

THE GENESIS CHIP

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The Genesis Chip

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~ THE MYSTERY MISSION ~

After five long years, the mystery mission is finally falling into place. All members of the team, have been selected, with each member possessing a distinct and sought-after expertise. The pilot, who will complete the crew, is in the process of being contracted.

The candidate is Axle Kade. At 5'8" and 180 lbs, he is in top physical form. His wavy brown hair has a small white patch in the front over his left eye. His brown eyes change to hazel at times, depending on the light and what color he's wearing. Today his eyes match his light brown shirt.

What this candidate doesn't know yet, is that he has already been chosen for this mission. Axle was the last choice from a list of five. The first four candidates, although more experienced, lacked some of the mandatory criteria.

It's Tuesday, and just like *every* Tuesday, Axle is at his parent's house for dinner.

"So tell me more about this potential project, son," Axle's dad questioned, with a hint of doubt in his voice.

"Well, I've already told you that it's a prototype space craft, but now I think there's a mission involved," Axle replied, with a mouth full of synthetic mashed potatoes.

"A mission? You're dreaming. Test pilots almost never go on missions. In my entire career, I was only on one mission, and that was a fluke."

"Dad, please, I know the story," Axle rolled his eyes.

"Son, you're barely thirty years old, sorry to say, you just don't have enough experience for a mission," Foster said boldly, as he left the table to refill his ice tea.

"You're right! I *am* dreaming. The same dream, I'm *always* dreaming; to be a part of a mission that will take

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mankind to other planets. I'm just like you, Dad. Your grandfather inspired you to become a pilot, and I have that same desire. *I want to go where no man has gone before!*" Axle laughed.

Axle's great-grandfather handed down a collection of rare sci-fi movies to Axle's father. They have both been watching and enjoying them for years.

Axle could hear his father clearing his throat, so he braced himself for the next barrage of questions.

"It's just that you told me about this project two weeks ago," Foster said, between gulps of his root tea, as he returned to the dining room table. "Do you know what type of space craft it is yet? Have you found out anything about the client? Have you learned anything more over the past two weeks?"

"Why do I feel like I'm being cross-examined? Can't you just be happy for me? I already explained it's a prototype. I haven't seen it yet. And, I told you who the client is."

"I did some checking, Axle. None of my contacts ever heard of the TMA. I am just trying to understand why this so-called Time Management Agency, would need a spacecraft!"

"You did some checking? Dad, they are a top-secret agency, and I can't tell anyone, *anything!* This could jeopardize my being selected. For the past two weeks, I have signed every non-disclosure document known to man. The background check has been so thorough I think my security clearance has now risen to just under secret agent!"

"Calm down, son. You know my contacts are very discreet, and I wouldn't do anything to compromise your chances of getting the job. I'm on your side, but I wanted to know more than you were telling me."

"Dad, I'll tell you everything that's happened so far, if you promise to stop checking up on me."

"I'll try," Foster nodded with a slight smile.

"Okay, I've had every possible test; from hand-to-eye coordination, physical stamina, and speed of my reflexes

measured to the thousandth of a second. The reason I think it's a mission is the extensive psychological testing they put me through. I'm thinking; if the project is just to get the bugs out of the craft, why give me a psych test at all? I'm excited. I want this job. I need this job. I'm almost broke. I don't even have enough money to pay for all the new flight certifications coming up," Axle said, all in one breath.

His father paused, and felt a split second of envy as he realized that this may *actually* be a mission. His mind was flooded with the facts. Axle is young; the older a person gets the more cautious they become. He is willing to take a chance. Axle is single, no special person in his life. He lives alone. Minimal repercussions if something goes wrong. This could very well be a dangerous mission.

Foster is now faced with the possibility of losing his son. He felt his chest tighten, but knew that any negative response now, would classify him a paranoid father. Nothing he could say would change Axle's mind, anyway.

"I love you and I worry about you, son. Just be careful and remember..."

