

Chapter 13

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Revelations 21:1-2.

The bridge was completely silent. The *U.S.S. Prophet* was mere minutes away from Gaia. Upon arriving in Gaia's star system, they could begin sensory analysis, initiate communications, and learn the status of the atmosphere, the surface conditions, and most importantly, the status of the colony. Nearly everything could be ascertained from orbit but that wasn't good enough for the passengers on the *Prophet*. They waited eagerly to touch down on the surface, and walk on Gaia. They wanted to see it for themselves.

The bridge was spacious. The crew spent most of their time there, and it was designed to be comfortable and allow for the crew to move about with ease. The bridge was trapezoidal, with the longer side to the rear. The walls were dark, while the consoles and display screens were all black with virtual keyboards projected on the surface.

On this very special day, five members of the delegation joined the standard complement of thirteen bridge officers. They wanted to be there for first contact. All of them had their eyes fixed on the main viewer, a large screen at the front of the room. The image on the screen was black, except for a few stars in view and a target resting over a large white star directly in the middle of the screen. A few lines of text gave the name of the star, the number of planets in the system, the distance, and the time of arrival.

The counter on the left side of the main viewer counted down from ten seconds... then five seconds... then finally zero.

Captain Nicholas Catskill could feel the intense excitement in the room. The main screen showed the Gaia star system and the other four planets. A few numbers and graphs on the left side detailed information on the range to the planet.

They had arrived.

“Ensign, hail the colonists. Send out the greeting package.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

The greeting package was a long message of “hellos” and basic information on their expedition and what they needed from the colonists. Captain Catskill found it funny that no one could agree on how to say hello. Apparently, they needed to say it just right. The colonists had been left alone for so long, they might feel abandoned and therefore hostile toward the delegation.

A couple of seconds passed with no answer.

“How long does it take for the message to reach them?” Will Cissaft asked.

“It should be almost instantaneous,” Catskill replied, frowning. “Send it again.”

After nearly a full minute of silence, the woman at the side console said, “Nothing, sir.”

“Anything on sensors?”

“No sir,” Santiago replied. “No signature for the Ark or any of the transport vessels. Wait... I have detected several satellites orbiting the planet. Most of them are Consortium, but a couple are unidentified.”

“They have satellites but no communications?” Cissaft asked. “How can that be?”

“It is unclear,” Santiago replied. Catskill shot her a look. *I’m captain, not him.*

“What about the surface? Can we see what the colony looks like?” Ambassador De Prece asked.

Catskill turned, ready to inform the delegates that they needed to shut up or leave, but he realized Marissa was asking him, not Santiago. *Good, he thought. At least she knows where she is.*

“Yes,” he said. “When we get closer we should be able to get a visual with the forward scope.”

The screen showed the second planet getting bigger and bigger. From a small white dot with a big label, it grew to the size of a grapefruit. Suddenly, a large box appeared around the planet and the image zoomed in. Another box appeared on part of the surface near the northern pole and the image zoomed in again. A brown continent could be seen with a small patch of green in the middle of it. The box moved about the surface. Finally, it

stopped towards the bottom in the middle of the green patch and zoomed in again to reveal the Gaia colony.

A large blue river snaked down the middle of a valley, turned sharply left, and then turned again, exiting the screen at the bottom. The main viewer shifted to a three-dimensional making the image jut out from the blank wall behind it. The topography of the area became clear. On each side of the river were flat plains that gradually rose into hills.

Near the bottom of the screen, just off the eastern bank of the river, was a large discoloration. All around it were other small discolorations, blotches of gray, white, orange, and red. They branched out from the big blotch in the middle.

The city had six branches. One extended to the banks of the river; the others extended eastward into the hills. Some of the suburbs looked like cities of their own. The land in between the towns was divided into geometric shapes, mostly rectangles and triangles, with parallel lines indicating crop fields.

"It's huge!" De Prece exclaimed.

"The layout, everything is all wrong," Cissaft added. "What have they been up to?"

"Sensors read numerous heat sources, large and small," Santiago said. "The biomass sensor is off the chart. The infrastructure all looks intact. The energy readings are huge. It's producing over two hundred percent the expected output."

