking his nose or scratching his groin. But he stood up as they entered and smiled.

"Captain Farr, from the Sigs and Coms Section of the 4th Divisional Intel and Security Unit reporting for duty, sir!"

On cue, Jacey and the rest of the soldiers gave the full salute.

Cap passed across their ceevees.

"Won't you and your people please sit down, Captain? I would like to apprise you of the current situation and find out a bit about yourselves. This is a small station, more like one big family, really." Voicke smiled again. Jacey wondered if he was really such a happy bod, or just flashing his fancy dental implants.

Chairs flipped down from the walls and when Jacey gratefully eased into one of them, it remoulded around her aching lower body. The room was plusher than she'd expected with thick-piled carpet on the floor and wood effect plastuff furniture,

including her chair. There was lots of primeware, including a full sized wallscreen, also a holo-pad and glyphcube slot fitted into the large curving desk between her unit and the Big Man.

“Mm. Well, there’s no shortage of experience here.” Voicke peered at their ceevees on his deskscreen. “I must confess that we were somewhat surprised that Galaxytrust saw fit to send us military personnel when we requested extra help. But on reflection, I think that it’s probably an excellent idea.” Another big grin.

And what would he do about it if he thought the idea noxious?

“The standard coms equipment has picked up flashing lights from our gas giant, Zeus and a couple of its moons...” Voicke droned on while Jacey struggled to listen. This wasn’t the time for a full-on briefing – they were chewed out after a fierce two-day ramp-down from faster-than-light speed, for Earth’s sake!

“...also been some anomalous readings coming from Sector 18. The only other person who has seen all the vids and coms info is our xenobiologist, who can fill you in. Otherwise we’ve classified the information and the coms station is completely off limits.”

Xenobiologist? This didn’t sound like a routine assignment at all. Not for the first time, Jacey wished she hadn’t been brought in on this project at the very lastest minute.

Voicke stood up and reluctantly Jacey too got to her feet, trying to ignore her sore joints. “I must say, you being military is going to cause talk around here.”

“That’s alright, sir. We can deal with that.” Captain Farr sounded reassuring. Voicke’s smiles seemed to have thawed her out, anyhow.

“Oh, quite.” Another tooth fest. But Jacey happened to be looking at his eyes, this time. They gave it away. Voicke was afraid.

As they all trooped out after Lendl, who sullenly escorted them to their accommodation, Jacey’s mind raced. What had a Station Commander so scared? Surely it wasn’t the arrival of the military? Unless he was pulling some sort of scam. Right out here on the frontier she’d heard that normally law-abiding bods sometimes got up to all sorts of shoddiness.

Or, was it something to do with those flashing lights - the ones that’d been classified? No one had *said* that this assignment was typical military make-work; she’d just assumed it, this being her first posting since her Implant. But what if she’d been sent, unbriefed and unprepared, into the middle of something altogether more challenging... and dangerous?

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Xing-hua

Professor Bai Xing-hua stormed down the middle of the corridor, along the red-coded Priority Path. Two maintenance techs had to jump out of his way. Xing-hua didn’t care. He was too noxxed. How *dare* they? Who did these people think they *were*?

His rage pulsed out a thudding beat in his ears as he swung into Admin. Without stopping, he shouted, “He in?”

Voicke’s underling, Jarka Lendl, jumped up, flapping her arms like a demented hen, “Professor Bai... you can’t just... He’s very busy right now. Professor Bai...”

Xing-hua had already pressed the entry button while Lendl was still clucking at him and as the door slid open, he barged past her. Voicke jumped – his round-eyed startlement did nothing to smooth Xing-hua’s temper. The weazenwit should’ve been

expecting him. Bad enough when the Station Commander turned out to be a fickle-fingered hypocrite, but to be so obtuse made it a downright insult. Xing-hua hated dealing with stupidity. Such a waste of time and energy.

“Professor Bai!” Voicke jumped up out of his seat.

Xing-hua jabbed a shaking finger at him, “I am resigning. This is an outrage! A complete betrayal of trust. We’d *agreed*... how could you?”