"I know!" Axle interrupted with a laugh. "Keep my finger on the eject button. Anyway, I'd better take off now. I have another interview tomorrow at 1 PM. I have to travel into downtown LA, and that always takes longer than planned. I have to find the Nico Mas building."

"That should be easy. It's a newly renovated, 40 story building. It has that new state-of-the-art rainbow-tint glass that changes color as the sun moves. I saw a special on it. It also has the new style transport tubes. You won't have any trouble finding it. Now, go say goodnight to your mom before you leave. She's waiting anxiously in the den downstairs. She knew I wanted to talk to you alone," Foster said while hugging his son.

"Dad, you won't tell mom anything, will you?"

His father's expression reassured him that this was *their* secret.

~ ~ ~

Getting into the city was as grueling as Axle expected. He made his way downtown and found the Nico Mas building. It was not as easy as his father made it sound. As he entered through the automatic doors, he saw a small crowd impatiently waiting for the transport tube.

“What’s going on?” Axle asked to no one in particular.

A young man spoke up, “We’ve been waiting more than ten minutes. They must be having air pressure problems again. If I wasn’t going to the 32nd floor, I would have already taken the stairs,” he laughed.

“Where are the stairs? I’m going to the third floor, and I only have three minutes!” Not waiting for an answer, Axle searched the map posted between the transport tube doors. He made a mad dash. “Oh great, I wanted to arrive calm and collected, instead of sweating and gasping,” he said aloud as he took the stairs two at a time. Catching his breath, at exactly one o’clock, he opened the door to suite 306.

The waiting room was as narrow as the hallway. On each side of the door were four metal, government-issued, dark green cushioned chairs-eight in total. The beige walls were bare. The lack of reading material was obvious-not even a brochure, or a table to put anything on. *Either they just moved in, or they’re not staying long*, Axle thought.

He approached the receptionist seated behind the glass partition directly in front of him. She was a heavy, middle-aged woman, with fiery red hair. Her mouth turned downward, giving her a natural frown. Her blouse was so loud, you could almost hear it. Around her thick neck was a thin strand of pink pearls, that nearly disappeared in the folds of her loose skin.

Axle's eyes darted past her and scanned the hall directly behind. He counted six doors; none bearing a name or marking of any kind.

The receptionist glanced at him and pointed to a screen on her desk with his picture on it.

“Sit,” was all she said as she motioned him to an empty chair along the sterile-looking wall.

There were two other men waiting. They watched him as he turned from the desk and sat down. They nodded but did not exchange names or pleasantries. Then they returned their gaze straight ahead. He wondered if they were being considered for the same position and were meeting with Mr. Martin.

Up until this point, Axle hasn't spoken to anyone from the TMA. His hope is that this will be a face-to-face interview, and not an appointment with another doctor or lawyer.

Less than a minute later the receptionist tapped her earpiece and said, “Yes, sir.”

The three men in the waiting area looked up. She made eye contact with Axle and gestured him over, still not using his name. She slid a badge under the glass and buzzed him in. As soon as the door closed behind him, she whispered, “Third door on the left.”

As he approached the door, it opened. A male voice said, “Right on time, Mr. Kade. Please come in.”

Axle was surprised to see just who it was. He recognized him from the media. *Franklin St. Marten*, not Mr. Martin. He won the Nobel Peace Prize five years ago for his work with the environment. He seemed a bit heavier. His hair was showing some gray, but he appeared to be quite fit for a man in his late forties.

He shook Axle's hand. Axle was utterly speechless! He motioned Axle to sit in the empty chair. He then positioned himself on the corner of his light brown, marble desk, one leg dangling.

Axle tried to steady himself and not show his nervousness. He stumbled a bit and almost missed the chair. *If St. Marten is involved, this is a major project!* He thought.

“Mr. Kade, I am Franklin St. Marten.”

“Yes, I know, sir,” Axle replied, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

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“Let me get right to the point; you have been chosen to be part of a team. After reviewing a multitude of profiles, I have come to believe that you are the man for this project. This mission is extremely discreet and has the potential to be highly dangerous. Because the ramifications of this project are so significant, *if successful*, you will be very well compensated.”

