

PANOS SAKELIS

COSMIC SEAGULLS
EXODUS



Translation by
Danae Athanasopoulou Phelps

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KEADAS

Pete thought his new call of duty was being announced to him rather rudely. His commander had called him into his office and with a tone of finality gave him his orders.

“Hotshot, it's time you packed your bags and got ready for lots of mind-numbing hours with a computer. In the next few hours an old debris collector will go into orbit – it's called Keadas or some shit. The crew gets off as soon as she docks at the station. The cleaners will take over and clean her guts out; shouldn't take more than five days. After that, she's yours. I'll cut you some slack and let you board at the last minute.”

“And then what?”

“You do one last clean up of the surrounding area and in ten months you deliver it to Neptune's space station for a deep space mission.”

“Why don't we just kick her out into space now?”

“Handsome, you're not getting this. Your job is to go collect certain satellites that are lying around the whole damn planetary system, so you're going to have to show some initiative here.”

“And why me?”

“Just tough luck, kid. Anything else?”

“Ten months solo?”

“If you were all doubled up, you wouldn't have this problem. You'd have a lady friend to take with you.”

“There are literally dozens of doubled up officers in the unit and you pick me?”

“All I can do is pretend I don’t see things, kid. Find a woman who can stand your guts and get your papers to say you got hitched. Until the guys above find out you forged them, you’ll be halfway home.”

“Well, my baby-blue eyes might have turned heads back in the day but they don’t work miracles no more. Not like they used to. Also, this is going to need cash – lots of cash...”

“Don't worry,” said his commander with a sideward glance, shifting in his seat. “No one will be looking for the scraps you pick up along the way. Just make sure you tidy up the details on your own.”

Pete understood that he was left with no choice. If his commanding officer was willing to turn a blind eye to seedy business, he knew that the whole thing was a lost cause. He’d board the craft with nothing but ten months of loneliness ahead. He needed to do something about getting some company on board; even for him, ten months of being alone with himself seemed like dangerously too much.

Pete was thirty, born or naturalized on the Moon, and of French descent; he wasn't known for his looks. What did stand out about him were his sky-blue eyes and his dirty mouth. When he looked at you, he could stare right into your soul – most women stayed away from him for that reason. They all had their secrets but he could always tell straight away what they were. Waitresses and space whores were the only ones that didn't seem to be fazed by how much the man sitting across from them could see right through them or not – though after a couple of drinks, most of them tended to spill their guts to him anyway.

He tried to stay fit and it wasn’t hard to distinguish a muscular build hidden behind a seemingly fragile frame. He was tall with brown hair but it was his facial hair that drew attention. A dense beard contrasted greatly with his pale eyes, and whose length erratically ranged from clean shaven to bushy caveman.

As for the craft, one thing was certain: it was no regular spaceship. You couldn't really call it anything else, but if you had to definitively call it something, disregarding any theory on the naming of celestial objects, the thing Pete was staring at would have to be described as a space dumpster. It had been commissioned in about 2100, when there had been an increased need for obsolete satellites to be collected and dismantled. The craft was controlled by a mainframe computer located in a square chamber at the very centre of the craft. Its main operational requirements were to seek out and collect obsolete artificial celestial bodies and objects, which in turn were to be dismantled and reduced to resources and raw materials. These were kept in storage in the dumpster's bowels.

The crew was not extensive. It comprised two men and two women who claimed to be couples, and their responsibilities didn't go further than making sure the crafts functioned properly. Their stay aboard the craft was a two-year minimum, and the almost compulsory choice of couples manning the ship was so that any possible psychological difficulties caused by abstinence could be avoided.

The whole venture was under the administrative and financial charge of the United Nations; this particular, unusual craft was called Keadas, after the human pit hole in ancient Sparta. The craft's twelve-core main computer, incredibly fast and rigorously programmed, was based on advanced technology that apart from outer space navigation, also specialized in separating feedstock based on their recyclability.

Keadas, now the name for both craft and mainframe computer, had a default logistical subsystem that assured the craft maintained optimal storage configuration so as to save space. It even had a furnace that melted metal into more manageable states of storage. All electric circuit units got disassembled to their smallest possible size and stored separately; their parts were evaluated for reusability and then either stored for future use or tossed into the scrap pile.

All of this was handled by an assembly line of six robots that took

their orders from the mainframe and handled all the necessary machinery involved in the disassembling of space debris. No serious effort been made at manufacturing the robots to appear more human, their frame only perfunctorily resembling that of a human torso with mechanical limbs.