“Please... sit down. I think there’s been a misunderstanding.” Voicke patted the air as if calming him. Making him angrier still.

“Oh yes, there’s been a misunderstanding, right enough. I *explained* the enormity of the task and you said that you understood. That you would give us more time...” Xing-hua felt close to tears.

Why was he at the mercy of such a geneless gaper?

“You said you’d support the increased expenditure in overtime and the extra equipment I’d requisitioned. Which is being unloaded, as we speak...” The pounding in his head was shivering his vision. He grabbed at the edge of Voicke’s desk, as giddiness overwhelmed him.

“Professor Bai, please sit down.” Voicke handled him into a chair that unfolded behind him.

Xing-hua slumped, his floodtide of fury washing away in a rising wave of nausea. Pressing his icy hands together, he muttered, “A betrayal, that’s what it is.”

Voicke rapped out a staccato message on his deskscreen and leaned towards him. Xing-hua, panting slightly, struggled to regain his breath. Maybe it hadn’t been prudent to get quite so angry, given the procedure he’d recently undergone.

Voicke was gabbling at him, “Professor Bai, I’m assuming that you’ve found out about the military presence on our station... yes?”

Xing-hua could only nod.

“I give you my rarest undertaking that they have absolutely nothing to do with the nanolab, or your work there.” Voicke gave one of his sickly smiles. “Ah, here we are.”

The Lendl woman scuttled in with a steaming mug of tea.

Xing-hua took the mug, grateful that it was only half full, because his hands wouldn’t stop shaking. The hot liquid made his eyes water and seared his tongue as he gulped it down. He generally preferred his drinks tepid, but this was helping him feel better.

He glared suspiciously at Voicke, “So why are they here, then?”

The self important button-jabber gave him an insufferably smug grin, “I’m afraid I cannot divulge that information, Professor.”

“Hm. It’s something to do with those lights that you got Dassin Selmi looking at, is it?” Xing-hua couldn’t resist it.

The man deflated like a punctured airhut. “You’re not supposed to know about this matter. Dr. Selmi was instructed to keep it secret.”

Xing-hua felt his temper rising again, which in his present physical condition was evidently unwise. He swallowed the last of his drink, trying to regain control. “We are both professional scientists, working in the same lab. She wanted to know if any form of nano-organisms were capable of creating such light signatures. Of course I am not going to babble this info about the station.” He shivered. Did one always feel this ill when running a temperature?

“And are they?” Voicke leaned toward him.

There was something of the fawning dog in his manner, which Xing-hua detested. “Are they what?”

“The nano-organisms. Are they capable of creating such light signatures?”

Xing-hua shrugged, “Some photo luminescent nano-organisms emit light pulses. But in order to be clearly visible over the distance between this station and the planet Zeus, the numbers would have to be in the zillions. Which would certainly have registered on the autoprobos we’ve sent into the atmosphere.”

Xing-hua stood up. “I must get back. Er, my regrets... I should have realised that you would not go back on your word so soon. And if we get any results, I will let you know first thing.”

Voicke treated him to another of his smarmy leers. “I’m glad we were able to sort it out, Professor. And... I hope you’re soon feeling better.”

He grunted and left Voicke’s den. He stared fixedly ahead as he marched through the Admin office block, conscious that he’d made something of a fool of himself. Still, it was done now. What he urgently needed was a full physical examination. He’d calculated that the major effects on his body would last over a forty-eight hour period. But he’d only been in quarantine for thirty-six hours with a four-degree rise in his body temperature, before rushing out to confront Voicke.

Aching and nauseous by the time he arrived back at the lab, he was sickly aware that he’d broken his quarantine by storming through a busy part of the station in a fit of rage excessive, even by his hot-tempered standards. He rubbed his gritty eyes with sweat-chilled fingers. The pressure of this project just got worse and worse. Had he infected others around him? And what other unpredictable side effects would he suffer?

