

## PRAISE FOR BENEATH

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-- *Booklist*

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**"Greek myth and biotechnology collide in Robinson's first in a new thriller series to feature the Chess Team... Robinson will have readers turning the pages..."**  
-- *Publisher's Weekly*

## BENEATH

By Jeremy Robinson

Smashwords Edition

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ALSO by JEREMY ROBINSON

*The Didymus Contingency*

*Raising the Past*

*Antarktos Rising*

*Kronos*

*Pulse*

*Instinct*

## BONUS MATERIAL!

Don't miss the exclusive sample chapters of Robinson's Chess Team series found at the end of this book.

PULSE will be available 3/26/2010 in mass market paperback.

INSTINCT, the sequel to PULSE, will be available 4/13/2010 in hard cover.

## FREE AUDIOBOOK/PODCAST NOVEL

BENEATH is also available as a FREE audiobook, available at [Podiobooks.com](http://Podiobooks.com) or the author's website: [www.jeremyrobinsononline.com](http://www.jeremyrobinsononline.com).

## **DEDICATION**

For Walter and Stan, my techie geniuses

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Because this is a special edition ebook I don't have the normal group of people to thank. No publisher, agent or designers took part in the creation of this book. I wrote it, laid it out and designed the cover myself.

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"If we have learned one thing from the history of invention and discovery, it is that, in the long run - and often in the short one - the most daring prophecies seem laughably conservative."

-- Arthur C. Clarke, *The Exploration of Space*

"It is easy to go down into Hell; night and day, the gates of dark Death stand wide; but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air - there's the rub, the task."

-- Virgil, *Aeneid*

"Spaceships and time machines are no escape from the human condition. Let Othello subject Desdemona to a lie-detector test; his jealousy will still blind him to the evidence. Let Oedipus triumph over gravity; he won't triumph over his fate."

-- Arthur Koestler, Writer

"The search for new life, exploration of the world around us, accumulation of global knowledge for the betterment of mankind; no one questions these ideas. They are the fundamentals of world-wide human society and the very basic principles of science. New life forms are discovered every year in the most remote regions of our world, providing unique glimpses of the evolutionary process and delivering incredible advances in medical science, saving countless lives. Seeking out new life should be a tantamount concern to every living soul on Earth..."

-- Dr. Kathy Connelly, Biologist and Oceanographer

"Maybe this world is another planet's hell."

-- Aldous Huxley

## PROLOGUE -- COLLISIONS

Glowing dully in the light cast from the distant sun, a spinning chunk of interwoven nickel and iron the size of Khufu's Pyramid, cruised past the outer fringes of our solar system, missing Pluto by a miniscule six hundred thousand miles.

Moving at 75,000 miles per hour, the asteroid sped past the orbits of Uranus, Neptune and Saturn, bringing it deeper into the solar system and on a direct collision course with Earth. But, as often happens with solar intruders, a slight tug, a nagging pull of gravity began to exert its force on the interplanetary projectile. The course of the asteroid was modified and redirected towards the solar system's vacuum cleaner, mighty Jupiter.

Just as the ancient god Jupiter protected the Roman Empire by reaching out and smiting enemies with lightning bolts, so too did the solar system's guardian. Reaching out with its gravity, Jupiter pulled the asteroid toward its surface, threatening to crush it within a high pressure atmosphere of hydrogen, nitrogen, helium and other gases. The asteroid, now on a collision course with the outer atmosphere of Jupiter, began building speed, pulled in faster by Jupiter's influence.

Passing Jupiter's outer moons in rapid succession, the asteroid's fate seemed clear. But a near miss with Callisto, Jupiter's eighth and second-largest moon, altered its course ever so slightly, just enough to cause a premature collision. Noiselessly, the asteroid impacted with the frozen surface of Jupiter's sixth moon, Europa. The surface of the moon exploded with energy created by the impact and massive chunks of ice, launching stone and other materials into space. Some were pulled back by Jupiter's gravitational grip, but other chunks, moving fast enough to escape, tumbled into space and scattered across the solar system like a broken dinner plate across a tile floor.

One object in particular made off like a fleeing prisoner, toward the center of the solar system—toward Earth. The football-field-sized asteroid which once threatened Earth had been replaced by a smaller chunk of Europa, which slowly spun through the solar system, passing through the asteroid belt and the orbit of Mars without incident.

The house-sized object passed the moon and burst into flames as it entered Earth's atmosphere—3,053 years later.

**EARTH**

## CHAPTER 1 -- IMPACT

Muscles stretched and bones cracked as Michael Peterson twisted his own neck with his hands. His mother had always told him that cracking his own neck would one day paralyze him. But Peterson had stretched his neck to the point where his vertebrae popped every morning since his was a child. He stepped out of the tent and shivered as the frigid air struck his lungs.

*If only mom could see me now*, he thought as he looked out at the white expanse of the Arctic where he'd come in search of meteorites. Every year, thousands of space rocks made their permanent home on the surface of the Earth, or in this case, the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean. It wasn't that meteorites were more plentiful at the North Pole, just that they were easier to spot. Black specks on the stark ice usually meant one of two things, a polar bear's snout or a meteorite.

Peterson had the rugged look of a man who ought to be out in a cold expanse, seeking out new-found wonders. His face was covered in stubble, which helped block out the unending cold. His jet black hair had a slight wave to it, but was now covered by a wool cap and parka hood. Some teenagers might consider him old, but he was still ready to take on most any challenge his profession could throw at him. Not that there was much to being an astrogeologist with a specialization in meteorites. If he wasn't collecting rocks from around the world, he was dissecting them in a warm, cozy lab. But it was exciting work. He believed that the evidence for life on other worlds wouldn't be found through monitoring radio waves like the folks at SETI or by finding traces of water on the surface of Mars. No, the proof would come to us, in the form of microorganisms embedded in a meteorite. It only needed to be found.