St. Marten stood and walked over to his window, facing the street below. His light tan suit had a slight sheen, which enhanced his ebony skin tone. He spoke with a slight Caribbean accent. He continued to enjoy the view, as if seeing it for the first time. He was allowing Axle to absorb some of what he just said. Without turning, he asked, “Do you have any questions?”

Axle's gaze was fixed on *him* the entire time. He broke the silence with, “Sir, did you say *if* the mission is successful? Where am I going?”

“I'm not at liberty to reveal that at this time. But, you have been chosen to be part of the first team we're sending. I *can* tell you this; if the project meets our expectations,” he continued with a smile, “and we calculate a 90% chance that it will, let's just say, your compensation could easily reach into the millions.”

Long silence.

“How *long* is this mission?” Axle asked hesitantly, thinking, *I'll probably return an old man!*

“About a month, maybe less,” St. Marten answered.

It was all Axle could do to maintain his composure. He wanted to scream, *when do I leave?* But not wanting to appear too anxious, he paused and held back his reply. He was expecting St. Marten to ask him to *think about it for a few days, then make a decision.*

Instead, St. Marten said “I'm sure you have already reached a decision. Are you in?”

He was right. Axle had already given this plenty of thought. Millions for a months work? What kind of mission could pay that much?

“This sounds like a once in a lifetime offer, and *if* it doesn't involve nuclear waste, I'm in. When and where do I report, sir?”

St. Marten chuckled at the nuclear waste comment, tapped his earpiece and said, “Affirmative.” Then he turned to Axle and said, “Now! There will be a hover shuttle on the roof in five minutes.”

“Five minutes? I don't have anything with me,” Axle stammered.

“Everything you need has already been prepared for you. I'll see you when you get back. Good luck, Axle.” St. Marten smiled, shook his hand firmly, and put his arm around his shoulder as he quickly ushered him to a private transport tube that took him directly to the roof.

Axle stepped out onto a shuttle pad. The view of the city was spectacular. He could see the building he was standing on, in the mirror tint of the surrounding buildings, reflecting a multitude of brilliant colors.

I can't believe all the preliminaries I endured that led to a five-minute interview! Now, I'm on top of the Nico Mas building, waiting for a shuttle to take me to-who knows where? Axle's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of the hover shuttle.

~Hangar 14~

The landing wasn't as smooth as Axle expected. The rear entry ramp slid out automatically upon touchdown. It was a typical twelve passenger shuttle, except more streamlined than Axle was use to flying. It had twelve bottom thrusters instead of ten and the two rear thrusters were now replaced with four. But, it was essentially the same shuttle.

The rear door slid open. Axle hustled up the short ramp, bypassed the empty passenger seats and stepped right into the cockpit, taking the co-pilots seat.

The pilot appeared to be about 22 years old. He was thin, good looking, with jet black hair and not a hint of facial hair. His name tag read Justin Sonmire.

He looked over at Axle, stunned that he was in the cockpit beside him. He opened his mouth to speak as Axle blurted out, "I use to fly one of these." Then without taking another breath he asked, "So, where are we going? And, is anyone else joining us?"

"Hangar 14, sir. My only scheduled pick up was Mr. Kade, 1:15 PM, Nico Mas building," the young pilot answered as they took off.

Well that clears everything up, Axle thought.

"And, just where would Hangar 14 be, Justin?" he pressed.

"It's approximately 45 minutes northeast, sir."

"Where are you coming from?"

"Hangar 14, sir." He was a little nervous.

Axle turned his head, looked out the window at the beautiful, peaceful surroundings. A wave of concern came over him as he thought, *Mr. Kade, 1:15 scheduled pick up!*

This was already in the works, even before my 1 PM meeting. That's why the offer was so high; they wanted to ensure I would say yes. What kind of mission is this?

Axle glanced at the pilot and decided to put his own mind at rest for the next 40 minutes.

“So, how long have you been flying, Justin?”

“As you can tell from my landing, probably not as long as you, sir,” Justin laughed.