There were more comments and murmurs. The three other delegates whispered to each other.

"Bring us into geostationary orbit over the settlement," Catskill said.

"Yes sir."

"What about the transport ships? Are they on the surface somewhere?" Marissa asked the captain.

Catskill turned to Santiago. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes, but not at the established landing sites. They are lined up on what looks like a large tarmac north of New Eden...all twenty of them."

Catskill stared at the screen for a few more moments. "ETA to orbit?"

The ensign replied, "One hour eighteen minutes."

Cissaft seemed to relax. "Good, time to get a plan together." He turned and walked out of the bridge by himself.

“Great,” Catskill heard the ambassador mutter, “another meeting.”

When the *Prophet* entered orbit over Gaia, sensors gave a much more detailed picture of the colony. There was still no word from them, nor any signal from the Ark or any other ship. Catskill couldn't explain it. The colony was there, and it was huge. Obviously they had succeeded. Yet there was no signal at all. Sensors couldn't find the communications array. As he remembered, it should have been one of the first structures built once they disembarked.

Now that we're in orbit, most surface coms should be able to pick up our signal, he thought. They don't need an array. Any comlink of moderate strength could pick up our hails.

Cissaft was looking over his shoulder again. “What do you make of it, captain? What is going on down there?”

“Not sure,” he replied.

“Could they be ignoring us?” one of the Australian delegates asked.

Cissaft gave him a sideways look. “Why would they be ignoring us? This is the biggest thing to happen to them in fourteen years.”

The lieutenant looked away from her floating screen. “Sir, there are over one hundred forty-four thousand people according to sensors. Not only that, I am detecting thousands of animal life forms and plant life: deer, squirrels, birds, even a few bears.”

Catskill smiled and turned to the Americans. “It looks like your people have been busy.”

“Amazing,” De Prece murmured.

“Sir, look at this.” Santiago said pointing to the screen. A box appeared over the southeastern corner of the colony. “There are numerous mining facilities, over a dozen manufacturing centers, and the Halen plant is triple the size of the original Consortium plans. The roads are all paved and I'm detecting dozens of vehicles. This is at least double the development from the original colonial plans.”

“It's been fourteen years, ensign,” Catskill pointed out. “They've had time to get things done.”

“There's more. I can see hundreds of smaller structures outside New Eden. They aren't residential complexes. They look like houses.”

“That was not part of the plan!” Cissaft exclaimed. “All colonists were to reside in large tower complexes. Individual homes were not permitted, at least until the colony was much bigger and farther along. They’ve been taking liberties with the rules.”

Nicholas shrugged. *They’re building houses. Who cares? What’s the big deal?*

A loud beeping came over the intercom. “Signal detected,” the AI reported.

“Lieutenant?”

“Confirmed. It’s them.”

The message was short and to the point. It was a welcome message along with procedures for landing in a mile-long open field near New Eden. There was no landing pad, so they would have to use the nearest flat surface.

The *Prophet* entered the atmosphere at an angle to minimize stress on the hull. Catskill didn’t want to take any unnecessary risks. It was an alien planet and there were numerous unknown variables.

The crewmembers and delegates watched New Eden get bigger and bigger on the main viewer. After a few seconds, individual roads and buildings were visible. A few seconds later, one could see the movement of vehicles along the road. They were now at eight thousand feet. The last part of the descent was quick. The image turned from thousands of feet in the air to one looking out from right above the sky line.

The screen zoomed to the landing site in a large green clearing. There were two black roads nearby and a number of dots, all gathering near the virtual “X” marking the landing spot.

It’s people, Catskill thought. *People gathering to greet us. There must be hundreds of them.*

Across the road from the landing site were white buildings: some residential complexes, some smaller. On the other side of the landing site was what looked like a wheat field. There were no people gathering on the prairie side of the landing site. They arranged themselves in an “L” shape lining up along the two black roads.

The ship was now in its final approach. One of the crew members had moved the viewfinder to show the crowd. *Not hundreds,* Catskill thought, astonished. *Thousands!*

The gathering crowd covered the entire street from one end of the field to the other. Catskill noticed a small group of people in black standing in the middle of a cordoned off walkway cutting through the crowd.