He was only a child when the news of ALH84001 hit the papers in 1996, but it was one of his sweetest memories. The meteorite had been found on Antarctica in 1984, but wasn't analyzed for years. When it was...it rocked the world with the possibility of extraterrestrial microbial life on Mars. The president addressed the nation about the find. Conversations of life on other worlds ran rampant. Peterson based his school science project on the Martian stone, earning him an A in eighth grade astronomy. He was devastated when the stone was proven to contain no evidence of life, but the flame had already been ignited. Earning his doctorate degree by age twenty-five garnered him the respect of his peers and allowed him to start working on his life's dream at a young age. It was now 2021 and after seven years of searching, he was no closer to his life's goal than he was at the millennium.

Peterson lifted a stone in his gloved hand and let it drop. He watched as the rock hit the snow, creating a small plume of icy dust, and a tiny pockmark. Lifting the stone, Peterson smiled at the mini crater. He had often pictured what it would be like, witnessing a meteorite crashing to Earth; bursting through the atmosphere and crashing to the ground. He'd seen the results when such collisions took place in the civilized world; car engines torn through like a tank had just taken a pot shot, living rooms destroyed, trees severed in half. It was a miracle no one had yet been brained by one of the falling stones. He'd seen it all, but when it happened to him, for all his years of dreaming, he found himself completely unprepared.

The streak overhead caught his attention as he stretched in the early morning, preparing for another long day of scouring the frozen cap of the world. His first thought was that it was a crashing plane, or perhaps a satellite. But something about the way it glowed and broke up

told him the object falling across the deep blue sky was not man made. This was the real thing. An asteroid turned meteorite plummeting to Earth before his eyes.

It fell to the north, disappearing over the horizon. Peterson's eyes widened; he feared the object had been completely disintegrated by Earth's friction filled atmosphere. Perhaps he would find nothing but interstellar ash? Or maybe nothing at all. He was terrified that he would have nothing to show for the most enlightening, most invigorating and satisfying experience of his life. He held his breath.

A second later, he heard a distant thud. The meteorite had struck the ice, and not too far away. His mind spun with the possibilities that came when any meteorite was discovered: proof of extraterrestrial life, new elements, maybe even evidence for the beginning of the universe. The possibilities were endless. This object that just fell into his proverbial backyard could be as old as the universe itself. He stood there for a minute, pondering what he would find, and then suddenly snapped out of his thoughts, sounded the alarm and gathered his crew.

"Benson! Get your ass up!" Peterson shouted as he shook the outside of the sturdy, orange tent.

"I'm awake. I'm awake," came a voice from inside the tent. Seconds later the tent was unzipped from the inside and a tired, bearded face gazed out. "What the hell is so important?"

"A meteorite," Peterson said, with glowing eyes.

Benson was annoyed. "Yeah, we find a lot of those up here, but not at six o'clock in the morning!"

Peterson leaned in close and spoke with a voice that demanded attention, without the use of volume. "You don't understand. It just hit. I saw it hit."

Staring straight forward for a moment, Benson was lost in thought. "You're sure?"

"Saw it with my own eyes," Peterson said. "Wake the others. We're leaving in twenty minutes. And we're not taking any chances, so break out the bio-suits."

"Are you sure that's necessary?" Benson asked with a snicker. "You do realize how improbable it is for us to find life on one of these rocks, don't you?"

"Just do it," Peterson said as he walked away.

Within thirty minutes, they were high above the crash zone, circling a crater the size of a typical backyard swimming pool. Peterson looked out from the side of the helicopter, peering through the clear faceplate of his bio-suit. His heart skipped a beat. There was something at the center of the crater.

Something red.

"Take us down," Peterson said to the pilot, who instantly brought the chopper around. They landed fifty yards away, sending up a blinding plume of snow.

As soon as the chopper came to rest on the ice, Peterson, Benson and three other men, dressed from head to toe in silver biohazard suits, entered the swirling wash of snow and set out toward the meteorite. As though rehearsed, all five men reached the outer perimeter of the crater simultaneously and froze.

"Oh my god," Stewart, one of the interns, said as he gazed into the crater.

Peterson looked at Benson with a smile stretching wider and wider. "You're with me."

Slowly and calmly, Peterson and Benson descended into the crater which was six feet deep and smooth. The ice melted and refroze. It was tricky navigating the steep angle but the bio-suits had been designed for use in the arctic and the built-on crampons bit into the ice. Once at the bottom, Peterson opened his hip pack and took out a small device he had designed specifically for his line of work. He called it a geospectrometer. *Geospeck* for short. The

device could scan any object, geological, biological or man-made, and tell you what it was composed of—instantly. What was more important to Peterson was the device's ability to detect the presence of life, or even the residue of life, down to the microscopic. It was the astrogeologist's magic wand. Many finds which would have taken years to scrutinize now took seconds with a degree of error that put human analysis to shame. Every find was valuable, but thus far none had contained even a hint of life.

He looked down at the object. It was the size of a football and deep red in color. *This is definitely something new*, he thought, and then frowned. *Or waste ejected from the space station.*

He held the *Geospeck* over the object and watched as an array of numbers danced across the LCD screen, working calculations and identifying the rock's chemical and physical makeup. The numbers changed to words, listing out all known elements, several of which were common in all meteorites. Then it stopped.

Peterson's eyebrows furrowed deeply. That couldn't be it. Nothing in the list of elements listed on the *Geospeck* could account for the vibrant crimson color. Before he could voice a complaint at the device he had created, a new set of words were displayed on the screen.

Unknown element: classification - 001EL  
Unknown element: classification - 002EL  
Unknown element: classification - 003 EL  
Geologic Analysis: Unknown materials present.  
Biologic Analysis: Unknown potential.

Peterson's jaw went slack. Not only had they discovered three new elements, solidifying that this was indeed from another world, the biological analysis came back: *Unknown potential*. This by no means meant that he had discovered life, but something in, or on, this rock had confounded the geospeck. And *that* was something worth getting excited about.

"Unbelievable," Peterson said to himself. He looked back at Benson, Stewart and the others. "We've found something...something...I don't know...."

Stewart's excited eyes widened behind the bio-suit's mask. "Life?"

Peterson smiled. "Maybe."

Stewart looked confused. "Maybe. *Maybe?*"

"That not good enough for you, Stew?" Benson said.