“Would you like a few pointers?”

Justin nodded and smiled.

Axle began teaching him several maneuvers using the controls simultaneously.

“And this one could save your life, if you ever stall and go into a free-fall. Keep all the thrusters pointed straight down; they will cool off quickly that way. Don't panic. When the temperature is green, do a cold start. Even close to the ground, the initial thrust, will act like a cushion. Go ahead, try it,” Axle coached him.

“Are you sure this will work? It seems risky.”

“Trust me, go ahead. Stall. That's it,” he assured him.

“The ground is getting close really fast, sir,” the pilot's voice trembling ever so slightly.

“Not yet, not yet,” Axle said slowly, as he watched the pilot's eyes widening. “Okay, now! Cold start!” he shouted.

The blast from the thrusters brought the shuttle to a smooth, but rapid halt, as if diving off a cliff into a pool of water. Smooth!

“That was amazing! Thank you, sir,” Justin said with a shaky voice.

“The more you practice, the easier it will be to remain calm. So tell me, what's at Hangar 14?” Axle pressed again for information about the mission.

“I heard it was a ship, sir. Not even the guards have seen it. The security clearance is extremely high.”

“Is it a military operation?” he questioned, hoping Justin would open up.

“I’m not sure, sir, but there are more civilians than military personnel. I don’t know much more.”

Axle sensed the uneasiness of his young pilot. He decided not to press for answers.

“How often do you get to make the LA trip?” Axle asked, wanting to put Justin at ease.

“At least once a week, sir. I love flying over Apple Valley. However, I still can’t figure out how it got *that* name.”

“Well, many years ago, long before I was born, this whole valley was filled with orchards. There were thousands of apple trees as far as the eye could see.”

“What happened?”

“California’s increasing water demand has always exceeded its resources. Farm supply companies introduced Genetically Modified Organisms; which altered the DNA of the seeds themselves; making the crops more resistant to pesticides. It seemed to be a brilliant idea at the time. As it turned out, the GMO seeds had a shelf life and they ended up contaminating all the seeds, giving *all* the crops a shelf life. The health department became concerned over a sharp rise in obesity, diabetes and other diseases. The GMO seeds were placed under scrutiny. All the crops in the entire country and most of the world had expired. The soil became contaminated. A few organic farms and some green houses survived. But, their food supply wasn’t enough to prevent the world-wide famine,” Axle stated. ***

“How do you know so much about it? It’s recorded that no one knows why the crops failed,” Justin inquired.

“I know because my great-grandfather was on a team that traveled to the most remote parts of the earth, searching for uncontaminated seed. I read his journals. He documented about the large numbers of fish and animals becoming extinct. He described how people were eating anything they could find. The cattle went first, naturally. Next to go were the domestic animals. Before it was over, people were eating rodents. That’s when companies developed the refining process of turning bugs into the food that we eat today. I’m

glad the crops are starting to come back, and that only natural pesticides are legal. Many of the preservatives are outlawed. Foods are much healthier now,” Axle replied.

“Obesity certainly is no longer a problem,” Justin remarked. “Real food might be healthier, but who can afford it? I heard no one would eat bugs before the famine, and now insects are considered a food group,” he laughed. “By the way, wait until you eat the food at Hangar 14.”

“Is it disgusting military food?” Axle smirked.

“You’ll see,” Justin said with a smile. “Here we are now, sir. Hangar 14. There it is, down on the right.”

It appeared to be a totally abandoned air base.

Axle’s first thought was *if this is all they could afford, how are they going to pay millions?*

The buildings were dilapidated. The runway was overgrown; it looked as if it hadn’t been used in 25 years. They hovered over a road that ran alongside one of the hangars.

“Sonmire, Shuttle 02 returning.”

“Affirmative, Shuttle 02, you’re clear to land.”

Axle glanced up at the control tower. He saw shattered windows on the degrading structure that had been reduced to a giant bird house. He observed a few large nests on top of the wall that still held pieces of the decaying roof.

The hover shuttle landed on the road, right next to a set of double doors, located at the middle of the Hangar.