The main distinguishing feature of the robots, so that the crew could tell them apart, was their differently coloured trunks. To the crew, the robots were simply the Red One, the Blue One, the Yellow One, the Green One, the Black One, and the White One. All the robots were programmed with the same abilities but somehow each one had assigned itself the leader of an operation, depending on what that operation was. So if an operation involved loading and moving and needed workers, the red robot took over. The blue one was in charge of repairs and the yellow one oversaw the disassembling processes. The green functioned as a helper, the black one was the scientist and the white one the pilot. The weird thing was that none of the crew had ever wondered how the assignment of Chief worked among the robots when it came to operation leadership.

The robots communicated with Keadas wirelessly, so that nothing could be heard but the clanging of their scrapping machinery. When the crew spoke to the robots, they replied in the language in which they had been spoken to with a creepy metallic voice. Their final characteristic was that, by default, they had no involvement in the crew's operational needs and concerns.

The years went by and the various crew members came and went. But the degree of celestial object collection, despite all of Keadas' heroic attempts, was not satisfactory, since earthly bureaus did nothing but send more and more satellites into space in an attempt to contact or inhabit other planets of our solar system. This was done to such an extent that there was an increase rather than a decrease in the ultimate number of obsolete satellites. In the end, the Keadas pro-

gramme was deemed outdated and around 2250, despite having broken even with production costs long ago, it was decommissioned by the UN.

The command sent from the central offices was to set the craft in orbit around the Moon and prepare to drop off all its accumulated and stored materials, which of course were of some value. Captain Pete Duran was to lead the final phase of Keadas' withdrawal process, overseeing its final mission before sending it into deep space, so that in turn it wasn't reduced to another piece of scrap metal, aimlessly floating around in the solar system.

Pete Duran and Margaret Renard, one of the waitresses at Club Luna 3, had been hooking up over the past few months. That night, Pete made sure he got her a little extra drunk and held her a little tighter than usual as they made love, after taking some of his special powder to make the experience last that little bit longer.

"Margaret, I ship out in a few days," he said sadly with a furrowed brow.

"Where to this time?" she asked – she was used to him flying out all the time.

He explained his mission and asked her if she wanted to go with him.

"Pete, I'm in a bad way. I can't lose my job. I'm up to my eyeballs in debt and..." she trailed off. "You understand. I wish I could."

He promised her it would be well worth her while. He'd already had time to set up a plan to benefit from selling off Keadas' scrap metal which he hoped would give him some extra financial leverage. He'd do one final sweep over the Earth's atmosphere, which wouldn't cost him a thing, and would probably sell the scrap to an earthly company, providing it proved to be a legitimate business. All of this, however, wouldn't take place until the end of the next trimester. Until then, Pete would have time to tweak and specially select the collection of idiosyncratic satellites, among other activities.

Margaret didn't need too long to mull it over; she accepted his offer and appeared as his fiancée on paper. The judge smiled broadly as he signed off on their fake certificate and everything seemed to be falling into place for their ten-month journey. What Pete hadn't told Margaret about was their three-month return. *She'll figure it out on her own eventually*, he thought.

Aboard Keadas, the customary farewell party took place for the departing crew. It was customary because by this time the crew usually had some unfinished, often spicy, business to finish up, and they could all have closure. In the end, the only customary thing to happen was waking up to a night that everyone preferred to forget. Officially, their time on board ended the next day where they would disembark on the Moon, from where two years earlier they had boarded the space dumpster. Of the old crew, one of the men was the ship's navigator and the other ship's captain. Of the women, one was a mechanic and the other a chemist. As it turns out, six months into their mission the original couples swapped partners, and so on the last night they decided to have a little fun with one of the chemist's concoctions. Failing to work as planned, though, the mixture that resembled alcohol hit them so hard they didn't even have time to take off their clothes. The next morning, aided by the robots' wake up calls, they scrambled into the shuttle pod just in time. Luckily they'd already packed their few belongings the previous day.

Before the commander boarded the shuttle, he sat in the captain's chair one last time, and wrote a message to the central computer in an attempt to make light of the situation. *Friend, we're leaving. Get by on your own. The new guy who's coming has orders to send you into the beyond.* The central computer received the message and sent it for subroutine analysis; there the message was logged as *Incomprehensible*, since it had made no sense.