On an adjoining screen Catskill watched an external view of the *Prophet* as it slowly descended toward the surface. The large starship dropped slowly from a few hundred feet down to the ground. Five large legs extended out of the center hull to absorb the impact of the landing. They hit the ground abruptly with a loud *plunk*. The legs slowly bent, bringing the ship closer and closer to the ground. When the landing cycle was complete, the ship was little more than four or five feet above the grassy floor.

Time to open the doors.

Tom Darien stared at the ship anxiously waiting for something to happen. For a while it sat silent and motionless. Its engines were extremely quiet, making it difficult to determine if they were on or off. There were no lights and no windows. A large blue emblem could be seen along its side, with small lettering that read *Terran Federation*.

The ship landed parallel to the street, allowing the crowd to see it from bow to stern. The stern was flat with no visible exhaust ports or openings of any kind. It was dull gray with black stripes along the sides. The entry into the atmosphere had caused some superficial damage to the ship's skin but it was more than that. The skin had a dull ceramic-like quality. Strangely, it smelled like rubber.

The stern faced the crowd. It was flat with no visible exhaust ports or openings of any kind. A few of the officials in black standing near Tom took a couple of steps toward the ship then stopped. They looked at one another, confused. The crowd was becoming impatient as well, murmuring and whispering.

What are they waiting for? Tom wondered. *Fourteen years and now they're going to take their time?*

Suddenly a loud clang came from the rear of the ship and the outline of a doorway became visible. An opening appeared as two doors slid to each side. A ramp extended outward from the opening.

As soon as the ramp hit the ground, Tom could see figures emerging from the doorway people started exiting the ship. A man and a woman in black uniforms were first,

followed by a group in dark blue jumpsuits and one in a dark green robe. Some looked upward at the sky, others toward the crowd. A few spun around, getting a panoramic view of their destination. They were clearly excited, gasping and grinning.

The Gaians remained silent and nearly motionless. Everyone was waiting for something to happen but didn't know what.

Becca had thought she knew what to expect. She knew about the climate, the gravity, the brightness, and the terrain. She thought she was prepared for her arrival on Gaia. As soon as she took her first steps off the *Prophet*, all of her knowledge and preparation vanished.

Almost immediately she noticed the sky. It was an incredible dark blue and extremely vivid. It was dazzling, almost like a painting. Despite its dark tint, the sun shone with astonishing brightness. It was yellow, not white or grayish. Towards the horizon, the colors switched to the more familiar faded blue with a slight haze, but the haze was orange.

Her eyes began to water, blurring her view. She felt them strain from the brightness. She fought hard to keep her eyes open but they instinctively tried to protect themselves from a sensory overload.

Becca wiped her eyes several times, trying to get rid of the blurriness. She wanted to see *everything*.

With every step she sprang off the ground. The slightest effort moved her forward with speed and force. Without realizing it, she had lunged out of the ship and nearly sprinted down the ramp. Her arms moved effortlessly through the air. The slight aches of her muscles vanished. The weaker gravity was relieving stress from every part of her body.

Her skin tingled, followed by a feeling of warmth. Every breath came with ease, her lungs filled near capacity. The air smelled like recently cut grass. There were no artificial smells of any kind. Her nose started to sting, forcing her to slow her breath.

A powerful euphoria filled her. She felt an incredible urge to run into the field at full speed. An entire planet was laid out before her! Staying on the ramp was driving her insane.

And then there were the people. There were thousands of them lined up neatly along the side of the ship. The varying colors made it a sight. There were suits, dresses,

shirts, shorts, pants, and robes, of every color, size, and design. Some of the women wore dresses with dozens of colors and patterns. The sight clashed with the monochromatic uniforms of the visitors. There were pale faces, tanned faces, black faces, old and young and very young. There were children everywhere. Every fourth person was a child of no more than ten or twelve. The contrasting heights of the crowd made it look more like a forest, with canopy level trees and short shrubs that stood no higher than their waist.