They exited the rear of the shuttle. The pilot walked swiftly in front of Axle to open one of the double doors, allowing Axle to enter first. Inside, about four feet ahead, were another set of doors. Axle reached for the handle, but the pilot blocked his arm and said, “Just a minute, sir. Those will not open until the door behind us closes.”

When the doors behind them were completely sealed, and it was totally dark inside, the handles on the second set of doors suddenly illuminated.

A woman’s voice said, “Welcome, Gentlemen.”

There was a soft click, and the pilot opened one of the

doors.

It was brightly lit inside. In an instant, Axle knew there was no expense spared.

“Incredible!” Axle exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. Doubts about getting paid quickly vanished. His eyes were darting in every direction, not knowing where to look first.

“I love watching the reactions of newcomers seeing Hangar 14 for the first time. Follow me, sir,” Justin said.

Axle hesitated, letting his eyes soak in the elaborate interior. The Hangar was divided in half by the long hallway they were standing in. The wall to their immediate left crossed the entire width of the Hangar and reached the high ceiling. It was constructed from 4 x 8 foot, highly-polished, stainless panels. Diamond shaped brass hardware connected the panels at the corners.

The intricate recessed lighting in the ceiling was projecting a white silhouette of the American Bald Eagle. It covered the entire wall. Laying on top was a smaller silhouette, a little darker, leaving the outer six inches exposed. At least thirty layers of silhouettes continued getting smaller and darker. It not only had a three-dimensional appearance, but as the light shifted ever so slightly, it gave the impression of the Eagle soaring through the air.

“Impressive!” Axle exclaimed, catching the attention of two armed guards, who were positioned on either side of the doors, two thirds of the way down the hall.

Partenza Hall was written above the entryway. The guards quickly looked their way. Justin nodded to them. They returned their gaze to straight ahead.

“That must be where they keep the ship,” Axle declared. “Partenza Hall!”

Justin smiled. “Yes, sir, and on this side are your living quarters, an office complex, the mess hall and just about everything else.”

On the right side of the hallway, the walls were ten foot high and made from tinted glass. Four corridors

branched off the main hallway, about forty feet apart. The glass took on a shimmery tint as they walked by. As long as they were moving, it gave the illusion of water falling.

“Follow me, sir.” Pointing toward the wall, he added, “That’s one-way glass and anyone in there can see out.”

Justin guided Axle to the reception area on the right. It was a ten foot alcove, recessed between the second and third hallway.

“Hi Ivanna, this is Mr. Axle Kade,” Justin said with a broad smile on his face, never taking his eyes off her.

She was young, probably only twenty years old. Her light brown hair had blue streaks that matched her nail polish. She was well dressed in a stylish pink suit. She suppressed a smile and said, “Hi, Justin,” trying not to look at his childish grin.

Axle showed his identification. She tapped her screen and his picture appeared. She broadened her smile, “Good afternoon, Mr. Kade, this badge will allow you access into your living quarters, mess hall and Room 47. Have it on you at all times, security can be fierce.”

“Thank you, Ivanna. May I ask what’s in Room 47?”

“You may ask, but I have no idea,” she chuckled.

Justin Sonmire escorted Axle down the hall directing him to his living quarters. They shook hands.

“Goodbye, Mr. Kade, good luck,” Sonmire turned and quickly headed back toward Ivanna.

There’s no leaving now, Axle thought. As he approached his door, a red light scanned his badge. When the light turned green, the door unlocked. He stepped inside and surveyed his surroundings. His room was comfortably furnished.

It was stocked with military issued socks, underwear, and toiletries. Everything was in green tubes, with generic lettering stating its contents and a reorder number. The clothes were much nicer than what he owned. There were several pairs of black slacks, numerous collared pullovers in a variety of colors and all in *his* size. They knew!

He quickly showered. The entire time his mind kept racing, trying to imagine what was in Room 47. He left his quarters and traveled swiftly down the hall. As soon as he approached Room 47, his badge automatically activated the door lock. He entered.