Stewart looked uncomfortable. "Well, I—"

"Try to understand this from our perspective," Peterson said. "We've been coming here and collecting stones from space for how long now?"

"Seven years," Benson said.

"Seven years," Peterson repeated. "And this is the first truly unique meteorite in all that time. It contains something we—something *no one*—has seen before."

Stewart looked pleased again. "So this is big then?"

Peterson chuckled. "Very big."

"Famous big?" Stewart said.

Peterson put his hand on Benson's shoulder. "We'll see."

Stewart leaned over the lip of the crater and peered down at the meteorite, half buried in the ice, its red surface shining in the bright sun. "This...is...awe—" Stewart lost his balance

and fell forward. "Whoa!" His arms spun madly, like a penguin trying to fly, but it was no good. Stewart spilled into the crater, tumbled head over heels and began to slide, face first.

Leaping out of the way, Peterson realized that anything falling inside the crater would inexorably be drawn to its center, where the meteorite now lay. Half out of fear for Stewart, half out of concern for their find, Peterson yelled. "Dig in with your crampons! Don't hit the—"

But it was too late. Stewart's forward motion came to an abrupt halt as he smashed face first into the meteorite. Everyone stared at Stewart's motionless body, waiting for something, anything, to signify he was still alive.

"I'm okay!" Stewart shouted with a chuckle. "The facemask absorbed most of the impact." Wearing a wide grin on his face, Stewart rolled over onto his back. "See, I'm fine.... Huh."

After years of working with science minded folks, Peterson had learned that there was a single phrase that always held more meaning among scientists than among the layman. The simple word, "huh," usually predated a significant discovery, observation or in some cases, immediate and approaching danger. Peterson rushed toward Stewart, "What is it?"

Pointing towards his clear mask, Stewart said. "There's a crack in the mask."

Peterson knelt over Stewart's body, inspecting the mask.

If Stewart came into contact with alien biological material, the effects could range from nothing to instantaneous death. That's why with objects of particular interest, Peterson always had his crew wear bio-suits. When he inspected the crack in Stewart's mask, his anxiety level grew from moderate to severe. He sucked in a quick breath.

Stewart grew instantly nervous. "What?"

Benson knelt down next to Peterson and saw it too. "Some of the meteorite is imbedded in your mask. Can you see it?"

Stewart went cross-eyed, focusing on the inside of his mask. "Yeah, I see it. A little red line. Looks like dust in the crack."

"Is there any on the inside of the mask?" Peterson asked.

Stewart scanned the inside of the mask. "I don't see any. Am I going to—aahoo!" Stewart's head rocketed up with the force of the sneeze and then smashed back down. "Sorry about that, I...I..."

Peterson inspected the crack. The red material was gone. "Oh god." A thin cloud of red dust swirled inside the mask. Stewart inhaled and sucked in the material.

"I...where am I?" Stewart said, his voice sounding sleepy.

Benson shot Peterson a worried look.

Peterson whipped around toward the other men. "Get to the heli! Tell them we need a med-evac over here, right now!"

The men bolted for the chopper and Peterson turned his attention back to Stewart, who was beginning to quiver.

"What's that?" Stewart said fearfully, looking to his left. "Something's over there. And there! No, no, no. Where *am* I?"

"Hang on, Stew. I'm still with you." Peterson said, trying to remain calm.

"Dr. Peterson? I can't see you! Who's that talking? I can't understand?" Stewart shook violently. Benson did his best to hold him still. "My head...in my head...I can hear them talking to me...What are you?"

Stewart became deathly still, sucking in quick breaths. His eyes were wide. Peterson realized he was listening to something. "Stewart, can you hear me?"

"No..." Stewart said.

Peterson was confused by the response. If Stewart couldn't hear him, how did he know a question had been asked? It was when Stewart spoke again that Peterson realized the delirious intern wasn't talking to him.

"You're lying! No...no! Stewart was screaming as his body convulsed violently. His back arched as though an electric shock had ripped through his body. A burst of red foam spewed from his mouth, coating the inside of the mask. He froze in a sickening arched position.

Peterson and Benson knew Stewart was dead. And because he was contaminated there was nothing either man could do to resuscitate him. Peterson slumped back onto the ice, his chest rising and falling quickly as he attempted to catch his breath.

Both men looked from Stewart's dead body, then to each other, then back to the meteorite. Despite feeling sick to his stomach, Peterson realized what Stewart's death meant. It was a tragic loss, but in his death he proved the presence of alien biology.

Deadly biology.

*Living* biology.

Peterson lay on his back as the sound of the approaching helicopter grew louder. He sighed as he looked up at the bright cobalt sky and said, "All my life..."

## CHAPTER 2 -- LAKE VOSTOK

At -55 degrees Celsius, the air felt cold enough to freeze human lungs solid. Kathy Connolly had first felt the chill more than five years ago when she first arrived at Lake Vostok, deep within the heart of Antarctica. And now, with the outside temperature hovering around -70 degrees, she was ready for the balmy -55 degree weather to return. Of course, technology had improved since her first days at Lake Vostok. What was once several layers of thermal underwear, thick Parkas and rigid gloves had been replaced by super thin fabrics such as Insulite and Protectarol, which kept the body warm and pulled moisture away from the skin. In addition to the thinner materials was the revolutionary Simmer Suit. It circulated hot water through "veins" webbed throughout the quarter inch thick, head-to-toe garment. On top of that was worn a comfortable, wind resistant hooded jacket, light snow pants and sturdy boots—all designed to be functional and eye-catching.

But even with all the high tech gear, the cold still hammered her body. Connelly and Willard were already ten minutes over that mark, and the cold was beginning to seep through.

"Boss, we have to get back inside!" Willard shouted over a gust of wind. Ethan Willard looked like a visitor from another planet. His body was covered in the same outdoor gear as Connelly, but his light blue eyes were concealed behind bug-eyed, mirrored sunglasses.

"I just need one more minute!" Kathy said.

"Another minute and we'll be popsicles! We have to go now!"