Back in the quarantine quarters as he monitored his temperature, heart rate and blood readouts, Xing-hua struggled to control his shaking hands. However, even the scientist in him couldn’t work out whether the cause was a fever, or fear at what he may have let loose in Space Station *Ilex*.

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Taylor

Station Commander Taylor Voicke was tabbed into Galaxytrust’s latest Training Update, when the door slid open. He gritted his teeth. Double curse Galaxytrust and their “open door” policy! The visc-brain who’d thought up *that* idea evidently never had to run a space station.

“Er, can I have a nanosec please, Taylor?” Jarka Lendl looked worried.

‘Think of yourself as a friendly uncle to the people in your care...’ the Training Facilitator purred in his ear, ‘...and in the middle of the most testing days, you’ll have the satisfaction of watching your station running at maximum efficiency-’ Taylor flicked it off - what he’d give for a few mins of VR violence with that rotting Facilitator!

“Of course.” He smiled at the girl. “What can I do for you?”

She perched on the edge of the proffered chair as if it was glass. “I’ve just got the quarterly readouts from the station’s VR Bars. The incidence of virtual sex is up; 5% in females and 8% in males.”

“Is that altogether a bad thing?” These continual psyche probes often found non-existent problems, in his opinion.

“Not on it’s own, no. But taken with the increase of 24% in virtual situations of extreme danger and a 19% rise in virtual violent encounters, it could be interpreted as an indicator of increased tension amongst station staff. And...” Jarka’s eyes fixed

on her dataslate, as a slow flush covered her face, "...you're the target for 28.4% of the violence."

Taylor smiled as he stroked a key to scroll calming ocean scenes across his desktop, struggling to rationalise this hurtful discovery. Things were going badly on *Ilex*. It was staffed by ambitious, driven people. Of course they needed a target for their frustration; it was normal and healthy that they should.

"Don't worry, Jarka. I'm sure the situation will improve soon." He smiled at the woman seated tensely opposite him.

Taylor couldn't recall exactly what the Galaxytrust protocols were with failing space stations. Not that it mattered. The very fact that he'd been sent a bunch of soldiers with minimum warning was a grim sign of his current status at Head Office. Once they got these figures, he couldn't see how *Ilex* could avoid being downgraded from <Unsatisfactory> to <Failing>, unless Professor Bai stopped barging into his office with his paranoid fears and managed to come up with a miracle.

Jarka jumped up, still avoiding his eyes. "I... just thought – before I posted them into the Galaxytrust datafile aboard the supply ship... I wanted you to know." And she left.

As the office door slid shut, Taylor transferred the ocean scene to his wallscreen and sat staring at it. He'd always promised himself that upon retirement, he'd spend time alongside an ocean like this one. Moons shimmering in a mauve sky; green sand faintly glowing in the creamy moonlight. But unless there was some good news on *Ilex* soonest, he'd find himself appreciating his seascape far more quickly than he'd envisaged.

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Tate

There was a small scuffle in the slow-moving procession of bods shuffling around the temporary barriers Tate Yarker had erected. A familiar voice was raised over the sullen, complaining mutter of station crew facing an unexpected walk.

"Know what the noddies at Galaxytrust have gone and done?" Merrel's round face was an angry red.

Tate didn't bother to look up from the traveller bearings he was cleaning, Merrel Brookes was always noxxing over something. "Nah. What's it this time?"

"Only sent us a bunch of slotting soldiers!"

Tate dropped his degreasing hypo and stared up at her. "For cert?"

Merrel nodded. "Saw them with my own eyes, stomping off the supply ship. As if things weren't baneful enough, already. Reckon if it gets any more noxious around here, I'm station jumping. And that's truth!"

Tate wasn't interested in Merrel's threats to leave. "So why're the soldiery honouring us?"

"Dunno. They're part of Sigs and Coms, though. Captain Pouch-Mouth was bawling it out, for all to hear."

"Sigs and Coms! What's that all about?" Tate tried to keep his voice level.

"Dunno. Anyways, I gotta go."