Directly in front of him was the next generation flight simulator. It was glossy white and had a spherical shape about eight feet in diameter. A series of circular bands, approximately ten inches wide wrapped the sphere completely, allowing it to move in all directions. It was perched on a three foot square pedestal and was already in motion.

Axle approached and tried to peek through the small window on the top part of the door, as it went by, straining to see who was inside.

Suddenly, he heard a voice to his left. A man peered out from behind a three sided control booth and said, “Just making a few last minute adjustments.”

He was an Asian man, in a Lieutenant’s uniform. He was well built, with thick, black, short hair. He put his hat under his arm and extended his hand. “Mr. Kade, I heard you arrived. I’m Lieutenant JoeCat, from Honolulu. I have been sent here on a special assignment to train you. I will be your instructor.” He shook Axle's hand and then motioned him to enter the flight simulator. He immediately began to brief Axle on its capabilities.

“You will be working with eight propulsion motors that swivel in all directions, independently or grouped together. The controls are called rockers.”

There were two pads about eighteen inches apart with the imprint of a hand, approximately one half inch deep in each pad. The imprint of the thumbs, were about two and one half inches wide, with a sensor imbedded in each one.

“Place your hands, palms down, on the controls. Pressing down with the heel of your hand will bring the nose of the simulator up. Pressing down with your fingertips will bring the nose down; pressing with the side of your hand will

turn the ship. Anyway you rock it; the ship will take that direction. The speed is controlled by sliding your thumbs. You have the ability to configure the controls any way you like, within the parameters of their functions. The left and right rocket thrusters are located top center. Do you have any questions?" JoeCat grinned.

"Several," Axle said, looking through the program menu. "The foremost being; just *where* am I going? The simulator has thrusters, yet I don't see any programs with outer space scenarios."

"I do not have that information. I just design the flight simulators," JoeCat replied, still smiling.

Axle suspected that he probably did know, but may not be able to say. Either way, he's still in the dark.

"The controls will take some getting use to, but the design is brilliant," Axle stated.

They spent several hours going over every touch sensor on Axle's control panel. And just about every piece of equipment that would be within Axle's realm.

"We have a very rapid training regiment planned, so you will need to stay focused on this, and nothing else," JoeCat said emphatically.

"How rapid is that?"

"You must complete your training before all the mission details are ironed out. Just follow my instructions exactly, and you will succeed. I think we should end for today, Mr. Kade. Meet me here tomorrow a few minutes before 0700. Our morning meal time is from 0700 to 0800 hours."

"You can call me Axle, sir. I look forward to working with you."

Axle quickly returned to his quarters and collapsed on his bed. He could sense his mind beginning to race. His thoughts turned to the magnitude of a project that demands so much secrecy.

He wished he could speak to his father.

He closed his eyes and began to drift off.

~ ~ ~

Axle awoke early and hungry. He missed lunch and dinner the previous day. He showered, dressed and left quickly to meet JoeCat, in Room 47.

“Right on time, Mr. Kade, you look well rested. Let's go.” They made their way down a network of corridors. “The mess hall is just ahead on the right. Wait until you taste the food!”

“I guess it's not typical military food,” Axle grinned, remembering a similar remark from the pilot.

“You'll see,” JoeCat smiled.

They entered through the open doors of the military mess hall. There was a long serving line to the left, and to the right, there was an abundance of rectangular tables, each seating eight.

They proceeded to the food line. JoeCat grabbed two trays and handed one to Axle. The smell of bacon and eggs grew stronger as the line moved forward.

“Wow! That smells like the real thing,” Axle exclaimed.

“It *is* the real thing. Well, almost. The eggs are a 60/40 synthetic mix, very close to the real thing. The bacon is close to being pork. Meat is still a little hard to come by,” JoeCat laughed.

At the first station, a server placed a scoop of fluffy, yellow scrambled eggs, accompanied by a decent portion of hash browns, on Axle's plate. Axle hesitated not moving his tray, as a large variety of vegetables just ahead, caught his attention.