Connelly trusted Willard's opinion, but TES was too important. When the winds had picked up, she had known the supports would need to be secured, but she hadn't counted on the drop in temperature. Connelly looked up and took in the massive structure, which she had designed and built, mostly with her own hands. The Thermal Exploratory System (TES), towered fifty feet above Connelly. Its three black diamond shaped panels pointed skywards, enclosing and protecting the delicate innards—a sphere and three cranes—which gave the entire structure the shape of an ominous dark crystal.

"Not yet!" Kathy said. "TES is too important!"

"Important enough to die for?"

Connelly whipped her head to Willard and gave a quick nod.

Willard shook his head. "How am I supposed to keep you safe if you don't listen to me?"

Connelly's fingers flew over a keyboard at the base of one of the TES panels. Work was slowed by having to constantly brush snow from the plastic covered keys and her gloved hands made frequent mistakes. She had delicately tightened the slack on two of the support cables which held TES rigid against the wind, and had just started tightening the third when a loud *twang* filled the air. Connelly shuddered. She knew what that sound meant. One of the cables had snapped loose.

"Shit!" Kathy shouted. "Ethan, secure that line!"

Willard grunted in frustration, but quickly ran for the line, which was being whipped side to side, like a wriggling snake. Willard crept up on the cable, which was as thick as Kielbasa and flexible as a double jointed contortionist. Willard bent down, preparing to pounce.

Before Willard's muscles could snap him into action, the cable swung in his direction and wrapped around his ankle. A strong gust of wind took hold of the cable and pulled. Willard was yanked off his feet and dragged back and forth across the ice like a rag doll. Willard tried to dig into the rough snow and ice, but his gloved fingers simply scraped the surface. Willard's stomach twisted as he was launched skyward and slammed back down again. He

coughed as the air was knocked out of him, but he managed to get out a yell, "Some help here!" It was all he could manage before the cable was plucked up by the wind and Willard was airborne was again.

Connelly looked over just as Willard struck the ice. She wanted to help, but couldn't. Not before finishing. She worked the console with a burst of speed, eager to assist her friend. She gave the cable, which was whipping Willard around, some extra slack and prepped the retraction process. Once started, they would have thirty seconds while the system warmed up. After that, the cable would retract and either yank them both skyward, or snap securely into position on a hook braced twenty-five feet within the ice crust.

With her finger hovering over the final key, Connelly prepared herself to run. She pushed the button and sprinted towards Willard, who was now in a sitting position, hanging onto the cable above his feet. Connelly ran to the cable and took hold a few feet above Willard.

"Bout time," Willard said.

"Shut up and get that off your leg!"

Willard squinted behind his sunglasses. "Or what?"

"Just do it!"

Connelly imagined that Willard could hear the urgency in her voice, even above the howling wind, because he sprang into action, tugging at the thick cable.

Willard's foot was freed and he grabbed the cable, which ended in a loop. "All set!"

"Get it looped up!" Connelly shouted.

Willard tugged back on the cable, fighting against the wind, and with Connelly's help, was able to pull the slack cable closer to the hook, extending a few inches from the snow.

"Ten seconds!" Kathy shouted.

"Ten seconds until what?"

Connelly didn't answer and Willard didn't press the subject. He dug his heels into the snow and fell back with the cable, pulling it toward the hook with his hands. There were only inches to go, but the wind was putting up a fight.

"Five seconds!"

Willard grunted as he pulled with all his strength. The cable slid over the hook, but looked as though it might slide back off. With all the slack Connelly had given it, the cable thrashed wildly in the wind. But there was no time left.

"Let go!" Connelly shouted as though their lives depended on it. Connelly dropped the cable and dove to the side. Willard rolled away. As Willard flipped onto his back he saw the slack on the cable disappear as the line was sucked into TES like a giant strand of spaghetti. The line snapped taut and would have easily cut a man in half if he'd been standing too close. Willard caught his breath as he stared up at the secure line. They'd done it.

A shadow fell over Willard as Kathy stood above him. "What the hell are we still doing out here?" she asked. "It's freezing!" Willard laughed as Connelly thrust out her gloved hand and helped him to his feet.



From above, Lake Vostok was a sheet of monotonous white so plain it looked like God forgot to color a portion of the world. The stark expanse was barren, save for three outposts, the original Russian Vostok Station, which had fallen into disarray over the past forty years and was never used because of contamination and structural hazards. Then there was the Joint

Vostok Venture, which rented their facilities out to groups of scientists studying the ice layers and attempting to burrow down to the liquid lake below: of course, in thirty years of trying, no one had yet succeeded. That's why Connelly and her crew were here, to achieve the unachievable. But Connelly insisted on secrecy, insisted on her own facility, and after what she showed those funding her expedition, she got everything she wanted, and then some.

The Vostok TES Observatory stood in stark contrast to the surroundings, with its nine dark gray metallic domes, each pocked with round portals and luminous flood lights. Some of her Vostok neighbors had commented that it looked like a UFO at night. The nine domes were spread out in a circle and were connected by curved tunnels, all of which joined together at the center, where a large dome, the size of a four bedroom house, served as the main living quarters.

Willard and Connelly entered one of the outer tunnels through a thick hatch. Snow exploded into the hallway. Willard closed the heavy door behind them and secured it. After pulling off his hood and Simmer Suit head covering, Willard shook his golden hair with his finger, sprinkling water into the air, and smiled at Connelly. "Geez boss, you're almost as crazy as me."

Connelly smiled in return. Coming from Willard, that was a compliment. She continued to remove her gear, down to her Simmer Suit, as she spoke. "Better get used to it," she said. "Once TES is up and running we're going to be spending every other hour outside, just melting through the ice."

Willard shook his head. "That *is* crazy."

Connelly offered a sarcastic smile and said, "Thanks for your support."



The main living quarters were composed of separate bedrooms and a multifunction room, which served as kitchen, dining room, living room and most recently, electronics lab. The space was circular and forty feet in diameter, but it was cluttered with computers, spools of wires, soldering equipment, computer chips and other assorted high-tech gizmos. There was a lab for such work, but with only three of them currently stationed at the Vostok TES Observatory, they preferred to spend most of their time together.