Tate didn't reply, still trying to absorb Merrel's news. Sigs and Coms - part of Intel! As he recalled their slate-grey uniforms and hard expressions glaring down at his sobbing distress, his body tensed with hate-charged fear. Intel... why were *that* scummy bunch marching around the station? Sigs and Coms didn't wash with him. There was no separate Sigs and Coms section on *Ilex*, apart from the ironmongery

bristling out of the far end of the station and a couple of probes which was all automated. There wasn't even a bod assigned to the running of it cos Admin did that task. So if it wasn't Sigs and Coms, who were Intel sniffing after?

Tate looked distractedly at the tools laid out neatly in front of him, his mind in free-fall. This project wasn't planing out smooth at all. And if this contract got zilched, he could find himself sucking on hard vacuum. He automatically picked up the hypo and continued deglooping the bearings. He'd been headhunted for the position of Maintenance Tech, First Class on Space Station *Ilex* two years ago, when she'd been commissioned. Glossy new station; a hike in creds; prestige post on the outer frontier of the Empire... Tate had reckoned he couldn't lose. It hadn't occurred to him then that the project wouldn't be successful. They generally were. Galaxytrust didn't put energy, men and billions of creds into failures. But if you were part of a puked project, then getting a new contract could be a major problem. Tate'd known of first-class techs left totally spaced through no fault of their own. He shook his head. Merrel might have company when she left. However, quitting on a contract didn't shiny up your ceevee any. And now Intel had pitched up...

Tate swore under his breath, as he started piecing together the clunky, ancient mech-parts.

"You still working on that double-cursed traveller?" Merrel was back, peering down at him.

"Nah, I'm picking my nose and trying to figure out what to do next." He wasn't in the mood for Merrel right now. He'd been fending off her too-obvious interest for the past year, trying not to vex her. In her position, she could make his job untenable.

"Alright, alright. I only asked. You seem to spend half your life fixing the thing. You'd think the Firm would've worked out that technology had moved on since those museum pieces were invented."

Tate sighed. He had this conversation with at least one overhelpful bod every time the traveller broke down which, as it happened, wasn't too often, given the wear it got. "Yeah. And say that I have the latest thing in organic particle powerpacs and it breaks, or runs down. What happens then? Leastways with this sticky tape and string technology, I can fix or replace it."

"I'll let you get on with it, then. Just thought I'd swing by and keep you in the loop. Sorry if I bothered you."

Poisoned Planets, he hadn't meant to nox her. He stopped de-glooping and looked up at her. "My regrets for being shoddy with you. This job is scraping my synapses and your info nugget hasn't helped."

She grinned at him, her overlarge mouth nearly splitting her face in two. "Stand me a drink at the Planetview after your shift is over, then."

Slotting hells! Tate had figured she'd finally gotten over him. It looked like he'd been wrong. He thought fast. "Yeah, sure - come and join us. Ranee and me were already fixed up to go out. Meet you at eight?"

Merrel glowered at him, "Yeah, I'll stop by. You grotting well owe me that drink. Don't know what you see in her, though."

Ranee's beautiful, funny and smart and you aren't.

He muttered, "Yeah, well. I like her, that's all."

"Ha! Well, I gotta go. Before I'm missed." She wandered off.

Merrel worked in Stores. Tate reckoned the reason it took him so long to get parts after putting in an RR – Requisition Request – was cos Merrel was never there.

He sighed as he scooped up the bearing housing in a stasis field, quickly snapped the fitting together, tensioned the traveller drive-belt with an auto brace and switched it on. The familiar whine started up and the walkway began moving, to a distant cheer from a group of lading techs. Tate packed up his tools and dismantled the barrier. A dirty, unfavourite job done.

But Merrel's news hadn't improved the day. Space Station *Ilex* was a small place. Couldn't 'xactly run and hide. And when he ran into his first Intel bod - what then? A hard ball of angry fear rolled sullenly in the pit of his guts. Unwelcome and entirely too familiar. Tate stepped onto the traveller and leaned against handrail, wiping a shaking hand over his sweaty face, as he tried to figure out what to do next.