The server added another scoop of eggs and potatoes, thinking he wanted more. Axle moved his tray ahead to the next server, who quickly dropped three strips of bacon on his eggs. He motioned Axle to choose what vegetables he wanted.

Axle waved his hand indicating he wanted a scoop of everything. As the server was loading his plate, he asked JoeCat, “Are the hash browns made from real potatoes? And,

what are the vegetables made from?”

“All the vegetables and fruit are real,” JoeCat laughed.

“Fruit, where?”

JoeCat pointed to a kiosk in the middle of the room. It was piled high with a variety of fruit!

Axle's face lit up like a child at Christmas!

“Haven't eaten any fruit lately?” JoeCat remarked, grinning.

“I can only afford to look at fruit; and to see it fresh is a bit overwhelming. Pears, grapes, bananas, even apples. How did they get so large?”

“We have a Botany Lab on premises, where it's grown for experiments. We get fruit several times a week. Don't worry, they are completely safe, and they taste great,” JoeCat said, while popping a small piece of bread into his mouth.

By the time Axle made it to the end of the line, there wasn't any room left on the plate or tray.

“Axle, you know you can go back for seconds if you are that hungry. Pace yourself,” JoeCat smiled, broadly.

“I wish I had more room on my tray,” he laughed.

“There are seats at the end of that table in the corner,” JoeCat, motioned to his right.

Axle spotted Justin with a small group of men, seated at the next table. The wings on their lapels indicated they were all pilots. He nodded. Justin glanced up and waved back. Axle sat down and could see Justin out of the corner of his eye talking to his friends and glancing over at Axle. No doubt telling them about yesterday's maneuvers.

“Axle, I have a progress meeting at 0800 hours. It will give me a chance to find out how the other departments are progressing. I need to get an idea of how much time we have left,” JoeCat said.

“I haven't even been here one full day. How much progress could I have *made*?”

“You will do fine. I just need to know if we will be working ten-hour days or twelve.”

“Twelve?” Axle's voice cracked a little.

“Just enjoy your meal. I will meet you back at Room 47 after the meeting.” JoeCat finished eating and excused himself.

Axle finished what was on his tray. He exited the mess hall and went straight to the simulator room. Not knowing how much time he had, he wanted to make every minute count.

Coming up with the best motor configuration wasn't going to be easy. Working with eight motors, the combinations were endless. From here on, it would be trial and error.

JoeCat's face suddenly appeared on the monitor inside the flight simulator. “Good news all around. I have plenty of time to get you ready, and we will work twelve hour days.” JoeCat smiled, obviously enjoying his profession.

Axle kept a record of each motor combination. He pushed himself relentlessly to develop the perfect configuration that would allow him to navigate through every disaster scenario. Some configurations worked well for certain situations but not for all.

He continued going back and forth. During the first three days, he constantly encountered crash after crash. On the eleventh hour of the third day, he finally found the configuration that worked for 90% of the scenarios. He knew the other 10%, would probably never happen. But he had an alternate configuration ready, just in case.

“I found the best system, I'll use the two front motors for pinpoint steering with my right hand. The remaining six motors, I locked together, so they would move as one, for speed and general direction with my left hand. Rocket thrusters would also be controlled with my left hand.”

“Yes, that will work nicely,” JoeCat said in total agreement. He was obviously proud of his student, as well as his own teaching abilities.

~ THE SHIP ~

On the fourth day, Axle breezed through every possible disaster the flight simulator could inflict upon him. He worked steadily without incident. After he had aced his final test, he exhaled a sigh of relief.

“Great job, Axle,” JoeCat said encouragingly. “You look as if you need a break. Let’s get lunch.”

They entered the mess hall, grabbed their trays and went down the serving line.

On their way to their usual table, someone motioned to JoeCat from across the room. JoeCat quickly set his tray down. “The Commander wants to see me. I will be right back.”

The Commander was about 5'8, white hair, olive skin, muscular build. He had a broad smile on his face as he spoke with JoeCat. They both seemed excited.