Robert Samuels sat alone in the massive room, relaxing with his feet up on a desk as he soldered a small chip to the innards of a tiny cube-shaped device with two metallic connectors on either side. He bent in so close, gazing through his thick glasses, that he didn't notice his scruffy beard was beginning to singe. The rancid smell of smoldering hair hit his nose and he immediately sat back and began to pat the smoking beard out. He attempted to regain his casual composure as the hatch to the living quarters swung open.

Willard entered first with Connelly at his heels. "All I'm saying is that I'm sure, if I were a scientist, which I'm not, thank goodness, I might understand why melting through miles of ice to find some microorganisms is worth risking my life."

Robert turned to Willard and Connelly with a smile on his face. He'd heard this conversation before. "Funny... You say it's not worth risking your life, but alas...here you are."

Willard sat down across from Robert while Kathy put on a fresh pot of coffee. "Yeah, well, someone's got to keep you two alive." His nose crinkled. "What's that smell?"

Robert shrugged and did his best to look innocent. "I don't smell anything."

Willard glanced at the soldering iron still in Robert's hand. "You burned your beard again, didn't you?"

Robert furrowed his eyebrows. "I was concentrating."

Connelly returned from the coffee pot, which was beginning to gurgle to life and playfully rubbed Robert's already messy head of hair. "Don't start, boys." She sat down next to Robert and rolled her neck. "How's it coming?"

Robert held the small cube aloft like it was a prize recovered from a treasure chest. "We now have full BUD capabilities."

"What's BUD?" Willard asked. "Your dog?"

Robert grinned and pushed his glasses higher on his nose, pleased at the opportunity to explain. "BUD was originally a military project for tracking submarines around the globe. It was so sensitive that, when placed underwater, it could hear a dolphin fart a thousand miles away."

Willard smiled. "Dolphins fart?"

Robert ignored the question and continued. "The equipment picked up so much noise that software had to be written that would filter out organic sounds. Even after they removed all the whale calls, struggling fish and barking seals, they had to filter out man-made noises like recreational vehicles and underwater construction. When they were done, they could hear every sub under the water and track them to within a few yards."

"I don't think there are any submarines in Lake Vostok," Willard said.

"Quite true," Robert said. "I've removed all the software."

"Leaving us with one of the most sensitive microphones in the world," Connelly said as she stood and walked back to the coffee maker.

"Right," Willard said, "but how does that help you? You're looking for microorganisms."

"The point is, if there is anything, anything at all, making noise down there, we're going to hear it. Geothermal vents, shifting ice, even the microorganisms themselves. If there is any noise at all, we're going to hear it loud and clear."

"A microscopic symphony," Willard said.

"You got it," Connelly said as she returned with three piping hot mugs of coffee, which she placed on the table.

"OK," Willard said, "that's cool. But I still don't understand the significance of finding anything below the ice or even how you expect something to be alive down there. Like I said before, I'm no scientist—"

"That goes without saying," Robert said with a smile as he raised his steaming mug to his lips.

Willard continued, "—but the pressure must be intense. Not to mention the lack of sunlight and food."

"Ahh," Robert said as he finished taking a sip of the rich Columbian coffee. "Perhaps there's hope for the boy yet. That was actually an intelligent statement." Robert looked at Connelly. "You want to field this one, Kath?"

Connelly nodded, crossed her legs, and after taking a long sip from her mug, she looked at Willard. "Lake Vostok is buried beneath 4,000 meters of ice."

Willard opened his mouth to say something, but Connelly seemed to read his mind. "Roughly 13,000 feet," she said.

Willard closed his mouth and Connelly continued. "This means that any life we find down there has been cut off from the modern world for a million years. This life would most likely be in the form of microbes we call extremophiles.

"Like me," Willard said.

Robert chuckled. "Your penchant for extreme sports is a choice, Mr. Willard. These creatures have no option but to survive, sometimes thrive, in the most inhospitable environments on Earth."

"And the discovery of which," Connelly said, "would give us hints as to the planet's climate going back millions of years. Not only that, but the discovery of new organisms helps us to understand the world and quite often leads to major breakthroughs in other scientific fields."

"Like medicine?" Willard offered.

"Exactly," Connelly said.

"Though even I'll admit that the chance of a new drug being derived from a million year old microbe is unlikely," Robert said.

Willard smelled the aromatic coffee. "This lake...isn't it a closed ecosystem? I've seen enough conservation specials to know that bringing in foreign germs or animals usually wreaks havoc on the ecosystems without defenses. Your million year old microbes might catch the modern flu and be wiped out."

"That's two intelligent statements. Watch out, Ethan, you might just change my opinion of you. Though you're correct. That's why TES will be sterilized before melting through the ice."

Connelly chimed in. "And the exterior surface of the TES sphere, and even the TES cable are so hot that any microbes or viruses that the sphere comes in contact with on the way down will be vaporized."

"Huh," Willard said as he sipped from his coffee. "Sounds like you have all your bases covered."

"That's why we're the scientists," Robert said, "and you're the bodyguard."

"Safety specialist."

"Same thing."

"Hey," said Willard, "you two would have died like twenty times already without me here. If there's one thing I've learned about you science types, you've got all the brains in the world and no common sense. Not only do you walk into door frames and microwave metal containers—"

Robert looked over his steaming mug. "That only happened once."

"But you also believe that microbes could survive beneath this ice. You still haven't explained that to me. Your microorganisms are going to have to be beyond extreme to pull that off."

"There is one likely source of energy," Connelly said. "Given the shape of the lake, which is roughly the size of Lake Ontario, but far deeper, it's possible that there are geothermal vents heating the water and providing reduced metals and chemical nutrients. On top of that, the ice above is constantly moving, about four meters—thirteen feet—every year, providing nutrients and perhaps even ancient biological matter to the water. It is the most extreme environment on Earth, to be sure, but anything's possible."

"OK, fine," Willard said. "But why Vostok? Aren't there any other frozen lakes in the world? We're in the middle of nowhere with nothing else to do but freeze our butts off and play solitaire."

"There are seventy lakes under the ice in Antarctica, but most are much smaller than Vostok and probably have frozen solid within the past few thousand years. Vostok's size and depth make it the ideal hunting ground for microorganisms."