Across the road behind the crowd was a line of tall white buildings with enormous long windows. The building looked like stone but had a metallic shine to it. The windows were clean, the walls, everything. The fronts were cleanly landscaped with flower beds and lines of shrubs, everything perfectly landscaped and strategically placed. It reminded her of downtown Chicago, a smaller and perhaps more modest Chicago.

Becca reached the bottom of the ramp and her right foot touched the surface of an alien planet. It felt no different from walking in Mexico on unpaved trails. Her second foot followed, and then she was standing on Gaia. Behind her Felix and Khalid followed the same procedure. Both were quiet, inhaling the air, spinning wildly to see as much as possible. Felix had bumped into her on the way down. He seemed to be having trouble containing his excitement. She could hear him whispering a Bible verse under his breath.

After a few steps on the new planet, Becca bent down to feel the grass. It was short, perhaps three inches, with strange dark green soil underneath. She turned to see Felix drop to his knees, bend down, and kiss the ground. Khalid put a hand on his back and laughed.

Before long there were at least twenty people from the Prophet walking on the surface of Gaia. Another two or three dozen were waiting in the loading bay to come down the ramp.

A few feet away, she saw Will Cissaft, Marissa De Prece, and Captain Catskill walking toward the group of Gaian officials who stood away from the crowd, wearing distinct monochromatic uniforms. With a smile, the man standing in the middle took a step forward. "Captain... welcome to Gaia." The man said with a British accent.

The captain looked at him awkwardly. "Thank you, sir. My name is Captain Nicholas Catskill of the *U.S.S. Prophet*." Several people in the crowd exclaimed at the name of the ship.

Will Cissaft came forward. "My name is Will Cissaft, head of the delegation sent from Earth." The crowd again erupted in chatter at the word *Earth*. "We represent the members of the Consortium, which is now called the Terran Federation."

With every sentence, the crowd noise got louder. They asked one another what was said, with others repeating what little they could hear. After a few more exchanges, Becca could no longer hear the politicians.

The officials stepped aside and gestured at the roped-off path, clearly inviting the arrivals to see more of New Eden. Marissa whispered something to the delegate next to her, who walked back to the growing group of passengers now congregating on the grass. A few, like Felix, had kissed the ground. Others were sniffing the grass. Some were pointing toward landmarks on the horizon or at the giant yellow sun.

Becca's eyes had partially adjusted, and the bright light and clean air made it easy for her to pick out individual faces in the crowd of Gaians. She scanned them frantically, walking toward the delegation leaders.

As Marissa turned and motioned for her to stop, Becca found what she was looking for: a man standing behind the welcoming group, not ten feet away. He was in an official dark blue suit. The face had a number of new features but underneath it she could see the face. The eyes were not as sunken, the hair was longer, the cheeks were thicker, but she still recognized the face. It was Alex.

Becca yelled his name and ran forward, nearly knocking Captain Catskill over. Two men from the welcome group dove out of the way. Alex turned and stared. Becca could see him hesitate in confusion and disbelief. Then his expression shifted rapidly from caution to glorious revelation.

Becca flung herself into his arms and nearly took him to the ground. He somehow managed to stay standing as she embraced him, yelling wildly. Her eyes began to tear up again, not from the brightness but from intense joy.

After realizing what they were witnessing, the crowd erupted in applause, clapping and cheering for the joy that two human beings were sharing in front of them.

Later Becca would learn her moment with Alex helped diffuse a tense moment between colonizers and colonists. Neither knew what to do or say. The crowd expressed no elation at their arrival until that moment. With their dramatic and sudden display of

happiness and affection, the nervousness vanished. The crowd turned from cautious to celebratory.

Marissa watched the whole display and smiled. She had been waiting for this moment for seven months. She had dreamed of it, and now it was unfolding in front of her almost exactly as she imagined it. She began to clap as well, soon joined by the rest of the arrivals. In her mind, the perfect moment was complete.

Khalid's smile faded as he looked away from the siblings to see several people in the crowd reholstering half-drawn sidearms. He had also seen the *Prophet's* security chief try to stop Becca's headlong dash through the crowd. The intense and emotional moment had nearly been ruined by an irrational fear of confrontation—on both sides.