JoeCat nodded and walked quickly back to Axle. He placed both palms on the table, leaned forward and said in a low tone, “I have news.”

With that, he sat down, placed the napkin on his lap and began to eat.

Axle remained motionless. His gaze fixed on JoeCat.

Finally, JoeCat looked up at Axle with his usual smile. “At 1400 hours, we will be attending the official unveiling of the ship. You will be briefed on the mission, and meet the rest of your team. I am excited for you, Axle. I have trained many pilots, and you are more than ready. You will do very well, I’m sure. After lunch, go shower and change. I will meet you at 13:45 in the simulator room.”

“I know that I have been trained by the best. I just wish I had *one more* practice- session.”

~THE GENESIS CHIP ~

“Axle, it's just the unveiling. You're not taking off,” he said, trying to suppress a laugh.

Axle quickly ate and returned to his quarters to shower, shave and dress. He took a few moments to get his excitement under control. The anticipation of seeing the ship, meeting his team, was a bit overwhelming. Up to this point, no one has spoken a word about the crew or the assignment. He ran his fingers through his hair one last time and headed out the door.

JoeCat was waiting in front of Room 47 as Axle approached. “Are you ready?”

“Oh, yeah!” Axle grinned.

They proceeded down the corridor and joined a small group waiting in front of Partenza Hall. They nodded, no one spoke a word. The doors opened slowly. They were greeted by an attractive woman, who appeared to be in her mid twenties, with shoulder-length black hair. She had a blend of Asian and American features. On several occasions, Axle noticed her passing through the double doors of Partenza Hall. He attempted to greet her each time, but she always avoided eye contact.

“Welcome to Partenza Hall, right this way,” she said.

Directly behind her was a partition that obstructed the view of anyone passing by when the doors were ajar.

They followed her into a state of the art workshop and technological laboratory. Partenza Hall was immense.

Axle gasped and turned to JoeCat, “Now, *this* is impressive!”

To the left, was a transparent, freestanding conference room, twenty-by-twenty foot square. The long table and matching chairs inside that room were also made from the same transparent material.

On the outside, of the conference room wall was a shelf, two inches thick and eighteen inches wide; it ran the entire length of the wall. The shelf was desk height and angled down slightly. A row of eight chairs on rollers, were neatly tucked under the shelf, creating a long corporate work

station for the engineers.

The walls on the right side of Partenza Hall, were lined with metal shelving, filled with a medley of parts and spare pieces. The shelving stretched from the floor to the ceiling and rotated, allowing any particular shelf to be brought within reach. Metal work tables were placed opposite the matching shelves.

In the center of this large room, directly in front of the Hangar doors and fully concealing the ship; was a three-dimensional hologram. It was twenty feet wide by eighty feet long. It took on the appearance of swirling smoke or fog, mixed with sweeping colors of blue, purple and yellow. Occasionally, you could see a partial silhouette of the ship through the hologram. The assembled group was staring at the rear of the ship.

To the right of the hologram, facing the side of the ship, were four rows of chairs. A few select guests were already seated. There were several men and woman in lab coats, a small group in business attire, along with two men in military uniforms. Chatting amongst themselves were four men in ground crew uniforms.

With the sound of three soft chimes, they all took their seats. Their attention was now directed toward the ship. The lights dimmed.

A man stepped forward and stood directly in front of the hologram and introduced himself. "Good afternoon, my name is Jack Brock. I am the Mission Director."

He spoke in quite a serious tone, without the slightest hint of a smile. He was dark-skinned, handsome, well built, approximately 5'9", and appeared to be in his late forties. His closely-shaved face could not hide the shadow of his thick beard trying to emerge. He sported a military haircut that suited his nondescript attire; black pants, white shirt, black tie.

Jack Brock nodded to one of the four ground crew members, standing off to his left, whose name tag read 'Piper'. He was holding a remote control, almost entirely

~THE GENESIS CHIP ~

concealed by his large left hand. With one short tap, the hologram slowly disappeared, from the top down.

Axle couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The ship was magnificent!

"XODIS" was written on the side of the craft.

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