Willard placed his mug on the table. "So you're saying there is no other place like this on Earth?"

Connelly thought about the question and then nodded. "Yup, there really is no other place like this on Earth."

"Well, that's cool," Willard said. "But I still think this may be a big waste of time."

Connelly stood and headed toward the coffee maker with an empty mug in her hand. "If we get down there and find nothing, you might just be right."

Willard laughed lightly. "Then what?"

"Then," Connelly said, looking back at Willard as she poured some more coffee, "we're all out of work. Hey, what's this?" Connelly picked up a piece of paper sitting in the tray of the fax machine sitting next to the toaster.

"Sorry," Robert said. "Came in earlier. Haven't got a chance to read it yet."

As Connelly looked over the page, her face fell flat. Robert noticed right away. "What is it?" he asked.

After crumpling the piece of paper and rejoining the men at the table, Connelly said, "The Global Exploration Corporation strikes again."

"Those guys are a pain in the ass," Willard said, shaking his head in frustration at just hearing the name.

"What do they want this time?" Robert asked.

"Seriously," Willard said, "would you have even taken their money if you knew how many strings were attached? They want you to fly out there again?"

Connelly looked Willard in the eyes, her expression dull, as though she were living in a surreal world where what she had just read made no sense at all. "Not just me," she said.

"They want all three of us... Tomorrow."

### CHAPTER 3 – GLOBAL EXPLORATION CORPORATION

Michael Peterson found the lower hallways of the Global Exploration Corporation to be sterile. They had made an effort to soften their image on the floors above. The tourists, visiting on a daily basis, always 'oohed' and 'aahed' at the elaborate murals of Mars' surface, the ocean floor and the view from Mount Everest. But those floors contained gallery displays of the functional labs hidden below. The corporate offices were on the top floors. They were bright and full of green plants and seascapes.

Peterson chuckled to himself. Here he was, about to embark on an amazing adventure and he couldn't get his mind off the lower level decorations, or lack thereof. The floors were squeaky clean linoleum and the walls were white concrete. The only color came in the form of arrows pointing towards various departments; geology, astronomy, oceanography, biology—experts on almost every kind of "ology" could be found within the confines of these barren walls. The GEC made up for its lack of decor by housing some of the most colorful minds on Earth. Peterson was often proud that he belonged to such an astounding group, but felt even more pride at the fact that his past discovery and potential future discoveries were on the top of the GEC's to-do list.

Stepping into the cavernous elevator, Peterson sighed with relief for the privacy and the fact that he would soon be out of the windowless lab area and striding through the upper halls of the corporate offices. He hit the button for the tenth floor and then leaned against the back wall of the elevator. He closed his eyes and smiled as he imagined what the future might hold. Then the elevator stopped.

Peterson opened his eyes and looked at the control panel. He was stopped at the eighth floor. He'd reached the corporate levels, but not quite high enough. He leaned forward to push the buttons for the tenth floor again when the doors slid open. Standing on the other side of the opening doors stood a woman who looked like a strict school teacher, but her kind smile offset her bunned red hair, steel gray-blue eyes and tight-fitting power suit. She was easily fifty, pushing fifty-five but she held herself like a thirty year old. She looked at her watch and said, "Ahh, Dr. Peterson. Right on time, as usual."

Peterson smiled. "Miss Heintz. I thought we were meeting in your office...We are meeting in your office, right?"

"Call me Nancy, Dr. Peterson."

Peterson relaxed at the offer of using casual names. It was generally considered a compliment if the higher-ups referred to you by your first name, but even more so if they allowed you to use theirs. "Only if you call me Michael," he said.

"Very well, Michael. I was thinking about a different location for our meeting today." Nancy stepped into the elevator and took out a key card. She waved it in front of a small scanner mounted above the floor buttons. A small green light above the scanner blinked on while the metal beneath the floor buttons slid away, revealing a new button marked with the number eleven. She hit the button. The doors closed and Peterson felt his stomach sink slightly as the elevator began to rise.

"I didn't know there was an eleventh floor," Peterson said.

Nancy smiled. "There's not."

The doors opened to the tenth floor and both waited patiently for the doors to close. Peterson shifted nervously. The doors soon closed and they were pulled upward once again. He watched as the number changed from 10 to 11. He was beginning to feel curious about

what he was being invited to see. When the doors opened, it was more than he could have imagined.

Peterson's mouth dropped open as he stepped into the forty-foot tall, football-field sized green house. A large number of well-labeled plant species thrived in the massive space. At the other end of the greenhouse he could see full-sized trees, growing tall. Some bore fruit. Peterson took a deep breath and smelled the sweet and spicy air. *Like an old fashioned apple pie*, he thought. The bright green of the room in contrast with the dark blue, northern California sky was enough to take his breath away. He turned to Nancy. His stunned expression made her laugh. "What *is* this place?" he asked. "You can't see this from the road or parking lot."

"Only from the air," Nancy said. "It's not that we're trying to keep it a complete secret, but many of these plant species are endangered or already extinct. We try to keep exposure to outsiders to a bare minimum." Nancy raised her hand toward one of the tallest trees in the room, which had been trimmed to keep it from bursting through the glass ceiling. "That's a Brazilian Mahogany tree. Ten years ago it was used to make furniture and flooring, so much so that it simply couldn't recover and the best efforts of green organizations couldn't save it. There may be a few trees surviving in what little is left of the rainforests, but for all intents and purposes, the species is extinct, and that...that is the last one. We're hoping to reintroduce them in the next year."

Peterson looked at the tall tree. Its bark was smooth and grey; its leaves a brilliant green. A powerful tree. The fact that this might actually be the last of its kind on Earth made it awe inspiring. Peterson looked at Nancy with wide eyes. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Three reasons," Nancy said. "First, to give you a glimpse of the future. A greenhouse twice this size has been constructed for your mission, only the plants are different. If they're not producing food, they're cleaning the air or some other kind of benefit. Second, look up there." Nancy pointed through the glass ceiling towards the dark blue sky.