As soon as the pod had gone, Keadas recorded that for the first time that none of the crew members were on board. He immediately

ran all the subroutine security checks to find the optimal solution for what was to follow next. The research circuits still had the motion detectors on and were following through on orders as usual. Soon the cargo ships would dock with resources, though the new crew wouldn't board until later. The shuttle pod that had just left would return to the Moon in five days to bring back the two new crew members for the next journey. Until then, the computer would have to wait – so in the meantime he took the opportunity to put all systems on standby and the craft on autopilot, while running standard maintenance checkups.

Pete spent his last night on the Moon at a bar with some old pals, drinking until he couldn't stand. He'd arranged for Margaret to pick him up as soon as her shift was over so that the next day they were sure to be at the loading bay together and on time – from where, they'd board Keadas. At four in the morning, Margaret walked into the bar where Pete was waiting for her. Of course, there weren't many places like this on the Moon, since the entire lunar community was gathered under a total of ten domes that were interconnected by walkway tunnels. Initially, bars had been illegal since the Ministry of Interplanetary Affairs had wanted to keep its workers away from such unsavoury habits. But with the passing of the years, and what with the failure to populate surrounding planets in the solar system – something the authorities seemed very disappointed about – compromises were made. This, of course, also meant corners were cut and people paid off, and soon the Moon had an underbelly of its own replete with hookers, smugglers, dive bars, the lot.

The population distribution scattered throughout the Alien Planetary Systems was roughly seventy thousand. The APS was in reference to any colonies on planets and satellites, including space stations, other than Earth. Of those seventy thousand, fifteen lived on the Moon; thirty thousand lived on Mars; and twenty thousand lived on Jupiter's satellites. The rest were scattered about on various space

stations throughout the planetary system.

It was obvious that space colonization, even within the immediate solar system, had not gone as planned, the main reason being the great transport costs and the colonies' inability to gain independence. The decision to withdraw Keadas was just another cut made in the process, and certainly not the first. The decision was of a general character and by many it was seen as an overall surrender. Only very few space stations would remain in orbit, which had also had staff cuts. Now stations would have a crew of only five members who would change every five years. Only three thousand people belonging to a mining company would remain on the moon carrying on with their work as usual. Thousands of people who had been born in space, and who proudly called themselves 'aliens', were on their way to Earth due to these recent changes. In truth, they were the only aliens to have ever set foot on Earth. Aliens from other planetary systems had never shown their face and on the whole they weren't expected to show it anytime soon.

The UN assembly concerning the budget cuts in the interplanetary programmes was based on the general observation that the human race, despite being certain that it was not alone in the cosmos, was nonetheless situated on the edge of nowhere – or in any case, somewhere that seemed to have no immediate impact on any other extraterrestrial races. The decision was unanimous. There were to be budget cuts in the transnational programmes to colonize space, and instead funds would be used to decongest indigenous problems to Earth such as overpopulation and hunger. The problem of course wasn't that sixty-five thousand people needed to be repatriated, since most of them were well qualified, but the more troubling issue of re-programming the space industry so as to direct its efforts towards more earthly causes and needs. During this time, many feared the breakout of a world war.

The passenger pod with Pete and Margaret arrived at Keadas at six in the afternoon. They still had eighteen hours before they took

off on the craft's last journey. Pete, still hung-over, moved towards the navigation cockpit. He sat in the commander's chair and looked at the instruments in front of him.

"And I'm supposed to know which damn button to press?" he said out loud.

"That is not necessary. You can tell me what you want to do and I will execute it for you," replied the computer.

"I like you. What's your name?"

"I am the Keadas-1 model."

"Is there a number Two?"

"No. In the end they only made one such craft."

"So just Keadas. Let's start with something simple. Do you have a copy of my orders and duties?"

"Of course."

"Great, because that commanding jerk sent me here by force. Since you're going to be doing whatever I tell you, can assimilate his voice for me? And of course always call me sir. That way I can enjoy bitching at you for a while."

"You must be referring to your commanding officer. Should I call you just sir?"

"Yes. Anyway, there's no one else here."

"There's your double, sir."

"Her name is Maggie. Ready?"

The computer made some beeping sounds and eventually said in a changed voice, "This is the best I could do, sir. What do you think?"

"Sounds damn good!" said Pete hooting with laughter. "What's next on the programme?"

"In eighteen hours we leave for our final trimester of scanning for small satellites along the Earth's atmosphere and once that mission is complete we head straight for Neptune. But first, sir, you must confirm your orders."

"Fuck their orders. We pick up the biggest and most expensive things we find out there, offload them on the Earth's east side and