Looking up, Peterson could see the moon hovering in the sky above. "It's been fifty-two years since man first walked on the moon and we still look at it as a crowning achievement of mankind. With manned missions to Mars thrown in the trash for various reasons and the more recent moon trips being...redundant, space exploration has been in a slump. We need this to work, Michael."

"Not to worry," Peterson said with confidence. "Everything is on schedule."

"You're sure about that? About everything? I'm meeting with the board tomorrow. They'll give me the final go ahead even with a slim chance of success, but the final say is mine and I don't like slim chances. They haven't worked for any space program thus far and we don't need another failure on our hands. So I'll ask you one last time. Are you absolutely, one hundred percent, without question, sure that you'll find what you're looking for?"

"Not a doubt in the world. I've worked my entire life for an opportunity like this. I promise you, we will succeed." Peterson smiled. "I wouldn't be doing this otherwise. I don't like to fail."

"Good," Nancy said. "Neither do I."

A loud ring filled the air. Nancy reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a tiny cell phone. "Director Heintz here."

"Dr. Connelly and her crew are here to see you, Ma'am," came the voice of a receptionist on the other end.

"Direct them to my office," Nancy said, before hanging up the phone. She turned to Peterson, who was looking at the massive greenhouse. "Feel free to stay here as long as you'd like, but don't touch the plants. I'm meeting with the TES crew now. Update me on your progress by the end of the day."

"Will do," Peterson said.

Nancy entered the elevator and disappeared behind its closing doors, leaving Peterson alone in the gargantuan greenhouse. He looked at all the vegetation, some of it otherworldly and then up to the moon. His body shivered with nervous energy. He knew his view from the next greenhouse he'd be standing in was going to be even more impressive.



Connelly stretched and touched her toes, which felt awkward in the formal business suit she was wearing, but the three flights it had taken to get them from Antarctica to northern California had been cramped. Flights were much faster than they used to be, but more people than ever were flying. After landing in San Francisco it had taken them another three hours to drive to the Global Exploration Corporation's headquarters, which was situated in a forty acre portion of prime landscape. The grounds were impeccably maintained. The lush green grass was as trim as a marine's hair. A brook ran perpendicular to the main entrance at the front of the building. The compound could have been mistaken for a national park, if not for the expansive parking lot, barbed wire fences and large marble sign which read: Global Exploration Corporation. Overall, visiting the site was a relaxing experience and Connelly could understand why so many scientists clambered to get research space within the facility, but coming here was never a good thing for her.

The GEC had been funding her project for the past five years and in the last year alone, her funding had quadrupled. She wasn't sure why the money was increased, and she never asked. It allowed her to finish work on TES three years ahead of schedule. Upon arriving at the front door of the GEC headquarters, they were ushered in like celebrities, offered drinks and muffins, and had been waiting quite comfortably for twenty minutes when a pretty, young receptionist strode into the lobby and flashed a smile.

"Director Heintz is ready to see you now," the receptionist said. "Please, follow me."

Connelly stood with Robert and Willard at her side and followed the receptionist to the elevator. The doors opened and the receptionist motioned for them to enter. Once all three were in, the receptionist joined them, hit the button for the tenth floor and then stepped back out. "Take a right out of the elevator. Director Heintz's office is the last door on the left." With that, the doors closed and the three were left alone.

"Do they pay them to act cheery?" Willard said with a grin. "I think that girl ate Happy Flakes for breakfast."

"Corporate complexes like this tend to be imposing," Robert said, "even to the employees. It helps to see a happy face, even if it's fake."

"'Imposing' is an understatement," Connelly said. "And I have a long list of questions that need answers."

Robert played with his beard. "Like why they pulled us out two days before our first full test."

Kathy nodded. "Or the urgency behind the trip. Next day air from Antarctica isn't standard procedure."

"Or," Willard started, "why we're being treated like royalty. They were practically showing those muffins down our throats."

"Fattening the goose," Robert said.

"And I take it you've never been picked up at the airport by a limo before?" Willard said.

Connelly shook her head, no. "Just another in a long line of questions we need answered. This better not be a waste of time."

*Ding.* The doors opened and all three put on phony smiles before exiting the elevator. They turned right and headed down the hallway. The impending sense of doom grew like a tangling vine. Connelly paused at the polished oak door before knocking. "You ready?"

Both men nodded. Connelly knocked.

"Come on in," came Nancy's voice from the other side of the door.

Connelly turned the handle and entered the gleaming office. Connelly squinted as she entered the massive corner office, two walls of which were windows. Nancy was standing by her boomerang shaped desk. Connelly noticed a few family photos on the desktop, but nothing else out of the ordinary. No schematics, no documents or even a laptop that might provide some hint as to why they had been summoned.

Nancy motioned to three plush chairs that faced her desk. "Please, have a seat."

The three silently took their seats and waited for the bomb to drop. Nancy sat across from them, in her own comfortable-looking seat. She leaned back and smiled. "Mr. Willard, I see that your sense of style has not been exaggerated to me by our mutual acquaintances," she said with a grin as she took in Willard's casual blue jeans and green fleece outfit.

Willard turned red and looked at his clothes. He glanced at Connelly, with her business suit, which accentuated her long, firm legs. Then he looked at Robert, who'd at least made an attempt to look professional with his sweater and tweed jacket. Compared to them he looked like a college student. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut short by Nancy. "Of course, I only jest. Your other, more impressive qualities, have been made clear over the years as well. Your expedition has one of the highest safety ratings of all our expeditions and you're in one of the most inhospitable environments. Well done, Mr. Willard."

Willard smiled, clearly pleased. "Thank you."

Connelly shifted in her seat. Nancy turned to her and said, "I trust your flights were bearable?"

Connelly nodded, "I slept through most of them."

"Well, you must be wondering why we've made such a to-do about you being here?" Nancy said.

"The question has crossed our minds," Connelly said.

Nancy took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as though she were chewing over how to best phrase her next words. Connelly's stomach twisted with nervous tension. She was sure her funding was about to be pulled. "I trust everything is operational? With TES I mean."

"Yes," Connelly said. "We were planning to do our first full run through in two days, but we're positive she's fully functional and ready to go. We'll prep for the test as soon as we get back."

"That won't be necessary," Nancy said. "Kathy...may I call you Kathy? I always prefer talking to my best scientists on a first name basis."

"Of—of course," Kathy said.

"Kathy, how would you feel about continuing your work with TES at another location?"

Connelly raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"For the sake of time, I'll put this bluntly," Nancy said. "TES is needed for a more pressing expedition and we'll be transporting her by the end of the week. This is well within our contract agreement and is final. But I need to know if you'll be coming along."

"You can't do that," Connelly said defiantly.

"Look," Nancy said, softening her voice. "I know this is hard to comprehend right now, but the fact is, I had to pull a few strings with the board to keep you on this project."

"This is *my* project!" Connelly gripped her armrests.

Nancy rocked in her chair for a moment and then said, "Not anymore."

Willard interjected before Connelly could stand and start screaming. "Hey," he said, "I just got a natural history lesson from these two so even I know that there is no other place on Earth where there's a frozen lake buried under that much ice. So please enlighten us. Where on Earth, aside from Antarctica, is there a lake buried beneath miles of ice?"

Nancy smiled. "There isn't."

"I don't understand," Connelly said. "Where do you plan on using TES?"

Nancy looked into Connelly's eyes and said, "Not on this planet."

Robert leaned forward with his eyebrows perched high on his wrinkled forehead. "Come again?"

Nancy's smile grew wider. "Not on this planet... As you probably know, NASA had been planning a trip to the sixth moon of Jupiter, Europa, for years. But they ran out of support from the U.S. government. The GEC picked up the tab and have been coordinating our private enterprise with NASA and the U.S. government."

"This is unbelievable," Robert said. "Europa...but I thought they sent a probe there in 2010?"

Nancy nodded. "The Europa Orbiter. After a preliminary scan of the moon's surface, measuring density, temperature and other common elements, the probe was destroyed."

"You mean it crashed," Willard said.

Nancy shook her head. "No, it was destroyed in orbit."

Robert's forehead became even more wrinkled. "As in blown up?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "Just before contact with the probe was lost, it recorded an extreme increase in external energy. NASA believes a massive solar storm caused an overload. The rest is history. However, the mission was not a complete failure. The probe was able to determine that there is, in fact, a vast ocean one mile beneath the ice crust on Europa."

"I sincerely doubt that the existence of water alone is enough evidence to spur a manned mission to the center of our solar system," Robert said.

Nancy leaned forward on her elbows, growing excited. "Last year, a geologist named Michael Peterson, discovered a meteorite in the Arctic. It's been determined that the asteroid originated from Europa. It was the size of a football yet contained biological material swirled among some unknown elements."

Connelly, who had been lost in a sea of anger, snapped to attention, listening to every word Nancy was saying. "Biological?"

"Dead, of course," Nancy said, "destroyed during re-entry, but let there be no doubt, there is life on Europa, and we're going to get a look at it, up close and personal. We want you three to go."

Connelly looked stunned, but her defiance managed to take one last stab. "If we don't?" she said.

Nancy crossed her legs and sat back in the chair. "The project will go on without you and the operation of TES will be given to someone else. Though I'd prefer you on the team; if something were to go wrong I can't think of anyone better qualified to make the repairs. Can you?"

"You're telling me," Connelly started, "that you're sending us into space to search for life...on a moon. And if we don't go, my work, my life's work is going to go without me?"

Nancy nodded.

Connelly's eyes dropped to the floor and she stared at it blankly. Questions flooded her mind. "Am I correct in assuming there isn't even an atmosphere around this moon?"

"Actually," Nancy said, "There is. Albeit, very thin, but it does contain small amounts of oxygen. Kathy, I understand how you must be feeling right now, but the possibilities for discovery are beyond anything humanity has ever achieved."

Connelly became suspicious and squinted her eyes. "If we already discovered alien life from this meteorite of yours, why haven't we heard about it? Why isn't it plastered on every newspaper from here to Siberia?"

"That's because," Nancy said, "we haven't told anyone. Various space agencies have made major blunders in the past by going off half cocked and announcing to the world that they've made some major discovery, only to have it proved wrong in full view of the public. The result is a loss of credibility and of funding, governmental or otherwise. So you can see why we're treating this delicately. Failure, right now, means discovering we were wrong and that's it. But if we told the world we had discovered extraterrestrial life, and then, oops, we were wrong... Well, that would set the world's space programs back. And I'm not going to let that happen."

Robert was nodding, "Makes sense."

Connelly sighed and shook her head.

"I'm sorry," Nancy said, "but I really do need an answer."

Connelly looked Nancy in the eyes. "The simple fact that I go where TES goes, means I'm in. But, what you've told us— I never considered that TES might be used for something so foolish. So incredible. The possibility of finding life somewhere else in our solar system is...unbelievable. But I do have one condition."

Nancy nodded, waiting patiently.

"When we get back...when we return, I get TES back. Finding E.T. will be the discovery of a lifetime, but I'm still interested in understanding our own planet."

"Of course," Nancy said. "We will have a second TES unit built for you while you're gone. I'm afraid once TES is deployed, she will remain on the surface of Europa forever."

Connelly looked at Robert and Willard. "Well, boys? Feel like going to Jupiter?"

The best Robert could manage was a slow, stunned nod. Connelly looked beyond Robert to Willard. She was surprised to see his face looking very upset.

"I don't know, boss. It doesn't sound very safe. You on a moon. But you're crazy and likely to get hurt, and you'll need someone to save your butt. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't go, but... Are you kidding? I'm in like sin."

Nancy had to stifle a smile that grew at seeing Willard's excitement. "Excellent," she said. "I'll inform the council that we have the rest of our crew."

Connelly froze. "The rest of our crew?"

"You didn't think you were going into space alone, did you?" Nancy stood. "You'll meet them soon. For now, let's get you settled."

Connelly, Robert and Willard stood from their chairs and onto wobbly legs. They followed after Nancy, who was heading for the door. Willard slapped Robert on the back. "You know," he said, "I was wrong about you nerds. You guys do get to have fun. I might not die from boredom after all."

